

Methodist Hospital's
Community Health
Magazine

Spring 1998
\$2.95

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Against All Odds

Near-drowning victim experiences "miraculous" recovery

By Patricia Fitzmorris Danflous

Eleven-year-old Christopher Dixon is a whiz at video games, especially "Killer Instinct." He plays basketball hour after hour when he's not riding his bike or skating. He worries a little bit about a history test next week or a math assignment. After all, the first year of middle school is important. You might say that Christopher is just like any other seventh-grader. He's not. Christopher Dixon is a miracle child.



Of course,

he doesn't say that. The Alfred Lawless student doesn't really remember anything special that happened to him, and he sure wishes his mother, sisters, brother and other relatives would stop fussing over him. But they know he's special; they know that God's hand saved his life.

"It is a miracle that Christopher is alive today," says his mother, Marilyn Dixon. "And a greater miracle that his brain is not damaged," adds his aunt, Vera Blunt.

"The doctors at Methodist Hospital gave us little hope," says his mother. "But they kept working on him, trying everything to get him to wake up. Maybe God heard my prayers or maybe He just decided to give a little more help to the doctors and nurses so that they wouldn't give up."

Christopher drowned on the Fourth of July.

When his family arrived at a cousin's apartment complex for a celebration party, he was in the pool within minutes. He jumped in, came up and went back down. He didn't come back up and no one could see him. The pool was dirty and had several broken pipes.

Monique, Christopher's older sister, searched under the water for him without success, while his cousin, Deonne Jones, pleaded for help from anyone. No one answered the call for help. Hearing the other children's cries, Dixon called 911. "Then two young men came out of nowhere—André Totapo and Alex Scott," says Dixon. "André borrowed someone's goggles and searched for Christopher."

By the time he was pulled to the surface, Christopher had been underwater for at least 15 minutes. He had no pulse and wasn't breathing. "My older daughter applied CPR, with André's help, until the police, firemen and ambulance arrived," Dixon says. "They got a faint heartbeat, but he was unconscious."

"When Christopher arrived at the Methodist Hospital emergency department, he had been unconscious for quite a while and we were not sure how long he had been under the water," says Methodist Hospital emergency physician John Langley, M.D. "Although the prognosis did not look promising, we began a comprehensive set of tests while making sure that he was properly ventilated.

"In the emergency department, we have a commitment and responsibility to do everything possible for all of our patients, but when it is a child, you really want to make sure that you try every option, and a few more," Langley says.

For Methodist Hospital physicians, that extra step included prescribing oxygen therapy treatment

in the hospital's hyperbaric medicine unit. "Hyperbaric medicine is not one of the routine indications for a drowning victim," notes Gary Danos, M.D., one of the unit's medical directors. "In this case, however, we felt it might give Christopher an edge."

Danos, Christopher's pediatrician Louis Bevrote, M.D., and Methodist Hospital chaplain Paul Durbin escorted the family to the hyperbaric medicine unit and helped to explain the process that would send 100 percent pure oxygen throughout his body. "Christopher was in the hyperbaric chamber for an hour and a half as we continued to monitor his vital signs," says Danos.

The Methodist family has a special interest in Christopher. His grandmother, Addie Dixon, retired from the hospital after more than 23 years of service, and his aunt, Linda Johnson, is a current employee. "It seemed everyone at Methodist stopped by to offer comfort," Dixon recalls. "They all wanted to do just a little bit more to help him."

Following an hour and a half treatment in the chamber, Christopher was transferred to the pediatric intensive care unit at Tulane University Medical Center.

"You want to be encouraging and offer hope, but there is also a time to be realistic," says Chaplain Durbin. "This was a case in which the doctors were giving little, if any hope. We prayed with the family, but I told his mother that Christopher was in God's hands and it was uncertain if he would recover."

It was Sunday, July 6, two days after the drowning, when Christopher woke up. "I went in to talk to Christopher and hold his hand," Dixon recalls. "It was ice cold and I tried to warm him up. 'Chris, this is Mama, can you hear me?' I said. He opened his eyes. I couldn't believe it and neither could the doctors."

Christopher had been unconscious for almost 48 hours and woke up feeling fine, aside from



Near-drowning victim Christopher Dixon and his mom, Marilyn, share a special hug.

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exhaustion, a sore throat from a breathing tube and no memory of what had happened. Christopher was wide awake, defying the odds.

"This is a miracle," says Methodist Hospital vice president of patient services Carol Beck, R.N. "When a person is underwater for such a long time, the usual outcome is death or severe brain damage. Christopher's recovery is miraculous."


Doctors and nurses are still amazed. "We did everything that could be done for Christopher but were not sure if there would be a positive outcome," Langley comments.

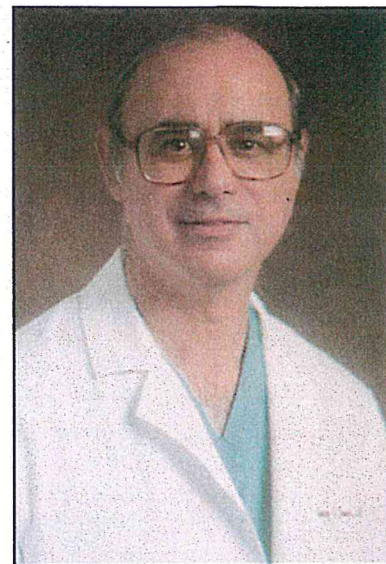
After Chris woke up, his neurological responses were immediately tested. The young boy was asked to wiggle his left toe, wiggle his right toe, move his right hand, move his left hand and turn his head from

side to side. Everything was normal. Several CAT scans and routine physical examinations, including speech and physical therapy evaluations, all provided the same results — Christopher had not suffered any damage other than some memory loss and physical weakness.

"One of his eyes had a red spot in it, but that was it," says Dixon. "We think he may have cut himself when he first jumped in the pool."

"Christopher continues to show no signs of his near-fatal experience," adds Bevrotte. "This is one special boy."

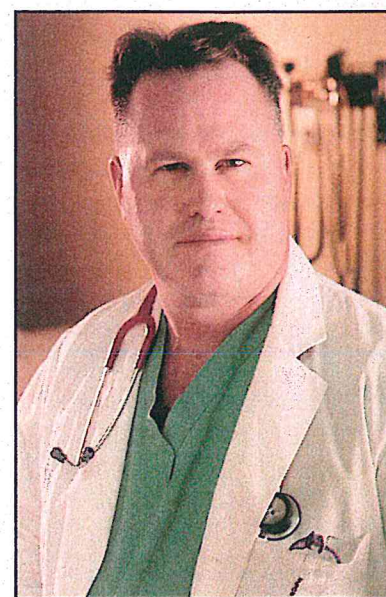
Some might call it luck, some would say medicine can do wonderful things, but the Dixon family just says, "Thank you, God, and thank you to all the doctors and nurses who wouldn't give up." 



Gary Danos, M.D.



Louis Bevrotte, M.D.



John Langley, M.D.

Water Safety Tips

Water sports are a year-round activity in Louisiana, so water safety is a constant concern. The first rule of water safety is to take every precaution possible. Wear life jackets when boating, check the water depth before diving, don't run around a pool, monitor young children and remember that drinking alcohol while participating in water sports is not a good idea. But these and other general safety precautions may not prevent the unexpected. If you encounter a drowning situation, follow these general emergency guidelines:

- Alert someone to call for emergency medical help.
- If you can easily reach the victim, extend your hand or leg and pull the victim to safety. If you are not close, throw out a rope or board.
- When a neck or back injury is suspected, keep the spine in a natural position by placing something rigid under the victim's neck and back as he is lifted from the water.
- Check for responsiveness, then open the airway and restore breathing and circulation.
- If the victim is breathing but unconscious, place him in the recovery position, on his side with his head leaning forward to drain any fluids.
- Keep the victim warm.

You Could Save a Life

Methodist Hospital offers cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) classes for the community on a regular basis throughout the year. The four-hour course provides participants with an introduction to basic lifesaving techniques along with the proper methods of applying CPR. For information on CPR classes, contact the education department at 244-5415.