

FIRST PERSON JAYSON BLAIR

Jayson Blair's name became synonymous with scandal and disgrace, following his highly publicized self-destruction at *The New York Times* in 2003 for rampant plagiarism and fabrication of news stories. The scandal rocked the venerable newspaper and led to the resignation of its two top editors in June 2003.

After a couple of years of tremendous upheaval that included diagnoses of bipolar disorder and the penning of a rapid response book, *Burning Down My Master's House: My Life at The New York Times*, Blair's life is beginning to turn around.

Now 29, Blair is working part time as a book editor and finishing the college degree he waved off when he grabbed the chance to write for *The New York Times*. His recovery includes medications, treatment, and continued learning about bipolar disorder. Speaking to the public about his experiences is two-way therapy treatment for Blair, and he says, the questions have become less onerous.

Blair was a featured speaker during February—Black History Month—at the Glendale Public Library near Phoenix, where Cynthia Landrum, event organizer, told the *Arizona Republic*: “Obviously, because he’s a controversial figure, we thought he’d draw interest.” But she also adds that Blair offers something that is not always available. “He talks about mental-health issues among African-Americans, and about dealing with his own mental-health issues. I don’t think he necessarily uses it as an excuse,” says Landrum, “but I do think it is an important issue and needs to be discussed.”

Following is Jayson Blair's first-person account of how bipolar disorder has impacted his life.

Making a turnaround

By Jayson Blair

It's not front page news when most people tell a lie. When I repeatedly did so, it was, and it was the reason for my downfall.

On Sunday, May 11, 2003, *The New York Times* ran a 7,000-word above-the-fold, front page story (accompanied by a 6,400-word litany of corrections) that summed up many months of lies, deception, and a double life I had been living as a reporter for the newspaper. *The Times* called my fabrications and plagiarism in stories about Iraq War prisoner-of-war Jessica Lynch, the families of missing sol-

diers, the Washington, DC-area snipers, and other high-profile stories of 2002 and 2003 a “low point in the 152-year history” of the newspaper. The paper also reported on errors and fabrications in my stories going back to 2000.

As a team of *Times* reporters and researchers dug into my background pulling together the loose threads for that Sunday newspaper article, I was sitting in Silver Hill Hospital in New Canaan, Connecticut, following a suicide attempt that only a few years earlier I would have thought unimaginable. I was not driven to attempt to take my life out of the burden of the scandal. Rather, the



Jayson Blair relaxes in his home in Centreville, Virginia, where he works part time as a book editor.

Photo: THOMAS D. BLAIR for bp Magazine

attempt came as I tried to hold on to my sanity among the waves of my rapid-cycling emotions in the days before it became obvious to my employers that I had fabricated and plagiarized at least one story.

In a matter of a few years, I had gone from being a rising star reporter at *The New York Times* to a disheveled, drug-addicted alcoholic whose mind was still ravaged after getting clean and sober. Like Icarus, I soared like an eagle, but fell with a shattered wing. It would be easy to say that May 2003 was the worst month of my life. I lost my job. I lost the respect of friends and colleagues. I was publicly humiliated. My girlfriend left me. And, in my heart, I had no one to blame but myself. It turned out, however, that May 2003 was actually the most important month in my life. That is when I was diagnosed as having bipolar disorder. The shreds of my life and the heart-wrenching disorder of years past all began to make a little more sense—at least to me.

I never wanted to be remembered the way I am now. Instead, I wanted to be remembered as a distinguished reporter for *The New York Times*. I wanted to travel the globe, collecting awards, and helping people through journalism. There are those who would want me to spend my remaining days focusing on the depravity of my past actions, and one should not misconstrue my reluctance to do so as a lack of remorse. In a life with emotional highs and lows that can only be tempered by the twin remedies of psychotherapy and powerful drugs, it does not do me much good to focus on the negative.

My mercurial moods first manifested themselves during childhood, when church choir leaders and teachers would comment on my excessive energy and my parents took me to a doctor to see if something might be wrong. I had been labeled as a gifted and talented child. At the same time, I was having difficulties that resembled a learning disability. I was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) by a general physician and was

treated with Ritalin for years, until a determination was made that this drug was doing me more harm than good.

Withdrawal from Ritalin proved difficult. About this time, I experienced my first episode of depression—a deep darkness

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that left me recoiling in my room, unable to relate to a loving and supportive family. These periods of despondence were followed by highs that I thought were the natural rising tide that follows depression. In those high school years, I found that the highs occurred when I was at my best—my most cre-

ative, charismatic, energetic, and intellectual moments. This was hypomania, although I did not realize there was a name for what I was experiencing.

Indeed, hypomania helped me excel in high school, where I joined the student newspaper, the *Sentinel*, and wrote as a reporter and news editor. I did not think much of my highs and lows during this period, other than knowing that my experience with depression helped me sympathize with those in pain, or experiencing mania, and gave me the gift—at times—of much energy. When I was hypomanic, it was as if I was on a train that could not be stopped, even with all my will and supported by the strength of others.

In the summer of 1994, following my senior year in high school, I went to work as a reporter for three months at a weekly newspaper based in Reston, Virginia. As a student at the University of Maryland, I worked for the independent student newspaper, the *Diamondback*, and wrote as a freelance writer or intern reporter for the *Washington Post*, the *Boston Globe*, and *The New York Times*. On the outside, people saw the mania and thought my career progression unstoppable. They were happy to measure my success as productivity.

But very few saw the deep depressions I experienced, or understood the dangers of mania. As my career rose to great heights for someone so young, few knew that I had already begun self-medicating with alcohol and drugs an illness I did not recog-

nize. I was a wolf in sheep's clothing, a train wreck waiting to happen. Only very attentive individuals, like my college advisor Olive Reid (now assistant dean at the University of Maryland's Philip Merrill College of Journalism, at the time director of undergraduate programs there), could see I was headed off the tracks and toward great disaster.

Olive recommended that I seek counseling. “Even though you are full of energy and always smiling, I can see through you and can tell everything is not okay,” Olive told me at the time. “You might be



Photo: PR NEWSWEEK

During May, 2003 when the scandal was at its height, Blair's face was the media image of the moment.

depressed, Jayson, as hard as that is to imagine. You just have to remember that being depressed does not make you weak, even though getting help takes a lot of strength.”

Still, because of my previous experience with ADHD and my pride, I resisted getting help. After all, I told myself, with all the grandiosity of someone in mania, what could be wrong with a college student who was going to take a job at *The New York Times* before he graduated?

I was in awe when I joined the reporting staff of *The Times* as a summer intern in 1998 at age 22 and was then named a trainee, or “intermediate” reporter, in 1999. I remember one moment standing in the hallway staring in wonder, respect, and admiration at the framed pictures of the



Blair has always been able to count on the support of his family.

men and women who had won a Pulitzer Prize for America's newspaper of record. I was honored even to be in the hallway.

At first, I was a reporter for the metro section, covering law enforcement, media, technology, utilities, and other topics. Initially, I received rave reviews from my supervisors for the amount of time I was willing to pour into reporting and taking on assignments that would be ducked by others. I was able to succeed, in part, because I was able to medicate my moods and keep myself hypomanic most of the time. Soon, however, this became much more difficult. I found myself increasingly in the bar and turning to drugs like cocaine to keep my highs going.

Often, I would get high to pull myself out of a morose mood and then go back into the office at 2 a.m. to finish a story. In addition to the long hours of drinking and drugging—and the toll they took on my body—this substance abuse eventually began to have little to no effect on my moods. Gradually, I sank into a deep darkness.

My "Come to Jesus" moment came in January 2002, when I went to get help from *The Times'* employee assistance counselor, on the recommendation of one of my editors. With this assistance, I got into rehab for my alcohol and drug problems—the only

problems I knew I had at the time—and my life slowly began to get better. None of us knew that I was also bipolar, and that by no longer medicating my moods, I was going to experience an emotional rollercoaster akin to what can happen when someone goes off his or her medications.

My first recognizable delusions came in the fall of 2002, after I had been named to the prestigious national staff of the paper. (I had been named a full-time reporter in 2001.) I was sent to cover the Washington, DC-area sniper shootings, something that only bolstered my manic grandiosity.

I already had inflated self-esteem, a decreased need for sleep, a mouth that could not stop moving, and thoughts that were racing. I was already easily distracted and focused only on goal-oriented activity. Soon, however, I found myself moving into the dangerous territory of mania—high-risk behavior in the form of fabricating and plagiarizing stories. The first acts were lifting paragraphs from Associated Press news reports without attribution and then placing them into my stories.

Quickly, though, the acts of plagiarism and fabrication became more bold and high risk, and my illness became more crippling. Perhaps, none of this would have happened, if I had not been so prideful as to not admit

weakness. At that time, I could have gone back to *The Times'* employee assistance counselor for help, but I didn't.

During this period, I knew something was terribly wrong. I should have asked for help. Had I done so, I most likely would have been diagnosed, and might still be a reporter for *The Times*.

Why did I fabricate and plagiarize? Bipolar did not make me lie.

I was trying to accomplish my job while I was sick without letting anyone know that anything was wrong with me. Thousands of communications professionals suffer from mental illnesses and have never let their disorders affect their jobs. I cannot underestimate the role immaturity played in my story.

I was caught in my deceptions as I was rapid-cycling between mania and depression. My landlords literally expressed concern that I might have a brain tumor. I was asleep all day and then up for days on end. Or I could not get out of bed for days, and then I could not find a bed where I could sleep. Attempting to reconstruct these months is both emotionally painfully and literally difficult because of lost periods. What I do know is that being caught is the best thing that ever happened to me. I know, at

Please turn to page 60



Photo: THOMAS D. BLAIR for bp Magazine

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the least, that I would have had to wait longer for the measure of peace of mind I now enjoy. If I had not been caught and if I had not attempted suicide, Lena Williams, the chairperson of *The Times* newspaper guild, would never have called *The Times*' employee assistance counselor, who got me into Silver Hill Hospital.

Without Lena's help and the help of others, I would not have been humbled and forced to set aside my pride. I would not have been so quickly diagnosed as having bipolar disorder. I would not have all the support of the beautiful people in my life and the wonderful opportunities I have now.

I have no idea what my future holds—I have good days and bad days now—but I am looking forward to growing and learning. It is hard for me to describe the difference between living with bipolar now, and my life when the illness was undiagnosed and therefore untreated. Today, I am in psychotherapy, under the care of a psychiatrist, and on medications. The road to recovery is by no means perfect and it has centered around faith, family, and friends.

The struggles with feelings of shame that strike at my ego because I have to take medication to survive and the remorse I feel about my indefensible actions at *The Times* remain a constant in my life. At one point, I almost slipped back into drugs and alcohol. And I have sat in my bed staring at the ceiling wondering why all life's blessings had to be accompanied by a chronic illness like bipolar. Those are only the worst days, however. On most days, I have a greater appreciation for who I am, a stronger understanding of my strengths and weaknesses, and a healthier and happier life, primarily through the support of my family and a small group of close friends who are also either living with bipolar, or in substance abuse recovery.

Focused on making something good come out of a bad situation, I have started a local support group here in Centreville,

Virginia, for those with bipolar. I speak at schools, libraries, and other places where people believe they can learn from my situation. The most pronounced change I've noticed in the last year when I am speaking has been that the questions have become less hostile—even from idealistic journalism students—and the focus has shifted from *The Times* scandal to learning how to live and recover from mental illness.

I am lucky to have a family who are devoted to understanding bipolar disorder and supporting me when I am depressed, or checking me when I am manic. I am lucky enough to have the chance to return to college to complete my degree in business communications and to build a large group of supporting and loving friends. I am lucky enough to have a flexible job, working as a book editor for Phoenix Books, that allows me to take days off when I am too high, or too low, or to work at four in the morning. As a recovering alcoholic and addict, I have found it easy to create my own 12 steps to mental health recovery, focusing especially on spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical health as the keys to using my illness to my advantage, and keeping it from harming me further.

Often, I am asked whether my continuing bipolar recovery has been made more difficult by also having to go through the terrible situation at *The Times*. I do not look at it that way. I understand that it took losing something major and valuable for me to take my mental health seriously. The experience at *The Times* has also given me the chance to make something good come out of my illness—opportunities to speak and be heard, and to make people more aware of, and knowledgeable about, bipolar disorder. Often, I believe, life's gifts come in strange-looking packages. This is one of those occasions.

When I look into the future, I cannot honestly tell you what my dreams are beyond continuing in my recovery, which has become the bright candle in the darkness, allowing me to smile when I think about the future. ●

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