Transcending Time
Body Donor Program’s ‘Silent Instructors’ Help Humanity

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Transcending Time

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It’s been said that the surest way to achieve immortality is to do something that outlasts life.

That observation rang true at an April 17 memorial service for the 215 people who in the past year had bequeathed themselves to the Body Donor Program in the Division of Anatomy at The Ohio State University College of Medicine (COM) to further medical education and research. The service was held in Ohio State’s Mershon Auditorium for the families and friends of the donors.

"The Body Donor Program is the pillar of our Anatomy Program," says Adriana Giuliani, MD candidate in the COM Class of ’19 and a student co-organizer for the 2016 memorial service. "The donors have given us an irreplaceable gift and as such are bringing up the next generation of physicians, dentists, nurses, other health professionals and educators—each one touching hundreds of lives."

The service included student and faculty testimonials, five musical performances and a sand-pouring ceremony in which the names and photos of donors were flashed on a screen and read aloud while students presented white roses to donors’ family members. For all of the tears, embraces and solemnity of the service, the day’s prevailing message was one of reverence and gratitude for the enormity of the donors’ generous gift.

"Your friend or loved one has shared the most cherished gift imaginable," said Patrick Lloyd, DDS, MS, dean of the College of Dentistry, in his welcome address. "In service to humanity, this gift enables future healers to experience the fundamentals of human caring and to glimpse at the very basics of human life."

The annual memorial service is organized entirely by students who benefit from the donor program, which serves the more than 3,100 students enrolled in anatomy classes at Ohio State each year. This total includes approximately 2,000 undergraduates. 800 medical students, 225 dental students. 100 physical and occupational therapy students, more than 30 graduate students seeking PhD and MS degrees in anatomy, and graduate students from other programs who seek a graduate minor in anatomy.

"We typically receive just over 200 bodies per year donated by people from age 18 and up; there is no upper age limit," says Body Donor Program Coordinator Melody Barton in the Division of Anatomy.

Considering the large volume of students in anatomy courses, there is always a need for more donors, Barton adds, emphasizing the incalculable importance of these gifts.

"How else can students in our many healthcare disciplines learn about the human body?" she says, explaining that textbooks and three-dimensional projections "don’t provide the touch and feel" of the body’s intricacies or provide the sense of humanity conveyed by the donors.

Barton says faculty and students regard donors with “ultimate reverence,” pointing out that all students must complete a form through which they pledge to follow numerous “rules of respect.”

"Students realize these are not a model; they’re people who have given their final possession so all of us may benefit from medical knowledge gained by students, physicians and researchers," Barton says, adding that donor families are also highly respected. "Families often delay their grieving and closure until they receive the cremains of their loved one, which can take up to two years.

"If a family chooses not to receive the cremains, they are interred at the program’s expense in a crypt at Silent Home Cemetery in Reynoldsburg, Ohio. Barton says students enjoy coordinating and participating in the memorial service, which is the only funeral some donor families have for their loved one. "It humanizes the donor," she explains. "When students see families crying and hugging and smiling, it brings all the emotions home a little more."

Nicole Wenger, MD candidate in the Class of ‘19 and a co-organizer of the 2016 service, agrees. "For many of us health-professional students, our donor was our first patient and first close encounter with death," Wenger
"Facing feelings associated with death—unease, coming to terms with our own mortality, questions of sacrifice and the human spirit—was as important to us as learning anatomy. Organizing the service was a way for me to process those feelings and give back to donors and families."

"I think the service is vitally important to families; they get to experience a sense of community with a room full of strangers...and see how thankful the hundreds of students are who have learned from their family member."

At the service, Wenger spoke of being inspired "by the generosity of your loved one. Our anatomy professors, as wonderful as they are, can teach us only so much with lectures and textbooks. To truly understand the human body, we need to learn from the body itself; these silent teachers taught me more than any textbook could."

Adriana Giuliani says organizing the service helped her "address the human side of the Anatomy Program and play a larger part in paying my respects to donors. I wanted to make sure enough detail was put into the ceremony so that each loved one would feel that their donor was appropriately and adequately represented."

Giuliani was struck by the diversity among donors. "They were Holocaust survivors, artists, recent college graduates, veterans, children's book authors, nurses and aspiring doctors." she recalls. "Their stories made me smile and cry, but they also made me appreciate them more fully for who they were."

Delivering the service's closing address. Joanne Lynn, MD '84, COM associate dean for student life, said she relates to emotions that donor families feel.

"You may have wondered: 'What were the students learning, and were they respectful and appreciative?'" Lynn said. "Several decades ago my family and I experienced the same thoughts when my grandmother gave this same gift to Ohio State's COM. But as I went through my own anatomy classes, those questions were replaced with admiration and respect for the gift and the deep value of teaching and learning that it reflected."

"Today's service demonstrates that our colleges and students are most aware of the extraordinary nature of this gift," she added. "They have learned the beauty of the structures of the body and their relationships to each other. And beyond the lessons of anatomy, your loved ones have taught us about bravery. Thinking ahead to one's final moments to plan such a gift is a brave and loving act."

Lynn said donors "also have taught us about selflessness, having given as much of themselves as they could to ensure that our students will be prepared to care for those who will someday need their help."
If you are interested in becoming a donor, please review full details about the Body Donor Program, along with an Anatomical Bequeathal and Cremation Authorization Form, at go.osu.edu/bodydonation.