About Jayson Blair

Jayson Blair was a reporter at The New York Times until an untreated and undiagnosed illness, known as manic depression, brought his career down. Jayson has made it through the fire and now runs a company, Azure Entertainment Corporation, his community service efforts, speaking engagements, appearances, and other similar matters. Jayson is finishing the last few courses toward his B.A. in Business Communications and has begun coursework toward his M.S. in Industrial and Organizational Psychology. The focus of Jayson’s graduate research is psychopathology and organizational change.

Here is a little information about Jayson:

For several years until the spring of 2003, Jayson T. Blair was a promising young reporter at The New York Times. His journalistic career, which became public in an unprecedented, 14,000 word front page story in The New York Times on Mothers Day, 2003, must go down as one of the most widely reported personal and professional breakdowns in the history of American media. For a while, it was almost impossible to read a newspaper or listen to a news broadcast without tripping over a mention of “the Jayson Blair scandal.” Within a year, Blair would be diagnosed with manic-depressive disorder (also known as bi-polar disorder), the key factor in his breakdown, the two top editors of The Times, Howell Raines and Gerald Boyd, would resign, and Blair would publish “Burning Down My Master’s House” (New Millennium Press, ISBN 1-932407-26-X), a 296 page, first-person account of the events that ended in his public self-destruction as a journalist.

Jayson Blair was born in 1976 in Columbia, Maryland, a planned community founded in the 1960s. His father is a career civil servant whose assignments include the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the Smithsonian Institution. His mother is a retired schoolteacher. When he was six years old, his family began the first of a series of moves that would take him to Texas, Georgia, and eventually back to the suburbs of Washington, DC, where the family settled in Centreville, Virginia.
home near Christmas 2004 with the family dog, Falcon, and two family friends.

There, Blair attended Centreville High School, where he became involved with the school newspaper and developed a passion for journalism. In his senior year he got his first newspaper job as a writer for a Centreville weekly. He entered the University of Maryland as a journalism student in 1995 and while he was a student there he worked on the University newspaper, The Diamondback, and for the Capital News Service, a student-run wire service. His early journalistic output earned him a number of awards, including the Fairfax County (VA) Public Schools Journalism Award, The Anne Sharp Excellence in Journalism Award, a Times Community Newspapers Scholarship, and a Virginia Press Association Award. Blair was named Liberty University Writer of the Fall Semester in 1994.

In 1996 Blair got an internship at The Washington Post where he worked in the paper's Howard County, Maryland bureau. He spent the following summer as an intern at The Boston Globe, and in 1998 he was granted a summer internship at The New York Times. He also continued to earn journalism awards. The include three Region II 3rd Place honors from the Society of Professional Journalists – two in Spot News, one for In-Depth Reporting, a Kingman Scholarship from the Washington, D.C. Society of Professional Journalists, a Gertrude Poe Community Journalism Scholarship, a Scripps Howard Foundation Journalism Scholarship, the Paul Berg Dimondback Scholarship, and a Richard W. Worthington Scholarship. He earned the Mark of Excellence twice in 1998 and once in 1997 from Region II of the Society of Professional Journalists – once for In-Depth Reporting and twice for “Best Daily Newspaper.” None of his awards has been rescinded.

Blair's passion for journalism eventually overtook his commitment to higher education. When The Times offered a trial position as a reporter in 1999, the acceptance of which would delay his college graduation indefinitely, Blair accepted. He never did finish his senior year at the University of Maryland.

In four years at The Times Blair's output of stories was prodigious. By his own count, he wrote more than twice the average number of stories that the average reporter of his rank at the paper would complete. He worked on the Metro Desk, in Sports, Metro-Business, and eventually on the National Desk, assigned to cover the DC Sniper story. His career at The Times did not suddenly go south in 2003. Despite his enthusiasm for the job and the long hours he voluntarily put in, problems developed early on. He was a heavy drinker, and eventually developed a dependence on alcohol and cocaine. He did not know it at the time, but his substance abuse was actually a form of self-medication for manic-depressive disorder, with which he was not diagnosed until after his professional breakdown. And despite his long hours, he was by no means a model employee.

It was not until after Blair went through drug and alcohol rehab in 2002 that his career began to spiral downward out of control.

“Once I was clean and sober, I had to face my underlying mental disorder,” Blair says. “The problem was this: I didn't know that I had a mental disorder.” Sobriety was followed by a period of depression,
during which Blair became fixated on an imaginary connection to teenage sniper suspect Lee Malvo, whose case he was assigned to cover by The Times.

“In the book, I set down events and my reactions to them as they happened and as I remembered them. As I look back now, after being successfully treated for manic-depressive disorder, the person I was then is a stranger to me now”. Blair now takes several prescription anti-psychotic medications. He continues to avoid recreational drugs and alcohol.

“Many critics have criticized me for using mental illness, substance abuse, and race [Blair is African-American] as excuses for my misdeeds. There are no excuses. In the book, I should have made it clear that many of my reactions to events at the time were typical of people with manic-depressive disorder. This is especially true of my grandiose reaction to Lee Malvo. Manic-depressive disorder is not an excuse. In my case, it is context.”

By the early 2003, Blair's career at The Times had spun out of control. Among his offenses were pretending to editors that he had interviewed subjects in person when, in fact, he had never met them, and not visiting locations of the datelines of his stories. Eventually, the discovery of an uncredited lift from the San Antonio Express-News brought his career as a reporter to a sudden end.

“Many commentators have tried to find a larger meaning for journalism from the events surrounding my breakdown. There is none. My story is nothing more or less than the mental and emotional collapse of a guy working in a very large fishbowl – in this case The New York Times – suffering a breakdown which he was trying to hide from his bosses. My deceptions in my last several months at The Times were part of an attempt to hide my personal problems. I thought that I had to cover up my problems in order to save my career. Ironically, it was the failed attempt at a cover-up that ended my career at The Times.

“If there are lessons to be learned from my story, and I hope there are, they might be something like this: Workplace ethics are not made to be flouted. When people tell you not to abuse alcohol and drugs, listen to them. When your good friends tell you that you need psychiatric help, get it.

“I brought embarrassment to friends, family, and a great newspaper because I did not follow those lessons. For me the price is a promising career in a profession I love. For someone else the price could be life itself. Unfortunately, the mentally ill person is often the last to recognize his own condition. I am not claiming that the substance abuse or the manic-depressive disorder made me do it – they only clouded my judgment, making it easier to give into the temptation to break the rules.”

Jayson Blair lives in Fairfax County, Virginia. He often speaks publicly on mental illness and substance abuse. His memoir, “Burning down My Masters' House,” has been published in the United States and in Israel, where a Hebrew edition is sold by Glory Publishing. A serialized version was published in the United Kingdom.