The Michael Slater Story
(1955 - 2016)
By Richard Mains

I'm Richard Mains, Michael's brother-in-law, and you may wonder why I'm here trying to share some of his life and adventures with you all. His immediate family, siblings and close friends would surely tell this story differently and Michael has done an extraordinarily good job of it himself on his Michael Slater blog. We shared a fascination with the history of science and technology, and increasingly over the years, family history. We both liked to write and tell stories, and I was fortunate to know him for over 35 years. I also happened to be his third customer at Webvanta, his last business, and was pleased to pitch in there on a project when Michael's health was failing. But I volunteered for this challenge today mainly to try and contribute something to this very sad, but also celebratory event. I've tried to include Michael's own words and thoughts as possible using his blog content and an extensive interview captured by the Computer History Museum in Mountain View, just a month before he died. So here we go...

Growing Up in L.A.

Michael became my brother-in-law in 1981 when his sister Patsy and I were married. She was the first of the three Slater family children born in Los Angeles and 8 years older than Michael who was born in 1955. Larry was located in between them. Patsy, with her best friend and close neighbor in West Hollywood, Loralee Denny, helped raise Michael for a few years as sort of a joint special project. But they left home on their own life adventures when he was about 10 years old. Not long after, Michael's mother Helen and father Dan separated, Larry left for college and Michael became the last Slater child at home and by default, the young man of the house with Mom. And those two had a special relationship all their lives.

In 1973 when Michael was about 17 years old, just before he left home, Helen and Ray Zager were married and Ray moved into the Slater family home. Ray's two children, Lynnanne and Paul lived there on and off too.

Dan Slater eventually married Karen Weiner who had a daughter Eve, so Michael experienced one of those complex, extended families that are fairly common these days. And, as we will see, he fared very well.

But, Michael was quite a different kid compared to his siblings. He had a major fascination with technical gadgets of all kinds. While staring at the family toaster as a young boy he wondered, "Why are there two wires...why wasn't one enough?" He remembered that "my family was completely flummoxed" and no one had the answer. His Father Dan was soon enlisted to find surplus electronic devices for him to disassemble and test in his self-created home workshop. He was a very curious lad and doing experiments of all kinds was just his thing. And he also loved to create what I've called "unannounced electronically induced surprises" for his family, often to their chagrin. Use your imagination here.

His father Dan actually took an electronics course in an attempt to better understand how to support Michael's growing passion. But when Michael told his Dad that he wanted to own an electronics repair shop when he grew up Dan said, "No, that's not what you're going to do. You're going to go to college. You're going to get a degree. You're going to work for a big company." Amazingly, Michael actually did all that, but much more too. But as a teenager he never stopped building electronic kits of all kinds. Michael's gifts for analysis, research and innovation that emerged early were predictive of his future. He always wanted answers to why things actually worked (or didn't).

Michael noted that his parents each had a particular influence on his career and life choices when he grew up. His mother Helen was a ceramicist all her life and ran her own business from a home studio. She was a life-long entrepreneur who loved good design, gardening and photography - as did Michael. His father Dan was a school psychologist during the year but each summer, with Helen's good help, he ran Camp Roosevelt. He established it in the mountains above Palm Springs and the campers, some quite young, stayed for several weeks at a time. Dan was committed to helping kids have a better chance at succeeding in their lives, but not as

much to making a profit from his endeavors. Michael, along with his siblings, spent every summer there in a beautiful setting while he grew up. We will see how these significant influences shaped some of Michael's choices, as his life unfolded.

To College & then Off to Silicon Valley

Michael laughingly replied when asked why he chose UC Berkeley, "because I applied to Stanford, MIT and UC Berkeley and Berkeley was the only one that accepted me!" So he left home in 1973, headed to Berkeley where Patsy, a UC Berkeley grad and by then Loralee also lived. He majored in Electrical Engineering to no one's surprise. Michael's complex career path after graduation in 1977 is profiled on his blog (see Resume), so I'll only add commentary here.   Overall, the new field of microprocessor design was a major focus for him when he worked at Hewlett-Packard in Silicon Valley, where he "felt like an ant in a maze". And that focus continued on, if on a very different scale, within Gryphon Engineering, his own Palo Alto consulting company. Michael notes that "my insatiable curiosity, desire to be independent and fascination for making things" drove him to create his own business. And he continued to work on microprocessor applications to biomedical systems, digital image management, complex web site design and development and many related areas for the remainder of his life.

An Engineer Who Can Really Write!

While still at Hewlett-Packard he began to write extensively creating a "Practical Microprocessors Guide" for their in-house training system and in 1988, on his own, a major college-level textbook called "Microprocessor-Based Design: A Comprehensive Guide to Effective Hardware Design" (see Amazon.com). As I recall, no one in his family, including me, could comprehend much in that book past the Acknowledgements section.   But one of Michael's many admirable traits was his absence of any need to humiliate people for their technical ignorance during IT-related discussions.

He generally assumed he would have to translate from a foreign technical language to common English, and seemed to do so with pleasure. That's just one reason his clients liked him so. Michael's writing skills soon became increasingly utilized in a multitude of ways and shaped his path forward in work and his private life.

Irene Stratton Appears and a New Family is Created

While living and working in Silicon Valley, Michael met and married Irene in 1981 and they moved into a house in Palo Alto. Irene supported Michael's business enterprises in various ways from the very beginning and increasingly became a very good editor. After discovering they were unable to have children on their own they adopted Gregory in 1990 and Mandy in 1996. And in 1990 they decided to depart the increasingly hectic Silicon Valley and move to a more rural setting in the Sebastopol area to raise their family. Loralee, Michael's early surrogate mother, extra sister and life-long close friend, after many adventures of her own, had moved to Sebastopol in 1989 with her then husband Jim and their daughter Erica. That was no doubt an attractant and Larry had also become a family doctor and worked out of nearby Santa Rosa. Michael's family eventually moved into a woodsy, canyon-based property and household a few miles out-of-downtown Sebastopol. After upgrading, it included a large home office, gardens, decks, a combo pump-driven waterfall and Koi pond, room for the family powerboat, and more. It was a great place for a young family. But, I've digressed, so back to the late 1980s in Silicon Valley where Michael and Irene were busy as beavers.

The MicroDesign Resources (MDR) Years

As Michael was completing his textbook he realized that microprocessors were changing so fast his book would need regular updating. So, in 1987 he established the MicroDesign Resources (MDR) entity and became the

editor/publisher of its innovative *Microprocessor Report* newsletter.   It soon became an industry standard source of the latest information on the rapidly evolving commercial technologies called Central Processing Units (CPUs) - effectively the brains of computers. Then, in 1992 when Loralee had separated from her husband, and after a dinner out with Michael and his family in Sebastopol, she asked him when alone, "can I have a job?", and was hired on the spot. She worked for MDR and with Michael's other companies mentioned below in various capacities over several years.

The company won awards for the "Best Computer Newsletter" on four separate occasions and established the annual Microprocessor Forum within which intensive technology and business-focused seminars were held.   The forums were sometimes provocative since many business competitors were present and interacting, but they were amazingly successful. A just-published article in Electronic Engineering Times titled, "Michael Slater Brought Clarity to CPU Complexity" details the unique value of his personal contributions at that critical time (http://www.eetimes.com/document.asp?doc_id=1329955). He sold the *Microprocessor Report* in 1992 but continued to mostly lead its operations through 1999, and it lives on.

Michael became the most quoted expert in Silicon Valley on microprocessors and appeared on the cover of the December 1996 issue of *Upside* Magazine among "The Elite 100: Leading the Digital Revolution". Michael mentioned to me in one of our last chats that the creation and production of the *Microprocessor Report* was probably his most significant contribution to the digital processing and information age of which he was so much a part. As he put it, "the thing I'm most proud of is that I was able to build a reputation as someone who was opinionated, but didn't shoot from the hip, and instead was knowledgeable and could be trusted." Andy Grove who ran Intel, the giant manufacturer of microprocessors in Silicon Valley, eventually stopped talking to him. It wasn't an easy life and Michael admits that "it seems like I carefully planned it, but really it was just dumb luck and following my instincts" (see "An Entrepreneur's Tale", by Jim

Turley, in Electronic Engineering Journal, at
http://www.eejournal.com/archives/articles/20160504-michael/).

PhotoTablet Becomes Fotiva That's Bought by Adobe Systems

Michael then became interested in what he calls "information appliances"
associated with his personal pursuit of the challenges involved in digital
photo management. He established a startup business with partners to
develop PhotoTablet that morphed into Fotiva, and the core of it all was
eventually sold to Adobe Systems in Silicon Valley. The deal included
Michael joining Adobe, as Director of Digital Imaging Research, and that
lasted 5 years during which he periodically commuted to the Valley from
Sebastopol - an increasing challenge to be sure.   Loralee was also woven
into all this but eventually worked separately for Adobe until she retired in
2012.

Webvanta is Born in Sebastopol

Michael then established Webvanta, in 2007, also with a partner, a
colleague from Adobe. It now provides website solutions for educational
and mission-driven non-profits. By using its own cloud-based Content
Management System, it allows non-technical customers to post and
manage their own content. His alma mater, UC Berkeley has been a
customer along with many small, independent organizations. That
company was recently sold to XFive, an Australian firm, but Webvanta's
current local staff will continue supporting projects. Michael and Irene were
very pleased with that outcome.

The Story Teller

Michael's career was "embedded" (microprocessor-like) in the digital global
world that we all now inhabit. Not long ago he produced an extraordinary 5
minute online story on YouTube so that all can understand and appreciate
how we got here. Explaining how the many pioneers over years
incrementally built on each other's discoveries to eventually create our

digitally-driven lives became very important to him (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMipEXVo4mo). He was that rare techno-nerd that could communicate effectively with everyone via images, story content, web sites, and do so with obvious, compelling passion.

He recently became very interested in communicating his own and his family's stories and has provided many for the current and future generations to appreciate and use on his partingthoughts.net site. He includes an analysis of how long he thinks such stories may last online using current technology and it appears that the book may still win in that contest.

His own stories will surely just increase in value over time as I've discovered in my own family where they become the best way to recapture the spirit of a departed loved one. For subsequent generations they are the main connection with family members they never knew. Michael realized all this clearly and it drove him to keep writing. And for that we owe him a great deal.

A Grown Up Family and Unexpected Challenges

Michael's interests and loves in life were exceedingly broad and in addition to his beloved family and dog Rio, included; travel, boating excursions, gardening, photography, writing, education and the history of technology. Through his children he also grew to greatly appreciate their prowess including competitive ice skating (see Blog, "Amanda's Skating Triumph") and magic (see "Gregory's Triumphant Magic Act").   His last challenge, dealing with treatments for his cancer led him to create an amazing Blog series (My Cancer Story) that tracked his progress and shared the good and bad news in exceedingly transparent ways. He courageously wanted to know how things worked (or didn't) right to the end and many of us who read his posts learned things about cancer treatment that we would never have dared to explore on our own.

Michael's Legacy Lives On

We will greatly miss his very special zest for life and his support for all in using the technologies that he helped develop and we use now to make it through every day of our own lives. His example in learning new things all his life and trying to share them with others, including those he loved, shines bright. He lives on within his family, the hearts of his many friends, his garden and of course in the digital cosmos that he helped to grow.