Deeded Body Program Speech

         Hello everyone, my name is Reese Blacker, and it is my privilege to speak on behalf of the College of Dentistry’s class of 2026. First and foremost, I’d like to express the gratitude that my classmates and I have for the intimate opportunity we had to learn from your loved ones. In the interest of the College of Dentistry’s class of 2026, we would like to sincerely say thank you.  To the donors and their families, I hope to display a great sense of reverence, respect, and honor for their sacrifice. It is because of this sacrifice that my classmates and I were gifted, quite literally, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to study the human body in a manner of exquisite detail that no other method could replicate. Of course, it is not only my class of 80+ dental students who are indebted to this sacrifice. Moreover, the thousands of patients that my classmates and I will treat over the course of our careers also are thankful for the gracious gift provided by your loved ones. Most likely, none of our future patients will have the opportunity to express their thanks personally, so, on their behalf, I’d like to take this opportunity to thank the donors and their families.

         While the purpose of us being here today is to celebrate the lives of those who benevolently gave themselves to participate in the Deeded Body Program, I hope we can also take a moment to laud what a miraculous gift a body is to all of us. A quote from Russell M. Nelson, a researcher, religious leader, and renowned heart surgeon, summarizes my astonishment at the human body more succinctly and eloquently than I ever could. He says, “[The body’s] formation begins with the union of two reproductive cells- one from the mother and one from the father. Together, these two cells contain all the individual’s hereditary information, stored in a place so small it cannot be seen by the naked eye. Twenty-three chromosomes from each parent unite in one new cell. These chromosomes contain thousands of genes that determine all the physical characteristics of the unborn person. Approximately 22 days after these two cells unite, a little heart begins to beat. At 26 days, blood begins to circulate. Cells multiply and divide. Some become eyes that see; others become ears that hear.” He continues, “The eye has a self-focusing lens. Nerves and muscles control two separate eyes to make a single three-dimensional image. The eyes are connected to the brain, which records the sights seen. No cords or batteries are needed. Each ear is connected to compact equipment designed to convert sound waves into audible tones. An eardrum serves as a diaphragm. Minute ossicles amplify sound vibrations and transmit a signal via nerves to the brain, which senses and remembers the sounds. The heart is an incredible pump. It has four delicate valves that control the direction of blood flow. These valves open and close more than 100,000 times a day- 36 million times a year. Yet, unless altered by disease, they are able to withstand this stress almost indefinitely. No man-made material developed to date can be flexed too frequently and so long without breaking.” I think I speak for all my classmates when I say our wonder, awe, and gratitude for the human body has increased during our tenure at school, and this is largely because of the time we spent with your loved ones.

To the family members and loved ones here today, these donors reserved roles as husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, friends and neighbors, and a host of other positions. For my classmates and I, they held the role of teacher. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk described a teacher best when he said, “A good teacher is like a candle- it consumes itself to light the way for others.” While human anatomy was at the forefront of what each donor taught us, that certainly was not all. Perhaps, more importantly, and of more value, we learned lessons of gratitude, service, teamwork, the sanctity and miracle of life, charity, humility, benevolence, curiosity, and philanthropy at the feet of your loved ones. While I desperately wish I could express my gratitude to each donor for what they taught me and the experiences they provided my classmates and myself, that is not possible. So, the next best thing I can do is to thank you, their beloved family members, in attendance today.

While I did not have the opportunity to know the personalities and dispositions of the donors while they were living, their willingness to participate in the Deeded Body Program speaks volumes as to who these individuals were and the character they must have demonstrated. Each one of them has the heart of a teacher, a sense of selflessness, charitable giving, and civility. In my eyes, anyone willing to give of themselves for the benefit of another lives an exemplary and extraordinary life.

With the newly gained knowledge my classmates and I have, and following the example of selfless giving from each donor, it is now our responsibility to go forward and bless the lives of many. We hope that the legacy of each donor can live on through us. Truly, without this most selfless sacrifice, we could not become the competent, capable, or qualified clinicians that society needs us to be. Each donor bestowed a gift to humanity that will endure for generations to come. While some here today have heavy hearts as we remember those who have participated in the Deeded Body Program, I hope we can all smile, appreciate, and rejoice at the blessing those whom we’ve honored today will be for countless individuals in the future.

In closing, I’d like to reiterate the gratitude my classmates and I have for the intimate opportunity we had to learn from your loved ones. American educator Stedman Graham once said, “It’s not what you have at the end of life, it’s what you leave behind that matters.” Certainly, each donor left behind a great legacy.  Thank you again, dear donors.