

CULTURE

Back from a coma, former Roanoke sportscaster returns to broadcast booth

Covid nearly killed Justin Ditmore — six times. Here’s how he survived.



by **Robert Anderson**
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Justin Ditmore works the Cave Spring–Hidden Valley game on August 26. Photo by Robert Anderson.

Justin Ditmore's life has been defined by numbers.

The 53-year-old Roanoke County resident kept score for 13 years as a reporter and sports director for WSLN-TV.

He crunched actuarial tables working in the insurance business.

However, one year ago, Ditmore's number was just about up.

He contracted COVID-19 during a summer beach trip.

Upon returning to Roanoke, he amassed these statistics:

He was hospitalized for 138 days.

He was in a medically-induced coma for 2 1/2 months.

He was treated by 10 doctors and more than 50 nurses.

He was on 23 medications.

He lost 69 pounds.

He nearly died six times.

Somehow, he survived.

So how do you thank the people who saved your life?

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“They just don’t know”

In late July 2021, Ditmore took a vacation to Sunset Beach in North Carolina with his two children; Andrew and Ashley; his girlfriend of eight years, Beth Fisher; and her twin daughters, Gracie and Sydney.

Toward the end of the trip, he began feeling sick. When Ditmore returned to Roanoke, he tested positive for COVID.

On Wednesday, Aug. 4 of last year, his oxygen level — which should be at least 95 percent for a healthy adult — was in the 80s.

After a trip to an emergency room clinic on Electric Road, he was sent home.

The next day, Ditmore’s oxygen level had dropped to the 70s.

Fisher handed him an ultimatum.

“She said, ‘You’re either going to the ER or I’m calling 911,’ ” he said.

It is the last thing he can clearly remember until early November.

Ditmore checked into the emergency room at Carilion Roanoke Memorial Hospital the following day. (*Disclosure: Carilion is one of our donors but donors have no say in news decisions; [see our policy](#)*).

He was placed on an extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO) machine.

He went on kidney dialysis. He was placed in a medically-induced coma. His weight dropped from 212 pounds to 143.

Ditmore texted Fisher, so he is told, upon arriving at RMH:

“No need to worry. Just need some oxygen. Will be here a little while.”

Then the texts stopped, and Fisher got a call from the hospital.

“They said he’s going on a ventilator,” she recalled. “The day I dropped him off, I never imagined that I was dropping him off for five months.”

COVID pneumonia had invaded Ditmore’s lungs with a vengeance.

He was not vaccinated.

“I was supposed to be vaccinated the day I went to the hospital,” he said. “I didn’t have a problem with it. I was 52 years old, in perfect health. I wasn’t ‘anti-anything.’ I just wasn’t in a hurry.”

But COVID didn’t care.

Ditmore was released from the hospital on Dec. 20, and he is still recovering from the trauma.

Why did he get so sick?

“They don’t know why it went to town on me,” he said. “They just don’t know.”

How did he survive?

* * *

“Sickest of the sick”

Sarah Curran was a schoolteacher in Indiana before she decided to change careers.

During her 10 years at Carilion she has been a cardiothoracic nurse.

“I went straight into the deep end,” she said.

Many of her patients are the “sickest of the sick.”

Ditmore qualified by all measures.

Curran oversaw Ditmore when he was hooked up to ECMO, a machine that removed his blood, infused it with oxygen and reinserted it into the body, essentially taking over for his lungs which were damaged by COVID pneumonia.

Chest tubes from a ventilator kept Ditmore's lungs inflated just enough to keep them from collapsing.

He was placed in the medically-induced coma, primarily to keep his oxygen level high enough to stay alive.

"We had to paralyze him, because even the act of shivering or coughing or twitching or blinking consumes oxygen," Curran said. "Even giving oxygenated blood he would drop to bottom-of-the-barrel range.

"We were still going to do all that we can because he might get better, but there were several times where the thought went through my head, 'What are we doing here? Are we allowing this man to die with dignity, because I don't think this is going to work?'"

Ditmore's nurse had well-founded concerns.

He set off the hospital's 'Code Blue' alert when he choked on his own mucous.

On another occasion, Ditmore nearly lost his life when he almost 'bled out.'

There were four other close calls.

"He almost died several times," Curran said. "There was a really good point in time where I thought he was going to die."

Curran already had lost COVID patients and it was taking a heavy toll.

"I was pretty broken from watching people who should not be dying, dying," she said. "It was affecting my entire life. Being in the particular field in nursing that I'm in is about as intense as it gets.

"I was really close to throwing in the towel. My husband asked me to quit, and not quit and put in your three-week notice, but quit as in go in there tomorrow and say that you're done."

Curran did not give up.

Neither did Ditmore.

He is just the fifth of 15 COVID-19 patients at RMH that survived after going on ECMO.

Curran said she was heartened in October when Ditmore had recovered after nearly two months on ECMO.

However, she knew Ditmore's recovery was just beginning.

"All of us are so relieved because we've seen what they've been through, but that's when the nightmare starts for them," she said.

"They have people telling them all the time, 'You're doing so good,' but they feel horrible. They've been laying in a bed for months. Their muscles have deteriorated.

We can't even allow them to eat or drink anything. They can't protect their a airway when they swallow because it goes into their lungs instead of down their esophagus.

"They're like a little weak, baby lamb. We have basically gotten them back to where they can do the work on their own, but it takes every bit of their effort."

Curran said the mental part of a patient's recovery is just as important as the physical improvement.

"It's stripped down to the bare humanity," she said. "It strips your dignity away. You've got people wiping your bottom for you. It strips you down to your bare soul. [Some patients] probably went to sleep sick but remembering being a healthy person. They wake up a broken shell of themselves that really has no control over their own body."

Ditmore had control over his resolve. The nurses took note when he left the ICU.

"He was a fighter," Curran said. "His heart was in good shape. He [had] a long road in front of him, but you feel pretty good about it. You just know it's going to be a super-long recovery."

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Beth Fisher with her diary. Photo by Robert Anderson.

Dear diary

Fisher's mother was a school librarian in Richmond.

Fisher has her own record of Justin's hospitalization up on a shelf.

She kept a daily diary for 62 days. The journal provided organization, a historical record and therapy.

"In the beginning, I had notebooks everywhere, because they would call me and I'd have to write it down and there's no way to remember this onslaught of information they're giving me," Fisher said.

"I said, 'I've got to have this all in one place so I can refer back to it.'"

While Justin could not read or hear the words, Fisher, who developed a mild case of COVID during the beach trip, still felt the need to communicate.

“The first 21 days I was not allowed to see him. The first day they only let me look at him through the glass,” she said. “I couldn’t talk to him, but it made me feel better that I could ‘tell him things’ so then I started writing it down.”

Fisher’s fingers caressed the pages gingerly as she opened the diary a year later.

“Some of it is hard to read again,” she said.

She paused at Day 26, Monday, Aug. 30:

“Hot, 90. The longest day ever. I receive a call early from the nurses that they have decided to take you to the OR to replace the chest tube and clean out the lungs. ... First you will need a CT scan to see where the blood is coming from. ... You have blood clots in the current chest tube. ... The nurse tells me this at 6:30 [a.m.]. Then I wait til 9 to talk to the doctor. He tells me the surgery will be at 12. At this point I call all the family and friends and ask for prayers.”

Fisher, who works fulltime at Comcast Communications and is a part-time yoga instructor, needed other help, particularly when bills began arriving in the mail.

“Because we’re not married, he’s in the hospital in a coma, and all of a sudden I realize somebody has to pay his bills and I have no access to his accounts,” she said.

“I didn’t have the passcode for his laptop. It was a gift from God or whoever that I opened up his laptop. I remembered that I had scribbled the password down on a notebook and found it and got into the computer. He had saved his password and his bank accounts.”

Fisher maintained the journal until Oct. 5, Day 62.

“Day 62 was the day he almost died in front of me,” she said. “That’s one of those things that you can never forget.”

She was unable to calm her fears until early November when Ditmore was transferred out of ICU.

“I wouldn’t say that I really felt he was out of the woods until they moved him to the [Progressive Care Unit] off the ICU floor,” she said.

“But we were still having a lot of ups and downs. He battled an infection for a long time they couldn’t get out of control. Is he going to be on dialysis? Is he going to be able to walk? Is he going to have [normal] brain function?”

Now that Ditmore has passed the one-year anniversary, his girlfriend has turned to the 62-page journal to make some sense of the long struggle.

“Just unpacking it all,” she said. “For me, I’m re-reading this because we’re just hitting the time when it was a year ago.

“It’s important to me to look at it now differently.”

* * *

Brave new world

Ditmore watched the 2021 World Series from his hospital room, but he did not remember that the Atlanta Braves defeated the Houston Astros in six games.

Months of narcotics pulsing through his veins had put the former television sports director on another wavelength.

“I thought the [San Francisco] Giants won the Series and they played in a small ballpark using little bats,” he said. “I come out of it and it’s the World Series and it’s the Braves and Astros and I’m like, ‘What?’ “

Curran calls it “ICU psychosis.”

“I was out of my mind a lot,” he said. “I would imagine I was stuck at my friend’s house, I was trapped at Kroger, I was kidnapped, I was kept prisoner in my dreams. They were doing experiments on me in the hospital. All that stuff I thought was happening.

“I don’t remember going to the hospital. I don’t remember anything from August, September and most of October last year. Luckily, my mental capacity, not that it was a high bar to begin with, it’s been fine.”

Ditmore’s recovery began with the simplest of important bodily functions: being able to urinate and learning how to swallow something besides an ice chip.

His failures were difficult to swallow.

“If I ever see another ice chip, ever . . .,” he said. “They’re going to see if I can swallow correctly. They’re giving me milk, water, pudding, different thicknesses of stuff. If I don’t pass this I’m going to lose my mind.”

Ditmore finally passed the test and celebrated in style.

“For whatever reason, I craved a root beer,” he said. “A nurse named Jill walks back in with a cup of root beer and some vanilla ice cream, and she made me a root beer float. I’m so happy, I’m like a little kid.”

* * *

A real gamer

Andrew Ditmore played football at Cave Spring High School in Roanoke County, graduating in 2019.

Today he is a senior majoring in Media Arts & Design at James Madison University where he is anxious to see how the Dukes’ football program will fare now that they have moved up to the Football Bowl Subdivision.

One year ago, Andrew had other concerns.

With his father on life-support in Roanoke, Andrew dropped three classes from a planned five-course load during the first semester of his junior year.

That was the least of his worries.

“I had basically come to terms that I would probably lose my dad,” Andrew said. “It was really terrifying seeing him from a distance, regressing the way he was. There was only so much I could do in Harrisonburg Virginia, two hours north.

“It was just a constant struggle knowing he was in the best hands possible but not only was there nothing I could do, but we could lose him any day.”

Andrew said he and Beth communicated frequently, but he believes his father’s girlfriend shielded him from much of the worst daily medical news.

“I think she told me only the things I needed to know,” Andrew said. “I was told a little bit more once he was doing better, that he had to be brought back to life, that I wasn’t necessarily fully aware of.”

Andrew also said he was worried about the impact of his father’s illness on Ashley, who last fall was beginning her senior year in high school at Cave Spring. He received news from their mother, Emily Scott.

“She basically kept me in the loop,” he said. “My Mom would give me updates on sister on how she was doing.”

Andrew visited his father twice during the early portion of JMU’s first semester when Justin was not fully awake.

Later, when Justin had improved, Andrew had a different sort of one-on-one meeting in mind.

He brought in an Xbox video game console for a Ditmore vs. Ditmore game of Madden Football.

“Me being the non-medical professional that I am, trying to move all these machines that are keeping him alive to set up an Xbox just to play video games,” Andrew said with a chuckle.

“It brought back some good memories between me and him, but also just kind of lifted his mood. There’s not exactly much you can do to entertain yourself in that room, so I think that was good for him.”

When did Andrew know his father was out of danger?

“When he knew how to pick apart my defense,” he said. “I was like, ‘Yep, same old guy.’”

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Ditmore in the broadcast booth at Bogle Stadium August 26. Video by Robert Anderson.

Air time

Ditmore was discharged from the hospital five days before Christmas, just in time to celebrate a special holiday at home with his family.

EZ Rampz, a local company, installed a metal ramp in his driveway so he could roll his wheelchair into his house. He slept in a hospital bed in his basement until he was finally able to walk up two flights of stairs to his bedroom in March.

He still walks with a pronounced limp because of the neuropathy that developed in both feet from being completely immobile and bedridden.

He was able to move with the aid of a walker by late winter, then he ditched the cane he was using in May.

He had his gall bladder removed in April.

On top of it all, he tested positive for COVID again in June.

This time, Fisher had a statistic that her sports-loving boyfriend did not know.

“Fifty percent of people after a long hospital stay, die in the first year because they get something else,” she said. “I never told him that, but I knew it.”

For a change, everyone breathed easily.

Ditmore was placed on a relatively new drug called Paxlovid and escaped with little more than cold symptoms.

“I’m down from 10 doctors to three,” he said. “I don’t take any medications anymore. I was on 23 at one time.

“My lungs are permanently damaged, but [the doctors] don’t know how good they’re going to get, because very few people have been down the road I went down and lived.”

Ditmore missed Ashley’s 2021 volleyball season at Cave Spring, but he watched her Senior Night ceremony via face-time and was able to attend her graduation in person in late May. Ashley is now a freshman at her father’s alma mater, Virginia Tech.

He returned to his job as director of sales and marketing for Roanoke-based Milestone Development in late February, working from home.

He receives outpatient physical therapy twice a week and works out in a local gym three times per week.

His weight has climbed back near his football playing weight of 195 at Atholton High School in his hometown of Columbia, Maryland.

On Aug. 26 when the high school football season kicked off in the Roanoke Valley, Ditmore was behind the microphone at Dwight Bogle Stadium, broadcasting the Cave Spring–Hidden Valley game on WFIR–AM radio with weekly partner Chuck Baker.

Ditmore had enough air in his lungs to go on the air. His voice sounded strong.

“It’s good to have you back,” Baker said.

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The Carilion video about Ditmore’s fight against covid.

Answering the question

Carilion produced a four-minute video detailing Ditmore’s 4 1/2 month hospitalization.

The images and interviews hammer home how lucky Ditmore is to be alive.

“I think I lived for a reason,” he said. “What that reason is may yet to be determined.”

Some of the reasons Ditmore survived were the efforts of his cardiovascular surgeon, Dr. Mark Joseph; his pulmonologists, Dr. Frank Biscardi and Dr. Toribiong Uchel; his infectious disease specialist, Dr. Anthony Baffoe-Bonnie; and the scores of nurses and other hospital personnel.

“Doctor Joseph told me, ‘You’re a miracle,’ ” Ditmore said. “I thanked him. He said, ‘Don’t thank me. God saved you.’ ”

All the heroes are too many for Ditmore to name, but he has not forgotten them.

Intentionally, he spends some evenings at local restaurants where he might encounter one of his nurses, hoping to see a face for the first time not covered by a mask, goggles and a cap.

So how do you thank someone who saved your life?

By living.

“Justin’s recovery renewed my vigor for this type of medicine and how difficult it is. His case particularly renewed my hope,” said Curran, his ECMO nurse. “He was one of the first to truly have gotten to [low] point he got to and come out of it.

“His recovery was my recovery.”