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**Nanci Danison:** In the afterlife, she felt indescribable happiness as a feeling of love washed over her.



**Thomas Benson:** Even with his eyes closed, he saw the light from his window growing abnormally bright.



**Lynn Rietschlin:** She gazed at the sheer curtain, somehow sensing that her deceased father would soon appear.



**Corynn Nutter:** She noticed a girl about her age, with blond hair and blues eyes, seemingly floating next to her bed.

## Hospitals keep \$3B in cash reserves

How much to save,  
invest in community  
an art, official says

By Ben Sutherly  
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

A health-care construction boom hasn't kept local hospital systems from adding to the \$3 billion or so that they hold in cash reserves.

OhioHealth has amassed the most cash: about \$1.9 billion toward the end of its 2010 fiscal year. That's enough money to keep the health system, which includes Grant Medical Center and Riverside Methodist Hospital, running for about 356 days, even if its hospitals provided free care to all patients.

Among institutions rated similarly by Fitch Ratings, the median days of cash on hand was 215.

In comparison, UC Health in

See **HOSPITALS** Page A4

NOTED NEUROSURGEON

## OSU loses one of its top docs to Boston

By Ben Sutherly  
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Dr. E. Antonio "Nino" Chiocca, who came to Ohio State University 8 1/2 years ago to expand its fledgling neurosurgery department, is leaving for Boston, where he trained.

Chiocca, 52, will join the Brigham and Women's and the Faulkner hospitals as chair of neurosurgery and co-director of the Institute for the Neurosciences at Brigham, effective Aug. 1. The hospital is a teaching affiliate of Harvard Medical School, and Chiocca will hold a faculty appointment there.

Ohio State wooed Chiocca from Harvard in late 2003, in part by creating a neurosurgery department.

During Chiocca's tenure at Ohio

See **DOCTOR** Page A4



ERIC ALBRECHT | DISPATCH PHOTOS

**Anonymous:** Thousands of scenes from her life began swirling around her, immersing her so she could feel the emotions of others.

**O**n the day she died, Nanci Danison never felt more alive.

Engulfed in a cocoon of bright, warm light, she felt love and acceptance beyond human comparison.

She understood her life with perfect clarity and could answer even the most profound questions: about the existence of God, the creation of the universe.

During a breast biopsy in 1994, Danison felt herself slipping out of her body and into what she knows, unmistakably, was the afterlife.

An allergic reaction to the anesthetic caused her to pass out for only a few moments. Yet in that brief time, her world transformed: her perception of her law career and personal relationships; her religious convictions; her view of life and, especially, death.

See **HEREAFTER** Page A6

## LIFE AFTER DEATH

By Amy Saunders | THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Thousands say they've experienced  
the peace and warmth of the hereafter  
— and lived to tell about it

## Obama honors Vietnam vets

By Ken Thomas  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama paid tribute yesterday to the men and women who have died defending America, pointing to Vietnam veterans as an underappreciated and sometimes maligned group of war heroes who remained true to their nation despite an unwelcome homecoming.

"You were sometimes blamed for the misdeeds of a few," Obama said at the Vietnam War Memorial. "You came home and were sometimes denigrated when you should have been celebrated. It was a national shame, a disgrace that should have never happened. "Even though some Americans turned their backs on you, you never turned your back on America," Obama said.

Marking Memorial Day at both



JONATHAN ERNST | REUTERS

the black granite wall honoring more than 58,000 soldiers who died in the Vietnam War and earlier at Arlington National Cemetery across the Potomac River, Obama

See **VETS** Page A3

**President Barack Obama stands with his arm around Vietnam War widow Rose Mary Sabo-Brown, after he and first lady Michelle Obama laid a wreath with her at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.**

## House members take minute to speak mind

By Jessica Wehrman  
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

WASHINGTON — During a typical day on the floor of the House of Representatives, some of the quirkiest action occurs in a largely empty chamber before official business begins.

These are the congressional "one-minutes" or, more recently, five-minute "morning hour" speeches — off-topic verbal misfires once aimed at the C-SPAN audience. Not long ago they were considered so vitriolic and partisan that some congressional scholars recommended scrapping the tradition.

In a time when legislative action is increasingly rare — Congress has passed 119 public laws since it convened in January 2011, compared with the 908 passed by the "do-nothing" Congress of 1947-48



**UNDER  
THE DOME**

An occasional series  
on how government really  
works — or doesn't.

— members need to make it known that they're doing something.

The speeches give them a chance to talk about what they're doing. They can tell colleagues and constituents where they stand, and what they'd be for if more were actually being done.

It's here, for example, that Rep. Steve Stivers stood up and urged his colleagues to support a bill he'd

See **HOUSE** Page A4

## HEREAFTER

FROM PAGE A1

"Everything that I believed before," said Danison, 62, of Dublin, "I could no longer believe."

For Danison and others, near-death experiences represent major turning points, often with after-effects that last a lifetime. Perhaps 5 percent of the U.S. population has

experienced it, according to a study frequently cited by researchers.

The experiences represent a phenomenon with no single explanation. Few can agree on how people can later recount such high levels of awareness when their brains showed no signs of functioning.

Near-death experiences occur across ages, cultures and religions; with or without medication; and in

a variety of circumstances: near-drownings and drug overdoses, catastrophic car crashes and routine medical procedures.

Their similarity inspires conversational clichés — the light at the end of the tunnel, life flashing before one's eyes — yet no two experiences are completely alike.

Some researchers see them as evidence that consciousness exists outside the body, citing anecdotes

about blind people reporting visual details and patients describing their own surgeries with perfect accuracy.

"Near-death experiences are absolutely medically inexplicable," said Jeffrey Long, a radiation oncologist in Louisiana and founder of the 13-year-old Near Death Experience Research Foundation.

Others examine the experiences in neurological terms, correlating

their elements with mechanisms the brain uses in response to crisis.

Although University of Kentucky neurologist Kevin Nelson thinks near-death experiences are explained by science, he also acknowledges their power to change lives, usually for the better.

"They're important for the profound effect they have upon us," Nelson said. "How they came about is often of lesser importance."

## Nanci Danison

Within a few days of the diagnosis, Danison said her goodbyes, shared her will and transferred bank accounts into her sister's name.

She learned about the cancer in her breast last May — 17 years after her initial biopsy, which had proved benign but produced her near-death experience.

Doctors were optimistic about the Stage II cancer, which was less advanced than initially expected, and scheduled a lumpectomy.

Danison, though, felt certain that she wouldn't survive the surgery, and like many others who have had near-death experiences, she didn't fear death.

"It was like: 'Oh, my gosh. I'm going home!'" she said enthusiastically. "I was probably the only cancer patient who was ever excited they were going to die."

Back in 1994, she felt indescribable happiness in the afterlife as a feeling of love washed over her, like being moved to tears, but hundreds of times more intense. Rays of light,



ERIC ALBRECHT | DISPATCH PHOTOS

Nanci Danison: "We are all part of one entity. What happens to us after these bodies die is automatic."

which Danison identified as loved ones, greeted her as if she'd been away.

Pouring into her was endless knowledge — all she had ever studied, and philosophical lessons of the universe, but also truths about her behavior and personality.

Increasingly, Danison said, she felt humiliated as she realized how trivial her existence had been.

A partner at a large law firm, Danison had been working at least six days a week and waking up at night with case-related stress. She had divorced after five years of marriage, having seen her husband usually only for dinner on Fridays and breakfast on Sundays.

In the afterlife, her hard-earned achievements — three academic degrees, a prestigious job, a high

salary — seemed no more real or important than a TV show.

Seeing her time on Earth as fleeting and minuscule, she understood that everything had originated and would ultimately return to what she calls the "Source" of the universe.

"Life and death are simple," she said. "We have all these complicated religions and philosophies and belief systems that come from

human thought that have nothing whatsoever to do with the truth of the afterlife.

"We are all part of one entity. What happens to us after these bodies die is automatic."

Insistent that people should know what she had learned, Danison found herself physically moving backward, her knowledge fading as she returned to a body that felt as heavy and confining as clay.

It took years to make sense of an experience so extensive that she has now written three books. She sometimes speaks about the experience; and, through her website, regularly communicates with people seeking to learn from her philosophy.

Danison, who is single and has no children, started her own law firm seven months after the experience in an effort to reduce her stress. She tells family members she loves them after every conversation, knowing that it might be her last opportunity.

Since finishing her cancer treatment, she hasn't had another premonition like the one she had before the surgery. Although she dreads the thought of dying in a painful manner, she considers the process a transition, not an end.

"If your belief is that this is the only life there is, losing it is the most-terrifying thing that can ever happen," she said.

"I know for a fact that we continue to live."

## Anonymous

Somewhere over the ocean, as she worried about plane crashes, she wanted to know whether she had really visited the afterlife.

Until that flight to Hawaii, she had never researched her near-death experience, afraid that she would be diagnosed with some sort of mental illness.

Opening a book she had ignored for some time, she began reading about others who, in dying, felt more peace than ever before. Encouraged, she turned to her sister in the next seat and explained what had happened when the blood clot



Anonymous: "It was just the most beautiful experience in the world."

threatened her life.

"Ugh," her sister responded, rolling her eyes. "I think all you guys are hallucinating."

Since that exchange in 1990, the woman, now 49, has shared her story with her husband and her priest, but not with friends or even her parents or her teenage children.

The soft-spoken marketing professional asked not to be identified in this story, fearing the reaction

from her co-workers at a prominent Columbus company.

For her and many others, near-death experiences can be deeply secret as much as life-changing. Even those who wouldn't criticize the experiences, many say, could not understand their meaning.

"Over the years, I've tried to find the words, but they don't even come close to describing what I want to say," the woman said. "It was just the most-beautiful experience in the world."

She was 24 when she awoke in her parents' home to excruciating pain throughout her left side, caused by what she later learned was a blood clot in her leg.

At the time, she just knew — somehow — that she was dying. Too weak to call for help, she reached for a nearby sticky note.

*Thanks for everything,* she wrote in green marker, just before every-

thing faded to black.

As bright light began to fill the room, she found herself looking down at someone lying in the fetal position. Slowly, she realized that the person was her and that, wherever she was, her pain had been replaced by a wonderful feeling, as if arms were wrapped around her.

Thousands of scenes from her life began swirling around her, immersing her so much that she could feel the emotions of people she had helped or hurt at each moment. A greater force that she couldn't see or hear told her everything she wanted to know, although she can no longer remember it.

Her great-grandparents accompanied her for much of the experience, along with many others she didn't recognize but knew as loved ones. After a while, when she realized her time with them was ending, she couldn't understand why

she had to leave.

She cries now in remembering her heartbreak in knowing that she would return to a world of pain.

Back in her parents' house, she regained consciousness, twisted her skin until it felt real, and then cried for help from her family members.

Although she keeps the experience to herself, she gives thanks every day for the extra time. When death comes again, though, she trusts that it won't involve fear but the feeling of love she already knows.

"It was 100 times more — thousands of times more — than love for your parents or your child," she said. "Multiply that by I don't know how many times, that's what it was like."

"Nothing comes close. I love my husband; I love my kids. But nothing comes close."

## Thomas Benson

"He's forgiven me! He's forgiven me!" the congregation shouted, echoing the words of their pastor, Benson.

"I should not be where I am today because of my crack-cocaine use," Benson told the group, his reserved nature giving way to a voice that boomed.

"You know why drugs did not take you?" he bellowed. "Because God is not through with you yet!"

"You know why you didn't die when you should have died? Because God is not through with you yet!"

The members of Key to the Kingdom Ministries on the Northeast Side nodded in agreement, closing their eyes and raising their arms while joining Benson in praise.

Although they know about his addiction-plagued past, most haven't heard how Benson once lay dying from what probably was a drug-induced heart attack — and how God, he believes, spared his life.

The 44-year-old Pickerington resident worries that the story sounds crazy even to faithful congregants, people who greet newcomers to church with hugs instead of handshakes.

Benson's near-death experience in 1988 stemmed from a weeknight like any other: Just off the clock from his custodian job, he had traded his paycheck for marijuana and crack cocaine and mixed them together.

He woke to the morning light peeking through the blinds of his North Linden duplex, smoke still lingering in the air as he stretched and prepared to get out of bed for work.



Thomas Benson: "The key is to unlock purpose, unlock destiny — whatever it is God is giving you to do. I believe he was giving me the key to life."

Suddenly, he felt searing pain throughout his body, as if his internal organs were ripping apart. His heart sped and breathing slowed until he could no longer move.

Even with closed eyes, he saw the light from his window growing abnormally bright, blinding him as if he were staring at the sun. He felt movement and heard voices but knew he wasn't tripping again: If that were the case, he wouldn't feel so much pain.

*It's time to come home,* one voice said.

*You have another chance,* another followed.

Realizing that he had to beg for

his life, the 21-year-old began mouthing the words he was too weak to say aloud: "Please don't let me die. Please don't let me die," he said, gasping for air. "If you allow me to live, I will minister, I will preach. ... Please, I don't want to die right now."

Just then, a warmth filled his body, as if the touch of a hand had healed him. He no longer felt pain, but he lay in bed for the rest of the day, too terrified to move.

Benson didn't immediately abandon his lifestyle of partying six nights a week. He used to skip the clubs only on Friday nights to attend a "gospel skate" at a roller rink, thinking that counted as

church even when he was high.

But he smoked pot again only a few more times before quitting for good, unable to shake his feelings of guilt.

Although many people feel a spiritual growth after a near-death experience, Benson said he feels that he made a pact with God.

In getting clean, he reconnected with his middle-school girlfriend, Sylvia, now his wife and co-pastor, and raised their six children. He attended Columbus State Community College and worked a series of administrative jobs, including his current position at Franklin County Municipal Court.

All the while, Benson worked

toward building his ministry, traveling as an evangelist and serving as an associate pastor of another church before starting his own in 2000.

In addition to Sunday services, Benson hosts weekly support groups to help congregants with relationships, addiction and other struggles.

For him, his work at Key to the Kingdom gives meaning to the near-death experience that inspired the name of the church.

"The key is to unlock purpose, unlock destiny — whatever it is God is giving you to do," he said. "I believe he was giving me the key to life."

## Lynn Rietschlin

If the other driver wasn't already dead, she would have killed him, Rietschlin's daughter vowed when her mother awoke from a two-week coma.

Rietschlin had just learned of her 19 broken bones, including a skull fracture, as well as nerve damage, a partially collapsed lung and a spleen in danger of rupturing.

She wasn't angry, though, when told about the crash — how it wouldn't have happened had the other driver not tried to evade an eighth conviction for driving under the influence.

She'd had hateful, bitter moments in her life, having endured a messy divorce, but this wasn't one of them.

"I felt I had been given grace," said Rietschlin, 47, of Mansfield. "And their family had lost someone."

The crash, Rietschlin said, made her more loving, accepting and patient. It's a conversion shared by many people who have had near-



Lynn Rietschlin: "Maybe I really know for myself that death is just the next step."

death experiences, even as they endured the hardships that accompany traumatic events.

In 2009, the traffic light had just turned green as Rietschlin was driving to her 10:30 p.m. shift at a plastics factory 10 minutes from

home.

She didn't hear the police cars in pursuit, see the pickup truck flying toward her at 80 mph or feel the car door smashing into her.

One second, she was about to put her foot on the gas pedal; the next,

she was reclining in a warm cocoon of soft, golden light.

She gazed at the sheer curtain, somehow sensing that her deceased father would soon appear. She felt such peace that she was content to wait for him, even for what seemed

like years.

But at one point, she thought to look below her, where she saw a vision of her husband, four children, son-in-law and granddaughter.

Each glowed with colored lights that she instinctively and overwhelmingly identified as being love for her — so tangible, still, that the thought of it makes her cry.

Although she wanted to stay with her father, she knew she had to return for her family, to love them as much as they loved her.

"You can't do enough for those people when you realize what love really is," she said. "You hope that if they were in that position, they'd see that much love coming from you."

Three years after the crash, Rietschlin walks with a limp and suffers migraines, dizzy spells and back pain that prevent her from working.

Meanwhile, the family has struggled financially, with debt and medical expenses mounting, since her husband injured his back and lost his job in 2010.

Rietschlin, though, doesn't stress as much as she might have before the crash. Worrying about money just doesn't seem as important when she knows what awaits her at the end of her life.

"Maybe it's easier to find happiness in small things," she said. "Maybe I really know for myself that death is just the next step."

## Corynn Nutter

Her head slammed into the bottom of the hot tub so hard that she cracked some teeth.

At first, Corynn's friends thought she was hiding underwater, just joking around.

But Nutter knew immediately that she was helplessly stuck, her waist-long hair wrapped around and around the exposed drain of a defective tub.

She thrashed with all her strength as the two friends with her tried pulling her up, turning off the hot-tub pump and cutting with pink shears that were no match for her thick, curly hair.

Eventually, she stopped trying, opened her mouth and surrendered.

"I'm going to die, the 10-year-old thought, so I have to let this water in."

Around the Northwest Side home where the girls were playing alone, neighbors panicked as their calls to 911 went nowhere during a rare system failure that day in 1991.

But trapped underwater for at least five minutes — maybe even 10 — Nutter felt peace.

She remembers the sound of stronger scissors freeing her hair and the voice of the doctor at the hospital, saying that she was slipping into a coma and might not come out.

Her next memory: the hospital room becoming incredibly bright, and a bearded, red-eyed man with long hair approaching her with a knife.

"Get him out of my room!" Corynn screamed repeatedly, much to the alarm of her mother, who was sitting at her bedside.

Corynn then noticed a girl about her age, with blond hair and blue



Corynn Nutter: "It was a very calming experience, even though it was such a tragic experience."

eyes, seemingly floating next to her bed. The girl smiled at Corynn, taking the man by a wrist.

"He dropped the knife; his eyes turned blue; he turned around, walked out of my room, shut the door," she recalled, "and I woke up from my coma."

Emerging from the five-day coma, she suffered no injuries other than persistent headaches. Before the incident, a hose spraying cold water had been placed in the tub, perhaps cooling the water enough to help her survive.

She didn't experience nightmares, traumatic flashbacks or

even a fear of water: The week she was discharged from the hospital, her furious parents caught her playing in a neighbor's hot tub.

"It was a very calming experience, even though it was such a tragic experience," said Nutter, 31, now a hairstylist living in the Polaris area.

Without knowledge of near-death experiences or preconceived notions of the afterlife, children have reported stories similar to those of adults, with effects just as life-altering.

The man's face remains seared in Nutter's mind, as vivid today as

### MORE ON THE WEB

To hear and see Corynn Nutter, Lynn Rietschlin and Nanci Danison tell their stories, go to [Dispatch.com/video](#).

it was two decades ago. She wonders whether he was really the sort of demonic Jesus he resembled, and what would have happened had the angelic girl not intervened.

Nutter will always wonder whether — or why — the devil really appeared to a 10-year-old girl, one raised on prayer in Catholic schools and churches. Per-

haps as a result of her search for answers, she grew up to be a high-school student who was, on multiple occasions, kicked out of religion class for asking too many questions.

She hasn't attended Mass since high school, focusing instead on a spiritual presence that she feels constantly. For some reason, she trusts, God must want her here.

"There's no scientific reason I should be alive — none," she said. "How can you not believe there's something else out there?"

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# Essence of near-death experiences still debated

By Amy Saunders | THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Four decades ago, people who had near-death experiences probably wouldn't have called them by that name.

They might have assumed they were crazy. Not until 1975 was the term *near-death experience* coined in *Life After Life*, a book by psychiatrist Raymond A. Moody that has sold 13 million copies worldwide.

With its 150 accounts from people once on the verge of death, the book encouraged open discussions of near-death experiences as it introduced the topic to mainstream society.

But experts continue to debate whether such experiences represent symptoms of a dying brain or events that occur independently of the body, in the realm of the afterlife.

After exploring the subject in 11 books, Moody believes that an explanation of near-death experiences is irrevocably linked with an understanding of consciousness — which has eluded researchers since the time of Plato.

"We simply don't know how that unique inner-experience of being aware and being conscious is connected to the material substance of the body or the brain," he said. "In

reality, we just don't know."

Nor do researchers understand the extent of near-death experiences. Although the phenomenon probably has become more common with advances in resuscitation technology, experiences remain difficult to quantify when many people are reluctant to share them.

Experts state that 5 percent of Americans have undergone a near-death experience, but the figure dates from a 1982 Gallup poll.

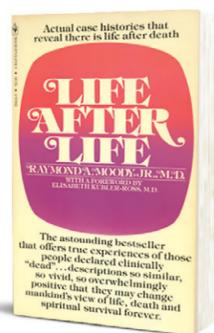
Other statistics stem from studies of more-specific populations: In 2001, the international medical journal *Lancet* published a 13-year study of Dutch hospitals showing

that 12 percent of cardiac-arrest patients reported near-death experiences.

The topic divides the medical community, with some physicians asserting that near-death experiences encompass a variety of brain functions that combine to create an experience unique to each person and situation.

Experiences occur, they say, as parts of the brain turn off and on in response to trauma: Activation of the visual system, for example, produces the bright light that many see; a release of dopamine results in a sense of euphoria.

A 1994 study in the *Lancet* noted



similarities between near-death experiences and fainting: In both situations, subjects reported feeling out-of-body sensations, seeing lights or a tunnel and enjoying a sense of peace.

People who had near-death experiences were more prone than others to shifting between waking and sleeping, University of Kentucky neurologist Kevin Nelson found in a 2005 study.

Visuals, memories and other dreamlike qualities of experiences, he suggests, seem vividly real when projected onto waking consciousness.

"They're not dreams in the usual sense," Nelson said. "But I think they do call upon the machinery of dreams under very different circumstances."

Other researchers insist that thousands of narratives, consistently similar worldwide, prove that near-death experiences can be explained only spiritually, not scientifically.

Radiation oncologist Jeffrey Long says that his 2010 book, *Evidence of the Afterlife*, contains nine lines of such proof, based on his 13-year examination of more than 1,300 detailed questionnaires submitted online to his Near Death Experience Research Foundation.

Among them: Patients under anesthesia have described a higher-than-usual level of consciousness, and people are certain that they encountered deceased relatives, including those they had never met or didn't know they had.

Many of the accounts involved verifiable out-of-body experiences, in which unconscious patients have recited the words of doctors during surgery and young children with no knowledge of medicine have explained complex procedures.

In an ongoing study at 25 major medical centers in the United States, Canada and Europe, researchers have been examining the relationship between mind and body during cardiac arrest.

One aspect of the study involves hospital rooms with hidden images that could be seen only if a patient was having an out-of-body experience. The study, researchers say, could carry implications not only for medicine but also for a societal understanding of life and death.

Yet with limited research and funding available, Long said, the topic remains widely open to investigation.

"What we don't know about near-death experiences far outweighs what we do know at the current time."