

Obituary, San Francisco Chronicle, January 22nd, 2006 (also available at SFGate on the web)

Joseph Oliger, a prominent computer scientist at Stanford University who helped to develop the early use of high-speed computers for weather forecasting and mathematical research, has died of pancreatic cancer at age 64 at his home in Truckee.

Professor Oliger died Aug. 28, but his death was not announced by Stanford until the past week.

Born on Sept. 3, 1941, in Milan, Ind., he was the son of Emmert Oliger, a salesman, and Catherine Oliger, a homemaker. He grew up on a farm in Greensburg, Ind. He received his bachelor's degree in math from the University of Colorado at Boulder in 1963 and his master's degree in applied math several years later.

In 1965, in his early 20s, he went to work as a computer programmer and analyst for the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder. The center has long been a pioneer in high-speed or "numerical" weather forecasting, in which computers try to calculate the future consequences of present weather conditions.

Professor Oliger married Deborah Hunter Clark of Boulder in 1967. They had two sons.

In 1973, the same year he left the center, Professor Oliger received a doctorate in computer science from the University of Uppsala in Sweden. In 1974, he became an assistant professor at the Stanford computer science department. In 1980, he attained the rank of full professor.

The Oligers divorced in 1984, and Professor Oliger never remarried. His ex-wife now lives in England.

In 1987, Professor Oliger and three colleagues co-founded Stanford's Scientific Computing and Computational Mathematics Program. He also continued working on mathematical problems posed by the use of computers to forecast weather, as well as those posed by computer models in oceanography, aerodynamics and hydrodynamics.

Professor Oliger's writings included technical articles and a book, "Time Dependent Problems and Difference Methods," which he co-authored in 1996 with Heinz-Otto Kreiss and Bertil Gustafsson.

Professor Oliger's "enthusiastic attitude" and "big heart" were recalled by one of his former doctoral students, Wei-Pai Tang, as quoted in a statement released Wednesday by Stanford.

The statement also quoted one of Professor Oliger's former colleagues at the National Center for Atmospheric Research, Paul Swarztrauber, as saying: "Joe was creative and would devise computer solutions that would only later appear in the literature. He had enormous grit and seemed almost oblivious to adversity."

Professor Oliger, an avid reader, outdoorsman and teacher, retired from Stanford in 2001 and moved to Truckee, where he enjoyed rock climbing and skiing.

His son Nicholas recalled: "My dad had a real, real love of nature, especially this area -- Truckee and Donner Pass. This was where he wanted to retire.

"He was so brilliant. He was a really, really wonderful man to grow up with. You'd ask him what time it was, and he'd want to tell you how a watch worked. He'd teach us about nature, about the clouds. I just miss him so much."

Besides Professor Oliger's ex-wife and his son Nicholas, survivors include his other son, Jason Oliger of San Francisco, and a granddaughter, Zoe, of Truckee.

No memorial service is planned. Professor Oliger was cremated, and the family plans to scatter his ashes on one of his favorite trails in the Sierra Nevada, Nicholas Oliger said.