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A Beautiful Life, an Early Death, a Fraud Exposed

By KATIE HAFNER

On May 14, Kaycee Nicole Swenson, an effervescent 19-year-old, died from complications surrounding leukemia, which she had been battling for nearly two years. From her home in Kansas, Kaycee, an unyieldingly optimistic high school basketball star, had chronicled her remissions and relapses in her online diary, or Weblog, which she had dubbed Living Colours.

For nearly a year, thousands of people went to the site to follow her travails. Many came to feel as if they knew her, and a few talked with her regularly on the phone. Some sent her gifts. Others with cancer spoke of her as an inspiration. On May 15, when Kaycee’s online followers went to her Weblog, they found a small image of a rose, accompanied by an announcement of her death:

"Thank you for the love, the joy, the laughter and the tears. We shall love you always and forever."

Hundreds of people, none of whom had ever met Kaycee, were crushed by the news of her death. "So many people reached out to this beautiful girl who was so positive in the face of adversity," said Saundra Mitchell, a screenwriter in Indianapolis.

But Ms. Mitchell was one of the first to cast doubt on what turned out to be an intricately detailed fabrication. A few days after the death announcement,
Debbie Swenson, a 40-year-old homemaker, confessed to having invented the life and death of Kaycee. Ms. Swenson, who has two teenage children and lives in Peabody, Kan., a small town about 50 miles northeast of Wichita, had posed as Kaycee’s mother.

In an interview at her home on Tuesday, Ms. Swenson, who appeared embarrassed and contrite, acknowledged that she had been the one to create the Kaycee character but said she had not intended to hurt anyone. She said she was surprised to learn how many people had been reading about Kaycee and to learn how emotionally invested people had become.

"The whole idea of an online journal is to write what you want to write," she said. "I wanted it to be something positive."

The Internet, of course, is no stranger to hoaxes. Cyberspace has become home to so many jokes, stunts and fabrications that entire Web sites exist just to keep track of them all. Usually the ruses are uncovered and forgotten within a few days.

But Ms. Swenson’s fabrication was constructed so expertly and made so emotionally compelling that even when faced with evidence that it was not true, many people who were sophisticated Internet veterans set aside their skepticism and continued to believe it. Others put their online expertise to work to ferret out the truth about the fictitious Kaycee.

The incident is revealing not only for what it says about the Internet as a safe redoubt for deception but also for the role it played when dozens of people, at once curious and angry, became electronic gumshoes and used the Web to root out the fraud.

The online life of Kaycee Nicole began two years ago on a home page at a site called CollegeClub.com, where Kaycee appeared as a sunny blonde whose page was filled with photos, poetry and allusions to heaven.

A year later, Randall van der Woning, a fiction writer living in Hong Kong, met Kaycee on CitizenX.com, a Webcam site. She told Mr. van der Woning that she had leukemia, which was in remission. Last July, she said the cancer had returned, and he offered to set up a Weblog and administer the site for her. Her first posting in her online journal began last August:

"I’m beginning a new exciting journey," she wrote. "It’s a journey into my survival. I want to win! I’ll fight to the finish!"

Not only did Mr. van der Woning, unaware of deception, spend countless hours working on Kaycee’s behalf, posting prose, poetry and photographs to the site, but he also paid the cost of maintaining the site.

Occasionally Mr. van der Woning spoke on the telephone to someone he thought was Kaycee, but most conversations took place using instant messaging. "I spoke with her every day," Mr. van der Woning said. "Sometimes I spoke with both Kaycee and Debbie at the same time. Figure that one out."

Ms. Swenson’s own Weblog, also administered by Mr. van der Woning, offered fine-grained descriptions of Kaycee’s travails. This entry came during one of Kaycee’s hospital stays:

"I told her I loved her and everything was going to be alright. She was told not to talk or move around. Green, glassy eyes looked at me as blood trickled out of her mouth. The urge to hold her as I had when she was a child was fierce."
"This is much more intricate and involved than anything I’ve been exposed to," said John Halcyon Styn, a self-described "professional Web explorer" who is a founder of CitizenX.com and lives in a house equipped with Webcams in San Diego. Mr. Styn first encountered Kaycee about two years ago, when she was on CollegeClub.com and went by the nickname Kutebabe.

Like Mr. van der Woning, Mr. Styn occasionally spoke on the phone with the person he took to be Kaycee. Both he and Mr. van der Woning now believe that the person on the other end of the line was Ms. Swenson. (Last year an article in The New York Times on computer use by college students included quotations and anecdotes attributed to Kaycee Swenson; the information was based on a telephone interview that resulted from a referral by CollegeClub.com.)

Many people who grew close to the character of Kaycee now point to signs that should have made them more skeptical. Jim McCormick, a registered nurse in Toms River, N.J., who communicated with Kaycee frequently via instant messages, said he grew suspicious last November. "She blew a hepatic artery, and I started having strange feelings when she didn’t go into the I.C.U.,” he said.

Mr. Styn used to work for CollegeClub.com, and at that time Kaycee was a volunteer chat-room monitor. He found it curious that when he offered Kaycee a paid position, she turned him down, explaining that she preferred to work without pay.

Others noticed inconsistencies in dates or striking similarities between spelling mistakes made by Kaycee and those made by Ms. Swenson on her own Weblog site. Still others found it curious that a 19-year-old would quote lyrics from the 60’s and 70’s.

In April, Kaycee told Mr. van der Woning that her liver was failing and that she was dying. Mr. van der Woning posted the news on Kaycee’s site. Distraught, he called her and told her that he would like to visit her. "I was quite insistent about that," he said, "because I didn’t know how much time there was going to be." Kaycee told Mr. van der Woning that she would be glad to have him visit, but that first she was planning to drive with her mother to Florida to visit a friend in Miami and see the ocean.

When Ms. Swenson called Mr. van der Woning on May 15 to report that Kaycee had died unexpectedly from an aneurysm, she wept inconsolably. "She was playing the part of the grieving mother all the way," Mr. van der Woning said. When he posted the news on Kaycee’s Weblog the following day, her online friends grieved as if they had lost someone in their immediate families.

But it was not until after the death that skepticism emerged full tilt. Ms. Swenson told well-wishers via Mr. van der Woning that there was no address for sending cards and flowers. She also said the cremation and memorial service had already taken place, just two days after the death. The doubters began to build their case.

"It was way too quick for it to happen," said Rogers Cadenhead, a writer in St. Augustine, Fla. "That’s what set a lot of people off, including me, who thought it was real."

Matthew Haughey, a computer programmer in San Francisco who runs Metafilter, an open Weblog where Kaycee and her illness had frequently been mentioned, saw site traffic "go sky high." Upon comparing notes, people discovered that no one, not even those who spoke to Kaycee frequently by
phone, had ever met her in person.

Ms. Mitchell, a 27-year-old crime buff, was one of the first to raise doubts publicly, on her own Weblog. She used the Web to search for a death notice in newspapers around Newton, Kan., where Kaycee presumably lived, but found none.

The tone on Metafilter, meanwhile, grew heated. Then, through more electronic sleuthing, one member of a Metafilter group of 50 or so people now calling themselves the Scooby Doos discovered that Kaycee’s CollegeClub page was tied to the same account held by Kelli Swenson, Debbie Swenson’s real 15-year-old daughter. Another Metafilter member announced that three days after Kaycee was supposed to have died, she logged on to her CollegeClub.com account.

Early in the morning of May 19, Mr. van der Woning got a call from a tearful Ms. Swenson, who offered an explanation: Kaycee’s real name, she said, was Katherine Marie, and she was the unwanted child of one of Ms. Swenson’s sisters. Ms. Swenson said she had brought up the girl as her own. Mr. van der Woning must, of course, keep all of that secret, she told him.

Metafilter, meanwhile, was engorged with skeptical postings. When the evidence of a hoax appeared incontrovertible, Ms. Swenson quickly sent Mr. van der Woning via e-mail a full confession, which he then posted on Ms. Swenson’s Weblog on May 20.

"Debbie must have been reading all this and realized she wasn’t going to be able to hide anymore," Mr. van der Woning said, "and that’s why she confessed."

In her confession, Ms. Swenson said the Kaycee character had been a composite of three people she knew who had died of cancer. "What I did was wrong and I apologize for it," she wrote. "I regret any pain I caused."

Mr. van der Woning suspects that it was when he and others started making plans to visit Kaycee that Ms. Swenson decided to kill off the character so swiftly.

Even after Ms. Swenson’s somewhat muddled public confession, the sleuthing continued. Dan Engler, a Metafilter user in Seattle, used Photoshop to resize a picture of Kaycee playing basketball. The enlarged shot revealed a lion’s head on the floor of the gymnasium. Metafilter users then did a search that identified the team as the Lady Lions from a high school in Oklahoma. They matched the No. 10 jersey to a student named Julie Fullbright, who, it turned out, had once been acquainted with the Swensons and was very much alive and attending college in Oklahoma. Ms. Fullbright knew nothing of the hoax until Monday, when Ms. Swenson called her to apologize, said Ms. Fullbright’s father, Vernon.

"It was like a story being reported by locusts," Mr. Cadenhead said of the diligence of the Scooby Doos. "They swept in and just pulled facts out of the air."

The Peabody Police Department looked into the case, then handed it over to the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s field office in Kansas City, which in turn decided not to investigate. "The loss isn’t great enough for the F.B.I. to open up a federal criminal investigation," said Jeff Lanza, an F.B.I. officer. Mr. Lanza said the fact that Ms. Swenson had not actively solicited money was another factor in the decision not to pursue the case.
Ms. Swenson said she had hired a lawyer because of the many angry phone calls she had received. Nevertheless, Ms. Swenson said on Tuesday that she believed the Kaycee character had been more helpful than harmful. "A lot of people have problems," she said. "I know I helped a lot of people in a lot of different ways."

She could be right. So compelling was Ms. Swenson’s creation that powerful online connections were made among those who believed in the Kaycee persona and among those who pulled it apart.

Mr. Styn, whose gifts to the fictitious Kaycee had included a care package filled with hats to cover her head during periods of baldness, said that he refused to become cynical in the incident’s unsettling wake.

"One lesson you can learn from this is to trust less, but I’m choosing not to pick that one," Mr. Styn said. "The fact that she wasn’t really there doesn’t mean that thousands of people weren’t able to trust and give love to a stranger. The fact that the Internet is a medium where people can feel those things is encouraging."