Michael Slater Brought Clarity to CPU Complexity

"Microprocessor Report" founder remembered

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SAN JOSE, Calif. – Michael Slater, an engineer turned serial entrepreneur who founded a leading newsletter on microprocessors, died of cancer at his home in Sebastopol, Calif., on Saturday.

Slater was most widely known as the founder of MicroDesign Resources, founding editor/publisher of its *Microprocessor Report* newsletter and host of its Microprocessor Forum. The company got its start in 1987, a heyday for designers of microprocessors who came to consider the newsletter required reading and the event a must-attend.

The newsletter and events were well known for bringing clarity to one of the most competitive and complex segments of the semiconductor industry. "The Microprocessor Forum was the place the industry came together, it was his brainchild," said Jeff Bier, founder of DSP consulting firm Berkeley Design Technology Inc.

"He understood the importance of bringing people together," Bier said. "It became an important place to announce products, take the pulse of the industry and connect with colleagues – I've looked to it as a model when I've done events," he added.

Bier remembered Slater as "a really kind, humble, capable, super-smart person who was wonderful to collaborate with."

"When I was getting my company started to do DSP analysis he could have thought we were potential competition, but he really embraced us and offered to collaborate with us and helped us get our start," Bier recalled. "I don't think he hesitated, that was just his nature to help teach people -- it's kind of a rare trait--he was a generous guy," he said.

Patent analyst Rich Belgard was a long time consultant to *The Microprocessor Report* and the first investor in the company behind it.

"I was very impressed with both Michael and the idea," Belgard said in an email exchange. "I told Michael that I'd like to meet with him, and that I couldn't see anything that would keep me from investing…except that I probably wouldn't invest if he showed up in a BMW because I wanted my investment to fund his company, not any expensive habits.

"Sure enough, Michael showed up in his BMW, but, given Michael was Michael, I wound up investing, and participating anyway. He truly was one of a kind. I'll miss him," Belgard wrote.

In 1993, Linley Gwennap became the first full time employee Slater hired to work on *The Microprocessor Report*. Gwennap runs and owns the newsletter today which supports eight regular contributors as part of his consulting firm, The Linley Group (Mountain View, Calif.)

Slater "was very knowledgeable and had very high standards in the quality and accuracy of writing," Gwennap said. "He set up a rigorous process where all articles were reviewed by an editorial board and internal staff, he taught me that process and we passed it on to other writers on the publication today," he said.

Gwennap recalled one anecdote where Slater bumped heads with Andy Grove, the former chief executive of Intel Corp.

Back in the mid-'90s we got a call saying Andy Grove wants to meet you guys for dinner. We thought it was a great opportunity…[At the dinner] Andy immediately launched into a tirade on some article Michael had written that was critical of Intel and spent the entire night denigrating him and threatened to pull Intel's subscriptions. Michael said he was sorry Andy felt that way but it would not change the way we covered Intel because we had a responsibility to our readers to be unbiased.

Andy wasn't too happy but we went on doing what we were doing. I think Intel did cancel some subscriptions, but after a year or so they came back again and they are still a big subscriber today.

With the newsletter, Slater "was creating the journal of record for the entire microprocessor industry at a time when it was going through massive change," Jim Turley who worked as an analyst for Slater wrote in a recent online reminiscence. "Somebody had to write this stuff down before we all forgot, or before the victors rewrote the history books," Turley quipped.

Slater had significant influence on industry issues, recalled Kevin Krewell, a principal analyst with Tirias Research who worked as an analyst for Slater.

"AMD, Cyrix, and IDT/Centaur were each going to develop their own version of x86 multimedia instructions," Krewell recalled. "He saw none of them would have gotten critical mass on their own and got them to talk to each other, getting the ball rolling on what became an agreement to collaborate on one unified instruction set extension," he said.

Hearing of Slater's cancer diagnosis, Krewell connected him with an oral history group at the Computer History Museum in Mountain View. Slater gave volunteers there a two-hour interview three weeks ago.

"His energy level was still good…this past Saturday was supposed to be a party at his house but last week his health collapsed suddenly," Krewell reported.

In January 2000, after more than 12 years working on the newsletter and related events, Slater sold the company he built. It was a time of consolidation in what was then a heavily PC-based microprocessor segment that was becoming dominated by Intel. Fewer competing companies and products made for less interesting stories and events and a less robust business.

The same month of the sale, Slater formed a startup to create tablets designed for digital photography, a still emerging field at the time and one of his passions. The company was eventually sold to Adobe Systems where he worked as a director of digital imaging research for five years before forming another startup. His last startup, Webvanta, designs Web sites for academic and non-profit organizations and others.

"Although he left the microprocessor industry in 2000, his loss is still felt today… You wanted to impress Michael and have him write good stuff about you," said Krewell. "All these years later, people know who he was and ask about him. He made a lasting impact," he said.

When he was diagnosed with late stage cancer last year, Slater started his own Web site called *Parting Thoughts*, focused on his illness, his hobbies such as gardening and life in general. In mid-May, Slater was still well enough to give at a local high school an annual talk on innovation in high tech with characteristic enthusiasm and humor.

In his latest blog posts, he talked with an engineer's candor about the details of his illness and his thoughts on his own mortality.

"Tuesday afternoon is something of a blur. I decided to go on Hospice; I did not want to die in a hospital, and they weren't going to send me home as a regular hospital patient in the condition I was in," he wrote on June 9.

In an earlier post he responded to a question on how he thought about his diagnosis.

It seems almost impossible, like a surreal dream, that I am seriously ill. I am truly enjoying life with Irene [his wife], my kids, the animals, my garden, and the beauty of Northern California.

The reality of my situation is sobering, of course, when I stop and think about it. But I am focusing as intensely as I can on right now, and right now is good!"

Slater started his career as a member of technical staff at Hewlett Packard. He graduated from the UC Berkeley College of Engineering in 1977 and is listed as the inventor on three U.S. patents. Family requested any donations made in Slater's honor go to New Horizon School.

— Rick Merritt, Silicon Valley Bureau Chief, EE Times