

Trayvon Martin's friend Rachel Jeantel: 'I'm still standing'

Written by Jazelle Hunt, NNPA Washington Correspondent
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) – As Rachel Jeantel inched toward a high school diploma, she tried to keep in mind that she had a promise to keep. Her slain friend, Trayvon Martin, would have wanted her to finish school, and she had promised his parents and other supporters that she would.

Now, she has kept that promise.

The world met Jeantel last year, when it was disclosed that she was the last person to speak to Trayvon Martin before he was killed by George Zimmerman. Over two days of testifying as a key witness in the Zimmerman trial—in which she was questioned for six hours—a storm of opinions, analyses, and judgments were made about her – some on target, some not.

At the time, she was just a teenager thrown into the spotlight in the midst of a personal and national tragedy.

It's a chapter of her life she doesn't like to talk about, mostly referring to it in solemn tones as "the situation." Bringing it up immediately deflates her cheery, laugh-filled conversation.

"I'm grateful for Trayvon and everyday when I work hard or have the smack-down on me, I just say if he was here he would say 'keep going,'" Jeantel said in an interview.

"The situation was a learning experience for me, and for everyone. As everyone was watching the trial, we were all learning things about the United States. But I'm still standing. You don't need to be afraid of me, and you don't need to feel bad about the situation. Justice will still be served."

Last year, Jeantel wanted nothing more than to be left alone. She was grieving and feeling guilty, choosing not to attend Martin's funeral.

"I was running from Sybrina [Fulton], "she says referring to Martin's mother. "I wasn't ready to face her. I didn't want to talk about it."

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She was traveling constantly, for questioning as part of FBI, law enforcement, and legal investigations. She was missing a lot of school. Only her closest friends knew that she had been on the phone with Martin when Zimmerman first spotted him.

"Nobody knew where I was. I'd lie about where I'd been every time somebody brought up Trayvon, and they would always bring it up in school [that he had been on the phone]. I'd deny saying it was me," Jeantel says. "All the traveling and talking to the FBI was too much on me, and I was doing it by myself. I still wanted my normal life."

That normalcy never quite returned. She still gets recognized at Wal-Mart, where people ask her why she shops there "now that [she's] a celebrity." They want to take pictures. Sometimes they're too nervous to approach her, and send their children to ask instead.

She shrugs off the attention, often responding to strangers that she still needs clothes and make-up just as they do. "For now, I just deal with it," she says.

Another adjustment has been the tidal wave of Black men and women who emerged to teach, steer, and coach Jeantel, now 20, as she transitions to college and womanhood. It began with her attorney, Roderick Vereen, who ushered Jeantel through the media spotlight after Zimmerman was acquitted of second-degree murder and manslaughter.

He remains "like a father figure." Vereen's assistant, Rose Reeder, manages Jeantel's scheduling. His friend, Karen Andre, also a lawyer, stepped up as a mentor. Miami-Dade School Board member Dorothy Bendross-Mindingall arranged for her to transfer to the Academy for Community Education, a small, attentive alternative high school where principal, Deborah Carter took Jeantel under her wing.

During an interview on his radio show, Tom Joyner offered Jeantel a full scholarship to any Black college she chooses, and also hired a team of tutors to help improve her math and reading proficiency to college-ready levels.

"I was not used to that. It was a lot of people. I could never sneak around, I couldn't go no place!" She says, laughing and sighing with appreciative resignation. Once, one of her tutors came to pick her up at home and she invited him in to say hello to her parents, who speak limited English. He greeted them in fluent Creole, much to Jeantel's chagrin. For the self-proclaimed "spoiled-brat daddy's girl" who was "used to having her way," this new team of no-nonsense adults – who could report directly to her parents without her translation – was not exactly welcome.

It's something they all laugh about now. Though her new normal is a challenge rooted in tragedy, it's bearing good fruit, too. Jeantel explains, for example, that her friends often draw inspiration from her life. One in particular, at her new school, confided that she was considering dropping out.

"I showed her my schedule of all my tutoring, and my calendar, and I told her she better not quit," she says. "And she graduated and got her diploma with me. I've been through my worst."

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Everybody's been through their worst times, but mine was in the public eye. If I could deal with millions of insults, you can deal with two."

She's even worked her way back toward Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin, who she now calls her "number one supporters." Fulton was one of the people cheering her across the stage as she accepted her diploma.

"I love them because one thing about my village is they keep it real. I'm telling you, I was bad," Jeantel says. "I would see them every day and sometimes I'd get five different lectures a day. I'm down to two, so I'm working on it."

In fact, Jeantel is working on a number of things. With her tutors she's focused on vocabulary, grammar, and mathematic skills. With her mentors, she's focused on wellbeing and gaining the necessary life skills to become independent. This summer she hopes to get a job. When her academic skills are up to par, she'll enroll in college. In the far future, she sees a college degree and a creative career, ideally in fashion design.

"I want to thank everyone who was standing behind me during and after the trial – every single person who ever supported me. Trayvon, his family, my family, even President Obama," Jeantel says. "I'm still standing, still smiling. [Zimmerman's acquittal] was a disappointing day. But justice will be served, and I will get my degree, and we will continue."