

When she came under fire for supporting Kanye West through his antisemitic tirades, **CANDACE OWENS** didn't mind. Triggering people is her business, and business is good. **EMILY JANE FOX** talks to the conservative firebrand about political theater versus deeply held belief

PLAYING FOR KEEPS

FLAMETHROWER
Candace Owens
addresses the crowd
at the 2023
CPAC conference.

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YOU MIGHT THINK it's silly to say that an unpaid intern with six figures of student debt living in one of the most expensive cities in the world has power, until you know that the internship was at *Vogue* in the *Devil Wears Prada* era. Budgets were fat. Everyone was skinny. And that year, among the 20 interns buzzing around the fashion closet, Candace Owens was queen bee.

Yes, that Candace Owens.

"She never took no for an answer," a *Vogue* alum told me. "She was organized and relentless, smarter than everyone—and knows that."

"She was running the show and completely kicking ass," a fellow intern said. "There was not some kind of formal

Yet nobody was surprised to see her at the center of the biggest controversy at Paris Fashion Week last fall. In a picture she posted to Twitter (and which remains to this day), she looks over her shoulder, beaming, next to Kanye West. The two are backstage at his fashion show, sporting matching shirts blaring **WHITE LIVES MATTER**. The spectacle echoed far beyond the fashion world and marked the beginning of West's media spiral during which, among other hateful statements, he praised Hitler. The fallout cost West most of his business, rightfully, and thrust Owens into broad fame as a political flamethrower.

A million and a half people subscribe to Owens's Daily Wire show, which airs as both a podcast and a YouTube video through the conservative media company. For an hour, she holds forth with her scorching own-the-libs views on the news. It's here that she recorded her response to Kanyegate, which led many people to question why she fell short of condemning what was very clearly hate speech. It's where, in the conservative fiefdom, she's become the It girl, enough so that just about everyone, including Owens herself, wonders if she has a future in politics. If you see how her staff stays glued to her as she commands their daily meetings, cracks up at her jokes during taping, how commenters online worship her, how the Republican media powers that be—Sean Hannity, Tucker Carlson—feed off her words, nothing seems far out of reach.

The show tapes at a nondescript warehouse on the outskirts of Nashville,

of sweets—mints and candies and gum. She told me she sees humor in everything. "I was like, well, should I donate?"

THE INTERNET LOVES good and evil, good or evil, and there exists no one more Manichaeian than Owens. For six years and counting, Owens, 34, has been a heat-seeking missile heading straight into the center of every controversial topic, or, better yet, creating a controversy where there wasn't one. She's an unlikely Republican—a millennial who studied journalism and interned at a fashion magazine, and a Black woman in an era when no more than 10 percent of Black voters identify with her party. The second point is particularly relevant, because the present-day Republican Party at best exists among racial tension and, at real, stokes it. When Owens says things that a lot of white Republicans in this country would not dare, they are able to say, "See?"

She appeared on Carlson's show last fall to assert that the two worst things you can be in America today are a Black child in the womb and a straight white man. Around the same time, on her own podcast, she defended herself against people who say that she doesn't understand Black culture. "I have to keep reminding you that I don't want to be a part of this culture," she said. "I want to destroy it. I want to destroy it further than it's already destroyed itself. I want to go backward. Your idea of progressivism is clearly regressive," adding, "This is a new plantation."

In the era of the hot take, hers are the

family's "Never complain, never explain."

I sat down with Owens after she'd taped a show featuring a 10-minute monologue about how shame is a good thing and more people should feel shamed by their bad behavior at airports. I told her that this story is probably the most difficult story I'd ever reported. No one, I told her, wanted to talk to me on the record. Everyone was scared of her. Either they did not want to be associated with having known her or they did not want to risk having her go after them. "And I will," she assured me.

In person, her face knocks you a bit sideways in its symmetry, perfectly made up, with the doe eyes of a Disney princess gone *Killing Eve*. "It's a very good fear to have. I don't take it sitting down and there's a reason for that," she said. "I should be a hero, but they hate me because they can only see Black people as a hero through the vein of victimhood."

Much of her public messaging centers around the notion that the American left has made Black people believe they are victims, which she's called "a mental plague on Black America." Racism will always exist, she says—just not systemically; it doesn't prevent her or anyone else from being able to do something. "The entire Democrat platform is built upon an everlasting stream of victims versus oppressors, and black America is their favored horse," she wrote in her book, *Blackout*, which debuted at number two on the *New York Times* best-seller list. This country does not have a police brutality problem, she has argued, "but we do have a black on black brutality

I inspired a mosque massacre...is the reachiest reach of all reaches!! LOL!"

"I love Candace because her analysis is consistently deep and interesting," Carlson, one of the only people who agreed to speak on the record, told me. "She's not a shallow person, and she's not afraid to see and describe what she considers the bigger picture. That's a rare thing. I can definitely see why people would like her to be quiet, but I hope she keeps talking."

It's not hard to see why people believe that Owens, like Donald Trump and West and even Carlson sometimes, are simply playing characters in our political theater. They are unapologetic and unafraid and keenly aware of how to weaponize talking points to get what they want. Absolute certainty goes viral, and no one is more absolute or certain than Owens. But is it all deeply felt, or is it the performance of a lifetime? "It's such an easy answer," Owens said when I asked her which, smiling and blinking her eyes at me like I was the world's greatest idiot.

OWENS GREW UP in a low-income housing tower on the edge of Stamford, Connecticut, until she was in grade school, when she and her three siblings moved to a middle-class neighborhood with her paternal grandparents. There was a yard to play in, bikes to ride, and a comfortable home. It was Bible study every week, church every Sunday, prayers before every meal. Her grandfather was raised on a sharecropping farm in Fayetteville, North Carolina, during Jim Crow—he'd dodged the bullets of

"The idea that black children who perform well in school are somehow 'acting white' is in and of itself a racist assessment.... It fosters a culture where brighter black students must decide between wanting to be accepted by their race, or performing well in their studies." (Owens lowercases *black* in her book; it is *Vanity Fair*'s style to uppercase.)

In high school, Owens partied and dated and studied. She joined the cheerleading squad and track team, volunteered for Big Brothers Big Sisters, and performed in a poetry slam. She remembers sitting in her bedroom asking God why her family didn't have more money, being angry for being dealt the wrong hand. "I had to have lived through certain things to inform my perspectives," she told me. "Because you're not given more than you can handle, believe it or not."

She was a regular teenager, until she wasn't. In the fall of 2005, according to old news reports, when Owens was in her junior year, she was attacked by three white girls. Per the reports, one of them left a voicemail on her phone, calling her a racial epithet and telling her that she "probably had a disease" because she was Black. Soon after in the school hallway, one of them accused her of having sex with one of their boyfriends and threatened a fight with Owens at cheerleading practice after school. That evening, the girls showed up at a local Blockbuster, where Owens was working at the time. When she saw that the girls who had threatened her earlier were outside waiting for her, she tried to run

Her 2017 video titled "I DON'T CARE ABOUT CHARLOTTESVILLE, THE KKK, OR WHITE SUPREMACY" sent her into the consciousness of right-wing hosts like Jesse Watters and Alex Jones.

hierarchy, but it was very clear that she was running the show. People loved her."

If not her style. People who worked with her said that she would come to work wearing hats with animal ears or "girl boss power suits" with a bra under a blazer. "Very eccentric and not normal," as one person put it. Yet they all described her as one of the best interns ever. Nobody expected her to continue on at the magazine, though. "She was not a fit at *Vogue*," a former higher-up said flatly.

partly in order to fly under the radar of people who might show up to start something if they knew where to go. Every morning she arrives at 9 a.m. in a chauffeured black SUV with her security guard and her assistant, a Tennessee native named Savanna.

"The FBI told me about someone who set up a GoFundMe to kill Candace Owens," she said, laughing, as we pulled up one morning in early March. Her patent stiletto rested against a bag

hottest. She possesses a mechanical understanding of outrage. It works, now more than ever, when gray areas, particularly online, do not exist. Even if you're sure you absolutely deep in your bones disagree with her, you know even deeper that it would exhaust you to debate her. "Candace's mode is always doubling down," one person who works with her told me. "She is a very strong thinker whose motto is 'Never apologize, never back down,'" an inversion, witting or not, of the royal

problem in America." The Black Lives Matter movement, she's said, has meant more destruction of Black lives.

Anywhere a hot button exists, she pushes twice. She is resolute about not vaccinating her children and has called it "mutilation" when trans children suppress puberty. She was named in a manifesto by a white nationalist who cited Owens as his inspiration for killing 51 people at two mosques in New Zealand. In response, Owens tweeted, "The Left pretending

Klansmen. He went north when he was 16, married at 17, and devoted himself to work, faith, and family. When Owens lived with them, there were strict rules, early wake-ups, big expectations.

In school, Owens excelled. In elementary school she joined a program for high achievers. All of the other kids were white. She would get shoved, or teased for not knowing the lyrics to rap songs in the cafeteria. She felt her good grades and rule following were seen as a racial "betrayal."

back inside, but they'd blocked the door. The store manager happened to look out the window at that point. He told police that when he ran outside to help her, Owens was lying on her stomach as the three girls beat her and shouted a racial epithet. One girl ripped out Owens's earring. The confrontation was caught on a security camera. The girls were charged with second-degree breach of peace, second-degree unlawful restraint, conspiracy to commit breach of peace, and



THIRD RAIL

Above: Owens and rapper Kanye West wearing "White Lives Matter" shirts at the Yeezy Paris Fashion Week show last year. Opposite: Owens with her husband, George Farmer—the CEO of Parler, a social media platform for conservatives—in 2019.

conspiracy to commit unlawful restraint and intimidation by bigotry or bias. They were tried as minors, meaning the hearings were closed to the public. The attorney for one chalked the whole thing up to boyfriend issues, not bigotry.

A little more than a year later, Owens was again singled out. Unlike the first incident, this one she wrote about in her book: She was curled up on a couch at her then boyfriend's house one evening when a string of calls came through. She let them go to voicemail. It had been a rough week. She'd gotten in a shouting match with one of her friends, a guy who she says was jealous of her boyfriend. The fight resulted in the young man getting suspended from school. He and four

is dead! Harriet Tubman—that [N-word]? She's dead too! Rosa Parks, that fucking [N-word], she's dead!"

Owens could identify at least one of the voices on the messages; others would take FBI agents weeks to try to decipher. "It is difficult to land upon the correct adjectives to convey exactly what I felt when the messages had concluded, except to say that my reaction was physical," she wrote in her book. "It was like having the wind knocked out of my chest—an unexpected force stealing my oxygen immediately...I ache for high school Candace, alone and crying, unaware of what the next morning would bring."

Once the mayor's son was identified, local media descended. The story was

against the Stamford Board of Education and the case was settled for \$37,500. (His counsel? Norm Pattis, Alex Jones's lawyer who inadvertently put incriminating documents in the hands of opposing counsel.) "I was labeled, officially, as the victim," Owens wrote.

With years of distance, her perspective has shifted. She told me that her friend wasn't racist; he was a hurt person trying to hurt a person. It had been the media's analysis that destroyed lives. When I told her that the friend had since changed his last name, she looked surprised.

I asked her how she squares the fact that she was the victim of heinous racial attacks and now broadcasts that there is no such thing as systemic racism. "It's not about whether or not you are a victim because I can guarantee you are. That's the easy part. But how do you get over these things? How can you use your experiences and recognize that they're not permanent? You're not locked into being a victim forever," she said. "I always come out stronger."

OWENS'S PATH TOWARD conservatism started with the pursuit of a journalism degree. But she dropped out of the University of Rhode Island her junior year—an issue with her student loans, she's said. That's when she interned at *Vogue*. In 2012, she took a job as an assistant in private equity to pay down the loans, then saved enough money to quit and practice yoga. None of her friends from back then remember her being particularly political, though everyone generally assumed she was liberal. She



comfortable admitting. And by 'more times than I'm comfortable admitting,' I mean 6,214½ times"; why was everyone obsessed with anal sex? ("I'm not a backdoor banger"). She lauded West, who, at the time, she adored as a fan but definitely did not know: "Yes, I am aware this is going to come off as arrogant, I feel that I am the female Kanye West." She

world are doing everything in their power to correct the time warp, but like, COME ON!!" The only semblance between Owens then and Owens now seems to be her sense of conviction. According to one person who worked with her back then, "It was working at the time, and it was clear she was going somewhere with it."

In the spring of 2016, the women of

internet term for posting someone's identifying information online, which tends to lead to harassment both on the internet and in real life. Owens, at the time, had never even heard of doxing. The day that the Kickstarter went live, Zöe Quinn, a key target of the sexist internet hate campaign Gamergate, called Owens to ask her to shut down Social Autopsy.

*She felt **MOST OF THE CRITICISM** was coming from people with **AN AXE TO GRIND**—Meghan McCain, for one, who Owens says "hates my guts" after they feuded over COVID vaccines.*

others, including a son of then Stamford mayor Dannel Malloy (later governor of Connecticut), prank called Owens. In the messages, people called Owens a racial epithet. "I'm gonna kill you, you know? Just because you're fucking poor. And you're black. Okay?" one message said. "You better not be fucking there, 'cus you might get a bullet in the back on your head. You big whore. You fucking whore... Martin Luther King had a dream. Look at that [N-word], he's dead. That [N-word]

splashed across the front page of every local newspaper and at the top of nightly news broadcasts, Owens's image flashed again and again. Everyone picked a side, she wrote, and many people thought she was lying.

The NAACP called for every boy on the tape to be arrested. After some of the callers were arrested (records are sealed), Owens returned to school with two security guards. On his daughter's behalf, Owens's father filed a federal lawsuit

came up with the idea for Degree180, a female-centric blog with the tagline "A blog for millennials, by millennials (No clickbait or listicles ever. We promise)."

Owens served as both the boss and a content creator, writing dozens of exceptionally personal posts in the platform's run. She had range: four reasons why dating an older man was the best decision she ever made; why stay-at-home moms are "batshit crazy"; on faking orgasms ("I've faked it a lot, more times than I'm

warned the GOP was headed for a "tea-party coffin [to be sealed] because the 'gay-transgendered-bi-straight-anything-else' conversation will be instantly over, deleted done," and she "actually [finds] it creepy that you have cared so much and for so long about somebody else's sex life"; and that reproductive organs and issues will no longer be a topic of presidential debate: "It was recently confirmed that the republicans are actually stuck in the 1950's, and the leading scientists of the

Degree180 had a new idea. They launched a \$75,000 Kickstarter campaign for a website called Social Autopsy. The idea was to let social media users take screenshots of posts that they found offensive or harmful and put them into a database that users could search by name. "Wave goodbye to cyberbullies and trolls," announced a Social Autopsy video in which Owens said that her team had compiled thousands of profiles. Immediately, the idea was derided as a breeding ground for doxing—the

At the same time, trolls began to dox Owens, posting her address and identifying her family members, and sending her threatening, racist emails and texts. With little more than a hunch, Owens erroneously accused Quinn of being behind the hate campaign. Jesse Singal, in a story about the debacle for *New York* magazine, painted Owens as a naive, conspiracy-minded young person who didn't understand the internet. The only news outlet



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 77 that framed Owens favorably was Breitbart. The only prominent people who offered Owens support were alt-right heroes like Mike Cernovich and Milo Yiannopoulos.

That was the red-pill of Candace Owens. She started listening to Ann Coulter and Larry Elder. She read Thomas Sowell and Milton Friedman. She watched Fox News for the first time. She searched “black conservatives” on YouTube. “I became a conservative overnight,” she said in an interview with conservative talk show host Dave Rubin at the time. “I realized that liberals were actually the racists.” By August 2016, when Trump stood onstage at a Michigan rally asking Black Americans, “What the hell do you have to lose” by voting for him because “you’re living in poverty; your schools are no good. You have no jobs; 58 percent of your youth is unemployed,” Owens was hooked. “This moment—Trump’s single question—forever altered me,” she wrote in her book. That Trump’s campaign flouted the media—a group Owens blamed both for what happened to her in high school and again with Social Autopsy—was the Reagan-red cherry on top.

At that point, YouTube was a cash cow for young conservatives with strong points of view. She teamed up with other Black conservatives and began posting under the name RedPillBlack. In her first video, posted in 2017, Owens acted in a sketch in which she came out to her parents: “Mom, Dad...I’m a conservative.” Within a few months, she was on the right-wing speaking circuit.

When Owens took the stage at an event in Palm Beach, Florida, Charlie Kirk, the cofounder of Turning Point USA, could not take his eyes off her. He hired her on the spot. For two years, Owens and Kirk traveled the country together as she grew her social media following and created more YouTube content. It was her August 2017 video titled “I Don’t Care

About Charlottesville, the KKK, or White Supremacy” that sent her into internet virality and into the consciousness of right-wing hosts like Jesse Watters and Alex Jones. She became a regular on Fox News and a Twitter warrior unafraid to go after anyone or any topic, from Tomi Lahren to #MeToo, Ben Shapiro to Kim Kardashian. (West, who at the time was married to Kardashian, tweeted that he loved the way Owens thought.) In 2018, she traveled to Washington, DC, where she met with Trump about prison reform. The president tweeted that she was having “a big impact on politics” and represented a group of “very smart ‘thinkers.’” She founded Blexit, a movement dedicated to driving minority support away from the Democratic Party. The idea, she’s said, was born out of a chance meeting with Nigel Farage, the man who spearheaded Brexit. Owens was introduced to another Brit that year, George Farmer, now CEO of Parler, the alt-right conspiracy theory breeding ground slash social media platform. Seventeen days after they met, he proposed to Owens over FaceTime. Eight months later they got married, at the Trump Winery in Virginia.

On Blexit’s public debut in 2018, Owens told Page Six that her “dear friend and fellow superhero” West had designed the organization’s logo, which said, “We Free.” Three days later, West denied any involvement with the design or with politics in general. The next day, Owens tweeted a statement that blamed the press for “trying to use Kanye’s name to create drama and further divisiveness which is wrong,” clarifying that he merely introduced her to a designer. “The insinuation that Kanye is now the author of my political movement is pointedly wrong and dishonest,” her note read. “Let’s not politicize love.”

ONE MORNING LAST October, Owens’s phone lit up with an urgent message from West. A few weeks earlier, Owens had gone after his ex-wife, Kardashian, calling her “a prostitute” and “a body without a soul,” and referring to her mother, Kris Jenner, as “a pimp.” West had been publicly feuding with Kardashian too while privately locked in custody debates. Maybe he was texting her about that.

He wasn’t, it turned out. The details were nebulous, but he needed her to be at Paris Fashion Week. Like, tomorrow. She didn’t know if he wanted her there as a member of the audience or as a participant.

It had been 11 years since West debuted his first collection in France, and in the intervening years, he had never failed to cause a stir. Whether a show would actually happen, where it was going to be, whether he could even find a PR agency to represent him, was unclear. Owens agreed to get on a plane. He was a big part of her story, she explained in a later interview. He had given her the courage to speak out about who she is. Plus, they had business to attend to.

She happened to be three months postpartum with her second child and going through it. Her Daily Wire show had just switched to filming five days a week. Her infant daughter had already been on 10 flights so that Owens could continue to breastfeed. Paris would be her first time away. “So it was a lot,” she told me. “Nobody thinks about that stuff and it’s not a complaint. This is the business I’m in. They see you as a character.”

West wrangled Anna Wintour and Naomi Campbell, John Galliano, LVMH scion Alex Arnault. The crowd waited in an empty office tower just down the road from the Arc de Triomphe for the show to begin. Backstage, West was armed with two shirts—a black one and a white one, neither of which Owens had seen before. On the front was an image of Pope John Paul II and the words “Seguiremos tu ejemplo,” or “We will follow your example.” On the back, in block, all capitalized letters was the phrase “White Lives Matter,” which the Anti-Defamation League has called hate speech and attributed to white nationalists, who began using it in 2015 in response to the Black Lives Matter movement. Instantly, Owens said in interviews and on her podcast, she understood what West was trying to express. She said that they wanted to call out the media hypocrisy and the fallacies of the BLM movement. “If Black lives mattered,” she said, “things that I’ve been talking about throughout my entire political career,” from (in her view) obesity to crime to family structures to educational deficiencies, “would be getting attention, not the T-shirt.”

At a party the night before the show, a stylist who worked with West was going around showing photos of the shirts to a handful of fashion insiders, according to two people familiar with the situation, remarking on how incredible they were. Everyone else, these people said, universally agreed that they were offensive. West had been undeterred and wore one to address the crowd: “Everyone here knows

that I am the leader,” he declared. “This is an unmanageable situation.”

That became increasingly clear, in the moments and hours to come. Jaden Smith walked out of the show, as did some editors and writers. “Indefensible behavior,” Gabriella Karefa-Johnson, *Vogue*’s global fashion editor at large, posted on Instagram. (West viciously, publicly attacked her in response.) British *Vogue*’s Edward Enninful called the shirt “insensitive” and “inappropriate.” West and Owens soaked up the outrage over omelets at the George V.

Owens and West had other business, though: Parler, the company her husband ran. The platform is well known for harboring right-wing extremism, disinformation, and antisemitism. It was one of the few platforms that welcomed Trump after Twitter banned him, the place where insurrectionists allegedly organized January 6. In early 2021, well before Paris Fashion Week, Apple and Google took Parler off their app stores, claiming that Parler had broken their terms of service by failing to have an adequate content moderation system in place. It had struggled to build an audience and even lagged behind Trump’s Truth Social, widely considered a business failure. According to analytics from Similarweb, Parler saw just over 1.2 million visits a month for the past 18 before Owens’s Paris trip. Still, in Paris after the show, Owens and West discussed the possibility of West buying it. Things went sideways from there.

For Owens, it started in the airport. It was 4:30 in the morning. She wanted to get home to her babies. She was carting a case of pumped milk when she was stopped by airport security. The guards told her that she would have to speak to international police, to which she said, Take me to your boss. Take me to your boss’s boss. “This was very clearly my hill to die on,” she told me, laughing as she mimed holding her fist in the air, a martyr with her milk. She argued with everyone she needed to. They let her through.

Outrage over the T-shirts had barely died down when West started a spree of public antisemitism. Days after the fashion show, Fox aired an interview between West and Carlson in which West accused Jared Kushner of orchestrating Middle East peace treaties in order to “make money.” He also made comments about Kushner’s brother, Josh, owning a greater percentage of Kardashian’s Skims shapewear than West did. Days after that, Vice News published outtakes of Carlson’s interview in which West

said that Jews control finance, an age-old antisemitic conspiracy. West doubled down on social media. The public condemnation was swift, and his posts were deleted. Fellow celebrities denounced his remarks. The Anti-Defamation League started tracking his statements. LA’s Holocaust Museum invited him to visit. Elon Musk tweeted that he’d expressed concerns directly to West. On October 9, West tweeted, “I’m a bit sleepy tonight but when I wake up I’m going death con 3 On JEWISH PEOPLE The funny thing is I actually can’t be Anti Semitic because black people are actually Jew also.” Twitter and Instagram suspended him.

Within days, Owens recorded a podcast announcing that the whole affair had ruined her Saturday. “I was having a great weekend until my phone exploded with text messages,” she said. “Everybody asking the same question, ‘Is Kanye West antisemitic?’” People had once accused her of being antisemitic, she pointed out—even though, she said, she had almost married a Jewish man before meeting her husband. She worked for Jewish bosses and had lots of Jewish friends.

Years earlier, she had spoken on a panel in the UK, and someone in the audience asked her if we should embrace the word *nationalism*. She responded by saying that *nationalist* had become a dirty word because “whenever we say ‘nationalism,’ the first thing people think about, at least in America, is Hitler.”

“If Hitler just wanted to make Germany great and have things run well,” she elaborated, “okay, fine,” adding that he went beyond Germany, which made him, by her estimation, a globalist. Democrats played the clip at a 2019 congressional hearing on white nationalism for which Owens was called to testify. She claimed then that her words were taken out of context. In a recent podcast, she further explained:

“If you are an honest person, you did not think this tweet was antisemitic. You did not think that he wrote this tweet because he hates or wants to genocide Jewish people.” She asked that people “be smarter” and “stop calling people names, it’s a toddler game.”

The Daily Wire had hired Owens in 2020 in an effort to bring on diverse conservative talent, which is a small pool. Ben Shapiro, an Orthodox Jew, cofounded the site, and its audience is filled with pro-Israel Jewish conservatives, many of whom passionately condemned West’s

words. Executives urged Owens to come down harder on West, according to people familiar with the conversations.

The Greatest Lie Ever Sold, Owens's documentary in which she depicts the BLM movement as corrupt and George Floyd as an addict whose death was the result of an overdose, was about to debut. The Daily Wire had funded the project. They were putting on the premiere. And they did not want the cloud of West hanging over it. When Owens insisted that West attend, executives asked her to please uninvite him. Shapiro did no promotion for the documentary on his widely popular podcast on the network, which several people in their orbit noticed.

Not only did West show up to the premiere, he did so wearing a "2024" hat, perhaps hinting at his own presidential run, in which perhaps Owens would be his running mate. Days after the premiere, Parler's parent company announced that West would buy the social media network for an undisclosed amount. In an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, Farmer, Owens's husband, credited his wife for brokering the deal.

"It all felt really icky," one prominent journalist told me. "I don't know how it could seem like anything other than ick."

Owens touched on West in several more episodes of her podcast but never condemned him or his words. She talked about how important certain Jewish people are in her life—including her former boss, conservative radio host Dennis Prager, and his CEO, Marissa Streit, whom Owens referred to as a "sister."

Shapiro was asked at an event at Texas A&M University about West's behavior and his relationship with Owens. "Candace is great, but she initially gave a response that I thought was pretty wrong, both morally and sort of logically," he told the audience. "If she had said what Kanye had said she wouldn't be working at the Daily Wire. She did not say what Kanye said. Instead, she defended her friend initially in a way that I didn't like. But that is not a fireable offense. Nor do I even have the power of firing at the Daily Wire."

The colleagues tussled again on Twitter when Owens retweeted a known anti-Zionist who was criticizing the Anti-Defamation League. Shapiro called her out, saying that she was "[making] the conversation significantly worse," and,

"It's garbage." Owens replied a few hours later, saying that she didn't know who the person was whom she was quoting, but that Shapiro could have reached out to her privately. "Real relationships," she wrote, "should trump Twitter theatre. Let's set a better example going forward."

Owens told me that part of the reason she stayed silent was that she did not feel like it was her place to condemn her friend publicly. Another, she said, was an allergy to what she called "black square culture," referring to the black squares on people posted as a way to show allyship during the BLM marches in 2020. She said she felt most of the criticism against her was coming from people with an axe to grind—former Daily Wire employees, people she'd tussled with on the internet—hoping that this would be the moment to get her. Meghan McCain, for one, who Owens says "hates my guts" after they feuded over her Trump interview about COVID-19 vaccines. "I actually may have outwardly said she was fat, I don't remember," Owens said. "But the point is that she held on to that anger and then tried to convert it into pretending that she cared about Jewish people. That's filth.... She didn't care about a Jewish person. And that's actually, in my opinion, more despicable. Using something that might mean something to a Jewish person who is genuinely scared or terrified, and you're pretending to care about this issue because you just hate Candace Owens. It's like you don't care. It's just, 'I want to see Candace Owens fall.'" (McCain did not respond to a request for comment.)

I told Owens that there are Jewish people like myself who were terrified to see banners placed on freeways in major cities saying that West was right to call for Jewish death, or white nationalists online who saw his words as a rallying cry. Knowing how influential her platform is, I asked her, wasn't there a reason to say something to those people?

"I'm sure. I think in every scenario that I've ever been in, there have been people that I thought that I could have said something more," she said. "There's always something more, something better that can be said. You're never going to hit pitch perfect, especially with something so delicate trying to weave through a friendship, a career, a new mom. And there's no way that I handled that situation perfectly, but I handled the situation in a way where I felt that I could lay my head on the pillow at night and not feel that I had wronged anybody."

She says the events strengthened her relationship with the Daily Wire. Company leaders believed that her words were not fireable, according to people familiar. They also felt that taking such action would fuel the stereotype. "It was an impossible situation," one person familiar said. "And then, like everything online, it kind of just went away."

BY THE TIME Owens wraps at eleven o'clock in the morning, she's had a full day. Up at four, she and her husband pray, read scripture, and meditate before she works out at her home gym. She spends an early morning hour with her kids before hair and makeup arrive at 7:45, then her driver and security guard whisk her off to be at the studio for a nine o'clock meeting with her team: seven or so producers who hail from MTV's *Catfish* or the Hallmark Channel. One was a contestant on *The Great American Baking Show*. On the morning I sat in for the taping of the show, the crew drank her in—from a Britney Spears impression to poking fun at someone she deemed "not a looker."

After taking an afternoon walk, she cooks her family dinner. People always want to talk to her about politics, she said, but she really just wants to talk about cooking—how she goes to the grocery store every Sunday to plan for the week, which mainly looks like chicken on Mondays, and pasta on Fridays since her husband is Catholic, with a Mexican night somewhere in there. She calls herself "OCD organized" and says she gets "a high from organizing" her pantry with a label maker. She asked me if I've ever heard of a phrase her cousin just told her about. "Do you know what a trad wife is?" I do, and if you don't, it's a sort of June Cleaver-ing of Gen Z women on TikTok.

"God, how unhip am I? Yeah. I'm a trad wife. Put that in there," she instructs me, "and tell them I came up with it. I'm really traditional. I believe the men lead." She likes that there's traffic in town on Sundays because everyone's going to church. She likes that it's a place where people work with their hands. She likes that everyone in Nashville says hello to you, unlike when she lived in New York. That it's a place where people are kind. That's the one thing she thinks people most often misunderstand about her, she said. "I take my work very seriously and I'm very kind to people, and I wish that if I could wish something into the narrative, it would be that people

knew how kind I was," she said. "Put that in there," instructing me again. "The media's been very successful at hardening me."

I asked her about her role in creating this character that people view as hard, and how that character has created so much of the divisiveness that dictates the political climate. "I square it honestly," she said, "which is to say a lot of people will sell you this mushy narrative that they want the left and the right to come together and hold hands and skip into the sunset. I want to win. There's no middle ground to me when it comes to transgenderism and kids taking hormone blockers. ['Transgenderism is a mental illness,' she tweeted in March. 'Keep your children away from transgendered individuals and their parents.'] No, I want to win. There's no middle ground for me. When we talk about transforming language to refer to pedophiles as 'minor-attracted people.' [Owens was perhaps referring to the Old Dominion professor who said that pedophiles should be called 'minor-attracted persons.' They resigned.] No, no, I want to win. These are things that matter deeply. And so if I can knock sense into someone and bring them over to that side, great. Are there other areas where we could have a middle ground agreement on? Yeah, probably. But the stuff that really matters, no. I'm playing for keeps."

This seems to have won over folks in Nashville. Is she a celebrity in town? "I hate that word. It makes me want to die," she said, then, barely taking a beat: "I would say definitely. Yes." Everyone's been receptive and kind to her face in public, mostly, except for someone in the airport when she was wearing a MAGA hat. The woman told her the hat offended her. "I said, 'I want to let you know that I literally do not care. Literally not one bit, and you should find your seat.' I mean, how selfish," she said before continuing. "I actually once ran into Kamala Harris at the airport, she's very nice." Owens approached the vice president, who

was then campaigning. "I can't stop myself. I told her I wasn't going to vote for her, and she was like, 'Yeah, okay. I understand.' It was a very nice conversation."

It doesn't always go so well. Earlier this year, Owens's husband reached out to the interior designer David Netto after the couple saw his work in one of their friends' homes in Nashville. Farmer filled out the contact form on Netto's website. "My husband wrote the most polite email because he's always polite, he's very English," Owens told me. "We didn't know if we could afford a designer or anything."

Netto responded, "Dear George, thank you for your inquiry. I'd rather get beat in the ass with a wooden plank than ever go near either of you. Kind regards, David."

Owens said the response floored her. "If a white conservative male had written that email to an outspoken Black liberal, he would've lost everything," she said. "They would've said it was like Jim Crow." Reached for comment, Netto pointed out that he'd only addressed Farmer, a white man like himself, and said "It's not a race thing, it's a terrorism/amorality thing."

"After January 6, the joke's over. People like this should expect to be recognized as complicit with something very dangerous—and I don't mean Kanye—and expect to be told off in polite society," Netto emailed *Vanity Fair*. "Without Parler the Proud Boys couldn't talk to each other, so that's enough for me," he said, adding, "They'll find somebody to do their house, and I'm sure it will be beautiful."

IF ALL OF this sounds like Owens is gearing up for a political run, it's because she herself has floated it. "A lot of people see me running for office, and I've learned to never say never," she said. "You might have spoken to me seven years ago and told me that I was going to vote for Trump, be working for the Daily Wire, I would've told you to go easy on the drugs. And so

I follow the perspective that we have our plans and God laughs."

On a Trump redux, she says only, "I'd like to see who's running in 2024. That's one of the things that people have just very wrong about me—that I'm this ride or die. You don't even know who's running, who's going to be the best candidate, who has the best vision. I really very much disagreed with him about the vaccines. I was strongly against lockdowns. I say those things, but nobody hears them because they need to create the caricature of Candace Owens who never disagrees and is part of the Trump cult." (She added that she knows that she won't support Nikki Haley.)

She's not interested at this moment, though. She's launching a new show for the Daily Wire called *A Shot in the Dark*, geared toward moms, disseminating what she calls the truth and many call disinformation on the sorts of issues she says she wished she'd had more information on as a new mom—things like vaccines and household chemicals. She wants to launch a nontoxic makeup label. She plans on having four kids.

As with Trump, or West, it's hard to know whether she believes the things she says or simply believes in herself. Every person I asked for this story agreed it was the latter. "Truly charismatic people," one person close to her told me, "are able to talk themselves into anything. Outsized talents can do that, and Owens, she is an outsized talent."

Owens, when I posed it to her, looked bewildered. "I garnered my audience by saying what I believe," she responded. "I didn't have an audience [until] I said what I believed." She said she wished she could be fake—imagine how famous she could have been, she said. These battles she's fighting, she said, they don't make her popular. "They're not nothing. And I think some people think that. But we're not actually caricatures," she said. "We're actually saying what we believe." ■

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