

# WHEN A DYING PROFESSOR'S LAST SPEECH WAS POSTED ON THE INTERNET IT BECAME A WORLDWIDE PHENOMENON AND A NO. 1 BEST-SELLING BOOK, AS MILLIONS TOOK TO HEART HIS ADVICE ABOUT LIVING LIFE AND DREAMS.

STORY SHERYL-LEE KERR

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 VCRs 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."

Those 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."



# FAMOUS **LAST** WORDS

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 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.

Pausch urged parents to enable their children's dreams, to let them, as he was allowed, to paint spaceships and equations on their bedroom walls if they want.

He told the crowd of more than 400 friends, colleagues and students to put what matters first. And then, his eyes red-rimmed, he had a birthday cake wheeled out for his wife and asked the crowd to sing to her.

Jai hugged him fiercely and whispered two words into his ear: "Don't die."

"The speech was painful and wonderful all at the same time for everyone in the room," Zaslow says. "We knew we'd seen something incredibly special. I said goodbye to him on the sidewalk outside afterwards and he was plan-

ning to go home and spend whatever time he had left with his kids. To him, that was it."

Zaslow drove home, wrote up his *Wall Street Journal* column, and posted a short video clip from the speech with it. To everyone's surprise it became an instant sensation. Email after email flooded into the newspaper.

Then a full video of the speech went up on YouTube and it became a phenomenon – well over six million people viewed it in its various online incarnations, popularity which continues to this day.

"The phenomenon is unabated," says Professor Gabriel Robins, a friend and colleague who was mentored by Pausch at the University of Virginia in the 1990s. "I put one of the clips on the web, and one of them is getting close to 100,000 hits a day and growing."

But the question many are asking is why.

"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 and relationships with other people. He's a catalyst."

So strong was the interest in the lecture that publishers got into a bidding war for Pausch's story, reportedly paying up to an astonishing \$US6.7 million for it.

Zaslow co-wrote the book with Pausch, interviewing him 53 times for an hour at a time as Pausch cycled about for exercise.

"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."

Zaslow believes Pausch's approach to death contributed to his fame.

"It's like watching a man dying and living simultaneously," he says. "We don't think of death like that. When you think of a dying person they're laying in bed dying. They're not doing push-ups and telling jokes."

"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. People feel like they found him and created him and they really did."

Professor Robins says the speech made many who saw it look at their own mortality.

"In some sense he is not saying anything new," he says. "He's just putting it into focus and bringing attention to it and forcing people to kind of think about their own lives through his situation."

"If you think about it, his situation isn't that different to any of ours. We're all going to die, we all know it. We're all terminal cases. He's forcing us to look at that and think about it and ask, if we only had months, not years, what would you do? Would you still do your job

FROM FAR LEFT:  
RANDY PAUSCH  
PRESENTS A LECTURE;  
RANDY, THE DREAMER,  
AGED FOUR; FEEDING  
DAUGHTER CHLOE;  
HOLDING CHLOE AND  
SONS LOGAN AND DYLAN;  
LAST HALLOWEEN, THE  
WHOLE FAMILY OUT TO  
PROVE CHEMO IS  
NO MATCH FOR  
THE INCREDIBLES, IN  
COSTUMES PAUSCH  
SEWED HIMSELF.



RANDOLPH June 1965 + PAUSCH

## RANDY'S TIPS FOR LIFE

➤ DREAM BIG.  
FUEL YOUR  
KIDS' DREAMS  
TOO.

➤ EARNEST  
IS BETTER  
THAN HIP  
(WHEN HIRING  
PEOPLE).  
HIP IS SHORT  
TERM, EARNEST  
IS LONG TERM.

➤ DON'T  
COMPLAIN,  
JUST WORK  
HARDER.

➤ TREAT THE  
DISEASE,  
NOT THE  
SYMPTOM.  
TAKE A PART-  
TIME JOB TO PAY  
OFF THE CREDIT  
CARD, RATHER  
THAN DEALING  
WITH THE DEBT  
STRESS.

➤ DON'T  
OBSESS OVER  
WHAT PEOPLE  
THINK ABOUT  
YOU.  
IT'S REALLY  
INEFFICIENT.

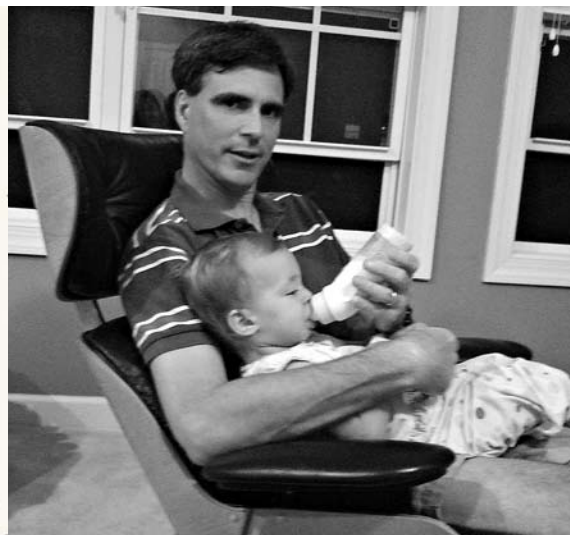
➤ LOOK FOR  
THE BEST IN  
EVERYBODY.  
ALMOST  
EVERYBODY  
HAS A GOOD  
SIDE. JUST KEEP  
WAITING. IT'LL  
COME OUT.

➤ WATCH  
WHAT THEY  
DO.  
FOR WHEN MY  
DAUGHTER'S  
DATING:  
JUST IGNORE  
EVERYTHING  
THEY SAY  
AND ONLY PAY  
ATTENTION TO  
WHAT THEY DO.

➤ BE THE  
FIRST  
PENGUIN.  
SOMEONE'S  
GOT TO JUMP  
IN THE DEEP  
END FIRST.  
CELEBRATE  
INNOVATIVE  
"GLORIOUS  
FAILURE".

➤ GET  
PEOPLE'S  
ATTENTION.  
THAT'S THE  
FIRST STEP  
IN SOLVING  
AN IGNORED  
PROBLEM.

➤ HANDWRITE  
THANKYOU  
NOTES.  
THEY WILL  
REMEMBER  
YOU. AND IT'S  
JUST THE NICE  
THING TO DO.



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 rest, 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 52nd 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. Everything he has done has been working towards that goal," says Professor Robins.

"But he's very careful not to pigeonhole them into telling them what their dreams should be."

"He's said himself that the worst thing a parent can do is force their kids to live the parent's own dreams for them to be a doctor or lawyer or whatever."

"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." ■

- To watch *The Last Lecture*, go to: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=jj5MqicxSo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jj5MqicxSo)
- Randy Pausch's website, with regular health updates: <http://download.srv.cs.cmu.edu/~pauSch>
- More resources: [www.thelastlecture.com](http://www.thelastlecture.com)
- Pancreatic cancer: [www.pancreaticcancer.net.au](http://www.pancreaticcancer.net.au)
- *The Last Lecture*, Hachette Australia, \$29.99.



For the Diane Sawyer interview with Randy Pausch, go to [www.perthnow.com.au](http://www.perthnow.com.au)



**RANDY'S TIPS FOR LIFE**

- **LOYALTY IS A TWO-WAY STREET. I ENABLED A STUDENT'S DREAM WAY BACK WHEN HE NEEDED IT, AND NOW I NEED IT HE'S ENABLING MINE.**
- **SHOW GRATITUDE. GO OUT AND DO FOR OTHERS WHAT SOMEBODY DID FOR YOU.**
- **BE PREPARED. THE ONLY THING YOU CAN COUNT ON IS WHAT YOU BRING WITH YOU.**
- **A BAD APOLOGY IS WORSE THAN NO APOLOGY. MOST PEOPLE WILL BE APPRECIATIVE OF A GOOD APOLOGY. IF NOT, DON'T LET IT EAT YOU.**
- **TELL THE TRUTH. HONESTY IS NOT ONLY MORALLY RIGHT, IT'S ALSO EFFICIENT. LYING IS INEFFECTIVE LONG TERM.**
- **NO JOB IS BENEATH YOU. IF YOU CAN'T OR WON'T SORT MAIL, FOR EXAMPLE, WHERE IS THE PROOF YOU CAN DO ANYTHING?**
- **NEVER GIVE UP. BRICK WALLS ARE THERE TO SHOW HOW BADLY WE WANT SOMETHING.**
- **BE A COMMUNITARIAN. GIVE BACK TO THE COMMUNITY – YOU HAVE RESPONSIBILITIES AS WELL AS RIGHTS.**
- **ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS ASK. JUST ASK THAT QUESTION. MORE OFTEN THAN YOU'D SUSPECT, THE ANSWER YOU GET IS "SURE".**
- **BEYORE OR TIGGER. EACH OF US MUST DECIDE "AM I A FUN-LOVING TIGGER OR AM I A SAD-SACK EYORE". PICK A CAMP.**

FROM FAR LEFT: RANDY WITH SON DYLAN, NOW 6; RANDY FULFILLS HIS WIN-A-SOFT-TOY DREAM; GABRIEL ROBINS WITH RANDY AND DYLAN; THE LAST LECTURE BOOK.