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Randy Pausch, 47, Dies; His 'Last Lecture' Inspired Many to Live With Wonder

By [DOUGLAS MARTIN](#)

[Randy Pausch](#), the professor whose "last lecture" made him a Lou-Gehrig-like symbol of the beauty and briefness of life, died Friday at his home in Chesapeake, Va. He was 47, and had lived five months longer than the six months a doctor gave him as an upside limit last August.

The cause was metastasized pancreatic cancer, [Carnegie Mellon University](#) announced.

Professors are sometimes asked to give lectures on what wisdom they would impart if they knew it was their last chance. Soon after Dr. Pausch (pronounced powsh), a computer science professor at Carnegie Mellon, accepted that challenge, he learned he had months to live.

He hesitated, then went ahead with the lecture, on Sept. 18, 2007. He said he intended to have fun and advised others to do the same. He spoke of the importance of childlike wonder.

But Dr. Pausch did not omit things that would break just about anybody's heart. He spoke of his love for his wife, Jai, and had a birthday cake for her wheeled on stage. He spoke of their three young children, saying he had made his decision to speak mostly to leave them a video memory — to put himself in a metaphorical bottle that they might someday discover on a beach.

As the video of his lecture spread across the Web and was translated into many languages, Dr. Pausch also became the co-author of a best-selling book and a deeply personal friend, wise, understanding and humorous, to many he never met.

“His fate is ours, sped up,” wrote Jeffrey Zaslow, a Wall Street Journal columnist who covered the lecture on the chance it would be a good story, and helped bring it wider awareness. The book he wrote with Dr. Pausch, “The Last Lecture,” was published this year and became a No. 1 best seller; last week it was still No. 1 on The New York Times list of advice books.

Some of the millions who saw Dr. Pausch on [YouTube](#) and elsewhere wrote letters and e-mail to The Journal and many blogs. Some said he inspired them to quit feeling sorry for themselves, or to move on from divorces, or to pay more attention to their families. A woman said the video gave her the strength to escape an abusive relationship; others said they decided not to commit suicide because of it.

The effort and the effect, even before the book, have been likened to [Mitch Albom](#)’s book on lessons he learned from his dying college professor, “Tuesdays with Morrie” (1997).

Dr. Pausch said in an interview with USA Today that he had never read that book.

“I didn’t know there was a dying-professor section at the bookstore,” he said with typical sardonic wit.

Time magazine named Dr. Pausch one of the 100 most influential people in the world, and ABC declared him one of its three “persons of the year” for 2007. [Oprah Winfrey](#) promised him 10 minutes of uninterrupted speaking time, and he used it to give a condensed version of the lecture.

Randolf Frederick Pausch was born in Baltimore on Oct. 23, 1960. In his lecture, he praised his parents for letting him paint pictures on the walls of his room. Dozens of parents wrote him to say they followed this example and allowed their children to decorate in the same way.

Dr. Pausch graduated from [Brown University](#), earned his Ph.D. in computer science from Carnegie Mellon, taught at the [University of Virginia](#) for a decade and joined Carnegie Mellon’s faculty in 1997. In addition to working in the

computer science department, he had appointments in the Human-Computer Interaction Institute and the School of Design.

His passion was creating programs he called computer worlds that students could use to create games. In fact, they were learning sophisticated computer skills. His annual virtual reality contest was highly anticipated, and work on virtual reality by some of his students won them the chance to experience weightlessness on an aircraft. They then used virtual reality techniques to mimic weightlessness.

Dr. Pausch received awards from academic and industry groups. Carnegie Mellon named a footbridge between its computer science and arts building for him to commemorate his efforts to link the fields.

Carnegie Mellon had a tradition of asking professors near the ends of their careers to deliver what it called “The Last Lecture,” but the name had been changed to “Voyages” when Dr. Pausch gave his. He bet with friends that no more than 50 people would attend. There was standing room only in the 400-seat auditorium.

Using images on a giant screen, he began by showing a slide of CT scans revealing 10 tumors on his liver. He then said he never felt better, and dropped to the floor to do push-ups, some one-handed.

He showed photos of himself as a boy, then listed his youthful dreams: to win giant stuffed animals at carnivals, to walk in zero gravity, to design [Disney](#) rides, to write a World Book entry (on virtual reality). He said he had accomplished them all.

But it turned out that other aspirations remained. When the director of the new “Star Trek” film heard that Dr. Pausch was a Trekkie, he invited him to appear in a cameo role, including a spoken line. When the Pittsburgh Steelers heard he had dreamed of playing pro football, they let him participate in a practice.

This March, Dr. Pausch testified before a House committee in Washington in favor of more money for researching pancreatic cancer. He held up an 8-by-10

picture of his three children and his wife, whom he noted would soon be his widow.

Dr. Pausch is survived by his wife, the former Jai Glasgow; his sons, Dylan and Logan; his daughter, Chloe; his mother, Virginia Pausch of Columbia, Md.; and his sister, Tamara Mason of Lynchburg, Va.

Dr. Pausch gave practical advice in his lecture, avoiding spiritual and religious matters. He did, however, mention that he experienced a near-deathbed conversion: he switched and bought a Macintosh computer.