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Revolutionary BIPoC women of the UW: Dr. Carolyn West

The importance of bravery as a BIPoC woman

By Rachel Morgan The Daily

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Editor's Note: In honor of Women's History Month, in an attempt to de-center whiteness and men from the perception of our history, the Opinion section is pursuing nine pieces that aim to amplify BIPoC women of the UW and their contributions to the community — and our history.

If there is one thing that Dr. Carolyn West considers herself to be, it is "generally fearless."
The reason for that: a plane.

“I was at a pretty low point in my life, I had some stuff going on, and I said, ‘OK, what can I do that I’m really afraid of?’” she said. “‘Jump out of a plane!’ And then after that, you survive that — you don’t have anything to be afraid of.”

While jumping out of a plane is a fairly good way to build character and grit, West has been pushing boundaries for her entire life in both her research and her career. At her very core, she has the admirable drive to be fearless and brave, two tools necessary to “carve out a place” for herself.

Even still, as a Black woman, she’s never had it easy. But West’s drive and passion for intersectionality and justice led her to where she is today: a founding faculty member of the UW Tacoma department of psychology researching intimate partner violence and the hypersexualization of women in the media.



Courtesy Dr. Carolyn West

West was introduced to the topic in the eighth grade when she checked out a book from the library titled “Scream Quietly or the Neighbors Will Hear” by Erin Pizzey, which detailed elements of family violence. Since then, West “just knew” that studying psychology and family violence was what she wanted to pursue.

During her time at the University of New Hampshire, she had the opportunity to study under Murray Straus, made notable by the fact that Straus’ first description of family violence scales was mentioned in Pizzey’s book.

But during her time at the University of Missouri, West became an “accidental activist.” In the 1990s, sexual harassment wasn’t as widely recognized as it is now, and laws were not in place to protect women. West was sexually harassed by a professor, and she chose to challenge the university in a court of law.

“I ended up complaining, talking to the director of women’s studies, who was my mentor, and I ended up filing a lawsuit against the university for sexual harassment,” West said. “And I started giving newspaper and television interviews about it because I felt like it was really

critical not to be silent about. And that was one of the hardest things I have ever had to do.”

The University of Missouri settled out of court and changed their policies surrounding sexual assault as a result. This experience reaffirmed for West that the only way to create change is to be vocal.

“And so for me, speaking out about any kind of injustice is important if you are really going to make change, and somebody is going to have to be the person who stands up and does that. And then when you do, you give other people permission to be brave and live authentically.”

Not only does West live authentically as herself, her actions continue to encourage others to embrace the same fearlessness she embodies. That being said, West recognizes that speaking up isn’t always the easiest thing to do.

“It feels in some ways being very exposed, and in some ways you become a target when you speak out about these issues — but that just makes it even more important to speak out about these issues,” she said.

West has gained confidence through her unusual research and her positive experiences in the UW community. She takes pride in working to uplift the stories of women of color, as a part of this community herself, and continues to pursue this work inspired by her personal history.

“Having sued a major university in my mid-20s, being a first-generation college student, and coming from — if you go back to the work that I do, I’m the granddaughter of sharecroppers,” West said. “I mean, coming from that ... knowing your history in that way, coming from that background, what is there really to be afraid of? The people who came before me, the kind of challenges they had to face. You know, I think I can stare down my white male colleagues who do this work.”

In her work, West has found that people are open to having difficult conversations about conventional and institutional racism, something she is heartened by. Amidst the pandemic and racial justice movements, there is no longer time to think small — as West suggests, “no more waiting.” This has never been more true.

West’s attitude is purely inspiring; pushing beyond societal boundaries has become a key part of her life and of her work. She has paved her own way throughout the entirety of her career, establishing a department around a field she has been passionate about since eighth

grade. Her drive to create an equitable space for women is so powerful, and this sentiment must be expanded beyond her classroom.

It is difficult to be authentically yourself. Societal barriers prevent women from acting freely. But that doesn't limit the confidence and fearlessness that can be exhibited by powerful women, especially women of color, given the right support systems and environments. West has most definitely done this for herself, and through her work, she encourages other women and her students to pursue and find the environments that allow them to be brave — just as other women have helped her to do.

And so, West will continue to live her life following the words of Black poet Audre Lorde: "I'm going to go out like a f---ing meteor."

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