UW computer-science superstar Ben Taskar dies at 36

Ben Taskar, a nationally recognized researcher in the field of machine learning and a professor at the University of Washington, died Sunday.

By Katherine Long
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Ben Taskar, a national expert in machine learning who joined the faculty of the University of Washington's Computer Science and Engineering Department this year, died Sunday night of an apparent heart attack. He was 36.

Dr. Taskar was one of several computer-science superstars the UW hired in summer 2012.

Ben Taskar

"Ben was a rock star in the computer-science world, but more than that, he was also a warm, thoughtful, and caring person," Hank Levy, chairman of the UW Computer Science and Engineering Department, said by email.

"This is a tragedy for his family and also for the department; both of us were building our future around him," Levy said.

UW computer-science and engineering professor Ed Lazowska called Dr. Taskar a leading figure in machine learning, or building computational systems that improve, and learn, with experience.

"When a thirty-something person dies unexpectedly, leaving behind a spouse and a young child, it scarcely matters that he or she was one of the generation's leading computer scientists," Lazowska said by email. "Ben was that, though: a leading figure in machine learning who made a tremendous impact on our program in his short time here."

Dr. Taskar received his bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees from Stanford University and worked six years as a faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania before joining the UW staff. He taught his first class at the UW in the spring.

Dr. Taskar's expertise was in computational linguistics, or speech recognition, the technology used in cellphones and computers that allows people to talk to their devices and be understood. He also worked with computer vision — teaching a computer to recognize an image, such as a face.

In a post on the Computer Science and Engineering Department's website, colleagues wrote that Dr. Taskar had "made many significant research contributions in areas spanning machine learning, natural language processing, and computer vision."

"Even in a short time at UW, Ben's brilliance, and his positive and gentle nature, made him admired and adored by everyone who knew him," colleagues wrote.

In an interview last year, Dr. Taskar said he joined the UW faculty in part because of its reputation for collaboration across different departments and disciplines.

Dr. Taskar is survived by his wife, Anat Caspi, and daughter, Aviv Taskar.

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