

Obama's social director comes to forefront after gate-crashing

(Chicago Tribune (IL) Via Acquire Media NewsEdge)

TMC.net

December 4, 2009

WASHINGTON _ Desiree Rogers described herself as "giddy with excitement" when she was picked to be social secretary for the new Obama White House.

"This is the perfect combination of some of the skill sets that I have," she told the Tribune at the time. "I don't think it can get much better than this." But a year and one gaffe-ridden state dinner later, it could be a lot better for Rogers. The former head of the Illinois lottery and Peoples Gas now finds herself in the Washington political crosshairs after a security lapse that allowed gate-crashers into last week's White House gala for Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

The Secret Service has assumed the lion's share of blame, but House Republicans are threatening to subpoena Rogers over questions of whether her office ignored protocol for such events and may have contributed to the breach. Partisanship aside, the incident has also focused an unwanted spotlight on Rogers, whose position is designed to raise the profile of the First Family _ not that of their social secretary.

The 50-year-old Rogers, a friend of President Barack Obama and his wife, Michelle, has shown a flair for personal publicity in what tends to be a low-profile position. She has been featured in Vogue and Vanity Fair and boasted in print of the marketing potential of "The Obama brand." That has raised eyebrows of all political stripes in Washington, the nation's center of power, cattiness and long knives, where some dismiss her as an imperious fashion-plate.

Walter Scheib, the top chef at the executive mansion for Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, said a golden rule for White House staffers was laid out clearly when he was hired: "Never define yourself by how close you stand to the president in the picture." "What has occurred is unfortunate on so many levels: the president, the first lady and our guests of state were in danger," Scheib said. "It's a fact. Folks who work at the White House, their one and only job is to guarantee the safety and be of service to the first family and the president." Rogers, a onetime Republican once considered as running mate for former Illinois Gov. George Ryan, is no stranger to controversy or adversity. Six years ago she survived a bout with breast cancer.

When Rogers was president of Peoples from 2004 to 2008, the Chicago-based utility was sued by the city and state for "massive fraud" linked to the Enron scandal that allegedly led to widespread customer overcharges. The scheme predated Rogers' term at the company's helm, but stonewalling of the investigation allegedly continued after she took

over. Peoples agreed to a record \$196 million in refunds.

The White House made it clear Thursday that it was standing by Rogers.

She's "not curling up in a ball," said a White House official, terming it "unfortunate" that problems at the Singh dinner had overshadowed Roger's success over the last year in arranging 170 parties and social events without a hitch. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said Rogers has made herself widely available for photos and interviews largely to accommodate heavy media interest in her role as the first African-American to be White House social secretary.

A similar message came from her ex-husband, Chicago financier and Obama fundraiser John Rogers Jr., who has spoken to her in recent days. "It's out of the question that she won't survive this," he said. "She's at the top of her game. She's busy with planning all the Christmas parties at the White House." (EDITORS: STORY CAN END HERE)
(EDITORS: BEGIN OPTIONAL TRIM) Divorced for a decade, Desiree and John Rogers have one daughter, a student at Yale University.

A native of New Orleans and two-time queen of a Mardi Gras krewe, Desiree Rogers came to Chicago by way of Wellesley College, a Harvard MBA and a job in operations at phone giant AT&T. After marrying John Rogers, founder of multibillion-dollar Ariel Capital Management, she managed newsstand operations for the Levy Corp. and ran a firm that operated museum retail stores.

Republicans are hardly known for their success with black voters, but former Illinois Gov. Jim Edgar, a Republican, proved an exception when elected in 1990. He embarked on an effort to recruit minorities and women in the top levels of his administration. And Rogers became Illinois' lottery director.

She had other GOP links as well. John Rogers' mother, Jewel LaFontant-Mankarious, was a prominent Republican lawyer who served as deputy solicitor general in the Nixon administration and as an ambassador-at-large under former President George H.W. Bush. In 1992, Desiree Rogers was an alternate delegate to the Republican convention that nominated Bush for a second term.

At the lottery, Rogers earned a reputation as a manager who was driven and self-confident, and some former employees found her initially intimidating. She launched several new games and gained celebrity appearing often on television as the very visible face of the lottery. In 1997, she left for an executive post at Peoples, which along with a sister company serves most residential gas customers in the city and on the North Shore.

Rogers left Peoples last year, briefly working on a social networking initiative for Allstate Insurance before joining the Obama administration.

White House observers said it's highly rare for social secretaries to actually take a seat at a state dinner, as Rogers did.

Rogers posed for the cameras when entering the White House on the night of Nov. 24, wearing pearls, a trendy Comme Des Garcons gown and a wide smile. "We are very excited," she said. "Everything looks great." Sticklers for protocol in the nations' capital said even her speaking in the first person _ rather than speaking for the Obamas _ was a faux pas.

Rogers, though, has won admirers. Washington-area hair stylist Ron Clemente remembers last spring when she came into a Georgetown salon, where she has had her nails done, and gave away several tickets to salon employees to the White House Easter Egg Roll.

Another admirer is Carl S. Anthony, historian for the National First Ladies Library in Canton, Ohio. "There's a real misunderstanding that they just plan parties," he said. "These people work really, really hard. It's a high-adrenalin job. They don't even go home on weekends, and they're always attached to those stupid BlackBerrys."

(Ron Grossman of Tribune Newspapers contributed to this report.)

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