



Remembering Our Silent Mentors

Text and photos by Denyse Lee

*“To make us see we are but flowers that glide;
Which when we once can find and prove,
Thou hast a garden for us where to bide ...”
– George Herbert, “The Flower”*

IN JUNE last year, eight of us, all medical students from National University of Singapore, went to Hua Lien, Taiwan, to participate in the Silent Mentor programme alongside our Taiwanese counterparts. Organised by Tzu Chi University, this programme essentially uses donated bodies to teach medical students essential surgical skills like suturing and fasciotomies, and also basic life-saving procedures like endotracheal intubation and chest tube insertion.

As there was a lack of bodies willingly donated for scientific and medical advancement in Taiwan, this programme was introduced to alleviate the paucity of donors. While the usage of synthetic models appears to bridge that gap, it will never be able to simulate surgery on an actual person to the extent that practice on a donor would.

Bodies donated to the programme are known as “silent mentors”, because through them, we would be able to learn important skills that every potential doctor should be equipped with. By practising on these silent mentors (three students per mentor), medical students like us could

accumulate basic surgical experience before entering the profession and operating on real patients.

One of the things that really impacted us would be the amount of respect accorded to the silent mentors. At the start of each day, we would begin by observing a few minutes of silence and reading the mentors’ life stories on a screen. Their life stories told us why they decided to be donors, what others thought about them, and what they were like when they were still alive. We would then bow to our silent mentors and inform them of the procedures we were going to perform on them. After the the simulated surgeries were over, we had to clean our mentors’ wounds and ensure that the stitches were secure enough, before placing them in coffins and preparing them for their funeral processions the next day. The amount of effort that went into the whole process was immaculate, and the level of sincerity that each student displayed was laudable.

Another unique aspect of this programme was getting to meet the families of our silent mentors before it commenced.

(The students from Taiwan were also given the opportunity to visit their mentors' families in their homes and get to know more about how their mentors lived.) I recall how the wife of my mentor held my hands in hers and told me to make full use of this opportunity to become a good doctor. The family members we spoke to all had tears in their eyes, and their genuine emotions were what transformed the operating theatre we worked in from a cold sterile environment to a nurturing and caring one that served to better humankind. There, every cut we made and every stitch we sewed became infused with meaning and performed with a goal in mind.

What made the altruistic actions of our silent mentors even more commendable was the fact that body donation is associated with strong cultural and religious taboos in many places. For example, some religions believe that the body has to be buried as a whole. Therefore, potential silent mentors may find it even more difficult to come to a definite decision if their family members observe such practices. Not only do the mentors have to accept the idea of their bodies undergoing physical procedures after death, they also have to get past (and help others to get past) the aforementioned traditional beliefs without any fear or regret.

We medical students may know the mechanisms behind the way we move, how our body heals itself, how we function as a human being. But actually dissecting and seeing each anatomic structure as individual units never fails to make me contemplate how intricate our bodies are, and yet, how vulnerable we are should one of these units start to fail. The whole dissection process made me more cognizant of the complexity of the human body, and I have learnt to appreciate good health before it is too late. We are grateful for the chance to learn these life-saving procedures and surgical skills, which would come in handy when we start practising in the future. Having hands-on

practice for these skills, instead of just reading about them in textbooks, helped us remember the steps better and equipped us to deal with unexpected situations.

Lastly, our silent mentors did not just teach us anatomy and procedures, they taught us how to appreciate the transience of life as well. Some of them were still young and at the prime of their lives when their journeys were tragically cut short. The lyrics from Paul Anka's song *Times of Your Life* – "gather moments while you may, collect the dreams you dream today" – echoed in my mind as we gathered to mourn the mentors' departure on the last day.

The other equally valuable lesson we learnt was unconditional love. During the training process, one of our tutors mentioned that these mentors gave up their bodies after death to improve medical expertise and benefit humankind, without expecting any reward. A silent mentor from a previous batch of donors even said that he would rather medical students make mistakes on him, than for them to do patients a disservice after they graduate. The mentors' sincerity and generosity are qualities that deserve to be emulated, and their unconditional love for others touches our hearts in the most profound of ways.

To our silent mentors, thank you for everything that you have imparted to us. **SMA**

"Carve your name on hearts, not tombstones. A legacy is etched into the minds of others and the stories they share about you."

– Shannon L Alder



Denyse enjoys doing humanitarian work, which was what drove her to organise a bone marrow drive on campus, and she hopes to start more humanitarian initiatives in the future. In her spare time, Denyse loves composing music and is particularly interested in how music can accelerate healing.



Facing Sharing a photo moment with our Taiwanese counterparts

Right The eight of us attending keyhole surgery class