Inspiration From “The Last Lecture”

Barb Henry, APRN-BC, MSN

Randy Pausch, PhD, a computer science professor at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, PA, delivered “The Last Lecture,” an inspirational message on achieving childhood dreams that has become known worldwide for its positive themes and Pausch’s moral authority to deliver it: his bravery, dignity, and humility in the face of terminal pancreatic cancer. On July 25, 2008, Pausch lost his battle against pancreatic cancer. “The brilliant flame may have been snuffed out, but his spirit continues to shine” (Pancreatic Cancer Action Network, 2008, p. 1). In the following excerpts, nurses from across the United States share their feelings about Pausch and “The Last Lecture.” Pausch’s life and work truly touch the hearts of oncology nurses.

I found “The Last Lecture” incredibly inspiring. It was obvious that, even before he was diagnosed, Randy Pausch was a man determined to leave his mark on the world and, when he knew he had so little time, on his children. That he chose and was able to share his insights into how to successfully live the life you desire and dream of, even while his was slipping away, was further evidence of this drive.

I appreciated the debate between Randy and his wife, Jai, over whether to take so much of his very limited time to give the lecture and write the book. What a difficult decision that must have been for them; one that must have been torturous for her to accept and support. At the end of the book, Randy makes the point that it was all done for his children. What an amazing and precious gift and legacy to leave to children who will not know their dad. I appreciate that he left so much of himself to all of us as well.

Connecting to people is why I love oncology nursing. Patients like Randy have much to teach us in that connection. His reflection of his life journey teaches others to connect. I have had many patients in my career in oncology reflect his response to illness in much the same way. Allowing this connection enables mentoring by the patient and inspires one to surmount their road blocks or, as Randy says, the brick walls that are put there for only those who really don’t want to reach their goal. Despite the brick wall of poor prognosis, there is a choice to connect to people and a positive response to illness. I believe Randy, via “The Last Lecture,” will help many families, nurses, and patients to connect in the future.

Angela Maynard, RN, BSN, OCN®
William Beaumont Hospital
Troy, MI

“The Last Lecture” inspired me deeply. As an oncology nurse practitioner who has been involved with patients with cancer for more than 25 years, I found Randy Pausch to be the perfect example of the “rule” versus the “exception.” No matter what is going on in my life, I need only go to work to be inspired by the attitude, humor, strength, and perseverance that my patients show me every day. As they

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battle acute, terminal, or the now common “chronic” cancer that we see many of them fight for years, they exhibit a zest for life that may not have been previously appreciated and teach us new lessons every day. As we in oncology all see, our patients are not dying from cancer, they are living with cancer. It is not depressing work, and we are not depressed in caring for them. Our patients are amazing, and I am the luckiest person in the world to be involved in their care.

Lisa Hineman, MSN, RN, AOCN®, PHN, ANP-C
Director of Operations
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Los Angeles, CA

I saw “The Last Lecture” series via the Internet and watched his interview by Diane Sawyer. I did not, however, read his book. His story is truly inspirational for all whether you are an oncology nurse, a patient, or just a citizen. His message demonstrated the power of humor, vision for what life is really all about (here and now), and love of his children, family, and students. We are all part of something bigger than ourselves. His legacy is proof. He also demonstrated how important it is to help those faced with life-threatening disease an opportunity to leave their legacy through video, journaling, letters, or tape recordings. What a wonderful gift to oneself, loved ones, and others.

Robin Gemmill, MSN, RN, CNS, CWOCN®
Senior Research Specialist
City of Hope National Medical Center
Duarte, CA

I work with a breast surgeon in Austin, TX. Although we do not deal with patients with pancreatic cancer, we see those women with stage IV disease. I saw the lecture, and probably will get the book, and I found it very stimulating and thought provoking. Some parts I can use, and probably do use without knowing it with our patients, especially when they are facing a recurrence of breast cancer or when metastasis is found. I have had friends with pancreatic cancer and that disease is so devastating. I believe this lecture and book should be in every general surgeon’s office and in the medical oncologist’s office as well.

Nancy Lebde, RN, OCN®
Office of Jane C. Nelson, MD, FACS
Breast Care and Surgery
Austin, TX

My experience with oncology nursing has included inpatient, outpatient, home care, and end-of-life care. I was attending a basic parish nurse training course at the Graham Center and was touring our community library and noticed the book on display and immediately borrowed it. I had heard about Randy’s journey and wanted to read the book. As I read it, I wanted to earmark many of the pages as a reminder to me of his messages. As I was reading the book, I commented to several colleagues about how wonderful and inspiring his story and message are. I can recall the day that I heard Charles Gibson say that Randy Pausch died. . . . I cried. I still am wondering why I cried. I have been a part of many, many patients with cancer and families’ lives over 30 years. What was so different about Randy? I don’t know, but I will reread his book as the message that went straight to my heart is in there. God bless him for helping all of us.

Nora Katurakes, RN, MSN, OCN®
Community Health Outreach and Education Program
Helen F. Graham Cancer Center
Christiana Health Care System
Wilmington, DE

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