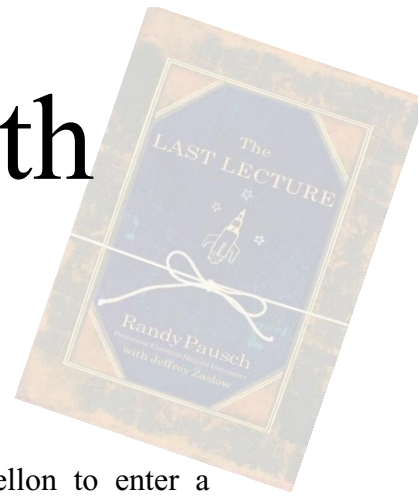


# Behind the Text with Jeffrey Zaslow



By ALIE NEUMEYER

■ Jeffrey Zaslow started his career serving up one of the staples in the world of baseball—hot dogs. Today, the loyal Philadelphia Phillies fan follows the same path and still delivers life’s essentials to many fans, only now in a much different form.



Zaslow followed his dream to write, and uses his

literary skill as an opportunity to discuss a wide array of life transitions. His words are printed in *The Wall Street Journal*, reaching out to the hearts of a world audience of readers.

After graduating from Carnegie Mellon University with a creative writing degree in 1980, Zaslow sent his resume to more than 150 newspapers across the country. Telling editors he already would be in town visiting friends, the recent graduate purchased a 30-day Northwest Airline pass and hopped on a plane to visit the prospective newspapers. Five job offers came from the resume drop. Zaslow decided to leave his familiar

surrounding at Carnegie Mellon to enter a scene of ambiguity at the *The Orlando Sentinel*. There, his byline accompanied many feature stories and an occasional column.

It only took a few years before editors from *The Wall Street Journal* took note of the talent in Zaslow’s writing. They asked him to make a shift in his career and write for the famous publication. He worked at the Journal from 1983 to 1987. While there, he wrote a front-page feature article which described a competition taking place at the *Chicago Sun-Times* to replace syndicated advice columnist Ann Landers.

In hopes of finding a unique angle for the story, Zaslow entered the contest and won the job over 12,000 other applicants. While at *The Sun-Times*, Zaslow received letters from numerous readers about topics including human emotion, hardships, pitfalls, and accomplishments.

After returning to the Journal in 2001, Zaslow created a beat unlike any other in journalism. While the *Wall Street Journal* is a

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well-known publication with a business and financial perspective, Zaslow didn’t find it hard

convincing his editors to move forward in letting him spice up the new personal journal section with his column on the subject of life transitions. Fittingly, his column is titled, “Moving On” and has since included topics

such as losing a loved one, changing jobs, getting married or moving into retirement.

Working in a field other than writing has never appealed to Zaslow. The creative act inspires him. But he knew innovation would be a key part of finding a niche to further complement his passion. "I always knew I wanted to write," he said. "But I also knew I wouldn't make 10 cents writing fiction."

The uniqueness of his column has made it easy for readers to relate to the subjects Zaslow chooses to explore. It has also provided him the opportunity to reach out and touch the hearts of thousands of readers. Zaslow finds the emotional attachment readers acquire when reading his column can sometimes pose challenges when writing about such



personal issues in a national publication. "I take [writing] seriously," he said. "When I'm finished, I think about how it will affect my readers. I want to make sure I don't hurt anyone; not all journalists can say that."

Using the transitions in his own life as a way to relate to his readers, Zaslow has had a few topics affect him more than the rest.

One showed up when the columnist met a man whose use of the words "I love you" had taken on a different meaning in a matter of seconds. These were the last three words the man had said to his daughter, minutes before she was killed in a car crash a few blocks from their home. A father of three daughters himself, Zaslow decided to use the "I love you" phrase as a basis of his next column. He took his own advice, and now uses the three words with more enjoyment than ever before.

In September 2007, Zaslow encountered an even bigger life changing experience after attending a lecture delivered by Carnegie Mellon Professor Randy Pausch. The professor was giving his last lecture, and although this was routine for other professors at the university, this talk was different for Pausch. The Computer Science professor was dying from Pancreatic Cancer when he was asked to give his final lecture at the university.

Sitting in the audience, it didn't take long for Zaslow to figure out the person before him

was not lecturing about death or dying, but was instead speaking to his audience about living.

Standing in front of 400 people, a charismatic Pausch talked about childhood dreams, the

importance of overcoming obstacles, enabling the dreams of others and seizing every moment. It was about living. The subjects presented in Pausch's last lecture were easy for Zaslow to latch onto, convincing him to write a column about the lecture in *The Wall Street Journal*. The article was posted online and accompanied a video of Pausch's last message.

The message was posted in the evening and after less than 12 hours, several readers had commented with reactions. It didn't take long for Zaslow to figure out he had come across something big with this article.

Many e-mails and phone calls later, the columnist began working 14-hour days, some of which included phone conversations with Pausch, to finish a book that would capture the essence of the dying professor's last message.

But, the two had to work fast. Pausch's illness was terminal and would dictate the number of days he had left.

With the help of publisher, Hyperion, the completed book was released on April 10, 2008. The first three copies were delivered to the people Pausch intended the lecture to be for from the beginning — his children. The book has been translated into 36 languages, is a No. 1 *New York Times* best-seller, and has had more than four million copies sold in the U.S. alone. Zaslow says the time spent working on the book was well worth it. "Nothing can compare; the book was a once in a lifetime opportunity," he said.

Zaslow continues to write and has transitioned into the final phase of finishing a book he started prior to Pausch's lecture. The book, titled *The Girls from Ames*, is a non-fiction story about 11 women from Ames, Iowa, who now in their mid-40s, have been friends all their lives. Its publication is set for 2009.

Dealing with criticism is a crucial part of writing, and in Zaslow's case, it is no different. The professional writer has had experience working in various settings, and although Zaslow has learned to take criticism better than when he first began, he says it is never easy.

However, he stresses feedback from an audience is a very important part of the process. "If no one is saying anything about your writing, it's not necessarily a good thing," he said.

Zaslow still works for *The Wall Street Journal* as a columnist and always is looking for new subjects to add to his collection.

With the publishing industry changing in difficult economic times, Zaslow says jobs like his are now harder to come by than ever before.

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His experience in the field is a perfect example for young writers, proving it takes more than interest in the field to build a career.

"The answer is not in traditional media," he says. "It's being creative and finding your own quirky path."

A path that might even start as a hot dog vender at a baseball stadium in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. ■