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How Pete Frates Found His Calling And Launched The Ice Bucket Challenge

“Be passionate. Be genuine. Be hardworking, and don't afraid to be great.” — Pete Frates

On March 13, 2012, Pete Frates was sitting at the dinner table with his parents, siblings, and girlfriend and he did what all great leaders do—communicate an inspiring vision. He would lead a movement to fight ALS and change the world. The mission had become personal. Six hours earlier a neurologist had delivered the news: Pete had Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. The baffling and crippling disease has no effective treatment and no known cure.

Over dinner that night Frates also announced a bold, seemingly improbable goal. He would bring the disease to the attention of philanthropists like Bill Gates. We all know what happened next. Frates did, indeed, spark a movement called the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. And in August [Bill Gates](#) joined millions of others who dumped a bucket of ice over their heads, posted the video on YouTube, [Facebook](#), and Twitter and challenged others to do the same. The viral phenomenon will go down as a case study in social media, having raised more than \$100 million in donations for the ALS Association this summer, compared to \$2.8 million for the comparable period the year before.

I met Pete's mother, Nancy Frates, two weeks ago in a moment we both found to be serendipitous. I had been invited to deliver a keynote speech on

the topic of communication to trainers of Keller Williams, North America's largest real estate firm. Nancy introduced herself to me after my presentation and we talked about the similarities between the inspiring communicators who I've studied and her son's ability to rally a generation behind his cause.

A gifted communicator. Pete Frates majored in communication at Boston College, a field of study his mother thought he should pursue because he was really, really good at it. "Pete could always command a room, a skill his teachers noticed as early as the sixth grade," Nancy told me. Pete gave a book report about one of his favorite baseball players and delivered the presentation dressed in a uniform. His teacher still talks about it as the most memorable presentation she had ever seen a child deliver. In the 9th grade Pete ran for class president. "He wrote the speech himself and it had everything you want in a presentation. It had humor, it was relatable, and a call to action. He mesmerized the room," said Nancy.

Pete's ability to mesmerize a room made him a recognized leader in the ALS movement even before the ice bucket challenge became a viral phenomenon this summer . After watching videos of his speeches and speaking to Nancy, I know why. Pete's passion is contagious.



Carmine Gallo and Nancy Frates share a passion for inspiring leaders like her son, Pete

People with passion can change the world for the better. You cannot inspire unless you're inspired yourself. In 25 years of studying communication I've never met an inspiring leader who isn't abundantly passionate about the topic or the cause. Pete fits the mold. Pete, the captain of the 2007 [Boston College](#) baseball team, is passionate about leading teams to

victory. On the day he was diagnosed, Pete did what inspiring leaders do—he articulated a bold vision and began to assemble the team to rally around the vision. “This is my new team,” Pete told his family.

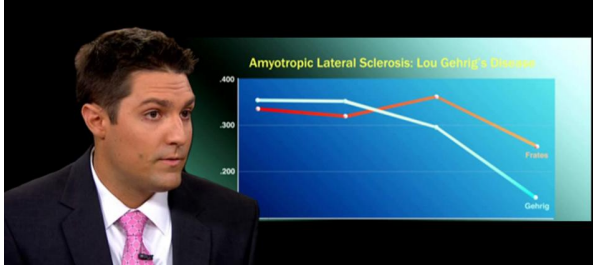
“Pete was working in the insurance field prior to diagnosis,” according to Nancy. Two months before his diagnosis he said, ‘Mom this is not my passion. It’s not what I am supposed to be doing.’” Pete believes his calling is to rally a generation to Strike Out ALS. As the guest speaker at an awards dinner for local athletes, Pete said, “I knew that as a group-benefits salesman I wasn’t using my gifts. I wasn’t living up to my full potential. As soon as I got the news it clicked, this is what I’ve been put here to do.”

The natural storyteller. Pete knew how to tell a story. The height of his college baseball career came when he hit a grand slam home run in Boston’s storied Fenway Park. Nancy tells me that Pete refined the story into an elevator pitch and weaved it seamlessly into every job interview. Pete understood his audience and knew how to tell the stories they wanted to hear.

Once Pete learned that virtually no movement has been made on a treatment or cure for ALS in 75 years, he accepted the diagnosis as an opportunity to be the voice for tens of thousands of people who live with ALS each day, and who often lose their voices as the disease progresses. Pete realized that a story had to be relatable. People had to somehow see themselves in Pete’s story. Pete wanted them to know that if it could happen to him, it could happen to them.

“Life before my diagnosis was very normal,” Pete told Charlie Rose. “I was a three-sport athlete in high school. I went on to play baseball at Boston College where I captained the team in ’07. I was 6-foot-2, 225 pounds and, as someone said, cut out of granite and ready to roll.” Pete understands the power of visuals to support a story. On the same Charlie Rose show he showed a simple graph with two lines comparing his batting average to Lou Gehrig’s toward end of his career. Pete tells the story of how one year he was batting .400 for a men’s baseball league and suddenly found himself hitting .250. One day a pitch struck his left wrist and it failed to heal,

which eventually led him to a neurology appointment where he received the news that would change his life.



Pete supports his personal story with a simple graph

Inspiring leaders start movements because they are, by definition, gifted communicators. Pete Frates is no exception. Today Pete and his wife, Julie, are focusing on raising their newborn baby. Nancy is energetically picking up the ball. Nancy tells me she has three upcoming speeches and, no doubt, will field many more requests to carry on her son's message.

Inspiring leadership is in short supply. At the age of 29, Pete Frates shows us all how it's done. **He's a storyteller, he's optimistic, positive, determined, passionate, and has an unwavering belief in the power of the human spirit.**

Frates has lost the ability to move his arms and legs and is confined to a motorized wheelchair. He has also lost his ability to speak, but his words continue to resonate with donors, researchers, individuals, and scientists who are more inspired than ever to focus their efforts on fighting the disease.

Carmine Gallo is a communication coach, keynote speaker, and author of several bestselling books including The Presentation Secrets of Steve Jobs and his latest Talk Like TED: The 9 Public Speaking Secrets Of The World's Top Minds.

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