

Day one of anatomy lab, and I thought I was prepared. Prepared to meet my donor, who would become my First Patient and my First Teacher. I had seen pictures while going over the material I needed and videos of what was to come. I had read blogs from medical students about their first experiences, and I had even read a book about people who had donated their bodies to science. So, Wednesday morning, when I put on my maroon scrubs, stuffed a bunch of purple Nitrile gloves in my pocket, went over what was going to be done that day in my head, and tied up my hair to enter Anatomy lab, I thought I was ready.

I was not ready.

They say it's the little things that make you realize who it is in front of you. The nail polish on the toenails, the delicate tattoo on the neck, the smile lines still etched on their faces. For me, it was my donor's hand.

As soon as I saw my First Teacher's Hand, the wrinkles, the sun spots, the calluses that told a story, I had to step back and breathe.

This is a human being. This is a human being. This was no longer a plastic model used in undergraduate classes around the country. This was once someone's child, sibling, parent, grandparent, friend, classmate. This is a human being. I felt so much gratitude.

Looking around the room at the other donors, it was clear to me that selflessness filled the air. In their wishes after death, these men and women had wanted to be here. These men and women had willingly donated their bodies to our school so that we could learn. So that we could be better physicians. So that we, with their permission, could see for ourselves the wonderful workings of the human body. So that those of us, myself included, who are kinesthetic learners and need to touch and do and feel in order to understand, could finally grasp the concepts we had once struggled with before.

I held the hand that made me pause, overwhelmed with feelings of wonder, fear, honor, and thankfulness.

Thirteen weeks later, and I still feel all of those things every time I enter the room. Wonder, for the beautiful and intricate creation that is the human body. Fear, of the complexity of it all and of the possibility of making mistakes. Honor, for being among the very few given the opportunity to explore the human body in such a way. Thankfulness, for my First Patient for letting me see what the skin hides, and for you, family and friends of all the donors, for letting them donate their bodies and for trusting us with such a precious gift. Thank you.

I know that I am not unique in these feelings. So I must say: We have all felt these things.

We held their hands, but they have been the ones to hold ours.

We touched their hearts, but they have been the ones to touch ours.

So thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for letting your loved ones donate their bodies to the University of Minnesota. The precious gift that your loved ones made for us to learn will not be forgotten.

Thank you.

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