

## *Where I am Now*

With thanks to Wanda and Brenda, the donors and their families, wherever they are.

*Disclaimer: The information included in the introduction is subjective. The observations of ADP records reflect my biases, interests, and moods, and the recording of those observations was made without the use of any formal tracking system.*

Early in 2014, the three staff members in the Office for Continuous Professional Development relocated from the basement of the Sony Building to the fourth floor of Light Hall. One of the rooms we moved into had been, for about ten years, the office for the Anatomical Donation Program (ADP). The ADP had been in existence at Vanderbilt since 1925 and had processed records for hundreds and hundreds of donors, most on paper and many of them in this room. As new occupants of an old office, we inherited and were tasked with purging those records.

We dutifully began by consolidating the files in the original four cabinets into three partially-filled cabinets, and then divided the volume so that each of us assumed responsibility for four drawers. Our job was to remove the non-essential paperwork: to locate and clip together the body form, donor card, death certificate, next of kin form, and final disposition form for each donor. If the cremains had been mailed, we were to keep the postal receipt as well. Everything else was to be shredded, and the salvaged papers were to be scanned and electronically saved before they too, were shredded.

It was apparent from the beginning that our task would be physical – there were odors to contend with, staples (and more staples!) to be removed, fragile papers to be gingerly handled – as well as emotional. The tale of the scrivener came to mind – *Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!* – and lingered throughout.

The records we worked with were arranged chronologically in army-green hanging folders. Some folders contained records for a single year, others for multiple years, some bulged with paperwork, while others were slim with fewer documents. But all of the records were carefully ordered, filed, and maintained, and revealed quite a bit about the women who were responsible for them.



Brenda Lair worked in the ADP during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s and had a buoyant, outgoing personality. She was inclined to establish relationships with donors and their families, and her records were full of cheery, carbon-copied correspondence. (In one of her letters, she commented on the new interstate system and how easy it made travel.) Disassembling Brenda's files could be a challenge because she stapled with abandon – her files were easily identified by the quantity of staples attached in every direction, as if a child had done the work. Indeed, the staples could look like a game of pickup-sticks, scattered and piled one atop the other.

Wanda Pope succeeded Brenda. She worked in ADP longer than any other staff member in a variety of locations – including the fourth floor office we inherited – and was much more conservative than her predecessor. Her correspondence was standardized with rarely a personal comment, and her papers were stapled with similar restraint: only the necessary number of staples was attached horizontally

in the upper left corner of each file. (They could also be a challenge to remove because she often stapled between sheets of paper, making it difficult (and frustrating!) to find and figure out which staple to remove first.) Over the course of her tenure at the ADP, use of the telephone became more common, so her files contained fewer letters and more notes from conversations with donors and their families. These, too, were transcribed in the same measured tone, even when the comments directed at her turned accusatory or the other party became upset. She was the model of professionalism.

Despite their different styles, however, it was obvious that both women valued their work and the people they dealt with. The first was evidenced by the content of the files which included every detail, both relevant and seemingly irrelevant, and the second by the letters of appreciation sprinkled throughout. Over and over again, donors and their families took the time to thank the two women for their “kindness and compassion,” the same words repeated through the decades.

Few other things were as constant as those words, however. The majority of the files in “my” four drawers were dated 1957 – 1976 and oh, the societal changes and donor differences they revealed!



The most noticeable changes were to the format, method, and content of documentation, that is, the actual paperwork in the files. Early donor records – those dating from the 1950s – rarely contained more than a death certificate or, in the case of fetal donations, a tag labeled “Baby Smith.” For others, there was only a piece of paper with the four-digit donor number written on it, often in pencil.

Correspondence to Vanderbilt changed, too. Telegrams were common in the earlier files, especially for those whose family members had died at Clover Bottom (a facility for mentally disabled people). Other correspondence was written on everything from personalized stationery to sheets torn from notebooks. The earlier letters were handwritten, often in an elegant script with an air of formality, and frequently directed to a male (Dear Sir) or males (Dear Gentlemen). By the 1970s, slanted script had given way to upright, boxy handwriting with bubble-dots over the i’s and a much more casual tone. Later records contained letters written on typewriters and occasionally a computer.

In addition to funeral service programs for donors, obituaries were sometimes saved. Newspaper articles describing the well-lived lives of prominent donors were in the files, as were articles detailing the more unusual circumstances of donors' deaths: the escape, pursuit, and killing of the Brushy Mountain prisoner and the forlorn college student who committed suicide in the hallway of the downtown Metro Nashville Police Station, among them.

Personal artifacts from donors could be found in the records, too, including poems by two women. The first was a teacher who fancied herself a literary figure, and on her death certificate her husband lovingly described her occupation as "Teacher/Poet." The second was a schizophrenic whose daughter wrote a note asking authorities to question whether her mother's death by drowning had truly been an accident.

Handwritten notes by Brenda, Wanda, and other ADP staff were found throughout the files, scribbled on the backs of used sheets of paper, computer punch cards, scraps, bits of cardboard, and once, on a familiar, folded brown paper towel.



Birth dates for adult donors ranged from the late 1800s to the mid-1900s. The earlier files documented a handful of immigrants, including men and women from the British Isles, Scandinavia, and Germany. This was consistent with the general characteristics of donors who were overwhelmingly white and of European descent. The single donor of Middle Eastern descent specified that he wanted the poetry of Rumi to be included in his service, and the funeral program in his file indicated that it was.

A greater number of the earlier donors born in the U.S. were non-Tennessee natives. Of these, the Northeasterners and Midwesterners tended to be better educated, making up the majority of professionals, including teachers, professors, engineers, and scientists.

Native Tennesseans tended to be farmers, laborers, service-industry workers—cashiers, waitresses, a parking lot attendant, a golf course groundskeeper, a bartender, and a cemeterian among them—or those in commerce, including sales people, small business owners, and corporate retail managers.

The three most common occupations listed on death certificates were teacher/professor, minister/clergy, and housewife. From the medical profession, two or three doctors donated their bodies and perhaps triple that number of nurses. Lawyers were scant and politicians absent. Of the 23-year old who died of MD-related causes, his parents listed his occupation as "Sports Fan."

Not surprisingly for Nashville, donors included those in the music industry. The ashes for one musician were sent by the ADP to a friend of the musician who subsequently left them in a repossessed trailer. An employee of the trailer leasing company gave the ashes to another person who held onto them for several years before his wife contacted Vanderbilt asking for “any information on this abandoned person.”

Veterans and victims of the two World Wars also donated. From the First World War were the 100-year-old veteran whose list of illnesses included “possible exposure to mustard gas,” a Belgian native deported by the Germans, and another veteran who carefully detailed with palsied hand that he had served from “April 29th 1918 to June 15th 1919.” From the Second World War were the Jewish man who had spent three years in a concentration camp and a veteran whose list of past illnesses included “frozen feet in the trenches.” Another veteran had been a gunner on an aircraft carrier where the kickback caused by the massive weapon resulted in kidney problems later in his life.

Husbands and wives often donated together and regularly asked to be buried together. Single women far outnumbered single men and were often identified as teachers. Overall, however, male donors were more numerous than female donors.

Early male donors were named Isaac Newton and George Washington, Horace, Homer, Milton, and Telemachus. Women, perhaps the wives of these men, were named Sadie, Daisy, Bessie, Lula Bell, Cora Belle, Lula Lee, Edna, Bertha, Mildred, Maude, and Myrtle.



Pre-1970s, white donors were kept at Vanderbilt and black donors were sent to Meharry. Most white donors voluntarily willed their bodies. The opposite was true for black donors, all of whom were transported from State institutions such as Clover Bottom or the Tennessee State Penitentiary, or were unclaimed. In fact, many of the institutional donors, both black and white, were essentially unclaimed, with no identifiable next of kin or with families too poor to pay the fees to have the bodies shipped home and buried. One prisoner stood out because of his cause of death: legal electrocution.

The first black person whose body was willfully donated to Vanderbilt was a 69 year-old single woman whose occupation was identified as “Maid” on her death certificate. She died in 1976 and her sister completed the Release of Body Form.

People donated their bodies for a variety of reasons, including one woman's "perfect horror of being put in the ground and covered in dirt." Far more common was the desire to help others. In fact, many donors seemed to be under the impression that their bodies would be used for research, and multiple donors explicitly stated that they hoped their donation would help prevent other people from suffering the same diseases they had suffered. Others donated out of necessity, and still others, including the baby whose body was discarded in the public dump, had no choice. There were few choices for death as well, as most donors died from old-age related causes.

Donors' medical histories were collected on the Next of Kin form and were usually reported by immediate family members, often spouses, but sometimes friends or executrices for those without family or for whom a family member was not the primary contact. Women completed the form more often than men. The donors' maladies were often neatly listed, sometimes dated, e.g., 1926 – scarlet fever. Some respondents took a moment to add a personal note, such as the wife who ended the history of her husband's illnesses with, "I loved that guy a lot." Another added, "We loved each other dearly." Sisters commented on sisters: "She was a remarkable person," wrote one, and added, "take good care of her." Some wrote narratives that focused on medical histories while others wrote narratives that described people: this was more than a body, they said, this was a person and I want you to know something about him or her. Some wrote with weariness, others irritability, some with resignation, and still others with inconsolable sadness. One man added a note that apologized for his tardiness in returning the Next of Kin form, but surely the office would understand. In shock and disbelief he added, there were six of us – three couples – who were "oh so close," five of whom had died in the last two years, the most recent having been his wife. I am alone, were the unwritten words, followed by the implicit questions: how did this happen? and what now? Another man added simply, (64 years), after identifying himself as the husband of the deceased. His wife was 95 when she died.



*Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men?... Sometimes from out the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring:—the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave; a bank-note sent in swiftest charity:—he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed to death.*

***Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street  
Herman Melville, 1853***

*Where I am now, you shall soon be.*

– traditional epitaph

