

= Kaycee Nicole =

Kaycee Nicole , aka Kaycee Nicole Swenson , was a fictitious persona played by an American woman named Debbie Swenson ( born Deborah Marie Dickman 1960 ) , in an early case of Münchhausen by Internet . Between 1999 and when the hoax was discovered in 2001 , Swenson , playing the role of Kaycee , represented herself on numerous websites as a teenager suffering from terminal leukemia . Kaycee was reported to have died on May 14 , 2001 and her death was publicized on May 16 ; shortly thereafter , members of the online communities that had supported her unraveled the story and discovered that Kaycee had never actually existed . Debbie Swenson confessed on her blog to the hoax on May 20 , 2001 .

= = Creation = =

In 1998 , Debbie Swenson 's real daughter , Kelli Burke ( born Kelli Jo Swenson 1985 ) , who was in middle school at the time in Gracemont , Oklahoma , created the online persona of " Kaycee Nicole " with a group of her friends . The group created a webpage for the nonexistent girl and used photos of a high school basketball player from their town to represent her , but do not seem to have played the role of Kaycee beyond that or given her an active persona . That came when Debbie Swenson discovered what the girls had done and , rather than forcibly discontinue the hoax , she adopted the persona and began playing the role of Kaycee . In August 1999 , the Swenson family moved from Oklahoma to Kansas .

= = Persona = =

After it came into Debbie Swenson 's possession , the Kaycee Nicole persona appeared on CollegeClub.com in 1999 , as a " sunny blonde " teenaged basketball star in Kansas who shared thoughts and photos with others on the website . She made friends easily with both users and staff at the site , even volunteering to help with administrative work and sending gifts to CollegeClub employees . " Kaycee " was interviewed by telephone by The New York Times in 2000 , under the name " Kaycee Swenson " . She described herself in the resultant article as a high school senior who was taking college courses and planned to start college full @-@ time the next year .

= = Blogging , illness , and death = =

In 2000 , Kaycee revealed to an online friend of hers , Randall van der Woning , that she suffered from leukemia , which was then in remission . Shortly afterward , she told him that the cancer was back . Sympathetic , Van der Woning offered to set up and host a blog for her to chronicle her struggles ; Kaycee accepted the offer and the two created " Living Colours " in August 2000 .

Kaycee 's blog recounted , in sometimes vivid detail , her struggles with the disease , including multiple hospitalizations . The near @-@ daily entries were presented as having been written by Kaycee or , in cases where she was too weak or ill , by her " mother " , Debbie . She maintained an upbeat writing style despite her apparent hardships ? her first entry said , " I 'm beginning a new exciting journey . . . into my survival . I want to win ! I 'll fight to the finish ! " and readers of her blog became devoted to the inspirational young girl . Readership of the blog became widespread , with millions of readers visiting the site in the two years it was active and many readers recommending the blog to their own social networks Some sent cards , gifts , and well @-@ wishes to Kaycee by mail ; still others spoke to " Kaycee " on the phone , some , such as the administrator of her blog , many times .

In April 2001 , it was revealed that Kaycee 's liver was failing . Concerned about losing a " friend " without ever having met her , Van der Woning insisted that Kaycee allow him to visit her ; Kaycee told him that he was welcome to visit , but not until after she returned from a trip she would be taking to see the ocean .

However , before Van der Woning could make his trip to see Kaycee , he received a call on May 15

, 2001 from Kaycee 's mother . Sobbing , Debbie informed him that Kaycee had died , unexpectedly , of an aneurysm the day before . News of Kaycee 's death was immediately posted on her blog :  
" Thank you for the love , the joy , the laughter and the tears . We shall love you always and forever . Kaycee Nicole passed away May 14 , 2001 , at the age of 19 . "  
Readers of the blog mourned Kaycee 's death , many posting obituaries short and long on their own blogs , and news of her loss became widespread and much @-@ discussed throughout the internet .

= = Unraveling of hoax = =

After Kaycee 's ' death ' , mourners who requested an address to send condolence gifts , cards , or flowers to were told that , despite previous acceptance of gifts by Kaycee , there was no longer a post @-@ office box mailing address for her in Newton , Kansas . Debbie Swenson also informed Van der Woning when she told him of her death that there had already been a memorial service and Kaycee had been cremated .

On May 17 , blogger Sandra Mitchell posted an entry to her blog mocking people who faked illnesses on the internet . Though she did not initially name Kaycee Nicole , the next day she published another commentary which did explicitly name her and suggested that in fact , Kaycee Nicole had never existed . She cited the nearly impossible haste with which Kaycee had been interred , noting that even if Kaycee had not been autopsied ? which was dependent upon the manner of her death and whether there was a doctor attending ? the two days that Debbie claimed that gathering of mourners , memorial service , and cremation had been accomplished in was unlikely ; Mitchell also noted a number of inconsistencies in the backstory about Kaycee 's cancer . Mitchell , working off Kaycee 's " internet address " , traced the girl 's location to Peabody , Kansas . She called around the town , asking if anyone knew of someone of Kaycee 's description who had died recently . No one did .

On May 18 , a user on the weblog Metafilter posted a thread entitled " Is it possible that Kaycee did not exist ? " , which posited , largely on the basis of Sandra Mitchell 's writings , that Kaycee Nicole might have been a hoax . Commenters in the often @-@ heated thread ( even the creator of the thread stated that " I mean , I want it NOT to be true . I hate the thought that a bunch of people are grieving over somebody who did not exist ! [ sic ] " ) made a number of observations about the story of Kaycee , among them that no one had ever met Kaycee in person ? not even the internet denizens who had been closest to her ? and that no obituary was available in a newspaper , anywhere , for a 19 @-@ year @-@ old girl named Kaycee Nicole .

As the Metafilter thread progressed , users discovered that Kaycee 's CollegeClub account was tied to the CollegeClub account of Debbie Swenson 's teenaged daughter , and that records showed that someone had logged into Kaycee 's account days after she was supposed to have died . A user investigated the photographs that Kaycee had shared on her blog , identified a school mascot pictured , and traced it back to a particular high school , then traced the jersey number that " Kaycee " was wearing to an actual player . Investigation of the player showed that the only connection she had to Kaycee Nicole was that her family had once been acquainted with the Swenson family ; she was not ill , was not named Kaycee Nicole , and had no idea her photo was being used by someone else .

= = = Confession = = =

On May 19 , Debbie Swenson placed a call to her biggest supporter , Randall van der Woning . She told him that Kaycee had not actually been her own child , but rather a foster daughter . She requested that he keep Kaycee 's identity secret . Van der Woning did as requested and kept the information to himself ; however , this had the side effect of allowing the Metafilter investigation to continue . As more and more evidence mounted that the story of Kaycee had been cobbled together using misdirection and borrowed facts , Swenson emailed the truth to him , and he , in turn , posted it to the In Living Colours blog on May 20 : Kaycee Nicole had never existed . " I didn 't know the

reactions would be so strong " , Swenson said . " I knew it was wrong and every day it ate at me and I couldn 't take it . " She now claimed that Kaycee was a composite of three people she had known with cancer , none of whom were her daughter .

= = Aftermath = =

Internet anger at the hoax was swift , with Van der Woning and many other supporters disclaiming Kaycee and Debbie Swenson . The local police in Peabody , Kansas were notified and soon handed off the case to the FBI as a possible fraud . The FBI declined to further investigate after its initial acceptance of the case , stating that it had not been able to find evidence that Debbie Swenson 's accepting of gifts for " Kaycee " constituted a dollar amount above their threshold for financial crimes .

Swenson was apologetic for the hoax , but said that she believed the Kaycee character had also done some good . " A lot of people have problems " , she told the New York Times . " I know I helped a lot of people in a lot of different ways . "