Donor Memorial Speech on Behalf of the Class of 2013

Hello, my name is Evelyn Brosnan, a first year medical student and it is my honor to share some thoughts on behalf of my class in the School of Medicine at this special gathering today. I’d like to start by telling you a couple of anecdotes, a window into the lab so to speak for a few moments so that you might know how incredible and meaningful this experience was that your loved one gave us.

Our donors’ bodies are carefully prepared and protected and we newbies have some trepidation meeting them for the first time. There is a tradition that dissection starts on the torso, and the person’s head, hands and feet remain “covered and bound” until last. These are considered the most human parts of the body and so most likely to engender discomfort initially for the dissectors. Yet it felt bizarre to me to make incisions into this person’s body without having any sense of who she was. So I asked the professor if I could unbind her head to see her and meet her before we started. Happily, he agreed. It made all the difference in the world to me. Quiet and peaceful now, she still had a band-aid on her forehead, a bruise where she had bumped into something unexpectedly, a gold tooth and an ethnicity different from my own. Here were the signifiers of a story, her narrative, her life that I was now privileged to enter.

Since real names are protected, somehow the name Doris emerged as a fitting way for our group to relate to her as a person. As we worked through the layers, she let us see how all the muscles that help us stand and bend and twist are arranged, and then the underlying vertebrae with those discs between them that can slip out of position and trouble us. Beneath that we came to the inner sanctuary of the spine. We opened up the dura mater covering, and there lay the spinal cord, soft and glistening, with a perfectly formed cauda equina of nerve roots at the end. It took my breath away. It was simply beautiful and strangely seemed so alive. A thought flashed into my mind that she hadn’t ever seen this and I caught myself literally almost tapping her on the shoulder to say, “look at this – it’s amazing”. Even though she couldn’t really lift her head and peer down her own back to see the beauty that was hers. In the coming years, whenever I perform a spinal tap procedure to get clues from a patient’s spinal fluid for diagnosis, I will remember to be careful about positioning the needle to protect these beautiful and vitally important nerves that Doris showed us so exquisitely.

Another afternoon, I got to dissect her heart. The heart is superb and well protected inside a resilient pericardial pouch and layers of fatty tissue. Holding it in this initial shapeless state I felt like a sculptor facing a block of stone, before those patient hands chisel away to reveal a hidden treasure. I settled in beside her head at the dissection table, and with her heart in my hands, carefully removed these protective layers to expose the shape we know - the four chambers and the coronary arteries that surround and nourish it with oxygen. Then I opened it up to reveal the clever valves inside and stunning chordae tendineae – literally the “heart strings,” that tug on these valves to keep them tethered as they do their work, opening and closing to help pump blood around the body. For four hours, it was Doris and I in a world of our own, this silent teacher showing me a wondrous vista. As I worked, I realized that this heart beat inside her chest...
for more years that I’ve been alive and how it symbolically held her stories of love given
and received. I wished she were able to tell those to me too.

And to each of you sitting here today I would like to recognize the huge gift *you* too have
given us. I lost my own mother a few months ago. She was somebody I was very close
to. And I recall how protective I was of her handing her body over to the morticians for a
mere 2 days to prepare her for the viewing and funeral. But all of you have waited
graciously for up to 2 years for us to do our work before you could get your loved one
back. I can only imagine what effect that has had on your grieving and that it perhaps
delayed closure for you. I hope today brings comfort to that process.

And in this time that you have waited so patiently, have you ever wondered, what’s going
on over there? How are they treating my mother, father, brother or sister? Are they being
gentle and kind to them? Do they value what they’ve been given? Are they being
respectful? Are they learning anything meaningful? And don’t they know that that’s my
kin, and are they treating them well?

I’d like to tell you today that the answer is “Oh yes. Oh yes indeed – as if it was our own
mother, father, brother, sister, grandmother, or grandfather.” On behalf of my class, we
sincerely thank you and your loved one for the extraordinary gift you chose to give us.
We *are* indebted to you for that. As we go forward in our careers, the technical aspects
of anatomy that we learned through your generosity will most assuredly come with us
and help us be better doctors. But just as importantly, it has shaped us as people, who
understand just how unique each person is on the inside as well as the outside and
accordingly how they might respond differently to our treatments. And who know *now*
what it is to value, respect and care for those who can no longer speak for themselves.

The last time I saw Doris was to take the final lab exam in Anatomy. Arriving at her
table was like meeting a friend. I smiled seeing her and at knowing so intimately the
structure on her body that was pinned for identification. At the end of these 10 weeks, she
was helping me one last time in the exam. I brought flowers that day and placed them in
her dissected hand. I felt it was the least I could do to honor her and say goodbye.

Thank you Doris - and thank you to all of you.