



Desirée Rogers: 'I Have Learned Who I Am'

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HER NEXT ACT: After a sometimes controversial run as White House social secretary, Desirée Rogers is backin Chicago to tackle a new challenge. reviving Johnson Publishing and its Ebony and Jet magazines.

Last February at the Casino, Chicago's elegant private club tucked behind the John Hancock Center, an exceptionally festive party brought together Chicago's A listers. The occasion was a birthday celebration for Neal Zucker, civic philanthropist and chief executive of Corporate Cleaning Services, a window-washing company. Guests included Mayor Richard M. Daley; M. K. and J. B. Pritzker; the investment management executive Joan Steel; Trish Rooney Alden, founder of a records management company; and Marko Ig lendza, the airport concessions king. But the arrival of Desirée Rogers, then the White House social secretary, made the biggest splash with a crowd not easily stirred. Rogers is glamorous, charming, and, at times, even coquettish, and she used her considerable marketing skills to transform White House social affairs from low-key get-togethers to lively ones. She is also well known both for wrapping her five-foot-ten-inch willowy frame in fashion-forward luxury (the Rush Street boutique Ikram is her favorite place to shop) and for navigating through life using high-octane networking skills. So attention is nothing new for her.

But that night, Rogers's presence was especially noteworthy. Several months earlier, she had fallen under intense and unwelcome public scrutiny when a pair of reality TV hopefuls managed to get past the Secret Service to crash the first state dinner of the Obama presidency. Suddenly Rogers's spotlight turns as social secretary appeared more attention grabbing than brand building, particularly her front-row seat next to the editor of Vogue at a New York runway show and her luxe fashion posing in WSJ., the magazine of The Wall Street Journal. In the hubbub that followed the state dinner security breach, The New York Times declared that Rogers was a woman who, —like Icarus, flew too close to the sun.”

By the time she entered the Casino for the party honoring Zucker (who had hosted Rogers's intimate 50th birthday bash in 2009), the central question about her was no longer who was she wearing or what was her next event; rather, it had become a variation of a pop song refrain: Would she stay or would she go?

The answer quickly became apparent. Arriving with her best friend, Linda Johnson Rice, chairman of Johnson Publishing, which owns Ebony, Rogers wore a sexy party dress a little too outré for a White House social secretary—even one whose wardrobe generated an obsession in the D.C. press corps. In contrast, Valerie Jarrett, White House senior adviser and D.C. neighbor of Rogers, arrived later, buttoned up in what one guest describes as a Madeleine Albright-style suit² and flanked by security men. Though the three women had once been inseparable, Rogers and Rice sat together that night, while Jarrett remained on the other side of the room. (In 2000, I wrote about the friendship of the three women

in this magazine. Go to chicagomag.com/sisterhood.) When the dancing began, Rogers took to the floor and cut loose, looking playful and carefree. —A whisper went around the room then, I says the aforementioned guest, —because it was clear to everyone that Desirée was leaving the White House. Less than three weeks later, she was back in Chicago.

Now Rogers faces some daunting challenges. As the recently named CEO of Johnson Publishing, she needs to revamp the major African American company—her best friend’s business—before it tanks in a drastically changed market. She is also ready to polish her own reputation, rebranding herself as the dazzling power player she once was. Neither task will be easy, but Rogers thinks she’s harvested an insight from her time in the Washington maelstrom. —I think I confuse people, I she says. —In this country, there is a bias against people who have a certain look or style. I have fought this all of my life. People only see this package, and it’s a tall and vocal package. So people think, Wait a minute, you can’t be this stylish and intelligent, too. I take people out of their comfort zone.

She adds that she has gained from the whole noisy experience. —At 50, I have learned who I am. I am not going to change who I am. But I will work hard to make people feel more comfortable. For me to change who I am would be the end of my soul. But I can keep this in consideration as I am talking, socializing, and enjoying other people.

Swampland, a political blog on Time.com, delivered a harsh epitaph of her stint in D.C.: —Rogers had come to make waves, she made waves, and she wiped out. But was it a bad mix from the beginning—a forceful, upfront personality thrown into a tradition-bound and misogynistic town? Or was she simply too headstrong and flashy to be a good team player in a political arena? It has been noted that before she went to Washington, Rogers’s social status and wealth had exceeded that of the Obamas for many years, yet suddenly she was supposed to be working for them. That may have been a collision in the making.

At the beginning of the Obama administration, Rogers was—outside of the president and the First Lady—the most enticing member of Team Obama. As The Washington Post noted, the Creole beauty arrived in town —to great fanfare, no small amount of it her own making. Stylish and accessible, Rogers quickly surfaced as the least dowdy political appointee in town—possibly ever. She was featured in Vogue a month before Michelle Obama appeared on the cover. In the WSJ. profile, Rogers modeled three outfits provided by the magazine (Viktor & Rolf, Jil Sander with Prada, and Calvin Klein) with three different sets of jewelry (Cartier, Fred Leighton, and Hervé van der Straeten). The WSJ. reporter described Rogers as unsure whether to wear

an Oscar de la Renta ball gown provided by the magazine for a photo shoot in the First Lady’s garden. —With a negative from the deputy press secretary, Rogers demurs, I wrote WSJ. Soon thereafter, The Huffington Post named her the best-dressed woman in D.C.

Around the same time, Rogers began churning out a busy schedule of social events at the White House. Her first week on the job, she met with Sharon Percy Rockefeller, CEO of D.C.’s public television station WETA, to map out a series of concerts—including performances by Stevie Wonder and Paul McCartney—that would be broadcast. —She had very high standards, and she brought a special degree of sophistication and polish, I says Rockefeller. For St. Patrick’s Day, Rogers had the White House fountain dyed green. For the traditional Easter egg roll on the South Lawn, she squashed the decades-old ritual in which D.C., Virginia, and Maryland residents camped outside for

tickets, instead creating a pre-event ticket application online, thus opening up the event to any citizen in the country willing to come to the White House. Her emphasis on bringing in outsiders contradicted the reputation she held in some Chicago circles for being occasionally standoffish. There were movie nights, music nights, and congressional cocktail parties. The First Lady's gardening project involved local schoolchildren. Overall, in her role as social secretary, Rogers supervised approximately 330 White House events in 14 months; if her job was, as she often said, —to make the White House the people's house,|| she succeeded.

Still, there were missteps even before the state dinner security breach. The White House social secretary is traditionally a quiet, in-the-background job, dominated by protocol and lists. From the beginning, the Obamas were clearly asking more from Rogers, and she herself was quoted in WSJ. as saying she didn't want to be —caught up in linen hell and flower hell and list hell.|| Yet for someone with such a pitch-perfect sense of style and taste, she displayed startling levels of tone-deafness at times. At an event in the White House kitchen with students from L'Academie de Cuisine, Rogers openly corrected Michelle Obama on the name of a china pattern. She allowed Vanity Fair to photograph and annotate the social secretary's East Wing desk. Then there was her high-profile visit to New York during Fashion Week. And she was quoted talking about the president, his wife, and the administration's goals in business jargon, saying, —We have the best brand on earth: the Obama brand.

Rumors floated that some in the West Wing, including people Rogers knew from Chicago—Valerie Jarrett, David Axelrod, Rahm Emanuel—were becoming increasingly frustrated with her attention-grabbing diversions. —You always want to present yourself well, but it can be a fine line,|| says Robin Givhan, Pulitzer Prize-winning fashion writer for The Washington Post. —The interest in Desirée Rogers's style began to overwhelm all the other things she was doing here.

The Secret Service ended up accepting full responsibility for the state dinner fiasco, but the incident highlighted the fact that Rogers had traipsed into the ball past the throng of photographers like the other guests, wearing an avant-garde Comme des Garçons evening gown. By then, she had risen so quickly and so high on the Washington scene that a fall hardly came as a surprise.

Rogers lowered her profile while overseeing the lavish White House holiday entertaining. Perhaps she was counting on her long-standing connection to the Obamas or her stellar fundraising skills (she bundled more than \$200,000 for the presidential campaign) to smooth the way. Or maybe she thought that all her hard work turning the White House into the people's house through noteworthy social events would counter the security kerfuffle. But the controversy, fueled by custom-bound D.C. society, refused to die down. As one Washington-based observer says, —The one thing you never want to be here is a distraction. And she had become a distraction.||

Several people close to Rogers say she thought leaving the White House three months after the state dinner would be a rather graceful and low-key exit. It didn't turn out that way. —Surprisingly, she wasn't prepared for how the media can turn—how one minute you're the darling, and the next you're the dog,|| says one of her friends. As a high-profile member of Team Obama, Rogers found herself besieged with media requests, even after she had settled back home in her Astor Street condo. —This was hoopla she didn't enjoy,|| says one of her confidantes. Still, she took comfort in the familiarity of Chicago and a strong circle of close friends. —She remains part of the power elite here,|| says Bill Zwecker, the Chicago Sun-Times entertainment and society columnist.

On Friday nights, Rogers began joining Linda Johnson Rice and the Gold Coast salon owner Leigh Jones for dinners out. She was spotted at Gibsons and at the School of the Art Institute's May fashion show; a breast cancer survivor, she agreed to emcee the Lynn Sage Cancer Research Foundation benefit in October. In June, she hosted an exclusive reception at her home for Ichiro Fujisaki, the Japanese ambassador to the United States. He had held one of the only going-away parties in D.C. for Rogers, and she was happy to be gracious in return. It was a small but dazzling fete, with elite guests including Maggie Daley, William Daley, Jerry Reinsdorf, and the real-estate mogul Judd Malkin. Then she took a long trip to Italy with her mother and her college-age daughter.

Privately, with some friends, Rogers acknowledged the painfulness of her Washington departure; to a very select few, she hinted that she would have liked more White House support at the time. She has remained close with the Obamas, speaking with the president since her departure and with Valerie Jarrett. Recently Obama met with Rogers's brother during a trip to New Orleans, and Rogers enjoyed a convivial dinner with Jarrett's daughter. In Chicago, a number of acquaintances have found her to be more open and down to earth now. —She was hurt by the experience in Washington, and who wouldn't be? I says a friend. —She's learned from it. I But not everyone is convinced of that. —After she moved back, I asked her, *“Why did you go to the runway shows in New York? Why did you get photographed sitting next to Anna Wintour from Vogue?”* says another Chicago friend, who has known Rogers for more than a decade. —And Desirée said, *“I am always associated with the best.”* Now that's the same attitude that eventually backfired on her. I (Several of her friends asked to speak anonymously out of concern she would be offended by their candor.)

All of Rogers's life, her brother, Roy A. Glapion, has said to her, —You are a tough one. I What he means is that she isn't easily categorized and her style often distracts people from her substance. Growing up in New Orleans, the daughter of Roy E. Glapion Jr., a city councilman, she helped out as a young hostess for her father's guests. But she wasn't only about style and manners. She excelled at school, and she talked about someday living in a place where it snowed. Her brother (who became a civil engineer and entrepreneur) and her mother still live in New Orleans (her father passed away there in 1999), but Desirée moved on, first to Wellesley, where she earned a degree in political science, and then to Harvard for an MBA. She married John Rogers Jr., the chairman and CEO of Ariel Investments, a Chicago-based mutual fund company. The two divorced in 2000, after 12 years of marriage, but remain close friends. (Their daughter now attends Yale.) Rogers first got to know Linda Johnson Rice and Valerie Jarrett through her ex-husband (he went to the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools with them), and it was also through him that she first met the Obamas (he played basketball with Michelle's brother, Craig Robinson, at Princeton).

In Chicago, Rogers's life operated on parallel tracks: She worked at high-level jobs (head of the Illinois State Lottery, president of Peoples Energy, an executive at Allstate Corporation) and served on the boards of various cultural institutions. —When she comes into a room, you can feel the energy, I says David Moseno, CEO of the Museum of Science and Industry. Rogers served as a director on the museum's board and, according to Moseno, —knows how to get things done. I Plus, she became a social engineer extraordinaire. With her exquisite taste and access to the most powerful and interesting people in town, her parties were sensations. During the 2008 presidential campaign, the Obama team offered tickets to a reception hosted by Rogers as a fundraising incentive. Her social and networking skills no doubt prompted Obama to name her White House social secretary—and now they are an integral part of her appeal to Johnson Publishing. It hasn't

been unusual for Rogers, since her return, to be asked by African American women for an autograph. That's the kind of star power the publishing company hopes to harness.

Designed in 1969 by the architect John Moutoussamy, the 11-story building that houses Johnson Publishing, at 820 South Michigan Avenue, is the first structure built in Chicago's Loop by an African American man since Jean Baptiste Point DuSable raised a log cabin in 1722. A popular tourist attraction and home to the country's largest corporate collection of black American and African art, the interior has a Swinging Sixties vibe, yet during a recent midday visit, both the massive lobby and the top-floor lunchroom resembled ghost towns.

Rogers's office, on the eighth floor, is a long, narrow slice of a corner. Unlike her former desk in the East Wing, which held two Hermès notebooks and a silver pen cup, her workspace here is devoid of personal touches. In fact, at the moment, the surface remains bare. It has been two weeks since Linda Johnson Rice named Rogers as the new CEO of Johnson Publishing, the world's largest publishing company owned and operated by African Americans (Rice remains as chairman of the board). The time has gone by in a whirlwind of meetings and strategizing. Rogers hasn't even gotten business cards yet. —I couldn't pass on the opportunity to work with two of the most exciting brands—Ebony and Jet magazines—in this country, she says. —I'm African American; these brands mean a lot to me. And to work with my best friend? What comes along better than this? Sitting at a small, round table in her office, Rogers has an open manner (—You can ask me anything, she says), and her wardrobe is professional but understated: a cream-colored pantsuit with a navy silk knit T underneath, a black-and-white enamel bangle, and navy peep-toe heels offering a glimpse of her Chanel Blue Satin pedicure. But the task ahead of her is more daunting than her demeanor might suggest.

This year marks Ebony's 65th anniversary, but the circulation numbers and revenue for both Ebony and Jet took a beating in the first half of 2010, with a 14 percent drop for the monthly Ebony, to 1.1 million readers, and a 12 percent drop for the weekly Jet, to 762,000. (Ebony reached its peak circulation of 1.9 million in 2002.) While all print media are under siege in the Internet age, statistics indicate that the circulation dive for Ebony is rapidly accelerating. —I know what you have to write, says Rogers. —Oh my gosh, their ads have fallen off, and their subscriptions have fallen off. What happened? I believe we could have done more. We could have been more aggressive. The print publication business is similar to the utilities business, I think, in that things have been done the same way for a long time. Now it's time to take a look in the mirror. I know what I see: No other publications are in better positions to represent African Americans than Ebony and Jet. OK, we've been a little sleepy, but now we're awake.

Founded in 1945 by John H. Johnson, Ebony was always positioned as an upbeat celebration of African American personalities, politicians, and celebrities. The magazine's initial run of 25,000 copies sold out easily. Johnson started Jet in 1951 as a weekly news digest, and it remains the country's only weekly news- oriented magazine that focuses on African Americans. In its early days, Jet covered the burgeoning activism of the civil rights movement; it also offered informative articles telling readers how to register to vote or how to find college scholarship money. As other national magazines shut down, Johnson's ability to focus on a niche market and to sell advertising directly aimed at that audience enabled his magazines to stay healthy—until recently. (Another key part of the Johnson empire is Fashion Fair Cosmetics, founded in 1973 by Johnson and his wife, Eunice.

With makeup and skin-care lines geared toward African American customers, Fashion Fair is sold at department stores and U.S. military bases.)

Johnson groomed his daughter, Linda, to succeed him, and in 1987 she was named chief operating officer of the company. (His son, John Jr., died in 1981 of sickle cell anemia.) With an MBA from Northwestern University and an unpretentious sensibility, Linda Johnson Rice took over as CEO and chairman of the board in 2008. But the recent years have dealt some blows: Her father died in 2005, and her mother passed away in 2010; the Internet deflated print publications, particularly those, including Ebony and Jet, that didn't quickly embrace the web as a way to engage a younger generation.

Since February 2009, Johnson Publishing has weathered a number of cutbacks, many stemming from a managerial edict requiring every employee to reapply for his or her job. Top management has moved in and out. Bryan Monroe, former assistant vice president for the Knight Ridder newspaper chain, came in as editorial director in 2006, but his job was eliminated in February 2009. At the same time, three of the four managing editors of Ebony and Jet accepted buyout options. Anne Sempowski Ward, a former assistant vice president of African American marketing at Coca-Cola, joined Johnson Publishing in 2007 as chief operating officer and took maternity leave in early 2010. The first week of June 2010, Rice hired Rogers as a consultant, and one of her first assignments was to fill in for Ward. Within six weeks of Rogers's arrival, Ward resigned. Shortly thereafter, the creative director, Harriette Cole, who had joined the company in 2007, followed. Cole's duties have now been assumed by the newly installed Ebony editor Amy DuBois Barnett, formerly of Harper's Bazaar.

"Did I just hire my best friend? Yes, I did," says Rice. "Is our friendship why I hired her? No. She was the most qualified. Period." Rice is quick to note that, in recent years, Johnson Publishing "didn't always execute everything as perfectly as we could have. But now we have our footing, and it is the perfect time for Desirée. She loves a challenge, she is honest in her thoughts and feelings, and she is a master at branding and marketing. And she has great brands to work with here. Plus, you have two women coming together—that's a powerful statement. [The job] may sound fluffy, but I know this is going to be hard work."

"We are going to reshape Ebony to appeal to a younger demographic," says Barnett. "I would like the magazine to ignite conversation in the African American community and beyond. And one way to do that is to engage our very best thinkers to share their opinions in our pages. Desirée has her finger on the pulse of what African Americans are interested in and concerned about." While shy about revealing any plans still in flux, Rogers stresses the need for Ebony to develop an Internet presence that allows a web-savvy audience to voice their own opinions. "You can't dictate to younger generations now," she says. "That's not the way the world works anymore. We need to create a dialogue with readers, both online and by taking our presence out into the community." One example she offers is the Ebony Education Roundtable held at the University of Chicago this summer, which included Ron Huberman, CEO of Chicago Public Schools, and Pam Goren, executive director of the Consortium on Chicago School Research. A standing-room-only crowd filled the room, and MSNBC aired a taped version in August. A printed transcript of the event appeared in Ebony's September issue. "We will continue to be actively involved in the community, because that is how we revitalize our brand," says Rogers.

She feels her career is built on brand development, particularly working with brands that she calls “perhaps somewhat mature. Look at my work at the Illinois State Lottery, where we really transformed that business from the Lotto game—which was our flagship—into the instant tickets. We went from selling 300 million tickets annually to 600 million by creating experiences for people. Then I went to Peoples Energy, which was also a challenge. Customers needed us, but they hated us. And the challenge was to improve communications. That was a ten-year body of work for me, which culminated in the first rate increase Peoples Energy has had in 13 years. You don’t get a rate increase if you’re doing a horrible job.”

Despite her rough exit from Washington, Rogers is similarly proud of the work she did there. “My goal was to make the White House a relevant place to the people of this country,” she says. “And I think I built a good foundation”

Still, at times, she feels she has survived a firestorm. But then the past usually fades into soft focus. “I was part of something extraordinary, and I continue to do what I can to be part of it,” she says. “We did our work. We did our jobs. So it would be selfish of me to even think of what was fair and what wasn’t fair. I don’t concern myself with that. I’m over it.”