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Activist and Professor Dean Spade Championing Liberation

McKenna White, News Editor

Dean Spade has been a professor at the Seattle University School of Law for almost 15 years, but his work doesn't end when the teaching day is done. Spade is first and foremost an activist working toward radical social change. His work centers around queer advocacy, but intersects with prison reform, police and border abolition.

"I don't think we can have queer and trans liberation unless we live in a world in which people don't live in cages," Spade said.

Spade grew up in rural central Virginia. While in high school, he participated in protests about his school's policies as well as the war in Iraq. His acute awareness of social problems pushed Spade to deeply explore how change happens within local, national and international politics.

"I was always trying to find out how people made the change and get to the bottom of what those stories were," Spade said.

After graduating high school, Spade attended Barnard University in New York City. There, he dove headfirst into the world of activism. During Spade's time in New York, the laws surrounding welfare and immigration were rapidly changing. Spade, whose parents were immigrants and relied on government assistance, felt called to make a change. The intersection of these issues with the LGBTQ+ community led Spade to question his own beliefs.

"I was really coming to understand how it all fit together and what my feminist politics, my queer and trans identities and my belief in racial and economic justice looked like," Spade said.

It was through this process that Spade began to develop his own ideas on queer acceptance. At the time, the mainstream idea of LGBTQ+ justice was characterized as full assimilation into heteronormative society. However, Spade believed in the need to resist oppressive institutions, not join them.

"We should take a liberation-centered approach that is racial and economic justice-centered," Spade said.

After attending law school at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), Spade went on to support grassroots organizations. In 2002, he founded an organization called the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, which provides free legal help to trans and gender-nonconforming people of color. In 2007, Spade began a teaching fellowship through UCLA and Harvard University. Then, in 2008, he began working at Seattle U.

“It felt like a meaningful thing to take a job at a law school at a university that says it’s dedicated to the well-being of poor people, that says it cares about racism and that says it cares about justice,” Spade said. “I thought it would be a different place from which to have conversations about what is limited about the way legal education is structured.”

Outside of his role as a professor, Spade has been actively working to create change in the community. He has authored two books centered around social movements, “Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics and the Limits of Law” and “Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During this Crisis (and the next).” Spade has been an active participant in many social movements. Consequently, he has personally experienced many of the common internal barriers to change. He found that one of the most tangible, effective ways to foster change is not through court decisions, laws or inspiring speeches but rather through individuals supporting mutual aid projects.

“Most of what people do in social movements is actually supporting each other to survive the existing conditions,” Spade said.

In 2015, Spade directed an hour-long documentary titled “Pinkwashing Exposed.” Pinkwashing is defined by activists as “when countries engaged in terrible human rights violations promote themselves as gay-friendly to improve their public image.” In the film, Spade covered the story of an Israeli Consulate-funded tour that was scheduled to come to Seattle, and the activists who opposed it. LGBTQ+ Israeli citizens were scheduled to come to the region to speak on the Israeli government’s gay-friendly rebranding campaign, all hosted by the City of Seattle’s LGBTQ Commission. Protestors argued that the campaign was just a tool being used to divert attention from Israeli occupation of Palestine. Due in significant part to the work of the activists, the event was canceled.

“Studying how people have fought back and resisted is so relieving when you live under conditions that are so overwhelming,” Spade said. “I get so much energy from learning stories about things people have done historically and elsewhere.”

As budget season arrives in Seattle, Spade is helping to develop the Seattle Solidarity Budget, which proposes centering funding around the needs of the most marginalized and vulnerable Seattle residents and away from police. He is also a part of the No New Washington Prisons group, which is currently working to oppose the expansion of the Western State Hospital. Spade is especially excited about working with Dissenters, a national organization centered on BIPOC students and students who are directly affected by militarism. As a member of the advisory team, Spade is able to coach students through their organizing process.

“It’s really scary to live in these times,” Spade said. “We have to find a sense of possibility.”