

Angela Davis retires from UCSC

UCSC Faculty
Campus' most recognizable professor expected to teach an occasional class

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SANTA CRUZ — Angela Davis, the iconic social-justice activist who has been arguably the most well-known UC Santa Cruz faculty member of the past two decades, has officially retired as a full-time professor.

Davis, a 17-year professor in the History of Consciousness Department and a former chair of Feminist Studies, has worked mostly with gradu-

ate students in recent years as she traveled the globe speaking on prison abolition and matters of oppression. She is a longtime champion of civil liberties and a prolific author on the intersections of class, race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation.

Davis began lecturing at UCSC in the mid-1980s, and her courses on feminist theory, culture and ideology, and other topics in the humanities

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Angela Davis speaks at late Chancellor Denice Denton's memorial in June 2006.

Dan Coyro/
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field became magnets for students. Davis was a big feather in the cap of a campus born during the civil rights era and already renowned for drawing radical thinkers.

"She did marvelous work as a teacher," said professor Bettina F. Aptheker, a leading feminist studies scholar at UCSC and Davis' close friend of 50 years. "Her classes were always overflowing."

Davis was traveling and unavailable for an interview last week, but Donna Haraway, chair of the History of Consciousness Department, said Davis retired because she wanted to travel, work with graduate students and find more balance in her life.

"Many people want something from Angela; she is a fundamentally generous person," Haraway said. "It has been very difficult for her to juggle all of the demands and her own priorities."

Davis, 64, who lives in the East Bay, officially — and quietly — stepped down in the spring quarter. Like many retired professors, however, Davis is expected to teach an occasional class, and even now she is continuing to work with graduate students and keep an active, activist presence on campus, colleagues said. She refused this spring to appear at a UCSC commencement ceremony while the university was at odds with union workers.

Last year, Davis spoke out against the suspension of a black student involved in an October 2006 protest at a UC Regents meeting, during which numerous students blocked exits to a building. Police used pepper spray and batons to remove students, but Allete Kendrick, who was charged with battering police, was the only student suspended.

Davis rallied with others outside the chancellor's office in June 2007, saying a recommendation for a three-year suspension stunk of racism.

Campus officials later reduced Kendrick's suspension to two academic quarters and community service, and Kendrick pleaded guilty to two misdemeanor counts in court.

Davis also championed the late Chancellor Denice Denton, applauding Denton's efforts to diversify UCSC along gender, socioeconomic and racial lines. At Denton's memorial service in 2006, Davis said Denton had fought "unrelenting homophobia" while helping to raise the profile of women and tackle diversity issues.

Davis has been an activist since her teenage years in Brooklyn, N.Y., where she grew up with Aptheker in "a circle of kids who were part of the progressive and communist left," said Aptheker, whose father, Herbert, was a leader in the party. After being educated at universities in Europe and the U.S., Davis went on to teach philosophy at UCLA, where she was fired in 1969 by the UC Regents for being a member of the Com-



Angela Davis stands with former UC President Robert Dynes at the memorial for the late UC Santa Cruz Chancellor Denice Denton in June 2006.

Dan Coyro/
Sentinel file

munist Party.

Although then Gov. Ronald Reagan, who became the Cold War hero of anti-communists as president a decade later, warned that Davis would never teach in the UC system again, Davis was reinstated after an outcry from academics and civil rights advocates. She first came to UCSC as a lecturer in the History of Consciousness Department in 1984.

She was made a professor in 1991 and three years later was appointed to the UC Presidential Chair in African-American and Feminist Studies, one of many national and international distinctions earned by her scholarship. She served as the chair of the Feminist Studies Department from 2003 to 2006.

Although Davis is an internationally known activist made legendary after her 1972 trial and acquittal for murder in connection with a courthouse hostage incident, she always made time for one-on-one student mentorship, campus activism and participation in faculty governance, colleagues said.

"She was very generous with her time," Aptheker said.

One of Davis' recent graduate students, Michelle Erai, a New Zealand native who taught feminist studies at UCSC after completing her doctorate in the History of Consciousness Department, said being a student of a legendary professor was "kind of intimidating" at first because

"the classes she taught were full of really educated scholars."

But Davis took a personal interest in Erai and her dissertation on violence against indigenous Maori women of New Zealand in the mid-1800s. Davis guided Erai through seven years of research and writing.

"Even though she travels a lot, she was really present and incredibly thoughtful in her comments," said Erai, who is serving a post-doctoral fellowship at UC Riverside and planning an October 2009 tribute to Davis at UCSC. "She really modeled how to operate as an academic and an activist."

Activism with the Communist Party is what first catapulted Davis to national fame. Not long after the battle to regain her teaching position at UCLA, the Birmingham, Ala., native was placed on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted List.

A gun registered in her name was used during a hostage incident at a Marin County courthouse that ended in the death of Judge Harold Haley. In August 1970, two hostage takers forced the judge and a prosecutor from the courtroom while trying to free a man on trial.

The armed men, who were shot and killed by police, were ultimately demanding the release of a trio of black prisoners known as the Soledad Brothers, whom Davis had been involved in defending along with the Black Panthers. The So-

ledad Brothers were accused of murdering a white guard at Soledad prison in retaliation for another white guard having killed three black inmates in what had been ruled justifiable homicide.

Within days of the courtroom escape attempt, authorities were hunting Davis, saying she was equally responsible for the judge's death if the shotgun she reportedly bought in Los Angeles was used in the commission of the crime.

Davis was arrested months later, launching an international movement called "Free Angela Davis." She served more than a year in jail before being cleared of all charges.

The complexity and enormity of her public persona was a boon to UCSC, though colleagues say she acted like anything but a celebrity.

"She has really mattered at putting this campus on the map," said Haraway, adding that Davis often served on many committees and groups behind the scenes. "What is often not seen is the attention she gives graduate students. She doesn't ride her reputation."

"She is not a person who uses her considerable fame to get out of things," Haraway said, adding, "Angela could have been a diva but she never was."

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