

Odyssey

2013 achievements



30 students in 2013 at 10th graduation

“Only the educated are free, and this includes me,” remarked Jasmine Banks at the May 8 graduation ceremony for the UW Odyssey Project. With hundreds of family members, friends, alumni, and donors in attendance, Jasmine and 29 other new graduates of the Odyssey Project stepped to the podium at the Great Hall of the UW Memorial Union to share something they read or wrote in this life-changing humanities course.

For the past ten years the UW Odyssey Project has helped adults facing financial barriers to get a jumpstart on a college education. Students receive free tuition, textbooks, and childcare as they earn

six UW credits in English literature. They meet Wednesday nights from September to May at the Goodman South Madison Library to discuss Socrates, Shakespeare, Toni Morrison, Martin Luther King, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, and many other writers, artists, and historical figures. The Odyssey Project continues to help its graduates as they pursue their dreams.

Odyssey Project Director Emily Auerbach

Those interested in applying or donating to the Odyssey Project should visit www.odyssey.wisc.edu or contact Emily Auerbach. 608-262-3733 eauebach@dcs.wisc.edu

told the crowd at the Memorial Union, “We now have students with bachelor’s and master’s degrees working as nurses, ministers, police officers, counselors, community leaders, and teachers. We love our ever-expanding Odyssey community of graduates!”

Auerbach presented awards in memory of her mother, whose story of escaping poverty through a Kentucky college with free tuition serves as one of the models for the Odyssey Project. Following the presentation of

the Wanda Auerbach Memorial Awards, Mayor Paul Soglin spoke of the value of higher education for stimulating creativity.

Creativity then filled Great Hall as new Odyssey graduates shared their writings. Many modeled their poems about themselves after Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” “Don’t try to change me or rearrange me,” Dominique Haskins said in “Song of Dominique,” because “I am who I am. I celebrate myself.” “I dream of painting skies . . . Thank God for the supplies,” noted Carrie Llerena Sesma in “Song of Carrie.” Mary Millon’s “Song of Mary” spoke of a woman “excited by the possibilities of the future yet haunted by her past.” Britney

Sinclair’s “Song of Britney” celebrated being whole and revived, no longer broken and deprived.

Tracey Cherry got a laugh from the audience when she ended her “Song of Tracey” with lines noting that she had eleven grandchildren, so many she can have a baseball team.

Other students conceived of themselves and their lives metaphorically. “I am a book, a masterpiece, ready to be understood, elucidated, decoded,” observed Akilah Freeman. Michelle Reams, who commuted every Wednesday from Milwaukee, compared her life to a spinning top, ending with “I am becoming dizzy and dazed. . . I might just have to change my spinning ways.” Patrice Smith compared women coming out of prison to clean slates dreaming of new lives.

Four graduates shared poems in more than one language. Tanatnan Chaipang from Thailand read “Song of Tanatnan” in Thai and in English, Angelica Cuahuey from Mexico read “Song of Angelica” in Spanish and English, and Jovite Rayaisse from Burkina Faso read “Song of Jovite” in Dioula, French, and English. Nancy Wambua from Kenya read her metaphor poem “I am a river” in Swahili and English.

Several graduates spoke of their connections with their classmates. “My classmates, my teammates . . . from people who were complete strangers to a tight-knit family,” Lewis Black said. Amber Turner spoke of the class as “all part of a picture, a picture that has different pieces yet fits as one in a single frame.” El-Rasheedah Wilson called her classmates “Odyssey soldiers” and said, “The Odyssey Class of 2013 ain’t no joke. We came from the bottom and now we’re at the top.”

China Moon Crowell called each Odyssey class “three hours of knowledge and mandatory eye-opening.” Shariisse Hancock noted “Odyssey . . . has opened a door enabling me to see that I can achieve greatness in my educational future.”

Shalonda Hilliard-Jones shared an essay she had written in response to reading Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. She described coming out of the cave of shame that she once felt

as a Black girl who had white grandparents because her father had been adopted. “I’ll go anywhere with my grandparents with my head held high.”

Some Odyssey graduates shared literature they read in class. Derrick McCann read a monologue by Walter Lee from Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*. James Morgan shared Frederick Douglass’s powerful writing about literacy as the pathway to freedom. Fantasia House read Maya Angelou’s inspiring “Still I Rise.” Three students recited Langston Hughes’s poems: Angela Jordan-Jackson read “Mother to Son,” Brandon Williams read “Advice,” and Eunice Conley read “Harlem” with its famous opening line, “What happens to a dream deferred?”

LoLita Phillips wrote a response to Hughes in an original poem called “I’m No Longer Deferred,” calling on others to “just tell fear to move!” Jovenus Price Pierce echoed Maya

Angelou when she ended her poem with “I will rise, rise, rise.”

Munroe Whitlock shared part of an editorial he wrote. “Black boys shouldn’t have targets on their backs,” Whitlock began, and called on his listeners to volunteer in after-school programs to help prevent the high drop-out rate for black boys.

Tosumba Welch got the audience to rise to its feet with his rendition of portions of Martin Luther King, Jr’s “I Have a Dream” speech. Welch credited his professors, classmates, and reading material for helping him to escape the cave of ignorance and begin “a never-ending journey of life and a limitless road to higher education.”

Michelle Whitman read “Emily Angel” and presented Professor Auerbach with an angel statue on behalf of the class. Balloons, flowers, and hugs also marked this joyous occasion.



Graduates of the UW Odyssey Project, a life-changing jumpstart course in the humanities for adults facing economic barriers to college, have gone on to earn degrees at UW, Edgewood, and other institutions.

Sherri Bester (Odyssey ’08), a mother of six who has won awards for her community activism, will walk the stage this May to receive a UW-Madison bachelor’s degree in Community and Non-profit Leadership. Bester credits the Odyssey Project with “opening up the endless doors to education, freedom, empowerment, and hope.”

Classmate Thomas Jasen Gardner (Odyssey ’08) will attend the same ceremony. Gardner has earned a UW-Madison Bachelor of Science degree in Life Science Communications as well as a certificate in Environmental Studies.

Rocio Morejon (Odyssey ’06) has earned her Bachelor’s in Social Work from UW-Milwaukee and will start as a community match specialist for the Boys and Girls Club.

Noting that she became the first in her family to graduate from college, Morejon adds, “The Odyssey Project experience changed my life and my outlook on education. I dedicate all of my academic success to this Project and I am so grateful for the opportunity to have been an Odyssey Student.”

Shanita Lawrence (Odyssey ’10) received her Bachelor’s in Business Administration from Upper Iowa University and currently works for UW Whitewater.

Two Odyssey Project graduates earned Master’s degrees during the 2012-2013 academic year. Tineisha Scott (Odyssey ’04) completed her Master’s degree in Marriage and Family Therapy from Edgewood College in December 2012. Scott now works as a social worker for the Hope House and Dane County Parent Council helping families in need. Cameron Daniels (Odyssey ’07) continued on after his Bachelor’s degree from Florida A&M with a Master’s degree in Marketing this month from Florida State University. Along

the way, Daniels has published columns as a sports journalist.

Dozens of other Odyssey graduates are pursuing their bachelor’s and master’s degrees. Kegan Carter (Odyssey ’04, UW ’09) has completed the first year of her graduate fellowship in Afro-American Studies at UW-Madison and will work as a teaching assistant for the department next year. Former Sudanese refugee Josephine Lorya-Ozulamoi (Odyssey ’08, UW ’12) has just been accepted into UW’s prestigious School of Social Work to begin work on a Master’s degree.

“The Odyssey Project was my passport to higher education, and I will always cherish its blessing,” Lorya-Ozulamoi comments.

For more information about the Odyssey Project—how to apply, how to donate, how to help—, visit www.odyssey.wisc.edu or contact Odyssey Project Director Emily Auerbach at 608-262-3733 or eauebach@dcs.wisc.edu.