

Carnegie Mellon University

Lost Chapter

The Last Lecture

The Bridge

When I was first diagnosed with cancer, I went to see Carnegie Mellon's president, Jared Cohon, to let him know. He met me in his reception area, and just making small-talk, told me I looked thin and trim.

"I see you're down to your fighting weight," he said.

"Well, that's what I've come to talk to about," I told him as he closed his door. "I'm thin because I have cancer."

He immediately vowed to do whatever he could for me, to call anyone he knew in medicine who might help. And then he took out his business card and wrote his cell-phone number on the back of it. "This is for Jai," he said. "You tell her to call me, day or night, if there's anything this university can do to help, or anything I can do as an individual."

President Cohon, and others at the university, did indeed make great efforts on my behalf. My surgeon later said to me: "Every time the phone rings, it's another person politely insinuating that you're not the guy to lose on the table."

But Carnegie Mellon also had given me a break by reconsidering my graduate-school application. Then, years later, the school hired me. Then it allowed me to set up academic programs that few other universities

would even consider. Now, once again, I felt this school rallying behind me. Let me just say it: To the extent that a human being can love an institution, I love Carnegie Mellon.

On the day of my last lecture, I was told that President Cohon was out of town and couldn't attend. I was disappointed. But actually, his plan was to fly back to Pittsburgh the afternoon of the talk.

He arrived halfway through the lecture, and I saw him enter the room out of the corner of my eye. I paused for a second. He stood against the side wall, watching me speak. I didn't know it, but he was set to follow me on stage.

He also had a surprise.

Less than a block from the lecture hall, a new computer-science building was under construction. A 220-foot-long footbridge, three stories high, is being built to connect the computer center to the nearby arts and drama building. President Cohon had come to announce that a decision had been made to name the bridge "The Randy Pausch Memorial Footbridge."

"Based on your talk," he ad-libbed, "we're thinking of putting a brick wall at either end. Let's see what our students can do with that."

His announcement was an overwhelming moment in my life. The idea of this bridge took my breath away.

Turned out, President Cohon wasn't kidding about the brick walls, either. Carnegie Mellon gave its architects and bridge designers the green light to be completely creative. They first considered having some kind of hologram of a brick wall on the bridge, allowing students to walk right through it. Now they're planning to design the bridge in a way that gives pedestrians a sense that a brick wall is ahead of them at the end.

I've never been a big fan of memorials or buildings being named in people's memories. Walt Disney had said he didn't like the idea of statues of dead guys in the park.

And yet, I'm a big believer in symbols as a way to communicate. The symbolism of this bridge is just amazing to me because I've spent my career trying to be a bridge. My goal was always to connect people from different disciplines, while helping them find their way over brick walls.

I am moved and pleased when I picture all the people who will one day cross that bridge: Jai, our kids, my former students and colleagues, and a lot of young people with somewhere to go.