PAINTED ON THE WALL OF A CHILD’S bedroom in the US state of Maryland is a little hand-drawn rocket ship complete with a fiery blast of rocket fuel. It sits amid sketches of a submarine, a quadratic equation and the outline of an elevator, and is headed where all little kids’ rocket ships should be headed – straight to the stars and beyond.

The artist was eight-year-old Randy Pausch, a little boy with a list of big dreams. These included authoring a World Book Encyclopedia entry, being Captain Kirk, playing in the NFL, winning a stuffed animal, becoming a Disney imagineer and floating in zero gravity.

Over the years, he has found a way to achieve them all, in part or in whole – from getting a cameo in the next Star Trek movie to riding on NASA’s zero-gravity “vomit comet” plane. And, as a computer-science professor and virtual-reality pioneer, Randy Pausch has also taught new generations to dream. The brightest future innovators and animators would sit in his class at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, absorbing his high-octane enthusiasm, irrepressible grin and penetrating stare.

With Jim Carrey looks and humour, plus a twist of Yoda wisdom and a healthy hint of nerd, Pausch earned a reputation as a showman, thanks in part to beating working VRs with a sledgehammer to teach his new students not to create things that will frustrate users.

But that’s the Randy Pausch of yesterday. Today the 47-year-old is a different man. Thinner. Greyer. Dying.

In late 2006, Pausch was diagnosed with one of the most deadly diseases, pancreatic cancer. He did not have long to live. In an instant his whole world was kicked off its axis.

First came the shock, pain and tears, as he and wife, Jai, dealt with the awful loss of knowing he would not grow old with her nor see their three little children grow up. “It pains me to think that when they’re older they won’t have a father,” Pausch says, “When I cry in the shower, I’m not usually thinking ‘I won’t get to see them do this’, or ‘I won’t get to see them do that’. I am thinking about the kids not having a father. That’s what chews me up inside when I let it.”

After the tears, the professor decided on a plan. He would approach his impending death like any engineering problem – albeit a problem with an imperfect outcome and few resources to fix it. He would put his energies into helping his family cope after his death.

“The metaphor I’ve used is that someone’s going to push my family off a cliff real soon and I won’t be there to catch them and that breaks my heart,” Pausch told US TV journalist Diane Sawyer. “But I have some time to sew some nets to cushion the fall and that seems the best use of my time. So I can curl up in a ball and cry or I can get to work on the nets.”

These nets included finding a way for his two little sons and baby daughter to remember and learn from him long after he’s gone. So when he was asked to give a Last Lecture – a series by professors at Carnegie Mellon where they pass on their wisdom as if it really was their final talk – he agreed, keen for the chance to pass on his inspirations and passions. He called it “Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams”.

“I have lived out my dreams in great measure because of things I was taught by all sorts of extraordinary people along the way,” Pausch says. “If I was able to tell my story with a passion, I felt my lecture might help others find a path to fulfilling their own dreams.”
Jeffrey Zaslow, a columnist for The Wall Street Journal, got wind of the lecture and gave him a call. “He was very funny on the phone – he was engaging,” Zaslow recalls. “He was driving and I said ‘Randy, you wanna pull over? You might get into an accident’. He said ‘Well, if I get into an accident’. he said ‘Randy, you wanna pull over? You might get into an accident’. He didn’t mind driving and I said ‘Well, if I get into an accident and die, what’s the difference?’.”

Zaslow decided to drive the five hours from Detroit to see Pausch speak.

“I am so glad I did – it was amazing being there. It was electric,” he says.

The Last Lecture was on September 18, 2007, and covered everything from Pausch’s boyhood dreams and his life advice, to how to handle adversity. He showed images of his tumour-filled scans to get the “elephant in the room” out of the way and dropped his lanky frame to the floor to do a few robust push-ups, should anyone think of pitying “the dying guy”.

For 76 minutes, in a speech never intended for public viewing, he offered his truths with humour, stories of the heroes and villains in his life and his inspirations and exasperations.

For him, the speech was a perfect storm of several things – one is the pathos and gravitas of the situation – the man is dying,” Professor Robins says. “But even if you remove the fact of the impending demise from it all, it would still be entertaining.

“It’s incredible. His legacy is that he’s making people think and re-evaluate their own lives and priorities with other people. He’s a catalyst.”

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And so that just resonated with people and it became a sharing thing. It was people sharing it with each other – that’s how it got started.

Professor Robins says the speech made many people look at their own mortality.

“In some sense he is not saying anything new,” he says. “He’s just putting it into focus to kind of think about their own lives through his situation. He thought he wasn’t going to see a word of it,” Zaslow says. “He thought he’d be done (dead) by January. so he would get off that bike and say ‘OK, gotta go’, as soon as he got back to the house, even if we were in the middle of talking about something. We just picked it up next day, because he needed to get back to his kids.”

The book on The Last Lecture, which bears the same title, shot to No. 1 on The New York Times bestseller list this month.

All the fuss came as a huge surprise for the man at the centre of it.

“He didn’t expect any of this,” Zaslow says with a laugh. “Now he’s sort of used to being famous, but in the early days he was befuddled almost. You know he’s very smart and he’s very self-assured – but he still was surprised.”

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tomorrow, next week, next month, if you only had six months left? Or would you do something different? Would you just pick up and go and live your dreams or gather your loved ones around you?

“He makes us prioritise. That’s why it’s so intriguing because everyone’s beginning to think like that. He’s gotten tens of thousands of emails – people have written to him saying ‘After I heard your lecture I changed my life and left my abusive relationship’ or some people have said to him ‘I contemplated suicide. After I heard your lecture, I called it off and now I’m OK’. And on and on and on.

“So he’s become a catalyst in thousands of people’s lives which are changing dramatically.”

Other changes were not so dramatic. When Oprah Winfrey did a follow-up to an earlier story on Pausch, she showed family after family inspired to allow their children to paint on their bedroom walls, Pausch style.

Yet amid all the outpourings of positive emails also came the hate mail. It has forced Pausch to unlist his phone number and hide his email and home address.

“Religious fanatics say to him ‘Why didn’t you mention Jesus Christ our Lord?’,” Professor Robins says.

“They say ‘You’re going to burn in hell and your kids are going to burn in hell too, and their flesh is going to be burnt off their body’.

“Strangely enough, these religious fanatics think they’re doing the Lord’s work. It’s very hard to argue with these people.”

As for Pausch, he is on borrowed time now. Eight months ago, doctors gave him just three to six months of good health. He has undergone chemotherapy and is trying to rest so he can begin an experimental vaccine, details of which he updates friends and fans with regularly on his website, along with his latest health news.

“He’s not doing great, you know,” Zaslow says softly. “He’s got heart and kidney failure issues. I saw him 3½ weeks ago. He’s slower. He’s not the guy doing push-ups any more. He’s not the guy on the bike, pedalling, either. It’s sad.

“In recent weeks he’s spent up to 20 hours a day in bed, sometimes. The world is going to remember him from that push-up scene, but that’s not who he is any more. So he’s got to go, and that’s brought on by the chemo.

“While he’s resting the tumours are growing. If, in three or four weeks he can have this new treatment he’ll do it, but he’s a realist, so…” Zaslow trails off.

Which brings us back to Pausch’s tricky engineering problem. His imperfect solutions with limited resources are being put in place now, piece by piece. He has spoken to others who have lost parents young to learn what made a difference in helping them cope.

He will leave his children a bagload of letters and emails from those uplifted by him. And of course they will have his book and a visual record of his most famous lecture.

“That lecture was in some sense a time capsule, a way to bottle himself for posterity for his children so one day when they’re old enough they can listen to the lecture,” Professor Robins says.

“And he told his publisher he doesn’t really care about any but the first three copies of his book – the first three copies will go to his children: ‘If other people want to read it and get something out of it, then more power to them, but that’s not why I’m doing it’.”

In an article for Brown Alumni Magazine at Brown University, Rhode Island, Pausch reveals he’s been making plans for his wife, too. “Jai loves to have fresh flowers in the house,” he says. So he’s arranged for weekly deliveries for a year after he dies.

The $2nd bouquet will come with a note attached: “Now it’s time for a new guy.”

For the man who began life with so many big dreams of his own, it seems almost obvious what Pausch’s final dream would be.

“Probably that his children will lead productive and meaningful lives and achieve their own dreams. It’s very likely that he’s seen them cope.

“Being a professor, he sees in his office on a daily basis the train wrecks of children who desperately are trying to please their own parents and he doesn’t want to do that for his own children.”

So his last dream would be that his children have the freedom to pursue their own dreams? To point their own rocket ships to the stars?

“Yes,” Professor Robins says. “To follow their dreams, whatever they may be.”