

Stories of Survival

NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES CHANGE LIVES

Many people grow stronger after trauma

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Death came calling for Dave Moore with a semiautomatic handgun.

It covered Sara Collins with concrete and steel beams and blood.

For Delores "Dee" Wilson, it couldn't even wait for her to finish watching *The Grapes of Wrath*.

In all three cases, though, death missed the mark. Barely.

That's not the end of the story. It's never the end of the story. Facing death can't help but leave its mark on a person, even if it's a question mark.

When ordinary people are reminded of their mortality - through an accident, illness, or a violent crime - something changes forever that cannot be changed back.

Sometimes, getting so close to death can be paralyzing, even after the threat has passed. Think of the person who gets in a car accident and refuses to drive again.

There are others who find meaning and purpose in the incident, strengthening them for the journey onward and giving them a new mission.

Either way, things are never the same. Not even for a day.

"The threat of death often leaves scars," explained Dan Shapiro, a cancer survivor and associate professor of clinical psychiatry who directs the medical humanities program at the University of Arizona.

MULTIMEDIA • In their words

[Dave Moore talks about being shot and sharing his story with children to teach them about the futility of violence.](#)

[Sara Collins talks about the physical and mental challenges that followed being injured when a terrace collapsed at the Lonz Winery.](#)

[Delores 'Dee' Wilson talks about falling into a coma and the miracle of suddenly waking up.](#)



Sara Collins still grapples with nearly dying six years ago when a terrace collapsed at the Lonz Winery. (THE BLADE/AMY E. VOIGT)

"Most of us are not wired to witness or experience horrible tragedy without consequence."

So while the rest of us look at tomorrow as a chance to voluntarily start anew, offering up shaky New Year's resolutions and hopes for reform, there are others among us who have had life changes thrust upon them by none other than death.

The question is: What happened next?

The Superstar

Mr. Moore is one who chose to confront the specter of death head on.

The Toledo man, now 65, can still see the gun going off, the orange spark, and the smoke coming out of the barrel of the weapon.

It was two days before Christmas, 1996. Two men had kidnapped him from his driveway and drove him to an open field to kill him in a random act of violence. He fled too late and was shot five times, including once in the head at point-blank range.

"I heard the gun go off and felt the bullet hit me in the head," he said. "The amazing thing is I was still conscious. ... They determined in the hospital I have an extremely thick skull."

Miraculously, there was minimal permanent damage as a result of the attack, which required a lengthy hospital stay. But there was a new mission in Mr. Moore's life: to bring his abductors to justice.

The two were arrested and convicted in the shooting death of a Toledo woman that took place 11 days later, thanks to Mr. Moore's testimony as a prosecution witness despite a threat against his life. "My survival was a means of getting them off the street," he said.

He's never run from what happened to him. Grateful to be alive, he uses it as an opportunity to teach young people about the futility of violence and the importance of treating people with respect. He speaks regularly as part of the Victims Forum Reaching Youth to Prevent Violence, part of the Toledo-Lucas County Victim-Witness Assistance Program.

For these youths, he relives the experience. "It's like a box I can put on a shelf," he said. "I pull it off the shelf for the kids."

Mr. Moore is what Mr. Shapiro, the clinical psychiatrist, calls a "superstar," one of those rare people who muster the strength to tackle a problem associated with their traumatic event.

"For some of them, the near-death event becomes a wonderful catalyst that provides a new compass and direction," Mr. Shapiro said.

In many ways, Mr. Moore, insists he's the same man he's always been.

The grandfather of three refuses to be angry or afraid. He still goes to work at the same job selling replacement windows. He's never attended counseling.

Prior to the trial, Mr. Moore said he carried a gun, but not any more. If anything, he said, the attack has softened him, made him more tolerant.

The biggest test came about six months afterwards when he passed a man trying to hitch a ride one night. In the past, he wouldn't have thought twice about picking him up. This time ... "It felt like a test by a higher force to see if I would rise to the occasion," he said.

He did, and as Mr. Moore picked up the man, he felt a surge of freedom and invincibility. "I felt that [in life] you've got to take risks," he said. "You can't build an eggshell around you."

The Seeker

For Miss Collins, nearly dying created more questions than it answered.

The Clyde native believes in fate, in a greater purpose. Why else would she have been pulled back from the edge of death?

When a terrace collapsed at the Lonz Winery six years ago, dropping Miss Collins and others 20 feet into a cellar, she broke her back and later developed a dangerous blood clot.

Today, there's a 12-inch scar running down the middle of her back and along her hip to remind her of the mess of concrete, chairs, steel beams, picnic tables, and blood that left one Toledo man dead and nearly 80 injured.

Now, she is fully recovered and living near Columbus, wondering what it all means.

"I think, what am I supposed to be doing with my life?" she said. "I'm an accountant. I crunch numbers. ... I'm like, am I supposed to be doing something else with my life? Is there a purpose that I'm not getting?"

The Rev. Joseph Cardone, a priest for nearly 20 years who is vice president for mission and values integration at St. Vincent Mercy Medical Center in Toledo, said he tells survivors not to worry about why they were saved.

Maybe it was luck. Maybe it was a skilled paramedic.

"Whatever the reason is - who knows? - be grateful," he said. "Your work isn't done."

Ms. Collins was a student at the time of the accident at Heidelberg College in Tiffin, where her work wasn't done. She underwent tough physical therapy and made it back to the classroom in time for fall semester. But she was miserable.

"When I first went back to school, I just felt like an outsider," said Miss Collins, now 27. "I couldn't tie my own shoes. I had to walk down the hall to my girlfriend and say, 'Can you tie my shoe?' in the morning."

"I cried all the time. I was miserable," she said.

To help her deal with everything, she went to church by herself almost every Thursday to cry and sort things out.

"Everything happens for a reason," she said. "No matter what I would have done, I was meant to be there when that happened."

She may not have discovered that reason yet, but Dr. William Hablitzel believes that one day she will.

He's a Perrysburg native and assistant professor of clinical medicine at the University of Cincinnati who distilled some of the lessons he's learned from patients in the book *Dying was the Best Thing that Ever Happened to Me* (Sunshine Ridge, \$24.95). (The title comes from a man who changed his life and found happiness after collapsing and having no pulse for 10 minutes.)

"I have found people who are a little frustrated because they've gone through a tough circumstance and they're not quite sure what it's done for them," Dr. Hablitzel said. "More often than not, at some point in their lives, they will come to appreciate that lesson."

As she continues her search for meaning, Miss Collins still lives daily with the accident. She sees a psychiatrist. Her family calls every year on the anniversary of her injury.

Little things can bring it back to life.

"There's a bridge here in Columbus when you leave one of the malls. If you have to stop at the light, you can feel it kind of moving. It scares me. It scares me to death," she said. "People who have balconies, I don't go out on them."

She can't escape it, but that doesn't mean it's consumed her.

"It's something I think about daily, but I don't want it to define me," she said.

Not afraid to die

Mrs. Wilson became an inspiration after she beat death. She became "the Miracle Lady."

For about three days in 1999, the Oregon woman was in a coma after suddenly slumping over while watching a movie at her home. She was 70, had a history of heart problems, and had suffered a cardiac arrest.

Doctors put her on life support. A priest performed last rites.

Her family - and her doctors - knew this was it.

"Honestly, we were kind of talking about her funeral and everything," said her daughter, Colleen Lange, of Oregon. "I said, if you're gonna wake up, you better do it now, 'cus we're gonna pull the plug."

Shortly thereafter, Mrs. Wilson woke up. Just like that.

There were no major, lasting problems, just an incredible hunger and a miraculous new nickname.

The next challenge was bringing Mrs. Wilson up to date. Thinking she was young again, she asked about her husband Bill's parents.



William Hablitzel says most survivors eventually learn a lesson from their tragedy. (THE BLADE/JETTA FRASER)

"They're gone," he said.

What about her own parents?

Gone.

Mrs. Wilson had to grieve all over again. And this was just the beginning.

"My God, when they told me I was 70, I said '70!?' I almost went back into the coma," said Mrs. Wilson, a lively, white-haired woman.



Delores Wilson, with husband Bill, says her faith deepened after she awoke from a coma and regained her health. (THE BLADE/ANDY MORRISON)

In the months and years after her recovery, she didn't dwell on the event. As the family photographs that cover much of her home attest, she used her time to be with her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

But there were times when she couldn't avoid it. At first, she couldn't remember where things were in the house and had to ransack drawers at random. She couldn't remember how to make chili. She couldn't remember how to square dance.

Always a religious woman who attended Catholic Mass every day, Mrs. Wilson deepened her faith. The former nurse started making the sign of the cross in the morning and evening and continues to spend 30 minutes or more reading and studying the Bible each day.

"I just thank God every day," she said.

Other family members said the experience strengthened their faith too.

"I guess all things are possible with God," Mrs. Lange said.

It sounds like a cliché, but the beauty of the world seems to mean more now to Mrs. Wilson. An avid rose gardener, the experience forced her to stop and, well, you know ...

"From the kitchen window, I can see the sunsets," she said, arcing her hand across the room. "The world is really beautiful."

She's getting older. She knows that. But her near-death experience changed something about that too.

"I'll never be afraid to die."

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