

shyness, and deep-seated fear of heights to become one of the best aerobatic pilots in the world.

But flying, it turned out, was just the beginning.

After my stint on the US Aerobatic Team, I applied the strategies I'd used to teach myself to fly to go after the dreams I'd deferred. In 2003, I went back to complete my PhD in computer science, the program I'd quit because I thought I wasn't smart enough. I worked with astronomers to solve the greatest mysteries of the universe. Then I applied for my dream job, a career I'd all but given up on because the odds against it were so great. I received six offers and landed what seemed to me to be the best job on the planet—Professor in the College of Engineering at the University of Washington.

I've lived the kind of life I never would have dreamed of as a shy awkward child in Indiana, a child no one expected much of. ... [And] I did it through a series of simple and rather ordinary steps, by combining math and logic with passion in an unexpected way. 🍌

Cecilia Aragon is the director of the Human-Centered Data Science Lab at the University of Washington. She and her team use both quantitative and qualitative methods to study how people make sense out of very large data sets. She was awarded a 2017–18 Fulbright Fellowship to conduct research in human-centered data science and teach visual analytics in Chile.



In Memoriam



Stephen Hawking 1942–2018

Theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking died on March 14, 2018, at age 76 from complications of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). Famous for his mind-bending theories of black holes and his popular book, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*, Hawking was a frequent visitor to Caltech. He did much of his seminal research on black holes during a yearlong visit to Caltech from 1974–75. Over the next four decades, Hawking, a professor at the University of Cambridge and a Sherman Fairchild Distinguished Scholar at Caltech, returned to the Institute often to conduct research and exchange ideas with faculty, postdoctoral scholars, and graduate students.

“Stephen was not only one of the greatest scientists of our era; he was also a wonderful friend, and an inspiration to me, both personally and scientifically,” says Kip S. Thorne (BS ’62), Richard P. Feynman Professor of Theoretical Physics, Emeritus. “He lived life to the full. He took me to Antarctica in the depths of the Antarctic winter! His sense of humor was legendary. When he started a sentence, laboriously on his computer, I never knew whether it would end in a deep pearl of wisdom or an off-the-wall joke. His insights into our universe have inspired generations of physicists who follow in his wake, and will continue to inspire for decades to come. I miss him terribly, already.”

“Stephen Hawking was one of the world’s greatest physicists, and his death is an enormous loss,” says Sean Carroll, a colleague of Hawking’s and a research professor of physics at Caltech. “He did more to advance our understanding of gravity than anyone since Albert Einstein. Stephen was also an irrepressible character who persevered in the face of overwhelming adversity. He traveled frequently, and could have gone anywhere; we were fortunate that he chose to frequently come to Caltech.”

Hawking was known for his scientific wagers, including a bet with Thorne and John P. Preskill, Richard P. Feynman Professor of Theoretical Physics at Caltech, regarding his declaration that information that fell into a black hole would be lost forever. He eventually conceded that he had been wrong.

Preskill recalls, “What I’ll remember best about my time with Stephen is that we could make each other laugh. I sensed when we first met that he would enjoy being treated irreverently. So, in the middle of a scientific discussion I could interject, ‘And what makes you so sure of that, Mr. Know-It-All?’ knowing that Stephen would respond with his eyes twinkling, ‘Wanna bet?’” 🍌

🍌 Read more about Hawking’s life at magazine.caltech.edu/post/in-memoriam