

Computing mensch had special way with people

David Notkin, accomplished software engineer, helped diversify his field and showed others how to live a complete life.



By [Jerry Large](#)
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David Notkin was a big deal in the world of computer science, but you wouldn't know that being around him. He was a modest-living mensch with a gift for making other people feel special, like they were a big deal. And to him, they were.

Notkin, who died Monday after wrestling with cancer for the past few years, was a professor and former chair of the department of computer science and engineering at the University of Washington, where he began teaching in 1984.

He was 58, and known internationally for his contributions to software engineering, particularly software evolution, and as a mentor who worked to bring a wider demographic to the science and technology fields. He is praised particularly for his work opening the doors of computing to young women.

The website of the National Center for Women and Information Technology posted a tribute to him, which includes a link to a [talk](#) he gave on diversity. Notkin said in that talk that when he started teaching, his students all looked and talked and thought like him. They were mini-mes, he said. He recalled joining a Pilates class and realizing that unlike his classes, no one there looked like him. He was in the minority and had to be conscious of how he was being seen and how his actions were interpreted.

He told the audience they should all participate in something, particularly a learning experience in which they were the minority, to get a sense of how that feels.

In his talk, Notkin used illustrations, sometimes comic ones, such as the one at the end of the talk, which showed a contortionist looking at his own rear end. Sometimes, Notkin said, getting out of your comfort zone means seeing something you probably didn't want to see.

I knew David as a friend whose huge, bushy beard was always crowned with a smile. He accumulated a lot of friends, and we all looked up to him — well, he was very tall. He had a sense of humor that might make you groan but always made you smile, too. Also he had Cathy Tuttle, his wife and soul mate, and their two children, Emma and Akiva.

Tuesday, at the memorial service for him, Emma said her parents taught her and her younger brother how to laugh not just when they are happy, but in the face of hard times, too.

Friends and colleagues of Notkin said he was a good listener whose full attention was always directed toward the person he was with at the moment. One of his colleagues, Gaetano Borriello, said David taught him to always assume the best intentions of others, no matter what someone else says or does. You try to understand the other person.

A former student said David's students all loved him because he cared about each of them, not just about the work.

People who spent any time with him saw that he treated everyone well regardless of their station in life.

He'd been fighting cancer for the past few years and urging everyone to get a colonoscopy. Last November, David's doctors told him he probably had only six to 24 months to live.

A lot of people wanted to tell him what he meant to them, so they organized a day of activities at the UW to honor him and called it [Notkinfest](#). That was Feb. 1, and more than 300 people from across the country (and one from Japan) attended. Everyone at that evening's dinner was issued a tie-dyed T-shirt with a photo of David on the front. David was also known for his T-shirts.

David reminded the people gathered that day that we were privileged. He said his parents were the children of poor Russian Jewish immigrants, and taught him and his older sister, Debbie, that every person on Earth has value. "We have to figure out how to give more back," he said, so that more people can better their lot.

His wife, Cathy, who is involved in what seems to be a limitless list of good causes, asked everyone at the service to do one thing for David, to deepen their own love and caring for other people. That's a great way to be a mensch like David.

Jerry Large's column appears Monday and Thursday. Reach him at 206-464-3346 or jlarge@seattletimes.com

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