Donor Memorial Ceremony Speech

Good afternoon! It is an honor and privilege to be able to speak to you today. My name is Jason Santiago and I represent the University of Colorado School of Medicine Class of 2017. I would like to start off by saying thank you to a few people. First, to the Donor Board for the opportunity to speak. To all the students from the various programs who benefitted from taking human anatomy during the past year, I want to thank you for the respect you demonstrated towards our donors and their families while working in the lab. To our esteemed professors who led us through this unique and highly educational experience, thank you for sharing your wisdom and guiding us through a rigorous and sometimes emotionally challenging experience. Importantly, I want to thank the families of our donors, those that are in attendance today and those that could not join us, for sharing your loved ones with us so that we could have this enlightening experience at the start of our healthcare careers. Please give yourselves a round of applause.

Unfortunately, the people I most want to thank are no longer with us. They are our donors, your loved ones. I think a ceremony like this can help us pay our respects and honor their memory but it still feels inadequate in comparison to the magnitude of generosity, courage, and self-sacrifice that they demonstrated in giving away their entire bodies. How can we possibly express sufficient gratitude for such a gift? How can we repay them for the tremendous learning experience that they afforded us?

To answer that question I think we first need to contemplate why our donors might have chosen to give us their bodies in the first place. In my opinion, the people who decide to donate their bodies to science are more than just generous people. If that were the case, many more people would sign up to be donors and we wouldn’t have a shortage of bodies from which to study. Rather, I believe that whole body donors represent a subgroup of very special people who are deeply concerned about their legacy, who often thought about how to make the world a better place, even in their last days. Indeed, the most common reason cited by people planning to become whole body donors is for the opportunity to continue helping others after death by educating young healthcare professionals like you and I. I don’t think it’s hard to imagine that your loved ones probably lived lives
full of service to others. Donating their body to science was just the last entry in a long list of admirable humanitarian acts.

I think to truly honor our donors and give them the thanks they deserve requires that we use the lessons we have learned from them to serve others and to try to emulate their great character in our daily lives. So how do we accomplish this task? Students, I encourage you to continue collecting memories of your patient interactions so that you can be continuously reminded of the intrinsic value and complexity of human life. From our time in the anatomy lab you might retain a mental image of the scars you saw on your donor’s body which can remind you that behind every patient’s chief complaint is an elaborate backdrop of mental and physical wounds that call us to deliver care that is both personalized and thoughtful. Perhaps your memory from the human body experience has to do with the great variety and character of our donors’ skin and hands which could be made analogous to the different paths that people take in life and the need for us to understand our patients own unique perspectives and positions in life’s journey. Maybe you will recall the delicateness of some of the body’s internal structures and can use that memory to remind you how fragile life can be and to appreciate just how much one less moment of suffering, or one more day of life can mean to a sick or dying patient.

Whatever you experienced in the human anatomy lab, I ask that you keep some remnant of it to add to your ever-evolving mental scrapbook of patient encounters. As we continue our education, and hopefully all find real paying jobs at some point, the rigors of our work will undoubtedly challenge us to remain sensitive to some of these aspects of patient care. By taking moments like these to reflect on our experiences we can try to remain mindful of the sanctity of human life and the incredible honor that comes with serving the needs of others. In this way, I believe we bring the most honor to our donors, extend their legacy, and also begin to furnish our own. Thank you.