

First-year medical students
organize a memorial ceremony to

C E L E B R A T E

special teachers



Right: Sara Rubenaker, Katie Thompson, Melinda Carter and Andrew Bloom organized the ceremony.

Above, the students accompany the remains to the mausoleum in Pleasant Grove Cemetery.

Above right, Carter speaks during the ceremony.



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Written by Karen Carlson ● Photography by James Hawker

Strains of Pachelbel’s “Canon in D” sounded in the chapel at Pleasant Grove Cemetery in Murphysboro, Ill., on a rainy May afternoon as first-year medical students attended a ceremony honoring some special teachers — those people who donated their bodies to the science of medicine.

First-year medical students at SIU study anatomy as part of their training. To thank the donors and their families, an annual ceremony has been organized by medical students for the past decade. This year’s ceremony, honoring seven individuals, was organized by first-year medical students: Melinda Carter, Andrew Bloom, Katie Thompson and Sara Rubenaker. The music was performed by first-year medical students guitarist Adam Andruska and violinist Nadia Ali. Each year is a little different, notes Rhonda Seeber, director of administrative services, and students can add their own special touches. This year’s ceremony was sprinkled with funeral customs from other cultures.

During the ceremony, Carter, educated in funeral customs, explained that in modern Buddhist Thailand, donating your body to medical science is highly revered by the society. “You become a teacher, a giver of knowledge,” she said. “Today we celebrate the people and honor the teachers. ... Never again will we experience the complexity and beauty of the human body as we have during our first year of medical school. This ceremony is a demonstration of our profound gratitude.”

Bloom expressed his faith in Christianity and quoted from several books of the Bible. “As future doctors, we are preparing to love our patients by helping restore them from disease, teaching them to stay healthy, and easing their suffering. These individuals, through the donation of their bodies, have greatly helped us.”

He added, “These individuals who chose to donate their bodies took the command to serve their fellow man one step further: to refuse to let death keep them from teaching others. They chose to continue to serve others, which in turn allows us to help those in need.”

“Let us strive to be this selfless. Let us remember every day to carry on their legacy,” Rubenaker added.

To close the ceremony, Carter explained how the Creole culture ends funeral services with joyful music, celebrating the life of the loved one now gone. After a rousing version of “Amazing Grace,” sung by medical student Norah Farley, accompanied by Andruska’s guitar, the audience left amid “A Joyous Send Off,” a New Orleans-style march.

Following the ceremony, the students escorted the remains to rest in the cemetery’s mausoleum, owned by SIU.

Seeber says SIU receives about 35 donations per year that help teach not only medical students, but future physiologists, physician assistants and students in SIU’s mortuary sciences program. “This

ceremony is an expression of gratitude by the medical students, recognizing the contributions individuals and their families have made.”

The students were grateful to thank these special teachers. “I’m glad we had the opportunity to give thanks to the families and show them how much we care and how grateful we are,” Carter says.

In this era of computerized and simulated training, Seeber says there still is value in learning from a real human anatomy. “Students need to learn how to deal with the real person,” Seeber says. “Lessons learned in anatomy class also will help them deal with future patients and remember that these are real people they’re helping.”

Thompson says learning from the bodies of donors gave her a better perspective for what the normal anatomy feels like compared to an abnormal anatomy. Carter agrees. “Using a computer simulation, you can’t appreciate the three-dimensional aspects of a body, and you lose the emotional component of working with a real person.”

“This person had a life, a family,” says Bloom. “We need to remember that.”

Thompson adds, “These people helped us get started in our careers. They’ve done a great and selfless act.” ●●●