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April 21, 2006

Democratic party is not the key to change

By **GENEVIEVE BOOKWALTER**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

The key to social justice and reform is not voting the Democratic slate.

It's reaching out to people who aren't like you — conservatives, different races, various classes — convincing them of the need for change and then working together to get it done, according to attorney Connie Rice, who spoke to more than two hundred people Thursday night.

"As progressives, we don't know how to talk to the rest of the U.S.," said Rice, at Holy Cross Church in Santa Cruz. Rice, cousin of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, was part of the seventh annual spring lecture hosted by the UC Santa Cruz Center for Justice, Tolerance & Community.

"Get rid of the ideological bent and look for smart solutions," she said.

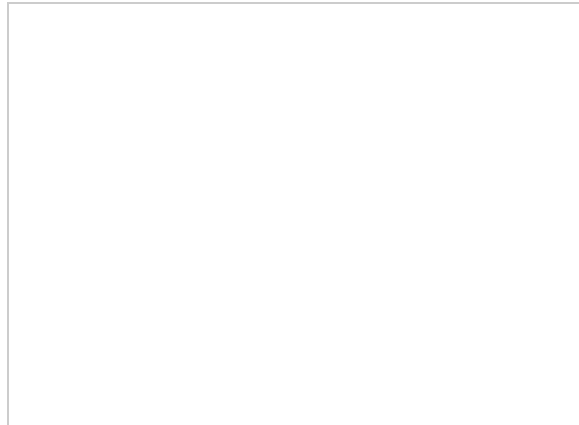
Rice, who graduated from Harvard College in 1978 and went on to New York University Law School, spoke about her work in Los Angeles helping broker gang truces, winning \$750 million in court for school construction, and \$2 billion to improve the city's bus system. She joined the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in 1991 and became co-director of the Los Angeles office in 1996.

She is now co-director of The Advancement Project, which combines litigation with consensus-based problem solving.

The key to her victories, Rice said, was not belonging to the political party in power. It was building a coalition so convincing that those in power could not say no.

That's what she did to earn money for badly needed inner-city school construction, for example, when she signed up inland Republicans to back her case. When she sued over Metropolitan Transit Authority's decision to take money from bus service to study rail, potentially stranding thousands of low-income riders, Rice made sure poor whites were listed as defendants along

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with African Americans, Latinos and other races.

Race, she stressed, is often not the biggest discriminating factor. It's poverty.

For example, she said, the black middle class looks away from African Americans in gangs and housing projects. Whites forget some of the nation's worst schools are in poverty-stricken, mainly Caucasian Appalachia.

Now, she said, it's time for those with degrees and disposable income to get over their differences and help the less fortunate.

"I think we have been the witnesses and embitters of an entire class of people," Rice said.

Afterward, UCSC student Sophie Perry, 21, took a few minutes to find the words to embody how the speech affected her.

"The whole damn thing struck me," Perry said, especially the honesty and importance of creating a community that works.

"It's really exciting," Perry said, "to hear that it really is about forming alliances, not enemies."

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