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Crystal Mangum's Return to Court

A sad final chapter to the Duke lacrosse scandal

by [Susannah Meadows](#) February 23, 2010

Just before midnight on Feb. 17, in Durham, N.C., police responded to a call about a domestic dispute. The voice on the line was a child's. "Please hurry," she said. "My mom is going to die." Authorities arrived to find a woman fighting with her boyfriend. She'd lit his clothes on fire in the bathtub and, according to police, was threatening to stab him. Her children, who are 3, 9, and 10, were in the next room. She was arrested and charged with attempted first-degree murder, assault and battery, communicating threats, injury to personal property, identity theft, resisting a public officer, five counts of arson, and three counts of misdemeanor child abuse, according to [The News & Observer](#).

It was the kind of report that would normally not go any further than the local news page of the Durham paper. Except the woman happened to be Crystal Mangum, who falsely accused three members of the Duke University lacrosse team of rape and assault four years ago. The case, of course, exploded into a national news story and brought down the Durham district attorney. As the reporter who covered that case for NEWSWEEK, I am sorry to say that I wasn't at all surprised by the most recent events.

Mangum was the woman who'd faced public scorn for putting the families of three innocent young men through hell. Her accusations ended the career of the prosecutor who took her case. They unhinged a great university and cost its insurance company untold millions. And yet, after the case ran into the sand, she seemed to have the least chance of all those involved of moving on and leading a productive life. As the trial wore on, one defendant's mother, Rae Evans even expressed sympathy for Mangum. "You know, when I'm trying to get over the rage, I am thinking about so deeply this young woman who has been abused by men all her life, and nobody has abused her more than Mike Nifong," she said, referring to the Durham prosecutor. And North Carolina Attorney General Roy Cooper did not pursue any action against Mangum for making the false accusations. Asked about it at the press conference where he dismissed the charges, Cooper intimated that she was not of sound mind. "Our investigators who talked with her and the attorneys who talked with her over a period of time think that she may actually believe the many different stories that she has been telling," he said.

I ended up spending eight weeks in Durham over a year of reporting on the lacrosse case, devoting a good deal of time to trying to figure out who Crystal Mangum was, following her trail into the worst parts of town. Though I never met her, I came to know a troubled woman and her hometown, a city still raw with racial bitterness.

At the time of the rape accusations, Mangum was a mother of two, working as an escort, and taking classes at North Carolina Central University. NCCU was the first publicly supported black liberal-arts college in the country, but it has struggled over the years to get adequate funding. The distance between the campuses of Duke and NCCU was a few miles and a lot of resentment. Students I spoke with at NCCU's campus soon after the rape charges were filed had no doubt that the lacrosse players were guilty but would beat the rap. One student told me, "This is a race issue. People at Duke have a lot of money on their side." Another student said, "It's the same old story. Duke up, Central down." He said he wanted to see the Duke students prosecuted whether they were guilty or not. "It would be justice for things that happened in the past," he said. For me, it was one of the more eye-opening moments of the whole case.

Mangum lived on a small street less than four miles from the Duke campus, but it might as well have been in another city. I drove out to her neighborhood on a warm afternoon hoping she might talk to me. When I pulled up in front of her house, I found what was basically a shack. With most of its paint gone, the wood siding had turned gray. I might not have believed people were living inside if her parents had not come out to shoo me away. I'd lived in Durham for four years as an undergraduate at Duke, and I had never had any idea just how extreme the city's poverty could be. Duke students have little incentive to leave the lush grounds of their "Gothic Wonderland"—a term long used by students and alumni, but not always lovingly. But if they did, they'd be faced with a stark reality: In 2007, almost a fifth of Durham residents were [living in poverty](#), and half of those were surviving on less than 50 percent of the cutoff.

My next stop was Diamond Girls, a dodgy strip club just outside of town. When she was 23—the same age as the Duke lacrosse team captain she'd later accuse—Mangum worked there as a dancer. She'd been involved with the courts before. One night in 2002, she lifted a taxi driver's keys while giving him a lap dance. With a blood alcohol level twice the legal limit, Mangum then stole the cab. Police chased her through the city; she was eventually arrested, but not before nearly running over a cop as he approached her car. None of the women I spoke with at Diamond Girls remembered Mangum. As grim as it was, the windowless storefront was perhaps better than her more recent work as an escort with a busy schedule of appointments at various motels, according to police documents.

Life seems to have been a struggle for Mangum for years. At 17, she told police that three men had raped her when she was 14, but the case was dropped when she didn't follow through with the authorities. Her father later told reporters that he didn't believe that she'd been raped then. Over the years, Mangum has been treated for mental illness, according to an interview her mother gave to *Essence* magazine. Later, when I was reviewing statements she made to the police about the night of the lacrosse incident, I remember counting that she'd changed her story at least 10 different times. There were so many different versions of events that her statements took on an air of absurdity. She came off as more pathetic than conniving.

Crystal Mangum's arrest this week is a reminder of the untidy ending of the Duke lacrosse scandal. Not the case itself, which was found to be so void of any credible evidence that not only did the state's attorney general step in to drop the charges, he also declared that the three players were innocent, that no rape had taken place, that a "rogue prosecutor" had overreached, and that, "in the rush to condemn, a community and a state lost the ability to see clearly." To boot, that "rogue prosecutor," Mike Nifong, was eventually disbarred.

But though the case ended, the sadness that the scandal incidentally exposed remains unresolved. Remember that racial slur? When the two black strippers left the lacrosse party in a huff, a white freshman on the lacrosse team yelled out to them, "Thank your grandpa for my nice cotton shirt!" Case or no case, the epithet still hangs in the air. And then there's Mangum herself. Back when she'd just accused wealthy white Duke students of rape, lawyers were volunteering to work for her pro bono should she want to sue for damages. This time around, with a case that's less financially promising, she's relying, according to WRAL.com, on a public defender. She's under house arrest on a \$250,000 bond.