

THE WHISTLE-BLOWER AND THE JOURNALIST

by Alison Bass



Alison Bass,
author of
Side Effects

Editor's Note: *In Side Effects*, award-winning journalist Alison Bass follows the landmark case brought against the pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline, maker of the antidepressant Paxil, for con-

The first time I spoke to Donna Howard my guard was up. Who was this anonymous caller who had left a cryptic message with the *Boston Globe's* City Desk?

Something about the misappropriation of funds from a state mental health agency. It sounded vaguely interesting, but as the newspaper's mental health reporter, I fielded plenty of crank calls and dead-end leads. It was late in the afternoon, I had just filed a story for the next day's paper, and I wanted to go home. Still, I dutifully dialed her number and identified myself. She sounded grateful, her voice clear, as she explained that she was the assistant administrator for Brown University's Department of Psychiatry and had in her possession documents proving that Dr. Martin Keller, the chief of psychiatry at Brown, was receiving hundreds of thousands of dollars from the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health

for research that wasn't being done. Howard said she also suspected that Keller's department was misrepresenting data for two drug trials. I remember typing quick notes, phone cradled

to ear, thinking this can't be for real. Why would the employee of an Ivy League institution be telling me this?

Donna and I agreed to meet the next day at a Burger King on Route 24, halfway between our respective locations in Providence and Boston. She would be wearing a navy skirt, she said, and had long brown hair. In turn, I told her I would be wearing a red winter coat. In my time as a reporter, I've ventured into riot-torn ghettos, slipped into locked mental institutions to investigate allegations of abuse, and met sources in smoke-filled back rooms of dingy bars. I've even gone undercover as a waitress at a restaurant in Miami to investigate possible labor violations. So meeting a

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woman whose laugh reminded me of chimes at a Burger King outside of Brockton would be one of my less adventurous outings. Or so I thought.

In a small corner booth, Donna explained she'd come forward because she had a daughter with mental illness and was outraged that a financially strapped state agency was providing a wealthy institution like Brown money under false pretenses. She said she also was concerned about the possible skewing of research data in two large randomized drug trials being conducted at the prestigious university. One of them was studying the effectiveness of the antidepressant Paxil, which would become one of the best-selling drugs in history.

Donna struck me as sincere, someone who had taken an enormous risk in meeting with a reporter she didn't know. True, she had recently accepted another job and would be leaving Brown in a month's time, but Martin Keller was a powerful man in certain circles. He could make it difficult for her to ever find another job in the mental health field. And she had no close relatives to support her if things went bad: her parents were deceased, her one sister had moved out of state, and she was a single parent raising a severely troubled child, whom she had recently adopted.

Everything Donna told me was backed by extensive documentation, including internal university records, and I filed a series of articles in the *Boston Globe* about research and billing transgressions by Brown's chief of psychiatry. Three years later, I wrote another page-one piece about Martin Keller, this

time reporting on the hundreds of thousands of dollars he was earning in annual personal income from the same drug makers whose products he studied and touted in medical journals. As with my first series, there were calls for investigations. In the end, no action was taken against Keller and he remains chief of psychiatry at Brown to this day.

All through this time, I kept in touch with Donna as she struggled to keep her manic-depressive daughter safe. Her steadfastness in the face of daunting personal and career challenges made the daily annoyances of my job as a journalist seem petty and insignificant by comparison.

In June 2004, when I read about the New York State Attorney General's landmark lawsuit against GlaxoSmithKline for allegedly deceiving the public about its blockbuster drug Paxil, I suddenly remembered what Donna had told me almost nine years prior. Back then, I hadn't been able to pin down her allegations about Keller's Paxil study, but now, with a few phone calls, I discovered that the Glaxo lawsuit was the brainchild of Rose Firestein, a feisty newcomer to Attorney General Eliot Spitzer's office. Thus another remarkable woman entered the story. In suing the second largest pharmaceutical company in the world, Rose took up the baton that had Donna hoisted.

It was the determination of these two women to fight for the public good that inspired me to write my book. I wanted the world to see them as I saw them: unsung heroes. ■

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