

Cornel West Speaks at Wright State University's Bolinga Center

By: Teri Miller Barker

Gas: \$2.22 a gallon. A parking space: \$1 an hour. A chance to see professor, author and activist, Dr. Cornel West, at Wright State University: Priceless. Literally. His talk, based on his best selling book, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*, was free and open to the public. On January 26, 2006, Wright State University's Medical Sciences Auditorium served as the backdrop for the event sponsored by WSU's Bolinga Black Cultural Resources Center.

The Medical Sciences Auditorium was filled to capacity, and the overflow spilled into the halls, lobbies and even the building's entrance with people eager to hear the famous philosopher. Some peered over the shoulders of people standing in the doorways, others sat Indian-style on the floor, enthralled with the Princeton professor's profound views and insights. It is estimated that, approximately, 700 were in attendance at the facility that could only seat 500.

"The emancipation of American democracy. This is the great gift of Black folk to America," stated Dr. West to his captivated audience. He said that Black people were determined to emancipate American democracy "by ensuring that White supremacy no longer constituted a major impediment of democratic energies by courageously asking questions."

The large audience was an eclectic mix of high school and college students, educators, entrepreneurs, clergy, and others from the general public. Also in the audience was comedian Dave Chappelle, whose mother, Dr. Yvonne Seon, provided the opening and closing remarks. Dr. Seon, the founding director of the Bolinga Black Cultural Resources Center, has returned to serve as Distinguished Visiting Director, and lead the Bolinga's 35th Anniversary Celebration. West's appearance was part of the Center's celebration.

West spoke of democracy and racism, and encouraged his listeners to strive for greatness as opposed to success. "Our problem, in part today, is that we have a whole market-driven culture obsessed with success. Everybody wants to be successful," said Dr. West. He further stated, "We wonder why young people are walking around obsessed with the bling-bling. We've gone from 'let freedom ring' to the bling-bling because their conception of themselves, their whole identity is so tied into their possessions, what they have, how they look, how they appear. I call it the peacock syndrome. Strutting around, looking at how successful one is, one's achievements and accomplishments. I say peacocks strut because they can't fly."

The event was well-attended, and most stayed for the reception that followed his speech. Attendees got the opportunity to meet and converse with Dr. West who was very accommodating and approachable. He patiently listened and answered all of his fans' questions. "Just having Dr. West here was a blessing in itself because you have so many

young people who needed to hear his message about racism and democracy,” said Eddie M. Dunbar, Sr., a student of Payne Theological Seminary. “He is important not only because of his books, but because he is an energetic organizer and a wonderful public speaker on the left.”

According to West, “One of the reasons why democratic powers are waning in our society is we don’t have enough courageous citizens who are willing to raise deep and serious questions about themselves, about society and the world.”

Dr. Cornel Ronald West was born on June 2, 1953 in Tulsa, Oklahoma. At age 17, he enrolled at Harvard University and graduated *magna cum laude* in just three years. He earned his graduate degrees from Princeton University, where he is currently a religion professor. West has taught at Union Theological Seminary, Yale, Harvard, and the University of Paris. Not only a prominent professor, author and activist, West has experience as a rapper and actor as well. He has released two rap CD’s, *Sketches of My Culture* and *Street Knowledge*, and appeared as Counsellor West in two of the three *Matrix* movies.