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George Wright of Lutherville rests after the service. His mother, Kathleen Kirk Wright, who donated her body to research, died Nov. 13.

Those who gave to the living after death honored

Annual service held for body donors

By Mary Gail Hare
Sun Staff Writer

In front of a single stone, the only marker over the ashes of thousands of donors, the Anatomy Board of Maryland gave thanks yesterday to those who willed their bodies to research.

About 75 family members took comfort from the words of clergy, doctors and state officials during the 21st annual memorial service at Springfield Hospital Center.

"These noble and unselfish gifts are profoundly important for our society," said Dr. Marshall L. Rennels, Anatomy Board chairman.

The families sat among the towering trees that shade the grave site and listened intently to the eulogy. Many return to the Sykesville hospital every year for the memorial service, which is always the third Monday in June.

"They have died, but they continue to give of themselves through their donation," said the Rev. Clayton Briley, chaplain of the hospital center.

Floral bouquets, many with banners that read "Mom" or "Dad," surrounded the monument inscribed "to those who gave unselfishly of themselves to advance medical education and research."

Gregory M. Lubiniecki, who just finished his first year at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, called each donation a precious gift of self.

"They shared the external physical form and revealed intimately their inner beauty," he said. "Despite the growing number of plastic models, computer programs and photos, nothing can replace working with the human anatomy, the keystone of medical knowledge."

Sangeeta Das, one of his classmates at Hopkins, said she never really understood the importance of donors until she studied anatomy. "They provide us with invaluable experience," she said. "It is truly amazing that so many have been so giving."

The donor program, one of the most successful ones in the country,

attracts doctors from all over the world to training in Maryland schools, said Ronald S. Wade, the Anatomy Board's director. Donations go to area medical, dental and physical therapy schools.

"A doctor can call us any time to schedule a surgical area and donor to help develop surgical skills," Mr. Wade said. "I thank these families for a legacy that improves the health of generations to come."

Dr. Jacek Mostwin, a urologist and surgeon, has worked with the Anatomy Board for seven years.

"I came to pay tribute to the donors and their families," he said. "We physicians are but vessels who transmit the knowledge we have to those who live on."

At 15 months, Lorenzo Choudhary-Smith, was the youngest participant in the service, which honored his grandfather, William A. Smith.

"We thought it was important to bring him," said David Smith. "All he has of his grandfather is what we are going to tell him, and this is part of it."

In the past year, 613 people have willed their bodies to the Anatomy Board.

"It is nice to know Dad is in place with like-minded people," Mr. Smith said. "He was always open-minded, selfless and compassionate and I have heard people here describing their relatives in much the same way."

Kathleen Kirk Wright, who died in November, also was among those honored yesterday. After the service, her son George walked away from the others and took a seat against the trunk of a sprawling ash tree. He hoped "to absorb the atmosphere" of what the hospital chaplain called "the place made holy by the remains of so many."

"I am so proud of her, not for this alone, but for many things," Mr. Wright said of his mother.

Then he pulled a leaf from the tree and placed it in the program he had promised to share with his father and his eight siblings.