



QUIET ON THE SET

February 4, 2025

Professor Carolyn West says the quiet part out loud — speaking publicly and raising awareness on the often stigmatized topics of domestic violence and sexual assault.

For Carolyn West, Ph.D., the opportunity to educate extends beyond the classroom walls. The University of Washington Tacoma psychology professor, credited with developing the UW Tacoma psychology program in the institution's formative years, has entered into a new professional chapter as a public intellectual.

“For me, being a public intellectual means I take academic knowledge that is buried in journal articles and book chapters, and I help put it together in a way that it can be consumed and understood by the larger culture,” West said.

West's research focuses on intimate partner violence and sexual assault. Her area of expertise can be triggering or taboo for some but, for West, it is essential to share information and resources for survivors and advocates.

“Any kind of gender-based violence, it thrives on silence, secrecy, and shame,” West said. “And the only way to really change things is to not be silent about it.”

Her outspoken approach has led to opportunities to share her expertise with countless students and, more recently, expanded to reach national audiences.

West has been brought on as the expert psychologist in high-profile media appearances such as the [*Red Table Talk with Jada Pinkett Smith*](#); documentary appearances in [*Subjects of Desire*](#), [*Chris Brown: A History of Violence*](#), and [*Diddy: The Making of a Bad Boy*](#); and interviews on podcasts like [*Psychology of Black Womanhood*](#), [*A word... with Jason Johnson on Slate.com*](#), and [*Therapy for Black Girls*](#). In these appearances, West discusses what domestic violence is, why survivors stay, and why perpetrators do what they do.

“It’s a way of stealthily educating people,” West said. “They’re thinking they’re watching something for entertainment, and then maybe it resonates. If I can say something where they recognize the domestic violence or the sexual assault in their lives or the lives of someone who is close to them, then that may prompt them to seek help.”

In addition to her various media appearances, West has been invited to speak at a multitude of universities, conferences, and conventions. She also authored a four-part [*Technical Assistance Guidance series on Serving Black Women Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence*](#). These guidebooks contain practical advice and strategies to effectively identify and serve survivors of domestic violence. This series provides instructions on key actions to take when encountering a victim of domestic violence, such as where to go, how to do a danger assessment, and what questions to ask to prevent further harm.

“That’s what keeps me going — if I feel like the work that I’m doing is making a difference in somebody’s life,” West said. “Writing for domestic violence advocates and giving them the tools to do culturally sensitive work - that feels like it has real-world impact to me.”

West researches and presents complex issues that require a certain vulnerability to discuss. But her classes on subjects like Sexual Deviance, Sex Crimes and Sexual Violence, Family Violence, and Psychology of Black Women address these topics with nuance and intentionality and are making an impact on the students who have the opportunity to learn from her.

Fae Osborne, a senior majoring in psychology with a minor in gender studies, initially encountered West during her first quarter at UW Tacoma. In every quarter since, she’s worked with West as a pupil or a teaching assistant, and Osborne now considers West a truly impactful mentor in her life.

“[West] approaches her work with such joy and compassion that it’s easy to see how she became one of the most beloved professors at our institution,” Osborne said. “The courses she teaches engage with complex, difficult subjects that often affect students deeply, but she is always able to bring levity back to the room with her sharp sense of humor and willingness to be vulnerable. And when students do need extra care, she is more than willing to make time for them.”

The effects of West’s teaching on her students are long-lasting. Karin Dalesky, academic counselor for the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences, was a student when West first arrived on campus in 1997.

“To this day I believe she was the most dynamic professor that I have ever experienced in the classroom,” Dalesky said. “The unique contributions she has made to UWT and our community are immeasurable.”

At UW Tacoma, West has earned many accolades, including the Distinguished Teaching Award (2013), the Distinguished Research Award (2016), and, most recently, becoming the inaugural Resident Fellow of the Office of Community Partnerships (2021-2026). This fellowship played a key role in expanding West’s work to include more

public-facing elements, paving the way for these opportunities to connect with advocates, activists, and the general populace across the nation.

And West's chapter as a public intellectual won't be coming to a close anytime soon. Looking forward, West has plans for another book, wants to complete her documentary on the portrayal of Black women in pornography, is compiling a report for the state on the racial disproportionality of sex trafficking, and is interested in participating in more film and television appearances as a featured expert.

West admitted that this work does come at a steep personal cost. It's difficult to imagine the resilience one must have to be immersed in topics that are so oppressive, not to mention the retaliation that can come with bringing these topics to light. But building awareness around intimate partner violence and sexual assault is the best way to combat it, so West remains steadfast in her purpose.

"I try to operate with a fearlessness in life," West said. "I skydive. I zip line. I travel. I just do all the things. And doing that, living a fearless life, is what keeps me emotionally balanced enough to keep doing this work."