

AS WE SEE IT

# Message of diversity

RICE:

Activist lawyer has a message  
worth spreading.

**S**anta Cruz is lucky to be able to host a number of fascinating visitors — many of whom are brought to the area by various UC Santa Cruz programs. Not enough credit is given to UCSC for its contributions to the local political and social life. But one such contribution came here last week, and we think it's worth taking time to give credit to one such visitor: Connie Rice, an attorney and activist from Los Angeles.

Actually, identifying her in any way runs the risk of inaccuracy, because she's someone who defies categories.

Take the word activist. The word connotes someone who protests, someone who works outside the system to make change.

Rice is hardly that. Yes, she is active, and she is someone who cares passionately about social justice. But anyone who listened to her public talk in Santa Cruz last week could tell that she works within the system, and she works hard to change the system.

What Rice cares about are the disenfranchised, those in society who are left behind. The gap between rich and poor, and the lack of opportunity for those who are poor, are problems that in Rice's mind get swept under the rug. As she said in her speech, it's time for those with money and education to do more to help those who are less fortunate.

Both major political parties have subverted the good intentions of many Americans by claiming that one party or the other is the only way to effect change, or to promote justice. Democrats say they're the party of compassion, and Republicans say they're the party of morality. Those claims don't help the public debate.

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Rice, who happens to be the second cousin of Secretary of State Condi Rice, would certainly be considered a progressive liberal herself. But it's a mistake to categorize her.

"As progressives," she told the audience, "we don't know how to talk to the rest of the U.S." She added: "Get rid of the ideological bent and look for smart solutions."

As a lawyer, Rice is known for her lawsuits that have targeted agencies to come up with funds for things such as new school construction. But she also is known for refraining from lawsuits if the outcome would cause more harm than good.

Her talk was sponsored by UCSC's Center for Justice, Tolerance and Community, a center that studies the issue of diversity. And diversity is what Rice discussed: not just racial diversity, but diversity of people and their ideas.

Her lesson? Reach out to people that aren't like you. Convince them of the need for change, and enlist their help in working together. Even as a member of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in Los Angeles, Rice still reached out to Republicans when she needed money for inner-city school construction.

Too often, here in Santa Cruz and elsewhere, discussion of social justice is constrained by the dictates of partisan politics. Rice's lesson is clear: diversity of people and of thought can lead to change.

And no one group has cornered the market on good ideas.