



CALIFORNIA

# Six years, a trial, and a firing. But no end to a professor's sexual harassment fight



Sabrena Turner-Odom, a longtime faculty member at Los Angeles Southwest College, has been in a years-long battle over allegations that top administrator Howard Irvin sexually harassed her. (Jason Armond / Los Angeles Times)

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Sabrena Turner-Odom had settled comfortably into the rhythms of campus life at Los

Angeles Southwest College. The English professor and tutoring director found it rewarding to guide students who reminded her of friends from her younger years — some who didn't see college as a fit, others who were lost to street violence.

“What I tell my students is: Education is the fight of your life, because it will change your life,” she said.

But the sense of fulfillment she built over two decades splintered in February 2017, when Turner-Odom started reporting to Howard Irvin, the college's then-vice president of student services and a former Los Angeles Police Department sergeant. During their frequent meetings at a circular glass table in Irvin's office, he would abruptly shift the conversation from work to her appearance, she testified in a civil court case she brought against Southwest College and Irvin.

He would say she looked “very sexy today” and “I would love to see what your body looked like naked,” she said in her testimony. Irvin stared at her body, scanning it from head to toe; stroked his genitals over his pants in her presence; and followed her across campus back to her office after meetings, whispering that he “would like to see [her] with no clothes on,” she also said in court.

And when Turner-Odom tried to fend off the comments, she testified, Irvin would respond, “I'm just a man,' and 'I'm no good.'”

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Last October, the two met on opposing sides of a civil courtroom, where troubling

chapters of Irvin's past emerged during a trial to determine whether the Los Angeles Community College District had failed to investigate and prevent the sexual harassment of Turner-Odom, and whether it was negligent in its hiring and supervision of Irvin.

The accounts of their time working at Southwest College and Irvin's career history were recorded in trial transcripts, court documents and interviews with Turner-Odom, her attorneys and college officials.

Irvin did not respond to multiple requests for comment through online messages, phone calls and texts.

The case provides a rare and detailed look into how one woman — determined to seek justice against an accused harasser — encountered years of investigations and questioning before ultimately having her day in court.

During the trial, the L.A. Community College District — the largest in California — asserted that Turner-Odom's allegations against one of its top administrators could not be proved; the district is still battling the case, which has roiled the struggling community college in South Los Angeles.

"I chose to work at that school. I grew up a quarter of a mile from that school," Turner-Odom said in an interview with The Times. "And I love that community. It's where I came to be, and I was not willing to let him take that from me."

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Howard Irvin's path to becoming a college leader was highly unconventional, marked by a troubling chapter.

He served as a Los Angeles police officer for 13 years beginning in 1985. Early

assignments sent Irvin undercover to target drug deals, prostitution and bookmaking, he said, and he eventually rose to sergeant, where he had a hand in some of the highest-profile cases of the 1990s.

While working undercover, he purchased a weapon used by the serial killer known as the Grim Sleeper — a piece of evidence that Irvin said helped identify the killer. And he said he was among the officers who responded to the police call at O.J. Simpson's house after the killing of Simpson's ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend Ron Goldman.

During his police career, though, he himself was charged with multiple crimes that were reported [by The Times in 1997](#) and became public again 25 years later in court.

In March 1997, Irvin was charged with stalking and making terrorist threats against an ex-girlfriend, both felonies, according to Orange County Superior Court records. The charges stemmed from months of unwanted contact with the woman — also an LAPD officer — after their relationship ended.

In June 1997, he pleaded guilty to the felony charges and to two misdemeanors for violating an emergency protective order the woman had obtained a year earlier.

As part of his plea agreement, Irvin admitted that he had “threatened to commit a crime resulting in death and great bodily injury” with the intent of causing his ex-girlfriend “sustained fear.”

He was sentenced to three years of probation. The Orange County court agreed it would reduce the felony charges to misdemeanors if Irvin did not violate the terms of his probation.

The Times reported in October 1997 that he was under suspension from the department.

Irvin was the subject of at least three internal LAPD domestic violence investigations during his time with the agency, according to [the Los Angeles Times article](#), which was included in the lawsuit and became part of trial testimony.

Odom told the jury she grew more fearful of Irvin after she read the article, which she found slid under her college office door with the message “watch out” written on it. In part, the article described an instance in 1992 in which a woman alleged that Irvin had fractured her neck. Irvin denied the charge in court. He testified that he was suspended for 22 weeks as the result of one of the internal investigations.

The LAPD declined to release the outcome of the internal investigations. Irvin resigned in June 1998, according to a department spokesperson.

The stalking and terrorist threat charges were reduced to misdemeanors in November 1998.

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After he left the police force, Irvin worked part time for three years at a counseling center, leading domestic violence prevention workshops for participants under court order to attend. He also found work as a counselor and adjunct instructor at several community college campuses in Southern California.

With career prospects limited by his earlier legal troubles, Irvin petitioned the Orange County Superior Court in August 2001 to withdraw his guilty plea under [a California law](#) that allows courts to dismiss misdemeanor charges after a person completes probation.

In a letter to the court, Irvin said he was requesting the expungement to “obtain a full-time tenured faculty position” that would help him provide for his family. He said he lived a “crime free life,” and was a devoted husband and father. The court granted

Irvin's dismissal request.

With a record clear of convictions, Irvin got a second chance to rebuild a public service career, this time in education. Years later, he earned a doctorate in human and organizational systems.

In 2015, the position of vice president of student services opened at Southwest College — a post that included responsibility for making “students and their needs a primary focus of action,” according to the job description. By then, his resume included several high-level administrator positions, including dean of matriculation and student development at San Diego Miramar College.

Irvin said in court that he felt personally connected to Southwest. As a young adult, he had spent some summers at his aunt's home nearby.

“I could do something for the community,” he said during the trial. “Because it was my community.”

Alberto Román, the district's former vice chancellor of human resources, was questioned during the trial about how Irvin secured the position at Southwest despite his past.

Román testified that he had reviewed Irvin's background check from the California Department of Justice showing the misdemeanors in the Orange County case. He said he didn't consider the convictions during Irvin's application process, because they'd happened years ago and been dismissed.

“Where we see conviction reports that have felonies or misdemeanors that have been dismissed by the court or expunged, we have been advised over the years not to consider those for purposes of rejecting candidates for employment,” Román said, adding that the instructions were “counsel's advice.”



Los Angeles Southwest College was founded after the Watts riots with a focus on educating Black students in the neighborhood. (Jason Armond / Los Angeles Times)

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**At Southwest College, Irvin was responsible for overseeing the budget and staffing for one of Turner-Odom’s big campus projects, an initiative to help students who are parents succeed in school.**

**The project was a natural extension of Turner-Odom’s work at Southwest, where she had expanded the tutoring program. She believed deeply in the mission of the college, which was founded in the aftermath of the Watts riots to educate Black students in the neighborhood. The student body is now more than half Latino and about 30% Black.**

**Turner-Odom had graduated from the school in 1996, and she said in court: “I**

wanted to fill some of the gaps that I experienced when I was a student there. ... That was my college. That was my home.”

When she and Irvin attended a Bay Area conference in February 2017, she testified, he asked invasive questions about her personal life. Uncomfortable, she asked a friend to accompany her to a dinner with Irvin so she wouldn't have to be alone with him.

But back at Southwest, they started meeting regularly to discuss the initiative for student parents, Turner-Odom said in an interview.

During weekly private meetings in 2017, Turner-Odom testified, Irvin made lewd gestures and comments, including saying that she “had never had a man like him before.” He told her they could “travel the world and the district would pay for it,” she said in court.

During multiple meetings, Turner-Odom testified, she saw him “squirm in his chair and rub his genitals and just make motions that he was trying to please himself as he was speaking.”

She feared showing up to work and stopped teaching a night class in African American literature, worried Irvin might follow her to her car. She started sleeping with a baseball bat by her bed. She considered buying a gun. And the more she rejected him, the more insistent he became, she testified.

“I was very clear and direct that I did not want a sexual relationship,” she said during the trial. “It was almost like he was trying to convince me.”

She verbally reported the harassment to then-interim Southwest College President Denise Noldon in November 2017. Noldon said she would “do what she could,” Turner-Odom said in court.



Noldon denied during the trial that Turner-Odom had reported such harassment to her during their meetings.

In December 2017 — about 10 months after Turner-Odom alleged the harassment began — she filed a formal complaint with the district’s Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, which is responsible for district compliance with Title IX, the federal law that bars discrimination on the basis of sex at institutions that receive federal money.

In the complaint, which was introduced as evidence in court, Turner-Odom said Irvin had retaliated against her for rejecting his sexual advances by firing two longtime student workers in the tutoring center. She also said Irvin offered to appoint her to administrative positions in exchange for sexual favors, which she refused.

Four days after she filed her complaint, a compliance officer responsible for investigating it requested more written information.

Turner-Odom responded by sharing the names of four women — including two students — who she alleged had also dealt with harassment from Irvin. And she identified campus employees who she said had “direct information” about her allegations against him.

In her complaint, she said the harassment had caused her severe nausea, anxiety and bouts of depression.

“His offerings of career advancement ... made me feel cheap, worthless and fearful of his retaliation,” she said in the complaint.

In February 2018, Turner-Odom met in person for two hours with the college compliance officer, Muriel Alford. In an interview, Turner-Odom said she felt uneasy when Alford asked why she hadn’t complained about the harassment sooner.

Turner-Odom received a letter from the Community College District that June notifying her of Alford's findings: There was no evidence to substantiate her allegations.

In the letter, included in court documents, the district's interim Deputy Chancellor Kathleen F. Burke wrote that Alford had been unable to reach several of the witnesses Turner-Odom had listed in the grievance, and that others had said they "were not direct witnesses to inappropriate conduct" by Irvin.

The district said the two student employees it fired had worked on the campus longer than is allowed for students.

Having run out of options with the district, Turner-Odom decided to sue. In the civil lawsuit filed in October 2018, she accused Irvin of sexual harassment and retaliation, and alleged the Los Angeles Community College District had failed to prevent the harassment.

Juliet Hidalgo, a spokesperson for the nine-campus district that operates Southwest College, declined to answer specific questions about Turner-Odom's lawsuit due to pending litigation. But she said the district thoroughly investigates sexual harassment complaints.

"Any allegations like this, we take it really seriously. We want to make sure that our district is a safe space for everyone to work," she said. "We do not tolerate any sort of retaliation or anything like that."

Irvin and Turner-Odom both continued to work at Southwest until December 2021, when Irvin was transferred to serve as acting vice president of student services at Los Angeles Trade-Technical College. Citing two pending lawsuits against Irvin, the Trade-Tech faculty union protested his transfer in a letter to Chancellor Francisco Rodriguez and the Board of Trustees.

The protests did not prevent Irvin's move.

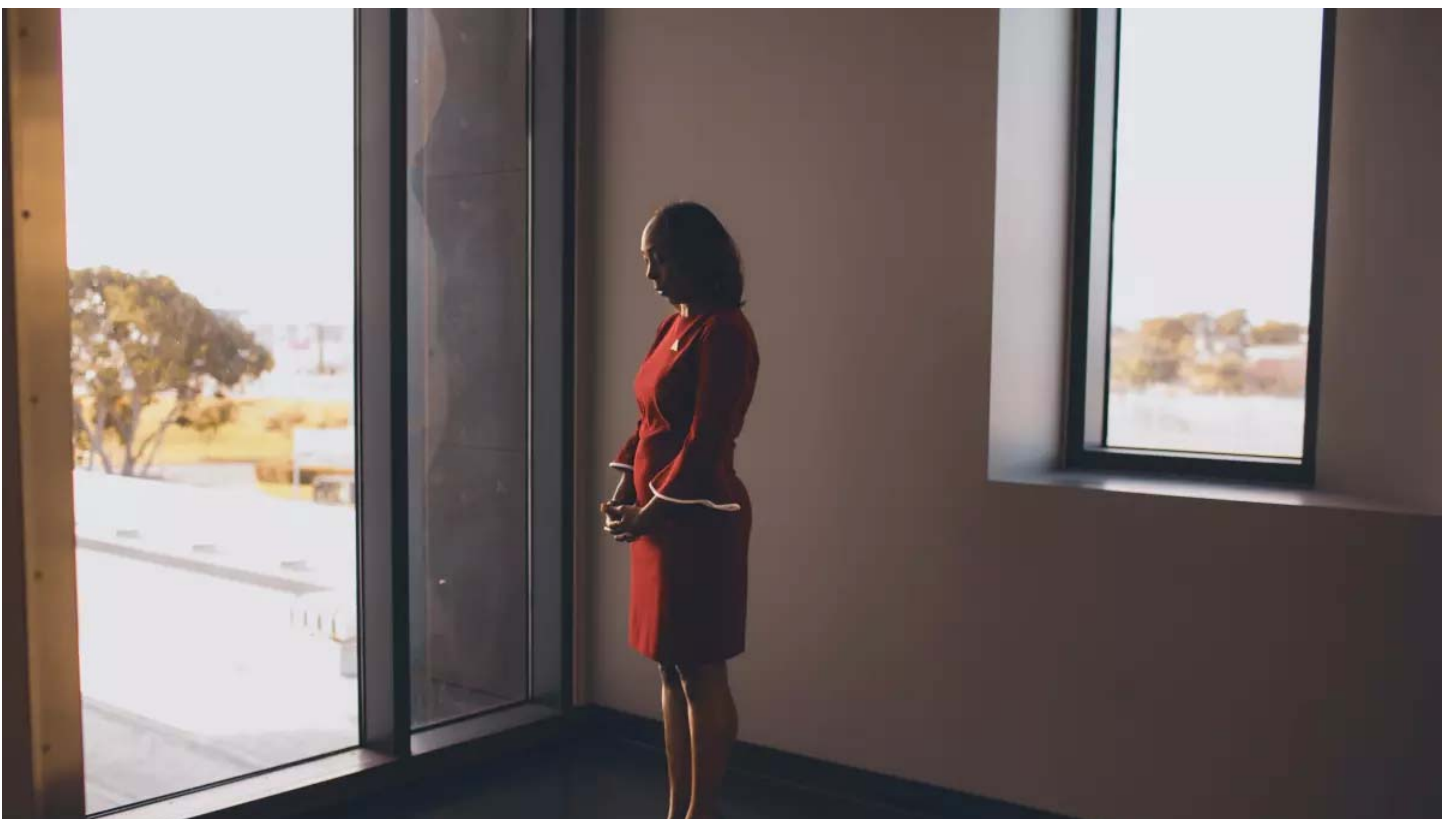
Turner-Odom was not alone in complaining about Irvin. Three additional civil lawsuits against the district involving Irvin are pending.

One, filed by Daniel Ortega, a faculty member in the counseling department, alleges that Irvin harassed, retaliated and racially discriminated against him.

A lawsuit filed by Erika Miller-Tate accuses Irvin of trying to fire her three times without going through formal district processes.

Another, from a counselor and instructor identified in court papers as Steve Doe, alleges Irvin failed to intervene when he faced sexual harassment from another administrator.

Attorneys representing the district in the Doe, Miller-Tate and Ortega cases did not respond to multiple requests seeking comment.





Erika Miller-Tate is one of three other current or former Southwest College employees who have sued separately over various accusations against Irvin. (Jason Armond / Los Angeles Times)

Hidalgo, the district spokesperson, declined to comment on the pending litigation. She said the district is representing Irvin in the Doe and Miller-Tate cases. Irvin is not named as a defendant in the Ortega case.

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In October 2022 — five years after she filed her Title IX complaint with the Community College District — Turner-Odom’s case unfolded during a two-week trial in Los Angeles Superior Court before a 12-member jury.

In support of her colleague, Denisha Hill, an adjunct instructor, testified that Turner-Odom had told her that Irvin had made sexual comments about Turner-Odom’s body.

Miller-Tate, also a witness, said in court that Turner-Odom also had confided to her about the alleged harassment. Miller-Tate said her close friend “went into a shell” — an abrupt change for a woman who normally had an active campus presence.

Irvin took the stand.

“Did you ever make any harassing comments to Dr. Turner-Odom?” asked Maryann Gallagher, Turner-Odom’s attorney.

“No,” Irvin responded.

“She says that you did.”

“That’s what she said.”

“She lied?”

“Yes, she lied,” Irvin said.

Richard Morton, an attorney who represented Irvin and the Community College District during the trial, argued that Irvin’s past court cases and LAPD history were irrelevant to Turner-Odom’s harassment allegations.

“It’s a history he’s got to live with, and he has been living with it,” Morton said during closing arguments. “This case has dredged up a lot of stuff. It’s dredged up some innuendos, rumors, hecklers. These are all decades old.”

Morton also said that none of the witnesses called during the trial had directly seen Irvin harass Turner-Odom. And he cast doubt on the professor, questioning why she waited until December 2017 to file an official complaint about Irvin’s behavior.

“That’s the first time the college was notified,” he said. “Before that ... she told her friends. She didn’t tell anybody else. Her friends all told you that she didn’t tell anybody else either. Nobody told anybody that had any authority to do anything about it.”

Gallagher countered that her client was forced to work alongside her harasser as she fought to hold him responsible.

“She tried everything she could to have them acknowledge and to have them be accountable, and they refused,” she said in closing arguments.

The jury returned after one day of deliberations.

They found in favor of Turner-Odom. Irvin had sexually harassed her, and the district had failed to prevent and investigate the harassment, had retaliated against her and were negligent in employing Irvin.

She was awarded \$10 million — \$8.5 million from the district and \$1.5 million from Irvin — for mental suffering and emotional distress.

Less than a week later, Irvin participated in a San Bernardino Valley College public forum to present his vision as one of five finalists for the position of school president. Over the course of an hour, he pitched himself to community members as a collaborator and someone who works hard to build teams, a presentation recorded and posted online by the college.

“This is what I want. This is what San Bernardino Valley College really needs,” he told the room. “They need a Howard Irvin in their life.”

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Before the October trial, over several months in 2022, Chancellor Rodriguez repeatedly asked trustees to consider a package that would have allowed Irvin to continue receiving a salary for nine months if he left the district, said Gabriel Buelna, one of eight trustees.

The proposed agreement would have placed Irvin on paid administrative leave with full benefits from Sept. 6, 2022, through June 30, 2023, to “avoid being terminated,” according to a draft copy of the proposal obtained by The Times.

Rodriguez declined an interview request through a spokesperson, citing the ongoing litigation. Four of the trustees did not respond to requests seeking comment.

Trustee David Vela referred questions to a spokesperson. Trustee Sara Hernandez

said in an email that the decisions by the board and Rodriguez around the sexual harassment allegations against Irvin occurred before her time on the board, and that she was “not familiar” with how they were handled.

Hidalgo, the district spokesperson, declined to comment on the proposed payout for Irvin.

The trustees declined to formally bring it up for a vote, said Buelna, who was the only trustee to vote against renewing Rodriguez’s four-year contract earlier this month.

“I said, ‘Over my dead body,’” he said.

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The end of Irvin’s career in the Los Angeles Community College District arrived quietly.

At a meeting this January, the Board of Trustees made the brief public announcement that in a closed session a month earlier, they had decided to “dismiss a vice president of student services.”

They did not mention Irvin by name or make any other comments. Irvin’s termination is final, said Hidalgo, the district spokesperson.





Miller-Tate, right, testified that friend and colleague Turner-Odom had told her at the time that Irvin was harassing her, and that she “went into a shell.” (Jason Armond / Los Angeles Times)

Irvin had remained at Trade-Tech until his dismissal. His district pay and benefits in 2022 amounted to \$282,495, [according to Transparent California](#), a privately maintained database of public pay records.

He did not get the position at San Bernardino College. In mid-September, he interviewed for the position of vice president of student services at College of the Redwoods in Eureka, but did not get the job, college officials said.

In March, the Los Angeles Community College District appealed the decision in Turner-Odom’s case, putting her award on hold. An appeals court has not yet ruled on the district’s request for a new trial.

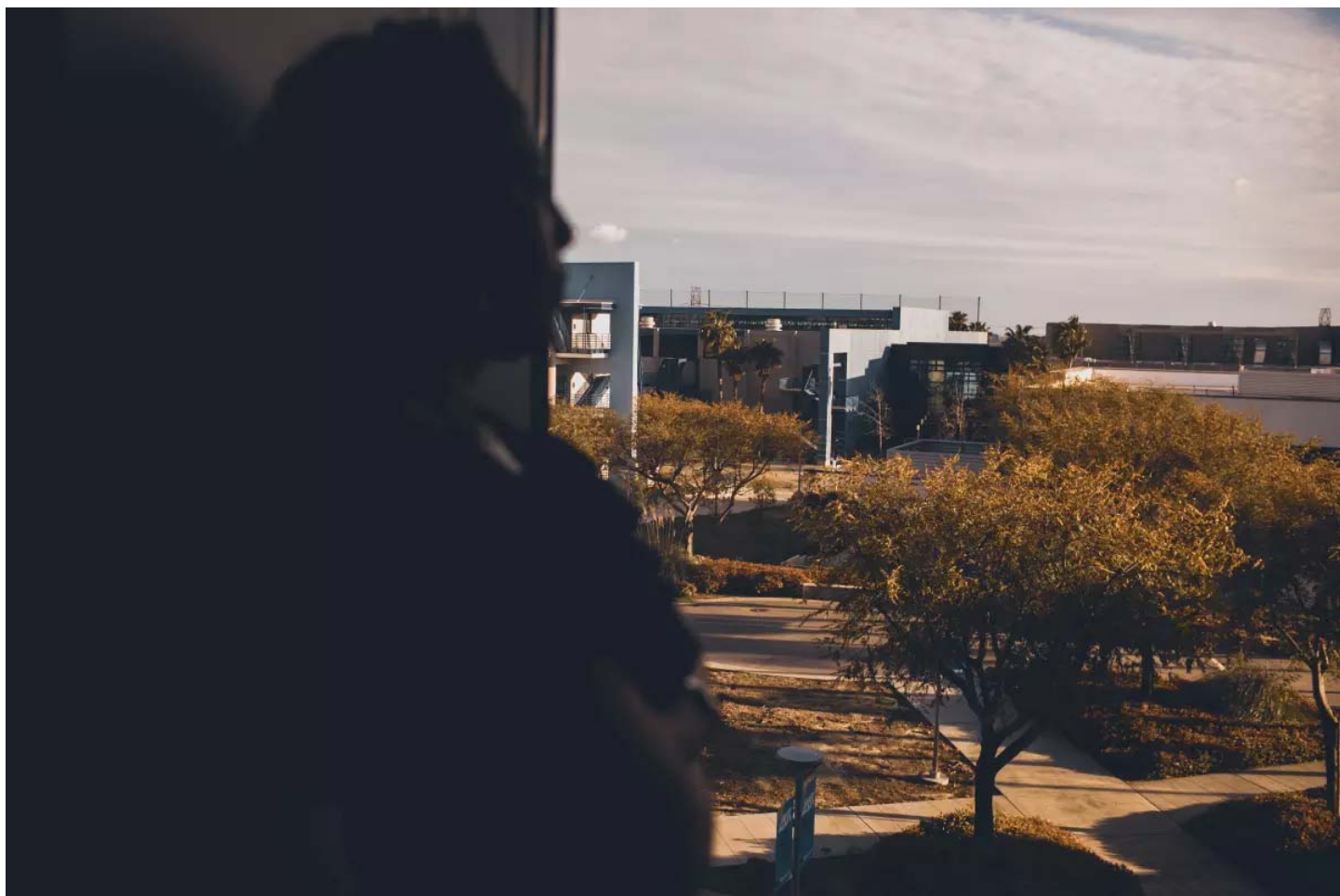
Janice Brown, an attorney hired by the district after the October trial, has argued that the \$10-million jury award was far too large because Turner-Odom did not lose pay or suffer any other financial losses.

“People say things; people can be rude. Nobody’s perfect in the workplace,” Brown said. “But behavior that’s inappropriate has to rise to the level of negatively impacting your work — you can’t get a raise, you get demoted, those kinds of things.”



**Brown said in an interview that Irvin’s criminal history should not have been introduced at trial because it was prejudicial, and that Irvin had “redeemed” himself over the years.**

**“Somebody has redeemed themselves, and then got a PhD in education,” she said. “And you still are saying, ‘You can’t be trusted’ because of what happened ... 30 years ago.”**



**“I love that community. It’s where I came to be, and I was not willing to let him take that from me,” Turner-Odom said of Southwest College and Irvin. (Jason Armond / Los Angeles Times)**

**Gallagher, Turner-Odom’s attorney, criticized the district for fighting instead of accepting the verdict.**

**Turner-Odom still works at Southwest, and plans to stay until she is eligible to retire with her full pension in a couple of years. She gave up the tutoring program to avoid**

having to deal with administration, and returned to a full teaching schedule.

It's difficult, she said, to show up to work knowing the community college system continues to fight her in court.

“I can't wait until I reach a point where I can walk away,” Turner-Odom said. “I'm never setting foot on that campus again once I can get out of there completely. There's nothing there for me.”



Debbie Truong

Debbie Truong is a higher education reporter for the Los Angeles Times. Previously, she covered PK-12 education for WAMU-FM (88.5), the NPR affiliate in Washington, D.C., and the Washington Post. She attended Syracuse University and received a master's degree in journalism from American University. She grew up in the San Gabriel Valley.