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## Convocation of Thanks Remarks

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## About the Convocation of Thanks

The Convocation of Thanks ceremony has been a tradition at the New York Medical College School of Medicine for the past 26 years. Every spring, the first year medical students compile a program of musical pieces, artistic representations, and spoken words in an attempt to demonstrate their appreciation to the family and friends of the individuals who selflessly donated their bodies to science in a final act of giving.

During the process of preparing for the ceremony, many of our classmates, ourselves included, came to realize that it is very difficult to put into words the appreciation that we, as first year medical students, feel for the generous donations from our donors and their families. We can say, though, that we accepted their gift with profound gratitude, and we hope that even in their absence we were able to honor their final wishes with the utmost respect.

We hope that by including a collection of speeches from the Convocation of Thanks ceremony, we can further honor those who have sacrificed so that we can become well-trained physicians. We wish to immortalize the words spoken by our classmates, which will continue to resonate with us throughout the course of our career.

Sincerely,  
Sherry Liou  
Margaret Nguyen  
*Quill & Scope* Managing Editors  
Class of 2017

# CONVOCAATION OF THANKS

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## Convocation of Thanks Remarks

*Christopher Monson*

I'd like to start by sharing that I love stories. Romantic or dark, dramatic or adventurous, comedic or tragic—it doesn't matter. So long as there are characters being tested by challenges, I can't get enough. I think this was part of the draw for me to practice medicine, because there is no better field for stories. And we get them all: lifelong epics, acute disasters, miracles, tragedies. Every patient has a story and it is our job to unravel it. One of the first things we learn in medical school is how to take a history—how to get the patient to tell you their story. But like a bad anthropologist, we try to help the people we study—to change how their stories will end.

As is often quipped when you enter med school, your first patient is already dead. But there is more to this saying than wit and morbid humor. These cadavers are not just an educational tool, a collection of organs and tissues, a body; these are people—people who have lived long, rich interesting lives—lives that have left their mark on their bodies. So even though the deceased could no longer tell us their story directly, my classmates and I had the privilege of spending several months unraveling each story as told by the very bodies in which they experienced them.

I'd like to remind you that the vast majority of us had never seen a dead body before our first anatomy session at this school. That first incision was very hard, at least for me. My parents can be proud that they raised a child who, if nothing else, is uncomfortable cutting people with knives. At first, to push through my discomfort I think I objectified the person

on my dissection table. She was an "it," not a "she" for the first couple weeks. I had enough on my mind trying to stay afloat through the deluge of information poured on us in those first days of medical school without trying to riddle out the metaphysics of death and identity.

Though it didn't happen all at once, my perspective did eventually change. Anatomical curiosities became possible symptoms. "These bones seem brittle" turned into "I wonder if she had osteoporosis?" Or "I wonder when he had that pacemaker put in?" "Do you think this fibroid tumor caused her any pain?" "I bet his heart anomaly gave every one of his doctors a scare! Maybe he had fun watching them freak out listening through a stethoscope before letting them know that they should hear a murmur." I think what really got to me were the tattoos and finger nail polish. These were some of the only clues to the personalities of our patients. By the end of gross anatomy, we wanted to know more about these people—not medically, not because we wanted to fix them, but because we had spent time with them and had glimpsed some of their story.

If I could thank our donors, who we honor today, I would thank them not just for helping future doctors unravel the tangled paths of the portal triad or brachial plexus, nor for giving hopeful surgeons practice with a scalpel. I would thank them for being our first patients, for teaching us our first lessons in humanistic medicine, and for sharing some of their life with us even after it had ended.



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## Convocation of Thanks Remarks

*Vinod Ravikumar*

It is an honor to stand before you—the friends and family of those who generously donated their bodies to the Class of 2017—to have the opportunity to express gratitude on behalf of myself and my colleagues for the tremendous gift that you all have given us. Today I want to take a few minutes to share an experience that I had in anatomy lab that I consider to be a pivotal moment in my life.

In preparation for our first anatomy lab practical exam, a group of friends and I decided to head to the lab to practice identifying structures a few days before the exam. Unfortunately, near the time of the exam, I was under the weather and could not accompany them. A night later, I decided to go by myself. Picture a dark, stormy night. In the middle of the rain, I was wearing a hooded sweatshirt, running to the building, and wiping off the water as I walked up the stairs to the fourth floor anatomy lab. The lab is about the size of this auditorium, full of occupied dissection tables and model skeletons interspersed between—certainly not where I envisioned myself in the middle of the night. Although my first instinct was to leave and come back in the morning when I would not feel so jittery, I decided to stay and I am so glad that I did.

I pulled out my books and sat down next to my dissection table. However, unlike previous times, I took a couple minutes before starting to look at the body lying out before me on the table, not as a cadaver, but as a person. I was instantly over-

whelmed by regret. She was allowing me to learn the ancient science of anatomy by giving up her right to a traditional burial—a tremendous gift—and as I sat next to her, I realized that I had never even said a simple thank you. It was probably the first time in my life that I had received something on such a grand scale without the opportunity to express my gratitude.

However, as I searched for meaning in her face, I truly felt that she was trying to tell me something. And in that moment, it was clear that she wanted me to question this newfound regret. She had donated her body in hopes of making my classmates and me better doctors, so that we could pass along her sentiment of unconditional love and generosity to our patients. Her contribution required no thanks, but rather, instilled in me a sense of purpose.

That late night in the anatomy lab redefined my purpose in life: to truly give without keeping score. I have no doubt that each and every one of my classmates experienced a similar feeling during his or her time in the anatomy lab. To my colleagues and future physicians, I challenge each and every one of you to not only carry this sentiment to your practice, but also to embody this sense of unconditional giving in your day to day lives.

On behalf of the Class of 2017, I would like to thank all of you again for the gifts of your loved ones.

# CONVOCATION OF THANKS

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## Convocation of Thanks Remarks

Israel Ackerman

My friends, family members, and prospective students often ask me about the transition to medical school. Early on, my response focused on the importance of time management; there is a heavy workload and I now have less time with family and friends. But at a certain point during the year I developed a different perspective. The things we are learning now matter.

I took calculus in my senior year of college because I noticed that many medical schools required or “highly recommended” it. It’s like when Mom says, “I highly recommend you take out the garbage.” I took the course to satisfy the requirement and have never looked back. But the lessons we learn during these formative years of medical school have profound significance, whether it’s learning about a disease or how to be a compassionate and caring clinician. All of a sudden we are not just focused on getting correct answers on exams but we are asking ourselves, “What can I learn from this?”

I recently spoke with Dr. Pravetz, who informed me that many—if not all of the donors—actually contacted him about making the donation. I had thought perhaps Dr. Pravetz would have to go around trying to procure donations, because that is how most donations work. Often when donations are made, it includes some self-serving purpose. I know that to get us to donate blood the blood bank has to offer us tickets to baseball games. It’s not solely about giving but also about our own personal gain.

When people are moving on in years or perhaps are not well, they begin to discuss their plans concerning what should be done when they pass on. Is there a greater time for them to think about themselves? They can be givers for their whole lives, but now? They should think about themselves. Instead the generous donors asked, “What can I give?” They gave not just when it was convenient. Not just when it was easy. They gave without any expectation of fanfare or accolades. It was giving in its purest sense.

What did they give? There are many seasoned physicians in this room and they have experienced the anatomy lab the same number of times as the medical students. One time. It is an experience that most of us will have once, yet it serves to influence our practice of medicine forever. Let’s say that of my classmates, even just one of us, one day, is performing emergency surgery and saves a life because of the perspective

we gained in the lab. And let’s say that patient goes on and ends up having children, and they grow up and have children of their own. Generations later we could seat the physician and the donor in the front of the room and fill the entire auditorium with people that are alive because of that one generous act which took place years before. Can you imagine?

This is the logic that is often ascribed to a famous quote from the classical Jewish text, the *Talmud* (an authoritative record of Rabbinic discussions on Jewish law and ethics). The *Talmud* inquires why G-d would start the world with one person. Why didn’t He create a population of people and place them on Earth? The *Talmud* responds in part by saying, “To teach that whoever saves a life, it is as if he or she has saved an entire world.”

I wondered why we end this event with the planting of a tree—perhaps because it is symbolic of today’s honorees. Because every winter the trees lose their leaves, and a child who is observing might even think that the tree is passing on. But in the spring we observe regrowth from that very same tree. That is what we are recognizing today.

I would like to thank Dr. Pravetz and the other members of the Department of Cell Biology and Anatomy who taught us the didactics of gross anatomy. Just as importantly, he taught us life lessons and provided us with this opportunity to reflect today. Thank you to all of the members of the school administration, faculty, staff, and my fellow classmates who have helped organize this event.

I would especially like to thank the families and friends who have honored us by coming today. We acknowledge that you have also sacrificed—be it cultural, religious or family funeral traditions, or the sense of closure that was perhaps compromised. I hope that today’s event provides an added sense of comfort.

And finally to our donors: any words of gratitude that I could try and express would surely ring hollow. I want to thank you, and I want to leave you with an assurance—an assurance that a valuable lesson was learned by this year’s Class of 2017. A lesson about science—sure—but also a lesson about giving. A lesson that we will hopefully carry wherever the practice of medicine may take us. Thank you.