



University of Washington

ANA MARI CAUCE

PRESIDENT WITH A CAUSE

Short of violence, University of Washington students tried almost everything to stop Ana Mari Cauce from taking over the American Ethnic Studies program in 1997. They staged sit-ins at Board of Regents meetings. They cursed at President Richard McCormick and threatened to occupy his office. They interrupted former Governor Dan Evans, the regents' president, again and again in an attempted filibuster. They issued demands.

A cadre of student leaders feared administrators were trying to kill the small department that focused on African American, Asian and Chicano studies. Popular faculty members were let go or passed over for promotion. Other teaching positions went unfilled. The dean of Arts and Sciences had not inspired confidence when he said classes on race, gender and ethnicity were essential, but “it is not essential that this requires the departmental programs such as now exist.”

To students, Cauce, the dean's hand-picked new leader, was the manager of a hostile takeover, maybe worse. In any case, she was a psychologist moving into American Ethnic Studies, which traditionally focused on history, literature and political science. She had not taught in the field, students complained, and although Cuban-born, she was not one of the minorities the program studied. In the campus newspaper, *The Daily*, student leaders said she must've got the job through the “good old boy network.”

Cauce was clueless to what awaited. *The Daily* ran a full front-page story about her, headlined “Under Fire.” Editors superimposed a telescopic gun-sight on Caucé's forehead—unaware that her brother had been shot and killed by the Ku Klux Klan. On the first day of her new job, she



Cauce kept a copy of the student newspaper published when she started a controversial career-changing UW job. *Bob Young*

walked to her office down a hall plastered with copies of *The Daily*.

Her thoughts went to her mother. Cauce was the one who had delivered the news about her brother's murder. Her mother responded with a noise "not quite human."

Almost in slow motion, Cauce walked down the corridor with one thought enveloping her brain: "My mother...better...not...see this."

In a letter responding to *The Daily*, she said she did not want to be depicted as competing with the students' preferred candidate to lead the department, Professor Johnella Butler. She expressed great respect for Butler, asked students to give her a year to prove herself, and ended by borrowing a metaphor from *The Daily's* cover. She said it would be in everyone's interest to declare a temporary "ceasefire" in the emotional controversy.

Her entreaty was met with a volley from a graduate student who saw a veiled threat. If Cauce only wanted a temporary cease-fire, the student wrote in *The Daily*, why should students wait until she "desires to renew hostilities?" Paraphrasing the Scottish-American revolutionary John Paul Jones, the student concluded in all caps, "WE HAVE NOT YET BEGUN TO FIGHT."

A year later, students who had complained about Cauce gave her a "rookie of the year" plaque. The new boss had gone to every American Ethnic Studies class to talk to students and get their views. Dr. Butler was promoted to director of undergraduate studies. Connie So, a popular instructor whose contract had not been renewed, was rehired. At the end of Cauce's three-year term, an oversight committee gave her and the department favorable reviews.

The arc of Cauce's career changed. She had once seen herself as an "accidental administrator." She had disliked process, distrusted authority and disdained bureaucracy.

Two decades later, she was lauded as president of one of the world's top 10 universities led by women.

The UW's 33rd president has blazed trails to a rumba beat. She is the first Latina, first lesbian and first exile to hold the UW presidency. And she is an academic unicorn—the ultra-rare insider at a major university who climbed the ranks to the summit, in her case, all the way from assistant professor to top Dawg, overseeing three campuses, an \$8 billion



"I was a geek before it was chic," says Cauce, here getting a tutorial from UW student Sukhdeep Singh during the national "Hour of Code" event. *Dennis Wise/University of Washington*

budget, 59,000 students, and 31,000 faculty and staff.

“Although I did not realize it at the time,” she says of the American Ethnic Studies flap, “I had become hooked on administration—the ability to bring disparate groups to the table, the satisfaction of building a program or department, or helping one to change, the adrenaline rush that comes from decision making under pressure.”

WHEN ANA MARI CAUCE (first name rhymes with “calamari,” the other with “cow-say”) was a young girl she dreamed of becoming a firefighter. Not for the red truck and all, but “only because of the Dalmatians.” Once she got past that, she wanted to be a teacher. “School was always my refuge,” she says. “No surprise, I was never one of those popular kids. I like to say I was a geek before it was chic. And so, books were what nurtured me.”

There’s a photo of her as a young school girl with a blissful smile, holding a basketball. That smile turned out to be a signature trait, unwavering through the decades. It’s warm and strong, not quite bittersweet but with a hint of a deeper story behind it.



“He lifted me up and helped build the foundation that still grounds me,” Cauce says about her father, who went from political elite in Cuba to factory-worker in Florida. *Ana Mari Cauce*



Cauce’s family fled Cuba and settled in Florida when she was 3 years old. *Ana Mari Cauce*

Cauce’s starts with the Cuban revolution in 1958. When Fidel Castro’s rebels reached Havana, Cauce’s parents feared for their lives. Her father, Vicente, was the country’s minister of education. They left straight from a New Year’s Eve party for the Chilean embassy, where the ambassador arranged for their safe passage out of Cuba. They eventually landed in Miami. Cauce, 3 years old, and her brother César, 5, soon boarded a Pan Am flight and joined them in Florida.

Despite her father’s standing as a political elite in Cuba, he was just another exile in America. His first job was sweeping floors in a hotel. For many years, he worked in a shoe factory. Her mother, Ana, tried several factory jobs. The Cauces temporarily hosted so many relatives and friends arriving in the U.S. that it

seemed Ana Mari or César was always sleeping on the couch.

Ana Mari, who quickly learned English, often translated for her parents. In her third-grade class, she was called on to translate for newly arrived Cuban immigrants, her first experience as a kind of teacher's assistant. While she and César felt like American kids, some things in the Cauce household still had a Cuban flavor, such as Thanksgiving, when they stuffed the turkey with beans and rice.

"I never felt deprived in any way, shape or form," Cauce

says. Her parents shielded her from the reality of their sacrifices. Only when she applied for financial aid for college did she realize she was "poor" enough to qualify.

Back in the early 1960s, before food stamps as we know them, welfare meant surplus food. Her parents were too proud to take it, but her aunt and grandmother would bring it home. "And for a long time I hated peanut butter because that was welfare food," Cauce says.

Another enduring memory: To celebrate her brother graduating from eighth grade, the family went to a Howard Johnson's restaurant for dessert. "We had ice cream and they put sparklers and stuff in it so it was a big celebration," she says.

Her father left some money on the table.

She picked it up and took it home.

"And I very proudly gave it to my father and said, 'You forgot this.' He turned to my mom and said, 'We're raising a bunch of heathens,' or some equivalent of that. And I think back on the fact that we never went out to dinner."

Her father never stopped reminding her that education is one thing no one could ever take away from her. His own education "didn't translate in this country—into power, wealth, prestige, any of those kinds of things. But it made his life richer in so many different ways."

Cauce's brother graduated with honors from Duke University. She graduated from the University of Miami *summa cum laude*, the highest distinction. In 1979, she shoved off for Yale University to pursue advanced degrees in psychology. One Saturday night during her first semester she and friends were getting ready to play Monopoly when she got a call from her mother, who had heard something about a rally.

Cauce turned on the TV. News stations were running stories about what



Ana Mari or her brother César (right) always seemed to be sleeping on the couch because her parents hosted so many Cuban exiles. *Ana Mari Cauce*



Ana Mari had to tell her mother (left) about her brother's murder at an anti-KKK rally.

Ana Mari Cauce

became known as the "Greensboro Massacre."

César Vincente Cauce had become politically active at Duke. After receiving his bachelor's degree, he faced a decision: accept a full scholarship to graduate school, or, stay in North Carolina and join a union drive at Duke Hospital. He got a job as a data clerk at the hospital and dove into organizing. Friends described him as thoughtful, able to get along with all kinds of people, and "not at all like the bossy kind of men." A big man with a big bush of brick-red hair, he was a core leader of the hospital drive.

On November 3rd, 1979, he took part in an anti-Ku Klux Klan rally led by the Communist Workers Party. Billed as "Death to the Klan," the gathering of 40 to 50 protesters drew an angry response from Klansmen and Nazis, who filled nine vehicles

in a caravan that rolled by the protesters.

Both sides shouted insults. Protesters banged on the Klan cars with fists or picket signs. A fight broke out with both sides wielding sticks from picket signs. A Klansman fired what appeared to be a warning shot into the air.

After 88 seconds of subsequent shooting, five protesters lay dead, including César Cauce, who was unarmed. He had been clubbed in the head with a stick, dropping him to his hands and knees. He was then shot in the neck and died on a patch of grass outside an apartment building.

Nazis and Klansmen claimed self-defense and were twice acquitted by all-white juries. A fact-finding commission created to reconcile lingering divisions in the Greensboro community, found that protesters used incendiary rhetoric and some fired guns (hitting no one) after the Klan shot first. But the Nazis and Klansmen were more responsible for the deaths, along with the Greensboro Police Department, which "showed a stunning lack of curiosity in planning for the safety of the event." Police commanders learned from an informant about the Klan's plans to disrupt the protest. But officers were directed away from the event, which was publicized enough that four TV news crews were on the scene. Officers stopped only one of the Klan cars from fleeing the scene after shots were fired.

In a snippet on TV, Ana Mari thought she saw her brother get shot. She called Greensboro police. Eventually, they confirmed that César, 25, was killed. It fell on her to inform her mother.

Afterwards, Cauce described herself as "flattened," too depressed to be angry.

FIVE YEARS LATER, Cauce was a newly minted doctor of psychology. Her mentor at Yale was Edmund W. Gordon, who had been mentored by W.E.B. Du Bois, acclaimed author and co-founder of the NAACP. Gordon's research focused on African American students who succeeded despite facing significant challenges. Gordon said Cauce was one of the best students he taught in his 60-year career. "Even in those early days Ana Mari was asking the hard-to-answer questions, and insisting on more than superficial and simplistic answers."

Cauce landed a teaching job at the less-than-fabled University of Delaware, in the small city of Newark. She was on her way to Seattle two years later to become an assistant professor at the University of Washington.

Her research, funded by the likes of the National Institute of Mental Health, tended to focus on minority and homeless youth. Her practice as a clinical psychologist required her to watch video recordings of her meetings with clients. "It was a humbling and painful experience," she says. She learned that she came across as stronger than she really was, partly because she was raised in a big loud Cuban family and expressed herself boldly. She was reminded of an old joke: How do you quiet a Cuban? Tie their hands.

"So I will literally at times sit on my hands," she says, "because it's important for me to make sure I'm leaving room for others to speak and that I'm listening."

She became director of clinical training in the UW Department of Psychology, a post she held for seven years. She was about to go on sabbatical when she was asked to serve as chair of the embattled American Ethnic Studies program. She had reservations. But Edmund Gordon, her mentor, framed the decision as "why not you?" She had to do it, he said. She was the right person. It was a matter of duty.

Battle-tested by the demoralized department, its polarized faculty and tenacious students,* she began a steady ascent at Montlake. In roughly three-year tours of duty, she became director of the UW Honors Program, then chair of the Psychology Department. (One colleague called her a "chairapist" for her accessible



In 1999 Cauce received the Distinguished Teaching Award, the highest honor the UW gives faculty members for their work with students. *University of Washington*

* In an editorial about their tactics hurting their cause, *The Daily* said American Ethnic Studies student leaders "made wild accusations and repeatedly played the race card."

style.) She moved up to executive vice provost, then dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. There was only one more stop before the summit. She was named provost, the university's second-in-command and top budget officer. Cauce joked that the provost's job is to trail behind the glad-handing president and say, "What he really means is 'No.'"

When President Michael Young, who was lured to Seattle from Utah, left the UW for Texas A&M, Cauce was elevated to interim president. After her appointment was announced at a Board of Regents meeting, staff, students and regents lined up for hugs. As a nationwide search was launched, the UW community surveyed the recent past and saw a series of outsiders who had bolted the president's office, or were asked to leave.

Cauce, on the other hand, bled purple. She had said the UW was her home, and as an exile, "home means a lot to me." She was not only a proven candidate, but one who just might supply a steady hand for years. And she was refreshingly collaborative and open. After telling a journalist about vacationing in Australia to help researchers count baby penguins, Cauce pulled up her sleeve to show a scar on her bicep. "That," she said proudly, "is a penguin bite."

She was not the first woman to serve as acting president. Phyllis Wise, a scientist and daughter of Chinese immigrants, preceded her. But Cauce would use her platform in a way that Wise, or no other UW president, had.



During a very personal speech in 2015, Cauce wiped away a tear while discussing her mother.
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JUST TWO MONTHS after becoming acting president, Cauce stepped to the microphone in the UW's Intellectual House, a longhouse-style facility created as a learning and gathering space for American Indian and Alaska Native students. It was April 16, 2015, Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Cauce's 37-minute speech was titled, "We the people: diversity, equity and difference at the UW." She wrote it herself and practiced it on a hike with a UW staffer, tweaking the speech along the way. Several hundred in the audience waited with anticipation. A recent Black Lives Matter march through campus had been disrupted by someone shouting

* Diversity of UW's 2018 student population by percentage: Caucasian, 39; Asian, 22; international, 15; Latino, 8; Southeast Asian, 6; African American, 4; Filipino, 2; American Indian-Alaska Native, 1; Hawaiian-Pacific Islander, 1.

“apes” at those peacefully assembled. Rather than play it safe as some candidates for president might, Cauce leaned into the controversy.

And she made it personal, almost uncomfortably so.

“The fact I was interim (president) was not the moment to start being timid,” she says. “I was also trying to decide, Is this a job I wanted?” At that point, she hadn’t thrown her hat in the ring for the presidency. To some degree, she still wondered, “Can I be me? Are the things I care about, is that a good match for the presidency?”

The “apes” comment had gotten to her. It was a reminder that even in progressive Seattle “we often fall way short of our ideals.” But before she opened up about her own life in a choked-up confessional, she took the audience down a provocative path.

Surveys showed that the current generation of college students thought they were color blind—to the point they didn’t even know about differences in American ethnic cultures. But, Cauce asked, is this good? Who are we erasing when we go blind? What’s being “whitewashed,” so to speak?

She called the lack of knowledge about other cultures the makings of a Molotov cocktail. Racism was baked into our country’s founding, she said, and consumed by generations of immigrants. She knew her family brought a Cuban strain of racism to America. Her aunt, charitable and religious, taught Cauce that her white skin was a gift so she should be extra kind to those who were darker. How, Cauce wondered, could she herself not have some racism lurking inside her?

We all need to be more aware of our prejudices, she said. When she met the woman, Susan Joslyn, who would become her longtime partner and wife, Cauce wanted to tell her mother. She expected her mother, a 4-foot-11-inch “Mack truck of persistence,” to be unhappy. But she didn’t anticipate what she said:

“Now both my children are dead.”

Nothing could’ve been more hurtful, Cauce said.

Her mother later offered to sell her only valuable possession, her condo, to pay for “conversion” treatment, Cauce said, shrugging and smiling. Then she wiped away a tear.

But her mother changed. She opened her heart to Joslyn, a UW professor. And, after a massive stroke,



Cauce called UW alumni and champion Bill Gates Sr. (right) a “big man with an even bigger heart.” *Ana Mari Cauce*

she died in Cauce's arms, mother and daughter proud of each other in the end.

"It's not just about bad people doing bad things," Cauce told the hushed audience. "It's about us. It's not about guilt. This is about change. This is about growth."

She challenged everyone in attendance to examine their own thoughts and feelings. She urged them to call out friends who tell racist or dumb-blonde jokes. And she encouraged them to learn about the pain and struggle of others.

WHEN REGENTS unanimously voted in October 2015 to appoint a new president, their decision was hardly a surprise.

Momentum for Cauce seemed to be building in the weeks and months beforehand. Katherine Long, veteran higher-education reporter for *The Seattle Times*, had written a story saying Cauce had widespread support on campus. Some even wondered why the UW was bothering with a nationwide search.



UW's 14th live mascot, Dubs II, an Alaskan Malamute, with the leader of the Husky pack. *Ana Mari Cauce*

Sure, Cauce was informal, a bit unpolished and hardly the pale male candidate out of Central Casting. But her down-to-earth approachability was part of her appeal. She wrote on Facebook about the joys of mowing her lawn. She drove a Honda that friends said was often a mess inside. She wore sweat pants to the supermarket. "Whether she's posing with Husky mascot 'Dubs' or greeting Chinese President Xi Jinping during a formal ceremony at Microsoft, she always looks like she's having a good time," Long wrote.

While Cauce was likely to be picked as president from the minute Young decamped for Texas, Long said her emotional talk at the Intellectual House helped introduce her to a wider audience and "put her heart out there."

One expert surprised at Cauce's appointment was Judith Block McLaughlin, a scholar of college presidential searches for three decades and chair of the Harvard Seminar for New Presidents. When asked to name an internal candidate promoted to president of a major American university, Block McLaughlin, came up empty. "Their warts are known...their enemies are right there on campus," she said.

As president, Cauce was more concerned about new toadies than old foes. "The further you rise the more people want to please you, so to speak. So you have to be very careful to make sure everyone doesn't just 'yes, yes' you."

As someone who believes you learn more from your critics than your supporters, Cauce wanted to encourage dissent among those who had her ear. “They’re doing you no favors if they don’t bring up the ifs, ands or buts to any particular direction that you’re taking. I tell people: ‘Come at me hard. This is the setting in which I want you to come at me hard because when we leave the room I want us to be on one page.’”

Cauce feels some ambivalence about all the “firsts” associated with her tenure. “On the one hand, you know, it makes me incredibly proud. And I recognize that it sends an important message to women coming after me.* On the other hand, there’s a bit of, ‘I’m not a woman president. I’m a president.’

“I want to be known for my accomplishments, not just that I accomplished them while being female.”

Another one of her peeves is when people talk about someone like her overcoming her background. “I’ve overcome obstacles. My background is part of my strength. It’s not something that I’ve overcome.”

CAUCE’S STRENGTH was tested, when campus Republicans invited right-wing provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos to speak at the UW in January 2017, on the night of President Trump’s inauguration festivities. Yiannopoulos was known for taking political incorrectness to the level of profane name-calling. He attacked specific college professors with insults and described “rape culture” on campuses as a myth. He was banned from Twitter for racism and misogyny. (He would later lose a book contract and editing job for endorsing sexual relations with boys as young as 13.)

Thousands of people asked Cauce to ban Yiannopoulos from speaking. An anti-fascism movement urged its members to shut Yiannopoulos down. Other schools, including New York University and Iowa State University, had canceled his scheduled talks for fears of violence between protesters.

While the leader of the UW’s College Republicans said such retreats amounted to “babying students,” some seemingly valid concerns were raised. Alysse Holt, a graduate student, said Yiannopoulos’ college tour “really signals the renormalization of the particular brand of white supremacy and white nationalism that’s being cloaked now within these broader conversations of free speech.”

But the only exceptions to First Amendment rights involve what lawyers call “fighting words,” or speech with a specific threat. Cauce stood her ground. “A university should—indeed it must—be a place where any policy or idea, even if offensive or outrageous, can be aired, discussed, examined and debated,” Cauce wrote on her blog. “That’s a cornerstone of our democratic system, and the University of Washington’s commitment to this ideal is rock solid.”

Conflict began brewing hours before Yiannopoulos’ scheduled talk in Kane

* As of November 2018, 43 percent of UW faculty were women. New faculty hires from 2014-2015 through 2018-2019 averaged 49 percent women. Women accounted for 33 percent of UW professors and 53 percent of assistant professors.



The president met with angry students after a shooting on campus sparked by the appearance of right-wing provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos. *Katherine Long*

Hall. People started lining up in the afternoon. Clashes outside the hall started a couple hours later when anti-fascists and ticket-holders traded “nazi scum” and “white power” shouts.

Despite a large police presence—124 UW and Seattle officers were dispatched to the scene—tension escalated. Bricks were thrown at officers. Paint and pepper-spray doused others. Joshua Dukes, 34, an anti-fascist protester, took a bullet in the abdomen when he confronted a man using pepper spray. A Seattle couple, both 29, pleaded not guilty to assault charges, claiming self-defense. Police had initially suspected Marc Hokoana of the shooting. But his wife Elizabeth’s attorney told prosecutors that she had fired at Dukes with a Glock handgun she had in a holster under her coat. (A King County Superior Court judge declared a mistrial in the case after jurors were deadlocked on a verdict. Prosecutors dismissed the case.)

In the aftermath of the shooting, Cauce was called “complicit,” “collaborator,” and “appeaser.” “This blood is on your hands,” said another message.

She held an impromptu meeting with protesters outside her office in Gerberding Hall. As the protesters, some wearing bandanas over their faces, shouted questions and accusations, Cauce tried to answer. She made it clear Yiannopoulos was “repulsive.” (His talk to a UW audience of about 200 featured insults about women, the disabled, and the left, and repeated use of the “C-word.”) She reminded the crowd that her brother was killed by white supremacists. She took responsibility for Dukes’ serious injury.

Someone shouted that she wouldn’t say she was sorry.

“I am truly sorry,” she replied.

Another shout: “Are you sorry you invited a fascist to campus?”



Cauce is the rare insider who climbed the ranks to president of a major American university. “My background is part of my strength. It’s not something that I’ve overcome,” she says. *University of Washington*

“I didn’t issue the invitation,” Cauce said.

The shouting continued. “You enabled it.” “You invited hate speech.” “You invited violence.”

Noting developments, such as President Trump’s attacks on journalists as “enemy of the people,” one newspaper columnist praised Cauce’s commitment to free speech.

“Here’s a Cuban immigrant whose brother died at the hands of right-wing nut-jobs, and she’s the one standing up for the free-speech rights of right-wing nut jobs,” wrote Danny Westneat of *The Seattle Times*. “Now that’s spine. That’s dedication to founding principles. That’s America—at least as we imagine ourselves to be.”

Two years later, Cauce remained convinced she made the right decision.

“Certainly I, you know, regret deeply whenever anyone on our campus is injured or hurt in any way. And so, I feel deeply, I feel awful about the young individual who was injured,” she says. But there’s a larger perspective to consider. “You know, at this moment in time, free speech seems to be a stand-in for allowing people with very disturbing views a position. But, we know that historically...by and large, free speech has been very empowering to disenfranchised groups. And so, we have to look at the long arc.”

AS WITH THE ANGRY students in American Ethnic Studies, Cauce didn't blame those shouting at her outside Gerberding Hall, or get defensive with them. They weren't mad at *her*. They were mad at the *president*. And she knew as president she had to work with them if she was going to be successful. She couldn't personalize their gripes, sulk or lash out; nor could she generalize their behavior to all students.

As for admirers who wonder how she got to be president—and with a sense of inner peace—her advice is to say 'yes' a lot. Even if you're not sure you can do the job you're asked to take on. "But you say 'yes' and you figure it out as you go along. I think if you're going to wait until you're 100 percent sure, you might be waiting a long time."

Responsibility more than boldness has guided her. And chief among her responsibilities is to make the UW a place of excellence *and* access. About 30 percent of UW students are the first in their families to go to college. Many of those students are growing up in neighborhoods and schools increasingly segregated by income inequality. College is likely the most diverse environment they've experienced. By helping them understand differences in one another, and by helping them graduate, the university becomes an engine for social and economic mobility, a spark plug for empathy and equity.

"For me, it really is all about the work," she says, "not about the position."

She feels a sense of pride that women or immigrants or LGBT folks are inspired by her and think they can reach a position like hers. "But, it really isn't about aiming for the position. It's about the work. And you can do the work from a lot of different positions. And if it brings you here, that's fabulous."

Bob Young
Legacy Washington

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