The dead teach the living

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Suzanne Felts, at a family dinner. She lived life to the fullest, her family said, and by donating her body to science somehow controlled her own fate.

“Charlise Suzanne Felts passed away on Friday, Feb. 27, 2015, in Austin, Texas, surrounded by family. She was 67 years old. Suzanne was born on Nov. 18, 1947, in Mount Holly, New Jersey, to Frederick Charles Starn and Charlotte Louise Gregg. She was raised in Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania, and received a degree in fine arts from Finch College in New York. ...

“Suzanne was passionate about nutritional healing, animals and the arts. She was an equestrian, loved travel, and found fulfillment and joy in caring for others. …”

And then she gave her lifeless body to science, to medical students who would learn from her bones and flesh and muscle and sinew to heal the living. She became their silent teacher.
In the winter of 2014, Linda Baker-Webber, coordinator of the Body Donation Program at UT Health San Antonio, received a call from Suzanne Felts. She was dying, Felts explained, and wanted to know more about the program.

“She told me she was interested in it, was considering it, that she had cancer and this was where she wanted to be, but she wanted to meet the people who would be taking care of her,” Baker-Webber said. “That’s highly unusual, to meet a donor, but it was very important to her. So I relayed that to my director.”

After four years as director of the program, Omid Rahimi, Ph.D., had never met a potential body donor, and he didn’t want to start now.

“Our program is anonymous,” said Dr. Rahimi, associate professor of cellular and structural biology who also directs the Human Anatomy Program. “There’s a balance we have to find. We have to separate the fact that this was a person from the fact that this [cadaver in the lab] was a tool, a machine. Otherwise it’s not easy to do what we do. The student has to be able to say, I have a job to do, I have to learn. For me, if I know the person, it would be more difficult.”

But Felts was insistent and continued to call.

“I told [Dr. Rahimi], if you speak with her, you’ll want to meet her,” Baker-Webber recalled.
On her own terms

By all accounts, Suzanne Felts was one of a kind, a child of the universe. She was highly opinionated and stubborn, especially when it came to her health. She was intensely spiritual, if not overtly religious. She was a social being and loved meeting people. All the wonders of nature fascinated her. She reveled in the beauty of art, as both a collector and a pastel artist.

And deadly cancer ran in her family.

Suzanne grew up in somewhat privileged circumstances in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Her parents were well off, and she was proud to trace her ancestors back to the Mayflower. When she was 19, she married and moved to a farm in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, where she had four children before the marriage ended in divorce.

Then it was on to Las Vegas, where she lived for decades and where her interest in nutrition blossomed. She opened a health food business and was keen to learn all she could about natural healing. She eventually met and married a Texan, moving first to Arkansas, then Marble Falls, Fredericksburg and finally Austin.

Two of her sons, twins Massie Wallace and Teddy Wallace, remember her as a free spirit, naturally inquisitive, a jokester who loved April Fool’s Day, an animal lover.
Massie’s wife, Anna, recalls Suzanne feeding all the stray dogs and cats in her neighborhood.

“In fact, there was a family of possums that were welcome on her back porch. She’d feed them every night, even though they’d fight with her own cats.”

But one interest overshadowed all others.

“Nutrition was basically her life,” Massie said. “In terms of taking care of herself, she always wanted to go the most natural route. She had a strong spiritual connection to a higher power. She was very much a person of mind over matter. Meditation, positive thinking, salt lamps, calm relaxing music. Her environment was most important.”

But by 2014, she had already faced seven bouts with breast cancer dating back 34 years. After finding a lump under her arm and learning that cancer had spread throughout her lymphatic system, Suzanne knew the end was near.

She always met the disease head on and on her own terms.

She was absolutely opposed to chemotherapy and never had the treatment, her sons said. She took a variety of vitamins, minerals and exotic supplements. She kept notes over the years of what foods to eat, what not to eat, what exercises to perform. She kept a daily “Life Plan” that outlined a health routine, with entries such as “Put chamae rose under my tongue” and “Eat 2 tablespoons sprouted raw red wheat.”
She didn’t believe in going to traditional doctors unless she absolutely had to, and even then “she’d just put them in their place” if she felt they were wrong, Teddy said. “She’d just debate them, question everything they did.”

And she remained whimsical about life, Massie said.

“Even when she was going to die, she could laugh at her cancer,” he said. “She wouldn’t let it control her. She didn’t pretend it wasn’t there, but she could laugh about it. At one point they put some sort of dye in her to see where the cancer was, and she said, ‘I just lit up like a Christmas tree. It was everywhere!’”

She began thinking of donating her body to science.

“She didn’t want to pass away, but she had accepted it,” said her daughter-in-law, Anna. “It was hard for her to accept that she wouldn’t be around to help people. She saw this as a way for her to express herself and help people learn from her when she’s gone.”

And to Suzanne’s way of thinking, Anna continued, meeting the people she was going to give her body to was an absolute requirement.

“She didn’t give them an option,” Anna said. “She wasn’t going to gift them with her body unless they met her. She said she wanted to see where she was going after.”

The ultimate gift
Omid Rahimi, Ph.D., director of both the Human Anatomy and Body Donation programs, discusses the intricacies of the human body with teaching assistants and fourth-year medical students Dawn Zhao and Matthew McMahon.

Dr. Rahimi is profoundly grateful to body donors and their families.

“The primary benefit of doing dissections on a cadaver is to learn the intricacies of the human body and the beauty of how the body works, how the body functions so well most of the time for so many years,” he said. “It’s the science behind what the physicians will use to treat his or her patients.”

The university accepts around 200 bodies per year. Donors must be 18 and there are no costs involved. (It’s illegal to pay for body donations or parts.) There are only a few exclusions. Donors can’t be obese or
emaciated, and they cannot have any communicable diseases or cancer that has metastasized in the abdomen to multiple organs.

The cadavers are used in anatomy classes by first-year medical students, dental students who focus on head and neck dissections, physical therapy students, occupational therapy students, physician assistant students, graduate and biomedical engineering students.

Anatomy workshops for EMT and AirLIFE workers also utilize cadavers, as do physicians learning new surgical techniques or procedures and residents who can practice procedures before treating patients.

Yet the cadavers represent so much more, Dr. Rahimi said.

“This is [the students’] first experience of being exposed to a person who has passed away and recognizing the value of the gift they have received, recognizing the altruistic nature of the person donating themselves for the greater good of humankind,” he said. “I think that really puts in context the career they’re about to embark upon.

“The value of giving and the spirit of love and caring for other people is what they’re gaining. There’s no other way to teach that empathy, that recognition of the importance of patient care, of respect and dignity. The cadaver is their first patient. The student will know more about this person than any other patient they will ever have because they’re going to fully learn the intricacies of this body they’re dissecting.”

**Body of knowledge**
Despite his reluctance, Dr. Rahimi, along with Linda Baker-Webber, met Suzanne on Dec. 29, 2014.

“She was bubbly. She was a beautiful woman,” Baker-Webber recalled. “To look at her, she was the picture of health. She was warm and very receptive, laughing, smiling, in very good spirits. She was a very joyful woman to meet, but she knew her fate.”

Dr. Rahimi said the meeting turned out to be “one of the most enlightening experiences for me.”

Suzanne was “prolific in telling others about her interest in health and nutrition,” he added. “She wanted to tell that to as many people as possible. And the information she had gained about her body through her research, her experiences with health and her disease, she wanted to give her body as a body of knowledge to us to learn from.

“She was 100 percent interested in, ‘How else can I help? Even in my death I want to be able to help. Here’s my body. Are you going to be able to use it?’”

Anna recalled the day of the meeting.

“I remember her getting ready for that interview,” she said. “She spent hours getting ready to go meet these people. It was really important to meet them and look alive. She said she didn’t want to look sick or for them to remember her as looking sick. She left the house in heels and all made up.
“She didn’t want to just be a body. I know it’s the Body Donation Program. But she said she wanted to give her life to them. I think she accomplished that.”

Suzanne left the meeting comfortable with the surroundings and with her decision to donate her body. Sixty days later, on Feb. 27, 2015, she was dead.

**Gone, but not forgotten**

Toward the end of each academic year, the Body Donation Program holds a solemn interment ceremony to bury the remains of donors. Faculty, staff, students and the families of the donors gather as bagpipes sound the familiar notes of *Amazing Grace*, an AirLIFE helicopter performs a flyover and buglers play *Taps*. Always, students representing each of the anatomy classes talk about the life lessons learned through those who gave themselves as the ultimate gift.

Last April, occupational therapy student Kathryn Crane addressed the gathering.

“There will not be a moment that goes by in our careers that we won’t think about what a blessing it was to have this hands-on experience,” she told the families. “Your loved ones have helped shape us as clinicians, but ultimately because of their generosity, they have helped those that we will treat. The gift they provided us is one that will continue to give and will never be forgotten.”