

Our First Patients

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“This is the place where death delights to help the living.” As a student of Florida State University’s College of Medicine Class of 2012, I recently learned this lesson. Although not an idea tested on in my Clinical Anatomy class, this lesson was taught through my professor’s guidance, letters from family members about their loved ones, and my own firsthand experience this summer. Most people would agree with the idea that death is not necessarily a delightful thing. However, in a laboratory filled with 120 new medical students on the ground floor of the College of Medicine, I saw a different side of this part of life.

Through the selfless nature of our “silent teachers”, those that donated their bodies to medicine, I learned the intricate anatomy of the human body. Endless hours were spent in the lab learning the paths of nerves and arteries, the actions of muscles, and the different features of the heart to name a few. As my Clinical Anatomy professor described it, it was during this time that we learned more about these individuals’ bodies than they would ever know. It is this exact knowledge that will serve as a foundation for my education and follow me throughout my career.

However, possibly more important was the lesson of generosity. Before meeting our “first patients”, as they are sometimes called, we were introduced to them through the family members of these considerate individuals. Listening to letters read that were written by daughters, sons, wives, and husbands, I learned that these people were no different than any one of us. They were housewives, businessmen, court

reporters, teachers, mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers. They enjoyed music, gardening, and life and wanted to give back to others through this meaningful contribution. Hearing these words showed me that such a gift was not only from the individuals whose bodies I learned upon; it also came from their family members. Considering many family members expressed hesitation in following through with their loved one’s wishes, the appreciation I feel for their ability to honor such a request must also be expressed. Without the strength of these family members, this powerful learning experience would not be possible.

So how exactly is it that death delights the living through such a process? Through the honoring of these silent teachers at a special memorial ceremony hosted by my class, one teaching assistant described it fittingly: “When thinking about the location and path of the portal vein, you will not think back to a textbook or lecture. You will think back to the body you saw it on and studied so extensively. That sense of reasoning is what will stick with you throughout your life as a physician.” Nothing could be more true. Although only a medical student with plenty of years to go, I owe so much to these individuals for the gift of knowledge they gave to me. It is this knowledge that allows me to carry out the task that all physicians take on to improve the quality of life of patients. Just as I benefited from the education our silent teachers gave me, future patients will benefit from this unselfishness as well. For this reason, I will always remember my first patients—our silent teachers.