

Death brings a 'last achievement': A unique memorial: Medical students eulogize 70 people they knew in a 'very different way'

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Illustration: Black & White Photo: Peter J. Thompson, National Post / Family members and students filled a London, Ont., church on the weekend for a service for 70 people who donated their bodies to science.

LONDON, Ont. - The families filed out of the church wearing sweatshirts, flip-flops and dark suits, wiping their eyes and clutching programs for the unique memorial service they had just attended.

It paid tribute to 70 people who died at least a year ago from all manner of illnesses -- cancer, heart attack, stroke, old age -- and who had donated their bodies to the University of Western Ontario.

Many of the speakers were students who knew the donors only as cadavers, but some of them wept quietly during the service on Saturday.

"We've also gotten to know your loved ones, perhaps in a very different way from the way you knew them, but nevertheless we've gotten to know them," said Dr. Peter Haase, a professor and teacher in the university's anatomy and cell biology department, as the service began.

"They've done so much for us, so whatever their role and occupations were in life, you can now add to that list teacher and mentor. I really do hope you take comfort and pride in this, the last of their achievements."

The church was nearly full as the students, who crowded into the first two rows, took their turns at the pulpit. Some slowly read out the donors' names, others climbed the steps carrying carefully crafted speeches.

Their sentiments were often the same: they appreciated the donors' altruism and wondered who they were.

"I feel both humbled and honoured that the donors have given their bodies to benefit our knowledge," Jeremy Mozzon, a first-year medical student, told the assembled families and friends.

"They have lived their lives and now continue to give so we can learn."

Most of the young people had never seen a dead body before they entered the laboratory last September.

Ramez Salti, a first-year dentistry student, described how he worked with the body of an elderly Asian woman.

He said small things -- the creases around her mouth, her eyes -- constantly reminded him she was a fellow human being. The day he tapped her skull with a hammer and chisel, then held her brain was especially significant.

"That's the person. It was in my hands," said Mr. Salti, 27. "I had ups and downs, and it was the one time I felt good, in a weird way."

The students never learned the identities of the cadavers beyond the numbers assigned in the laboratory. Some, including Mr. Salti, gave them names to humanize them; others avoided doing so to prevent themselves from becoming attached.

The students said the mood in the dissection lab was always serious. Each body part removed was carefully bagged and kept with the body.

Most donors had specified in their will that they wanted to give their body to Western. But the decision is ultimately up to the family, as a body becomes the property of the heirs under the Anatomy Act.

The decision to give the body away is, understandably, not an easy one to make. The school can keep the body for up to three years, which can prolong grieving while families wait for the ashes to be returned. During the wait, some people will inevitably wonder what is happening to the body.

Others never question their loved one's wishes. Matthew McBride, 37, says he always knew his mother wanted to donate her body. Both Joan McBride's brothers are doctors, and her son says her decision was motivated by a desire to do something useful in death, as she had in life.

Mrs. McBride, a mother of four, died of heart

problems at home in Windsor, Ont., at the age of 77. It has been nearly 15 months since her death, but speaking about her still moved her son to tears.

"Do we have closure? No," said Mr. McBride, who runs a chain of gift stores. "Is this a mourning period that is too long? I don't think so. It's the price that we're paying for what her wishes were. I don't begrudge her that, and it doesn't make me sad or angry.

"It's given me a lot of time to think about a lot of different things about the relationship that we had. If I had closure 14 months ago, you never know whether you would still be considering a lot of these things."

Mr. McBride attended the memorial at Trinity Lutheran Church with his extended family. The students' speeches had reassured him his mother's gift was used the way she had intended.

"They are going to use this training and knowledge and information moving forward, for the benefit of society in general," he said afterward. "That's what my mother would have wanted. I'm sure of it."

Other families were equally impressed. Some people said they are now considering taking the same step.

"All that's left is the body. The soul is gone," one man said. "Why not let somebody make use of it and learn something from it?"

Most medical schools organize memorial services for donors' families. Western held its service earlier than usual this year so more students could attend before moving home for the summer.

The cadavers will be cremated in late June. The ashes will be returned to the families, if that is what they wish, or buried at a nearby cemetery where the university has a plot after another service.

It was not the first time the students -- future doctors, dentists, physiotherapists, kinesiologists and occupational therapists -- had honoured their cadavers. University chaplains also visited anatomy classes in September, when the students first met their cadavers, and led a service before the dissections began.

Sean Peterson, a first-year medical student, said walking into the anatomy laboratory for the first time reminded him of his first visit to a funeral home as a child. He remembers a long row of cadavers on tables, each covered with a white cloth. His hands were clammy, his mouth dry.

"It's really difficult to come to terms with the fact that your first encounter in med school is with someone that's already passed away," he said. "It's a very moving experience."