Thank You Speech to Donor Family and Friends

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Good afternoon and welcome, donor family and friends. On behalf of the School of Medicine Class of 2020, I would like to express our profound gratitude for your presence as we share in honoring your loved ones today.

As medical students, we aspire to be stewards of a profession that upholds selfless service and compassion as some of its core values. While we hope to practice these virtues, your loved ones’ generosity wholly exemplifies them. Anatomy is the cornerstone of medicine, and our donors truly are our first teachers. They illuminate the brilliance of the human body to us. More importantly, they urge us to contemplate the transience of life and the certainty of death, issues we will engage with daily as we care for patients.

The discipline of anatomy certainly didn’t come naturally to me, but I found myself awestruck by the body’s poetry – the intricacies of blood vessels, like climbing honeysuckle vines; the fine meshwork of nerveplexuses, like tiny pearls on a branching thread. I grew up playing the violin, training my fingers to dance across the strings for hours. The first occasion I spent time alone in the lab with my donor, studying the wisdom of his hands, emotions welled up inside me. For his hands must have nurtured: watered plants, held another human being, or even played a musical instrument themselves. At that moment, I was overwhelmed by the feeling of belonging to something greater, similar to the view you have taking off from a runway when you have
the window seat – the city’s blocky skyscrapers shrinking to little Lego roofs, the glittering lights shrinking becoming glowing colored lozenges.

I’m sure my classmates shared similar experiences. Those who are athletes must have been especially amazed by our donors’ muscles, and those who are travelers must have admired their weathered feet. As anatomy progressed and we explored the intricacies of the body, we began to put all these incredible parts together into a map, into an entire world. But as much as we may have studied these physical minutiae – eyes, lips, hearts – only you knew the love our donors exuded, the lives they lived. Today we celebrate the joy they brought to your lives, and the insight they so unselfishly lent to ours.

Physician and poet William Carlos Williams once wrote, “Their story, yours and mine – it’s what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them.” During anatomy, I thought I knew how much our donors had given to guide our learning, but now, working alongside my preceptor in the clinic, testing the parts of patients’ bodies that I first learned by seeing and feeling in the anatomy lab, I really know how much they gave.

To my donor: I promise to carry your story with me. I will strive forever to see the impressions of your sacrifice both within the clinic and without. You reminded me that we contain multitudes. I’ll find your quiet walk in each ocean wave as it makes its unhurried journey to the shore; your wise breath in the rippling leaves of tiny shrubs and tall trees; your heartbeat in the thrumming purple peaks of the mountains.

Thank you for being my first teacher on the path to medicine.