

## Cadavers give students practical education

Anatomy class develops personal connections with lab subjects

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When senior Collin Francis set foot in the university's cadaver laboratory, the first thing he noticed was the thick chemical smell hanging in the room — the smell of formaldehyde, a chemical used to preserve human cadavers.

"The first day is the worst," Francis said. "The smell sticks to your clothes, your hands, your hair — everything, and you can smell it in your sleep."

As an athletic training major, Francis was required to take Functional Human Anatomy (HESC420) in which students dissect human remains to study the body. The cadaver lab, located in the basement of McKinly Laboratory, would be his training ground for the semester.

"When you first see it, it's like, 'Wow, I cannot believe I'm here,' " he said. "It's kind of a daunting experience."

Francis said most students are in shock when they first reach the lab, but their relationship with the cadavers evolves over time.

"We go into a level of acceptance, where we don't see it as a human but we see it as a biological tool," he said. "And then, after that, we learn to really appreciate and get kind of connected to our cadavers, to the point where, at the end, we really appreciate their sacrifice."

After students learn proper dissection techniques, they study the skin, bones, muscles and nerves, eventually reaching the brain and spinal cord, Francis said.

"Pretty much anything you can think of, we get a hold of it," he said.

David Barlow, professor of health and exercise sciences, who oversees the lab and teaches the anatomy course, said the lab was established in the 1990s and is used to educate students in health-related majors.

"It's an extremely valuable teaching tool that can't be replicated with computer animation," Barlow said. "You learn with your hands, you learn with your eyes, you learn by identifying the materials from a three-dimensional standpoint of a structure that functions in a highly dynamic and significant way."

Medical research depends on individuals who arrange to donate their body to science after their death, he said. Most of the cadavers come from the state anatomical board in Baltimore, and are brought to campus at the beginning of each semester.

"We try and bring the cadavers at a time when there's not a whole lot going on on campus," Barlow said. "They're brought in quietly."

To protect the students working with the bodies, the cadavers are screened for potential infectious diseases. Then, the bodies are put in a refrigerated storage system until the students are ready to use them. The lab currently has 11 or 12 cadavers, Barlow said.

"If the cadavers are appropriately embalmed from their source, they can sit out on one of the 10 tabletops for typically up to a full semester," he said.

At the end of the semester, after students have completed the required 90 hours of dissection, the cadavers are taken back to Maryland and cremated, Barlow said. Depending on the wishes of the family, the remains are either returned to the family or given a memorial service by the state.

Barlow said the lab is costly to run, and the university has discussed closing it in recent years. However, he



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The university's cadaver lab is located in McKinly Laboratory.

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said the lab brings prestige to the university and he believes it is unlikely it will be shut down.

Graduate student Steven Feldman said he was unsure of what to expect when he first visited the lab.

"[The lab] is chilly, it smells bad and the clothes we wore to lab, we only wore to lab," Feldman said. "Some people used Vicks VapoRub under their noses to try to diminish the scent."

Despite the initial unpleasantness, Feldman and his classmates formed a connection with the cadavers, he said.

"Some groups named their cadavers," he said. "At the end of the course, we all thanked the cadavers for broadening our knowledge of anatomy, which I felt showed a great amount of respect to the individuals who have dedicated their bodies to education purposes."

Feldman said the program allows university graduates to enter their field with knowledge that other students might not get until medical school.

"Without a doubt, I can say that it has helped my academic experience," he said. "The more anatomy you know, the better clinician you can become. And in what other class are you going to have the opportunity to hold a human heart or a human brain?"

Barlow said he teaches students to appreciate the cadavers as both teaching tools and human beings. At the end of the semester, he requires his students to hold a memorial service to honor the cadavers they have studied in the class.

"We treat the remains with great respect and dignity," he said. "They represented the names of someone who was a brother, an uncle, a father, a cousin, a relative, a loved one. Someone who had a soul and a spirit."

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