

EXCLUSIVE

Rachel Dolezal's True Lies

For a time this summer, it seemed all anyone could talk about was the N.A.A.C.P. chapter president whose parents had “outed” her as white. The tornado of public attention has since moved on, but Rachel Dolezal still has to live with her choices—and still refuses to back down.

BY ALLISON SAMUELS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JUSTIN BISHOP

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PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTIN BISHOP.

 SAVE

It's safe to say that Rachel Dolezal never thought much about the endgame. You can see it on her face in the local-TV news video—the one so potently viral it transformed her from regional curiosity to global punch line in the span of 48 hours in mid-June. It is precisely the look of a white woman who tanned for a darker hue, who showcased a constant rotation of elaborately designed African American hairstyles, and who otherwise lived her life as a black woman, being asked if she is indeed African American.

It is the look of a cover blown.

KXLY Exclusive: Rachel Dolezal responds to race allegations



At first, as I watched Dolezal’s story rise from meme to morning show, I wasn’t completely sure what to think, or particularly sure how much I cared; there are, obviously, a host of more crucial issues facing black America. But despite my initial reluctance to even acknowledge Dolezal’s presence in the national conversation, she slowly began to win my attention. There have been women over the years who’ve spent thousands upon thousands of dollars for butt injections, lip fillers, and self-tanners for a more “exotic” look. But attempting to *pass* for black? This was a new type of white woman: bold and brazen enough to claim ownership over a painful and complicated history she wasn’t born into.

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After making calls to what felt like everyone in black America, I was able to get a hold of Dolezal's e-mail and cell-phone information, and we began a friendly month-long correspondence. We spoke on the phone and exchanged e-mails as events quickly shifted the nation's focus from Dolezal's fantastical story to an actual tragedy in Charleston. Eventually, I visited her in Spokane, Washington, where she had been voted head of the local N.A.A.C.P. chapter in November 2014, the crucial, profile-raising step on her rapid ascent in the city's black community. Throughout our exchanges, as the cameras moved on to their next assignments and public interest waned, she has simultaneously defended the identity she has carefully crafted and insisted that she deceived no one in creating it.



Photograph by Justin Bishop. PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTIN BISHOP.

“It’s not a costume,” she says. “I don’t know spiritually and metaphysically how this goes, but I do know that from my earliest memories I have awareness and connection with the black experience, and that’s never left me. It’s not something that I can put on and take off anymore. Like I said, I’ve had my years of confusion and wondering who I really [was] and why and how do I live my life and make sense of it all, but I’m not confused about that any longer. I think the world might be—but I’m not.”

After her estranged parents set her downfall into motion by **telling a local newspaper**, in no uncertain terms, that their 37-year-old daughter had been born Caucasian, Dolezal was relieved of her paid and unpaid positions in Spokane. She resigned from her position with the N.A.A.C.P. (though odds are she would have been ousted if she hadn’t), and was asked to step down from a police oversight commission. Eastern Washington University, where she had a beloved part-time teaching job in the school’s Africana-studies program, did not renew her contract. Her life bears little resemblance to the one she and her 13-year-old son, Franklin, were living just six weeks ago.

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“I’ve got to figure it out before August 1, because my last paycheck was like \$1,800 in June,” she says. “[I lost] friends and the jobs and the work and—oh, my God—so much at the same time.”

And yet, Dolezal's claim on black womanhood still seems to be non-negotiable. Even in conversation with an actual black woman on the other end of the line or sitting in her cozy home, Dolezal unequivocally identifies as black. (Never mind the ancestry.com heritage test that arrived on her doorstep the day I visited.)

Dolezal spent years researching and then perfectly molding her black identity. She commands an impressive knowledge of African American literature, its writers, and the history of the Civil Rights movement. She attended graduate school at the historically black Howard University (where, [The Smoking Gun reported](#), she unsuccessfully sued for being discriminated against *because she was white*). She is an expert in black hair, both as a practical matter and as a subject of academic inquiry. She makes it clear she doesn't plan on altering the way she presents herself anytime soon.

"It's taken my entire life to negotiate how to identify, and I've done a lot of research and a lot of studying," she says. "I could have a long conversation, an academic conversation about that. I don't know. I just feel like I didn't mislead anybody; I didn't deceive anybody. If people feel misled or deceived, then sorry that they feel that way, but I believe that's more due to their definition and construct of race in their own minds than it is to my integrity or honesty, because I wouldn't say I'm African American, but I *would* say I'm black, and there's a difference in those terms."

This is a peculiar defense. If there is a difference between being black and being African American, it's one that escapes the vast majority of people I know. When I said as much to Dolezal, she claimed to have received a

recent traffic ticket where the police officer marked her race as “black” on the ticket without even asking.

“It’s hard to collapse it all into just a single statement about what is,” Dolezal says. “You can’t just say in one sentence what is blackness or what is black culture or what makes you who you are.”



Photograph by Justin Bishop. PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTIN BISHOP.

Dolezal feels her outing was a big misunderstanding, but she appears unclear on exactly what was misunderstood. She *did* identify as a black woman when she was not—there’s not much to misunderstand there. For months, she showcased Albert Wilkerson Jr., a black man she met in Idaho, as her father on Facebook, a move that could only be characterized as misleading. There’s not much of a misunderstanding there, either. The

problem, as Dolezal sees it, is one of timing. Had she been able to explain her complicated childhood and sincere, long-time love for black culture to everyone before the blow up, all would have been forgiven.

“Again, I wish I could have had conversations with all kinds of people,” she says. “If I would have known this was going to happen, I could have said, ‘O.K., so this is the case. This is who I am, and I’m black and this is why.’” Despite the controversy, Dolezal says she has been in touch with some of the people she wishes she could get a do-over with. She says that in the last few weeks she’s been in contact with members of the local chapter of the N.A.A.C.P., where she served as president for just over five months. Most of the interaction, she says, has been with the older members in the black community who continue to reach out to check on her.

“It’s been really interesting because a lot of people have been supportive within the N.A.A.C.P., but then there’s also some awkwardness because I went from being president to not-president,” she says. “I’m kind of just keeping a little bit of distance so that Naima can get in her flow of leadership. It’s actually hard because I think there’s a little coldness from her, which is hard to deal with for me, to feel like she doesn’t trust me as much now or something. I don’t know.”

Naima Quarles-Burnley took over as president of the N.A.A.C.P. in June, and earlier this month [told Spokane’s *Spokesman-Review*](#), “I feel that people of all races can be allies and advocates, but you can’t portray that you have lived the experience of a particular race that you aren’t part of.”

When I ask Dolezal if she feels her dishonesty about her race hurt the organization or other race-related initiatives in the area, she accepts some of the responsibility but also quickly deflects blame.

“Yeah, I mean taking away my ability to lead in the community by questioning my integrity or my character or whatever really hit all of those things really hard,” she says. “Everything I do is connected to other people, so I don’t know how to assess the damage other than within my own mind. I know what I was working on and different people and systems that I was engaged with, but I mean, I hope that people are jumping in and picking up the slack.”

As she figures out where she’ll land next, Dolezal says she is surviving on one of the skills she perfected as she attempted to build a black identity. At Eastern Washington University, she lectured on the politics and history of black hair, and she says she developed a passion for taking care of and styling black hair while in college in Mississippi. That passion is now what brings in income in the home she shares with Franklin. She says she has appointments for braids and weaves about three times a week. She says that a previous custody agreement with her ex-husband mandates she stays in the Spokane area, but that now her ex may approve a move given recent circumstances.

“I would like to write a book just so that I can send [it to] everybody there as opposed to having to continue explaining,” she says. “After that comes out, then I’ll feel a little bit more free to reveal my life in the racial social-justice movement. I’m looking for the quickest way back to that, but I don’t feel like I am probably going to be able to re-enter that work with the type

of leadership required to make change if I don't have something like a published explanation.”

And so, nearly 40 days after that local news interview, Dolezal is still unapologetically identifying as a black woman, still sure that any confusion about her singular story can be explained, still sure she'll be back in the movement as soon as people stop misunderstanding her.

Her cover's blown, but that turned out not to matter. It was never a cover to her, anyway.



PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTIN BISHOP.

Allison Samuels

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BY HADLEY HALL MEARES

The banner is divided into three sections. The left section has a dark green background with white text that reads "SPRING SALE" and a small image of a white tote bag with a red circular sticker that says "FREE TOTE". The middle section features a large "\$1" with "A MONTH FOR 1 YEAR" written vertically next to it, and a crossed-out "\$2.50" to its left. The right section is a solid black rectangle with the white text "Join Now" followed by a right-pointing arrow.