

'Orange is the New Black' star addresses UNCA campus



Photos by Jorja Smith - Photography Co-Editor

Lavern Cox, known for the Netflix original series "Orange is the New Black," spoke to UNC Asheville on March 4 in Lipinsky Auditorium.

Laverne Cox draws large crowd, answers students' questions

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Laverne Cox, a performer and activist who appears on the Netflix original series "Orange is the New Black," proudly introduced herself as an African-American, transgender woman to a packed Lipinsky Auditorium.

"I stand before you an actress and an artist and a daughter and a sister, and I believe it's important to name the various intersecting components of my multiple identities because I am not just one thing and neither are you," said Cox, who comes from a working class background and was raised by a single mother.

Cox spoke in Lipinsky Hall on March 4, attracting a largely youthful audience who know her as her character on "Orange," Sophia Burset. The series served as her breakthrough role to mainstream media, although she appeared on the reality TV show, "I Want to Work for Diddy" in 2008 before producing and starring in her own reality show, "TRANSform ME." for VH1.

Cox shared her painful background, a lifetime of bullying, name-calling and shaming, for her authentic expression of womanhood. She is quick to relate her own struggles to those of LGBTQ people nationwide, people of color and the feminist movement of the 20th century, which she said was transformative for

her during her college years.

Her speech, entitled, "Ain't I a Woman: My Journey to Womanhood," draws from the womens' rights perspectives that empowered Cox to transform her physical appearance into the woman she said she always knew she was.

Cox summarized what she took from the works of Bell Hooks, Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir as a college student in NYC years before her physical transition into a female-bodied person.

"One is not born a woman, but becomes one, and the one who becomes a woman isn't necessarily female, and ain't I a woman? Sojourner Truth spoke those iconic words, 'Ain't I a woman,' at an entirely womens' convention in 1861 in the context of the women's liberation struggle that suggested that she wasn't really a woman because she was black."

Moreover, she emphasized, those feminist figures paved the way for the movement Cox herself joined to fight for the rights of transgender people, before she had accumulated the star power she more recently began to enjoy. She recounted the stories of transgender victims of sometimes fatal hate crimes, as well as their daily fight for safety, job opportunities, representation and legal rights.

Brennen Hubbard, a senior and president of UNC Asheville's Underdog Productions, said Cox's

experience with LGBTQ issues and intersectional identities motivated her team to bring Cox to campus, which involved pooling resources with the Feminist Collective and Alliance and pitching offers to Cox's managers to get UNCA on their tour roster.

"The great thing about this event is that it was relevant to all students, not just LGBTQ-identified people. I think that it's important for student organizations to serve as advocates for all members of the student body," Hubbard said.

During an exclusive Q-and-A session prior to her speech, Cox discussed her current social justice project, a documentary called "FREE CECE" which is currently in fundraising to be produced; its Indiegogo campaign has raised more than half of its \$55,000 goal and will continue through March 29.

"FREE CECE" focuses on a transgender woman who believes she is wrongly incarcerated for the stabbing death of a man who attacked her without provocation in 2011. The film, told through the voices of Cox and Cece, will also discuss treatment of transgender people in the prison system.

Harper Spires, a 20-year-old junior political science student at UNCA, said students got a chance to discuss with Cox how issues of racial diversity and intersectionality play out at UNCA at the Q-and-A.

"We talked about advocacy and

inclusion on campuses. Intersectionality is often an issue, because people aren't really aware of all the things that go on in the lives of trans people," Spires said.

Spires said when thinking about LGBTQ issues, the "T" often lags behind, because it's not discussed alongside gender orientation, class or race issues.

"People were saying that the admissions office could do a better job of pulling students of color from Asheville High and Asheville Middle, which is something we've been talking about during the chancellor search," Spires said.

Cox also gave advice to Alliance leadership about including transgender voices in their advocacy work.

Cox's other recent tour dates include Harvard University, Brown University and the Facebook Headquarters in San Francisco, among others. Cox also said she is in the middle of writing a memoir.

Her appearance at UNCA coincides with the campus celebration of Women's History Month, including the March 27 performance of the core ensemble's rendition of the musical theater piece also called, "Ain't I a Woman." It includes a diverse selection of African-American music, from spirituals to jazz to classical, and pays tribute to Sojourner Truth, Zora Neale Hurston, Clementine Hunter and Fannie Lou Hamer.