

## Deja faces the world: Richmond burn survivor prepares for return to school

[By Karl Fischer and Shelly Meron](#)

[Contra Costa Times](#)

Updated: 03/22/2011 07:32:15 AM PDT

Deja James spent her first 15 years turning heads.

Now she dreads the attention. "It's the double-looks," said Deja, a sophomore at Kennedy High School in Richmond. "That's what I'm thinking about."

Deja entered winter break a typical teenager -- giggling with her friends, making her mom sit at another booth at Denny's after a night out. Tall and graceful, she danced for the crowd at school rallies.

But Deja left the holidays a burn survivor. Now, between bouts of medication and physical therapy, she agonizes over the moment when she must turn her face back to the world.

"They will probably ask a lot of questions," she said, pondering her return to school. "I do kind of want to go back. But then I don't."

Memory of the flames and her first days at the hospital remain indistinct, three months after a fire blasted the apartment she shared with her mother on Standard Avenue in San Pablo.

LaShawndra Polk woke to flames before 6 a.m. Dec. 23. She tried the door, which seared her hand. She and Deja eventually kicked out a window and jumped from the second-floor breezeway.

They lost shelter, clothing, income -- everything but a charred bed railing. Polk also lost use of her hand, making it impossible to work.

Now, while the parents fret about where to sleep and how to pay for food, the daughter wears the permanence of their misfortune across her broad forehead.

"She's a 15-year-old girl," father Kimmie James said. "Of course she's worried about how she looks. She thought life was over."

Deja survived unconscious those first days at Saint Francis Memorial Hospital in San Francisco, with tubes down her throat to eat and breathe.

Consciousness delivered fresh pain. Deja waited three weeks before stealing a glance in the mirror.

"I didn't like how I looked," she said. "I thought I was going to look like that forever."

Swollen, swaddled and scarred, the person staring back looked like no one she knew. Burns covered half her body. Skin blistered. Doctors patched it with pale skin grafts.

Deja, deeply depressed, feuded with doctors over her appetite. She must eat to heal, they insisted.

Her father took photos to chronicle her progress. He still hasn't let her see some.

"I show her, 'Now look -- your face is getting better, and it's going to continue to get better,' " James said. "Your face will heal."

These days, Deja's face supplies most of the cheer at home. Six weeks out, her normal skin tone has returned. She flashes manicured, turquoise nails.

She stretches to loosen her skin, distinctively patterned where the grafts took. Wounds remain on her back, mementos of her worst burns.

Deja and her mother came close to moving into a homeless shelter after her release from the hospital in late January.

"I said, 'I'm not taking my baby to a shelter,' " said Polk, who held jobs as a hairdresser and school aide before her own burns disabled her. "Even after I explained everything, they kept saying to go to a shelter. If you say you're homeless, then they expect you not to be choosy."

It fell to James, an unemployed dialysis patient facing foreclosure, to house his daughter. He sanitized to the hospital's exacting standards and evicted the dog to the yard. Polk slept on a relative's couch, meanwhile, visiting daily to care for Deja.

Money remains scarce. The family struggled to find an \$81 co-pay for antibiotics when a burn on Deja's back became infected last month.

A reprieve came last week, when Contra Costa Supervisor John Gioia found an apartment for mom and daughter in El Sobrante.

This week, Deja contemplated her return to school. She's waiting for the moment that feels right.

"People out there are ignorant, and of course they will look and wonder what happened," said friend Ana Carranza. "But she has a lot of friends. Hopefully they will be supportive."

Ana had spent the night a few days before the fire. The girls ate pizza and watched a show about hip-hop performer Nicki Minaj.

A few days later, she learned about the fire.

"I was trying to get to see her the same day, but they said no visitors and that she was about to go to surgery," Ana said.

They next met after Deja came home, with face discolored and fire-marked hands. Ana saw the grafts.

"I wasn't expecting her to look that way," she said. "I felt like crying, but I didn't want to cry. I didn't want her to feel bad."

Now, as her 16th birthday nears, Deja mourns that she still cannot dance. But she does feel more like herself every day.

And she still won't "friend" her mom on Facebook. "No," Polk laughed. "No, she will not."