

Civil rights activist Angela Davis visit stirs Cal Poly Pomona

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POMONA - Civil rights activist Angela Davis paid a visit to Cal Poly Pomona on Wednesday and gave an hour-long speech that was indicative of a life steeped in activism and academia.

Touching on concerns of the Trayvon Martin case, social problems related to incarceration and violence against women, Davis stood before a group of students, faculty and community members and called for a renewed effort to battle racism.

"We need to start a movement on how to prevent the poison of racism from continuing to infect generations after generations," Davis said. "We have to purge the country of racism. This is not a post-racial society. People have to recognize that, including the people in Washington."

Davis said during the 1950s and 60s, so many activists thought that by the 21st century, many of the race problems would be solved.

"Why is this still with us?" she asked.

About 600 people filled the seats of a Bronco Student Center Hall to hear Davis, while more than 200 others occupied the adjacent overflow room. Davis, a professor emerita at UC Santa Cruz, received a couple of standing ovations.

As news emerged Wednesday that George Zimmerman was charged with second-degree murder in the fatal shooting of Martin, the unarmed black teenager, Davis said the case is a disappointing reminder that the nation has not come as far as we assumed when it comes to racism.

"It's sad that at the age of 17, Trayvon Martin learned the very last lesson of his far too young life, that racism still infects the thoughts and emotions of so many in the United States," Davis said.

The Martin shooting was not an exceptional case, said Davis, and vigilante violence has been around for many years.

"I might say George Zimmerman is a modern-day slave catcher," she said.

As calls for the prosecution of Zimmerman continue across the country, Davis reminded the audience that incarceration is no panacea.

"George Zimmerman should definitely be held accountable but the problem I'm raising is, that will not purge our society of racism," Davis said. "By sending an individual to prison, in many ways, we are assenting to the continued reproduction of racist plans."

Best known for her political activism in the 1960s and her association with the Communist Party, Davis, 68, has done extensive research on the so-called prison-industrial complex. As noted during her introduction, Davis was placed on the FBI's most wanted list in the 1970s and spent time in prison for her alleged role in the murder of a judge. She was later acquitted.

"I loved everything from the beginning to the end," said Cal Poly Pomona student Evangela Brewster, 24, about Davis' speech. "She was so down-to-earth. I'm glad Cal Poly gave us this opportunity. It's something we'd never get anywhere else."

Renford Reese, a political science professor at Cal Poly Pomona and the founder of the school's Prison Education Project, said Davis' address inspired the entire room.

"Today we heard from someone who has dedicated her life to activism, who has dedicated her life in righting the wrongs of society," Reese said. "For me, it was inspirational."

Reese was pleased with the turnout, saying the crowd was similar in size to the crowd in February for the Cornel West address.

"They say this is Generation Me and that Generation Me doesn't care," Reese said. "Today is testimony that maybe they do care. They're just looking for the right cause and the right reason."

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Credit: Wendy Leung, Staff Writer