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Obituary: Howard Daniel Wactlar / Generous technology pioneer

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Howard Wactlar was a mensch.

A visionary in the field of technology and computer science, he also gave freely of his time, his resources and his love and attention.

In more than half a century of teaching and research at Carnegie Mellon University and the National Science Foundation, Mr. Wactlar is credited with developing technology and software engineering systems with seemingly limitless applications, from groundbreaking contributions to The HistoryMakers — the

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"Howard was a profoundly insightful scientist and a big thinker, whose ability to connect computer science to other disciplines enhanced our institution in innumerable ways," said CMU President Farnam Jahanian in a statement. "Before coming to CMU, I had the pleasure of working with him at the National Science Foundation, where he provided vision and leadership for information science and intelligence systems. His contributions left a lasting impact on the nation's research agenda in ways that will benefit our society for decades to come."

Mr. Wactlar, of Squirrel Hill, died March 1 of idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis. He was 77.

A native of the Bronx, in New York City, he came to CMU in 1967 after earning undergraduate and master's degrees in physics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Maryland.

Before his retirement in 2019, Mr. Wactlar held positions in various CMU departments, including the School of Computer Science and the Robotics Institute.

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He helped to launch the Software Engineering Institute, where he was associate director, and he served as director of the joint CMU/IBM Information Technology Center.

Simultaneous with his work as a researcher and faculty member at CMU, Mr. Wactlar shared his expertise with the NSF in many ways, including as the primary architect and project director of the Informedia Digital Video Library -- part of a larger NSF cataloging initiative in the early days of the World Wide Web.

Much of his work also focused on improving mobility and useful technology for the elderly and those with disabilities, as scientific director of the NSF Quality of Life Technology Engineering Research Center.

Mr. Wactlar worked with the Clinton and Obama administrations in various capacities, including as division director for Information and Intelligent Systems and as an adviser within the Directorate for Computer and Information Science and Engineering.

"Howard Wactlar was a source of advice and wisdom for many of us working on the national strategy," said Tom Kalil, chief innovation officer at Schmidt Futures, who served in senior White House science and technology policy roles for former Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. Mr. Wactlar "was invaluable as we worked to improve the computing landscape in areas such as

president and founder Julieanna Richardson.

"I call him our godfather," Ms. Richardson said. "He gave life to our project. He didn't ask for anything and he contributed a great deal."

When she approached him in 2001 with a request to combine new technology with the oral history project -- which at that point had recorded about 200 interviews with influential, unsung and well-known African-Americans -- his curiosity was instantly piqued, Ms. Richardson said.

"We had no money and I asked him if he would adopt us," she said. "I literally just called him on the phone one day and he swept in and with his team developed millions of dollars of technology for us. He was gracious and giving -- there's no word to describe what he did for us."

Mr. Wactlar and his team at CMU developed technology that enabled keyword searches for the video files through the use of transcripts.

"This is groundbreaking technology -- it was then and it is now, and this is what that wonderful man did for us," said Ms. Richardson, a Pittsburgh native and Harvard Law School graduate. "The digital archive that he helped us create is now in 90 colleges and universities across the United States. We have 11,000 hours of testimony from 3,400 people, and it's in all 22 reading rooms at the Library of Congress. That is what Howard Wactlar made possible."

Thanks to his efforts, The HistoryMakers project is readily available for anyone who wants to enjoy it, Ms. Richardson said.

"He was my answer to giving people access to the collection," she recalled. "He was a defining moment for us and he himself was a game changer. He has given voice to Black people -- thousands of them -- whose stories would never have been heard or accessible

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His colleagues at the university weren't surprised by Mr. Wactlar's generosity, which was expressed in other ways too.

"Howard was an exemplar of people who quietly got things done and focused on the work, without drawing attention to themselves," said Martial Hebert, professor of robotics and dean of the School of Computer Science, in a statement. "For Howard, it was always about the greater good of the institution. For example, he and his wife, Mary, donated a seat in the Rashid Auditorium that honors 'students, staff and faculty that are the greatness of SCS.' He will be greatly missed."

His daughter Sarah Langbein recalled the father who built her a self-contained video gaming system in his CMU lab before the advent of Atari.

"He used to take me to work and we'd hang out, putting together all of these cool things," said Mrs. Langbein, of Danville, Calif. "My Halloween costumes always had lights and meters and things."

Material things meant little to Mr. Wactlar, who loved to learn and always gave more of himself than he required of others, she said.

"He was this gentle soul. He was so generous and he was witty and a great listener," she said. "He was the greatest role model and mentor and he was just a rock. It was never about him -- he put everyone else before himself."

Along with his daughter, Mr. Wactlar is survived by his wife, Mary Solodar Wactlar; a stepson Ben Cohen, of Chevy Chase, Md.; a stepdaughter, Sarah Cohen, of Los Angeles; a sister, Linda Feller, of Micanopy, Fla.; and five grandchildren.

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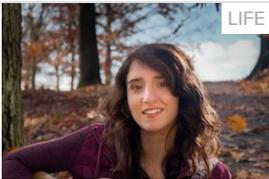*First Published March 13, 2021, 11:00pm*

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Which is your favorite among these common sports stadium / arena food offerings?

○ Hot dogs / Sausages

○ Ice cream / Popsicles/ Etc.

○ I don't buy food at sporting events

○ Other / Does not apply

○ Popcorn / Cracker Jacks / Peanuts

○ Nachos

○ I don't attend sporting events

○ French fries

○ Pizza

○ Burgers / Sandwiches

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