"Victim" Suzy Bass at home in Knoxville last year; right, with the "Suzy's Crew for the Cure" team; bottom, with close friend Julieanne Pope

SHE SAID SHE HAD BREAST CANCER—BUT SHE LIED

This popular teacher told students and friends she was going to die. What no one knew: She'd feigned chemo nausea, shaved her own head and was never actually sick at all. A Glamour *exclusive.*

BY ERIN ZAMMETT RUDDY

SUZY BASS HAD LESS THAN A YEAR TO LIVE. The Knoxville, Tennessee, high school math teacher was battling stage IV breast cancer, and it had spread to her shoulder and heel. Chemotherapy no longer worked; an experimental bone marrow therapy she'd tried as a last resort appeared futile. Her students and colleagues were devastated. Bass, then 41, was a popular newcomer to the picturesque private Webb School near the Smoky Mountains that fall of 2007. "Ms. Bass was the cool teacher," says Michaelan Moore, 18, who was a junior in Bass's Algebra II class. "Everyone just loved her immediately. We could tell her anything."

Because Bass had recently moved to Knoxville and was single, two Webb staffers—Julieanne Pope, 43, and Terri Ward, 51—became her part-time caregivers. "I left my cell phone on my nightstand every night in case she needed anything," says Ward, the dean of faculty. "On bad days I'd tell her, 'We are going to attack this. We are going to fight.'" When Bass was too sick to teach, they'd cover her classes. And they kept a steady stream of casseroles and smoothies going to

A DESPERATE LETTER Part of an e-mail Bass sent a friend in November 2007

Julieanne,
I am trying to have courage in the midst of my fear. However, I must get some things out and on paper just in case. I don't understand the circumstances by which we have been brought together, but I know I am thankful to God and all the universe for having you as my friend. You so don't deserve my DRAMA, but you are always there some how.... It's simple I am scared and I don't know if I can do this. I don't know why you were chosen, but I am so grateful I know you!! Thank you for helping me. I didn't want to bother you by calling, that's why I didn't leave you a message. I am so grateful you called. You saved my life tonight!! Thank you is not near enough to cover that for sure!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

There are times when being here at home alone is terrifying, while the thought of having to be in the hospital or having someone stay with me is equally terrifying. I don't know how anyone makes it. I don't see the light at the end of the tunnel anymore.

her condo. "We'd visit and she'd be shaking, pale and so sick," says Pope, Webb's technology coordinator. At school Bass would cover her head—bald from chemotherapy—with a knit cap, and limp from the tumor in her foot.

In October Webb students and faculty put together a team for Komen Knoxville Race for the Cure to benefit the local breast cancer charity affiliate. "Suzy's Crew for the Cure," they called it. But when race day came, Bass was too weak to even walk. "She just met us at the finish line so she could cross it," says Pope. As Bass's condition worsened, she sent an e-mail to Pope thanking her for her support and friendship, and in an attached document, she outlined her last wishes. She asked that she be cremated, her ashes scattered in the Cayman Islands, with no tears: "I want whoever is sprinkling to be enjoying friends, family and loved ones, laughing and just having fun," she said.

Inspired by Bass's brave battle, Webb's students dedicated their prom fund-raiser to her, raising money for Komen for the Cure by selling T-shirts bearing the charity's logo. "Everyone wanted to support Ms. Bass," says Eliza Dawson, 17, a student who helped coordinate the event. The students planned to present a check to the director of Komen's Knoxville branch—with Bass by their side—during prom, and their efforts were covered by the local newspaper.

A week before the big dance, though, the school received a series of troubling phone calls. The callers were intimately familiar with Bass's devastating saga. But they weren't upset about her deadly illness—they were furious.

Bass, they said, was making the whole thing up.

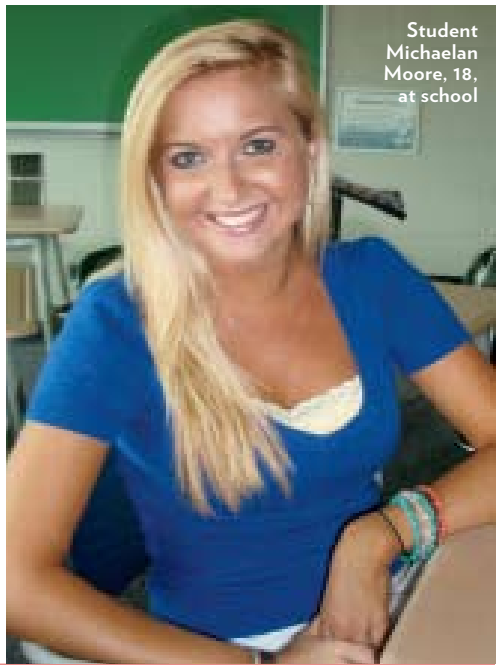
ON APRIL 21, Webb president Scott Hutchinson sat in his office, dumbfounded by the calls he'd received that day. Staffers from a school in Dallas, Georgia—where Bass once taught—had contacted him to expose what they claimed was Bass's latest deception. An employee googled her former colleague to see what had become of her; she found the Knoxville *News Sentinel* article about the prom fund-raiser. Bass, the callers warned Hutchinson, had pretended to be a cancer patient during her tenure at their school—and at yet another one in Alabama.

The school president—who couldn't imagine *anyone*, let alone one of his most beloved teachers, doing what these strangers alleged—called Bass to his office. "I told her, 'Find me a physician who's treating you for cancer, and I'll make this go away,'" Hutchinson says. After four days of stalling, Bass arranged for her doctor to call the school. But as the caller spoke with Rob Costante, an assistant head of Webb, it was clear that "he was a complete sham," says Costante. Heartsick, Hutchinson went to look for Bass—but she was already gone. Later that afternoon, Hutchinson got Bass on the phone and fired her.

As news of Bass's betrayal hit the hallways, emotions ranged from shock and rage to confusion and embarrassment. "I couldn't help but think about the 'end of chemo' cake I'd baked her with a pink frosting ribbon," remembers Moore. "That made me feel a little silly." The entire Webb community had opened their hearts—and wallets—for Bass. Her freshman classes had even bought a refrigerator for her classroom where she kept Gatorade (hydration is key during chemotherapy). "I cried, I was mad, I had every emotion you could feel," Pope says. When she broke the news to her daughter, Macy, the 13-year-old threw a breast cancer awareness band Bass had given her on the floor. "I can't even look at this," she said through tears. Teacher Amanda Rowcliffe, 47, thought of the night when Bass had called her, sobbing. "She said she'd just had her chemo port put in and was distraught about going to school with the ugly bandage showing," Rowcliffe recalls. So she went out, bought and delivered a turtleneck to Bass's home. "I felt so betrayed," she says.

A week after getting exposed, Bass pulled down her Facebook account, changed

> *I couldn't help but think about the 'end of chemo' cake I'd baked her with a pink frosting ribbon. That made me feel silly.*


Student Michaelan Moore, 18, at school

her phone number and disappeared. In her wake, she left a community of angry, bewildered people with many unanswered questions: How did she do it? How could we not have known? And the biggest, most puzzling one of all: *Why*?

AFTER COMING ACROSS a Knoxville newspaper story posted online about the scandal at Webb, I was instantly fascinated—and horrified. As a cancer patient myself—I have leukemia, which I write about in *Glamour*'s Life With Cancer column and blog—I have experienced both the devastation of a diagnosis and the roller-coaster ride of treatment. Not to mention the burden of knowing how scared my family and friends were for me. I wanted to understand what had happened here, so I started digging.

Suzy Bass grew up in Athens, Alabama, a city of 20,000 residents, with a brother seven years her senior; her mother, a former kindergarten teacher; and her father, a retired NASA engineer. "You could write a book about all the accomplishments Suzy had growing up," says her father, Bill Bass, 74, who agreed to talk to *Glamour* on his family's behalf. From a young age, he recalls, Bass was energetic, athletic and whip-smart (a childhood IQ test describes her "superior range of intellectual ability"). She had a passion for basketball, never missing summer camp with the University of Tennessee's renowned women's basketball team, the Lady Vols.

During high school, the 5'2" Bass made history as her team's second-highest scorer of all time. Her long list of extracurriculars included student government, marching band and a sorority that Bass presided over during her senior year. She graduated twelfth in her class of almost 200. When asked if anything ever seemed odd about his daughter's behavior, Bill Bass replies, "No, she had lots of friends and boyfriends." Then he pauses, cautiously adding, "In high school, we'd catch her in white lies. Nothing serious, but we were never quite sure she'd tell us the truth."

In 1989 Bass earned her bachelor's degree in math education from Athens State College (now known as Athens State University), and was soon doing what she'd always dreamed of: teaching math and coaching basketball. In 1995, not long after starting a job at Tanner High School close to her hometown, she told her parents that she'd been having breathing problems and persistent colds. Then one day she broke the news: She'd been diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma, an often deadly form of blood cancer. "I went with her to chemo on more than one occasion," says her father, who recalls sitting in the waiting room and watching Bass sign in and walk back to the treatment area.

Nearly one year later, a church friend grew suspicious of Bass's behavior and called the doctor she claimed to be seeing. After learning that Bass wasn't a patient after all, the acquaintance alerted Tanner High officials, who informed Bass's parents about the allegations. "We were shocked," Bill says. "I made an appointment to see the oncologist I thought was treating her, and it was true, he had no idea who she was." The school district's superintendent asked Bass to resign. For several weeks she was hospitalized for depression. But her treatment ended there—something her family would deeply regret. "There is a lot more understanding now about mental illness than there was in 1995," Bill Bass says sadly.

Following her release, Bass moved in with her parents, enrolled in school and earned a master's degree in education. She also fell in love with a man she'd met while teaching at Tanner High School. The couple married, but it lasted less than a year. Ready for a fresh start, Bass moved to Knoxville, where she had always dreamed of living, in the late nineties. She was as content as her family had ever seen her: pursuing a doctoral degree in mathematics at the University of Tennessee, teaching classes at nearby community colleges and tutoring her beloved Lady Vols (she counts revered coach Pat Summitt as a mentor). But Bass became overwhelmed while working on her dissertation. Thinking a new location would help clear her head, she took a job in Dallas, Georgia, at Paulding County High School in August 2003.

Bass quickly became one of the best-loved teachers there. But her demons were back at work too. She was at Paulding County for about a year and a half when the Basses got a call that their daughter had passed out at school. A few weeks later,

Bass called with a worrisome update: A mammogram had detected a tumor. Soon after, she announced that it was stage II ductal carcinoma.

Perhaps it can only be explained by unconditional parental love, but once again, the Basses found themselves duped by their daughter. "What blinded us was the fact that Suzy's colleagues saw her pass out," Bill Bass says. "We assumed it must be true if they saw it." When he and his wife visited Bass in Georgia, he recalls, she looked sick and appeared to have radiation burns under her arms. "My wife would rub cream on her to soothe them," he says.

Bass's church and school friends were drawn into her account of illness too. Her students pitched in for a pink iPod she could listen to during chemo. In the fall of 2005, the school nominated Bass for the prestigious Disney Teacher of the Year Award. "[Bass] may be the finest teacher/inspiration I have ever been associated with in 32 years of education," Jim Gottwald, the Paulding County principal told the Athens State University newsletter. But within days, the principal of Bass's previous school, Tanner High—who had seen an article about her nomination—called Paulding County. That prompted a months-long investigation, which revealed that Bass had forged a doctor's name on a certificate of disability that she gave Paulding's associate superintendent, and had told students she'd drop low test scores if they donated $100 or more to Relay for Life, another cancer fund-raising race.

In March 2006, she was forced to resign and surrender her Georgia teacher's certificate. Bass headed home. This time she told her parents that enemies at Tanner High had tried to sabotage her career and that she indeed had breast cancer, it had just gone into remission. A little more than a year later, Bass left for Knoxville.

Although she had told friends there that she was estranged from her family, that wasn't the case. The Basses just hadn't seen her for a few months. So they had no idea that, at Webb, their daughter was claiming that her cancer was out of remission. They didn't see that she'd shaved her head. They didn't know she was telling people the end was near. It was an old friend in Knoxville who called to tell them what had happened. "On the one hand, we were so glad she didn't have cancer," says her father, "but we also knew we had our work cut out for us." He and his wife felt guilt-stricken that they hadn't realized the truth sooner. "It all makes sense now," he continues, "but hindsight is 20/20."

Hutchinson, too, admits that he should have dug into Bass's history before hiring her. Determined that no other school would be deceived, he warned the agencies that accredit private schools in the Southeast about Bass. Hutchinson didn't pursue legal action; making a case against Bass, lawyers said, would have been difficult anyway. While others raised money for charity in her name, it's believed she never pocketed any, and that she never submitted any insurance claims for her fake illnesses. She also didn't take disability leave.

In the days after her firing from Webb, all anyone there could talk about was Suzy Bass. Many students assumed she had just moved to another school, her cancer persona intact. Others imagined her to be hiding somewhere from everything she had done. And then came summer break. By the time school started again in August, Bass was just a painful memory. No one thought they would ever find out why she lied to them. There's only one person who really knows, after all, and no one had seen or heard from her—until now.

ONCE SHE LEFT Knoxville, Bass admitted herself into an Alabama psychiatric ward and she told doctors she no longer wanted to live. There, she was diagnosed with bipolar, anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorders. After about a week of treatment, doctors released her and she moved to the basement apartment in an aunt and uncle's house near Athens, a quick 15-minute drive away from her parents and brother. Every morning and night, her aunt watches as Bass takes her medication.

Initially reluctant to accept my calls, Bass eventually agreed to talk on the phone and, in a series of conversations, answered questions—for the very first time—about what she'd done. Speaking with a thick Southern accent, she sounded calm and polite, even funny. I could see why so many people had adored her. When she told me about a recent session with her mental health counselor, she joked, "They charge $90 for 20 minutes and *I'm* the crazy one?" We talked about Knoxville, the Lady Vols and what a small world it is; I played volleyball as a student at UT when Bass was working in the athletic department there—we likely passed each other in the halls on a daily basis.

When our conversation veered to the tough questions, Bass freely admitted

Eliza Dawson and Lauren Sampson, students and prom organizers

> *"Many students assumed Bass had just moved to another school, her cancer persona intact. Others imagined her to be hiding somewhere."*

Pope's daughter Macy, then 12, with Bass in 2007

> *"What I did was wrong, and I'm willing to stand up and admit that," Bass says, "but my intent was never to hurt anyone.*

faking cancer three times. "I'm sorry I can't undo what I did, and I'm sorry that *sorry* is such an insignificant word," she says. "The remorse in my heart and soul is huge." Bass acknowledges that there were other lies she'd told friends and colleagues. She once pretended she had a fiancé who died on 9/11, that she'd played basketball at Florida State University and that she'd starred in the North American tour of *Mamma Mia!* "What I did was wrong, and I'm willing to stand up and admit that," Bass says, "but it doesn't change that my intent was never to hurt anyone. Never. I'm not that kind of person."

Listening to Bass detail the outrageous lengths she went to over the years to fake her symptoms is chilling. After spending hours researching cancer on the Internet, Bass learned to draw convincing-looking radiation dots on her neck with a permanent marker (doctors tattoo patients so they know where to line up the radiation machine every day). She would also roll up a bath towel, stretch it between her hands and rub it back and forth against her neck as fast as she could to give herself "radiation burns." She shaved her own head with a razor and made herself throw up from chemotherapy "nausea" in school bathrooms. And all those times her father accompanied her to chemo treatments? After walking through the waiting room door, Bass would meet up with an actual cancer patient—a friend she met at church—and keep her company during her chemotherapy.

Despite all that effort and time Bass spent learning how to appear sick, she claims that every time she feigned having cancer, she truly believed she was ill. "In my mind, I didn't lie to anybody," she says. "I know that's not what the people in these three communities believe, but in my world there was no doubt that I had cancer and was dying." Bass says it wasn't until she was sitting in Scott Hutchinson's office listening to the accusations leveled against her that she realized she wasn't actually a cancer patient. "I remember thinking, Oh crap, this is happening again," she says. Out of sheer desperation to keep her teaching position at Webb, she went through the charade of finding a "doctor" to verify her story. (Bass claims she doesn't recall whom she asked to pose as her physician.) "I loved my job and my kids," she says, "and just wanted to stay there so badly."

COULD SOMEONE honestly believe she is dying while actively lying about it? That's part of the puzzle Bass's counseling team is attempting to piece together. "It is certainly possible that given her diagnosis of bipolar disorder, Suzy could have truly believed she had cancer," says Marvin Kalachman, a licensed physician assistant who has treated patients for more than 30 years. He prescribes and monitors Bass's medication under the supervision of a medical doctor. Every other week Bass, escorted by a family member, drives for an hour from her home to see Kalachman and attend therapy sessions at Trinity Counseling Center in Huntsville, Alabama. Her parents are helping to pay for treatment.

Originally known as manic depression, bipolar disorder, which often strikes in young adulthood, is characterized by severe, pathological swings in mood from extreme highs (like euphoria) to extreme lows (depression), says Melvin McInnis, M.D., professor of psychiatry at the University of Michigan and a leading expert on the disorder. It's possible for a bipolar patient to experience delusions lasting days or weeks during an episode, Dr. McInnis explains. In Bass's case, however, she went to great lengths to fake symptoms—not a hallmark of bipolar delusions, he notes.

Marc Feldman, M.D., a world-renowned psychiatrist, has treated more than 100 women who have faked serious illness. Though he has never met Bass, he believes he has her diagnosis: Munchausen syndrome, a psychological disorder in which someone feigns or self-induces illness to get attention and sympathy. According to Dr. Feldman, a clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, and author of *Playing Sick?*, these people know that they are lying, but typically don't know why they're compelled to do so. And, he says, a diagnosis of bipolar disorder does not rule out Munchausen

> *I can assure you of one thing," Bass says. "If I can at all control this, it will never happen again.*

syndrome. Currently Bass's counselors have not diagnosed her with Munchausen syndrome and say they are primarily focused on treating her bipolar disorder, but add that her diagnostic review is not yet complete. What everyone does agree on is that this is a woman who will need help for a long, long time.

AS I UPDATE people at Webb on Bass's situation, they are eager to listen, even if they're not pacified by what she's said. "I wish her well, but I'm probably less sympathetic than someone looking at this from the outside because I was duped for a pretty long time, and our community was devastated," Scott Hutchinson says. Julieanne Pope remains skeptical: "She was such a manipulator," she says of Bass. "I feel sorry that she's sick, but I don't want her to do it to anyone else."

"I really don't hold grudges," says Terri Ward, who has thought about reaching out to Bass. "I had some good times with Suzy, but what makes me sad is that those blissful laugh-till-you-cry moments weren't enough for her." Bill Bass chooses to focus on the positive: "Suzy has brought a lot of joys and a lot of excitement to our lives," he says. "Yes, there have been sorrows, but we are still very blessed. She is here with us and she's able to get help. I just wish we'd found the right doctor for her 15 years ago."

These days Bass spends most of her time with family and continues to see her therapists, though she's working on rebuilding a social life. "It's hard to keep friends when you've done what I've done," she says. Bass is currently unemployed, a medical recommendation. "My counselors don't even want me saying 'Welcome to Wal-Mart. Here's your buggy,'" she says with a laugh. Bass hopes, though, that her determination will propel her through treatment to a more healthy, happy life. "I'm working to get past the guilt I feel and move past the mistakes I've made. I'm sick and I'm working on it every day," she says. "And I can assure you of one thing. If I can at all control this, it will never happen again."

If. That word lingers in my mind long after Suzy and I had that conversation. Even though I have spent many hours listening to her admit terrible lies, I actually enjoy talking with her and feel sorry for her. I want to believe that *she* wants to get better. Now that Bass has been caught in three states, with her deceptions publicized on the Internet and in this magazine, and now that she's getting ongoing treatment, there would appear to be serious impediments to keep her from doing this ever again.

But if Bass herself can't promise that one of these days she won't suddenly start faking breast cancer, melanoma or some other disease, how do I know she won't? How does *anyone*?

As one Webb student put it, "I was praying for Ms. Bass when I thought she had cancer, but now I'm *really* praying for her." ■

Erin Zammett Ruddy is a freelance writer living in Long Island, New York. Read her "Life With Cancer" blog and past columns at glamour.com.