

DENISE MADDOX

MY ODYSSEY

The UW Odyssey Project introduces economically disadvantaged adults in the community to college-level work in the humanities. Now in its second year, the Odyssey Project provides approximately two dozen students each year with evening instruction in literature, philosophy, art history, American history, and writing. The majority of the students are single parents, the first in their families to go past high school, and members of racial minorities. Emily Auerbach, Marshall Cook, Craig Werner, Kathi Sell, Gene Phillips, Jean Feraca, and other UW faculty and guest artists teach the course. Denise Maddox is a graduate of the first year of the Odyssey Project (2003–2004).

My name is Denise Maddox, and I am one of twenty-four people who were the first graduates of the UW Odyssey Project, Class of 2003-2004. I would never have thought that classes in the humanities would change my life forever. I mean “forever” without exaggeration because Writing, Art History, American History, Literature, and Philosophy transported me into a new world, where written words came alive and made magic inside my heart.

An odyssey is a life-altering journey of discovery. Like Odysseus in Homer’s *Odyssey*, I too started out on a life-changing journey. The boat was our classroom at the Harambee Center in South Madison, and the reading materials (books by Shakespeare, Plato, Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, Langston Hughes, Toni Morrison, and so many more) were the rough seas we had to travel through. In each and every port we landed were wonderful lessons to learn. The Odyssey crew consisted of the UW professors and staff members who gave us supplies to maintain this one-year exploration of learning. The teachers were the compasses that directed us through these rough seas and guided us safely to our destination.

The journey started in September with William Blake’s poems from *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*. We learned about a chimney sweeper who was a little child sold into slavery by his parents. As Professor Emily read the poem, tears rolled down my face. As an African American, I understand the bitterness of slavery. The poem went on to light a fire within my soul. I have been victorious in freedom. My freedom included wanting to better myself through education. This was the first time I realized how words can move you forever, even if the original writer is gone from this world.

WOW! The transformation had started, and there was no turning back from this course. I wasn’t alone on this journey. Twenty-four minds started to look at the world with different perspectives. Indeed with each lesson taught, the fire of knowledge began to burn brighter and brighter. For example, my classmate Tiffany Smith said, “I always wanted and have the will to succeed. The Odyssey class pulled it all out of me, letting



Denise Maddox gets encouragement in writing and speaking from Jean Feraca of Wisconsin Public Radio. (Photo by Richard White)



Odyssey Project Director Emily Auerbach with the class of 2004-2005 in their South Madison Harambee Center classroom. (Photo by Michael Forster Rothbart)

me know I could do it.” Another classmate named Joseph Hurst said, “I was fortunate to have been a part of the first Odyssey class. One of the great benefits of this class was studying the humanities. I have always loved history and knew about African-American philosophers, but through the Odyssey class I gained a great appreciation for the Greek philosophers, like Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates.”

Jean Feraca of Wisconsin Public Radio had heard about a free humanities program for adults near the poverty level started by Earl Shorris in New York. She had Emily Auerbach, Professor of English, set up and direct a program here in Madison. During the first-ever Odyssey Project graduation in May 2004, Jean Feraca quoted a poem by James Wright called “Today I was so happy, so I made this poem”: “An eagle rejoices in the oak trees of heaven, / Crying / This is what I wanted.” The reason she quoted this poem was that the graduation was a confirmation and fulfillment of a dream: that courses in the Humanities offered to students who wanted to go to college and never had a chance could transform lives and lift them out of poverty. This was only the beginning. Our class laid the foundation for the Odyssey Project Class of 2004-2005, which has been meeting every Wednesday night since September 10, 2004, and will have its graduation ceremony on May 18, 2005. Graduates of the UW Odyssey Project receive six credits in Integrated Liberal Studies.

Just months after starting their journey, members of the new Odyssey Class 2004-2005 showed signs that a transformation had started. Several students

wrote about the emotional experiences they went through during the first weeks of the course. Terry Fox reported, “This class is thought-provoking. It increases your awareness of the history of man along with the origins of many current systems we use as well as language. This class teaches me to look farther, to read about and most importantly develop my own thoughts and opinions.” James Robinson, whose brother Joe graduated from the Odyssey Class 2003-2004, said, “I feel different because I did not know that I would look forward to coming to class. I enjoy this time in class because it is an escape for me, an escape for a few hours that lets me explore my mind.” Other classmates report similarly enriching experiences.

Earl Shorris, who founded the original Clemente Course in the Humanities, a model for the Odyssey Project, explained in his book *Riches for the Poor*, “I like watching people having a second birth.” His statement is true—I am one of the examples of his words. “Rebirth” is the perfect word to describe what happened to me. I was like a caterpillar eating everything in sight, yet I was never full until I found focused learning in the Odyssey Project a year ago. The knowledge I received helped me finally transform into a multicolored butterfly. I spread my wings into the air to dry, and now I’m flying. I am pursuing a degree at MATC and I am on the Dean’s List. I hope eventually to transfer to the UW-Madison and earn a degree in writing and literature. The world might still see me as being poor, with little money and material wealth, but I am rich with knowledge and wisdom. ❖