

ODYSSEY ORACLE



INTRODUCING THE CLASS OF 2020



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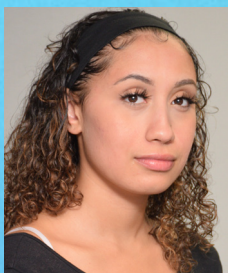
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Timothy Mosley



Lochè Mothoa



Moriah Parker



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Nina Salisbury



Jerome Sanders



Marcello Segovia



Riley Sessions



Shiloh Simonsen



Jaison Thomas



Carmen Tinajero



Savannah Torres



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Photography by Colleen Johnson, Director of Development

FEELINGS ON JOINING ODYSSEY

Students in the new Class of 2020 were asked, “How did you feel when you learned you were accepted into the UW Odyssey Project?” The winner of the adjective contest was “excited,” with “happy,” “nervous,” “overwhelmed,” “blessed,” and “proud” strong contenders as well.

I was overjoyed. It made my day start off positive and motivated. **(Aerial Bailey)**

I had very mixed feelings, mostly “I don’t deserve to have a spot.” . . . I felt like someone else would and should benefit more than me. I’m just a nobody and don’t deserve it. **(Margarita Barajas)**

I felt absolutely excited. I received the letter in the mail and didn’t even open it because I knew before that I had been chosen for this class. **(Ronald Burford)**

I was excited and nervous. **(Arkeia Cameron)**

I was excited to learn I was accepted into this class. This is a new experience for me. Also, I haven’t been to school in a while, so I’m happy I’m back learning. **(Laisha Cooke)**

I felt accomplished but uneasy. I had great fear that I wouldn’t have what it takes to make a good student and fit in. I quickly tried to give myself courage, though, because I know this is what I really want to be doing. **(Corey Dean)**

I was overwhelmed with excitement. I couldn’t stop smiling. At that very moment I knew I had a purpose and that I actually took the step to claim my future. **(Tiffany Dixon)**

I am so happy to have been accepted into this class, and I already am sure my life story will be changed. **(Kossiawavi Apeafa Elo)**

I really felt good about myself and about being with others that had built up struggles they want to conquer by learning how to speak to the pain that hindered them in their past. **(Rasaki Emmanuel)**

I was overwhelmed with joy. Most times I’m not accepted into things because I do not have a college education. **(Melissa Herriges)**

I felt a lot of joy in my heart. I was so happy I was chosen. I felt very blessed and thanked God for this blessing. **(Jyneeva Hunt)**

I felt very proud of myself and happy that someone gave me a chance. **(LaDiá Key)**

I was very excited. Education is very important to me, and I want my son to understand that education can take you a long way. **(Ashley Lee)**

I felt proud—what a proud moment! I think after getting off the phone with Emily, I got on my knees and prayed about how thankful I am for the opportunity. I shed a few happy tears! **(Tina Marie Martinez)**

I was very grateful and excited to begin a new journey. **(Elíazar Martínez-Munguía)**



I felt that there's still time and a chance. I've wanted to further my education and spoken of it so much that the fact I was finally getting the opportunity made me ecstatic but definitely scared and nervous. But I was happier than I've ever been. This is huge for me. There's only one way to go, and that's up. **(Ashton McDonald)**

When I was accepted into this class, I was incredibly excited, grateful, and a little nervous. I had been thinking about this program for years, but I never actually believed I would get in. I may have felt a little disbelief as well. **(Kristina Mellott)**

I was very excited and blessed. I believe this program will open so many doors for me in the future. **(Timothy Mosley)**

I wasn't having a very good week at the time. Receiving an acceptance made me forget about the negativity. **(Lochè Mothoa)**

I felt stress coming off my shoulders. I felt that I had a chance that many didn't have the opportunity to receive. In short, I felt blessed, favored, and excited to begin. **(Moriah Parker)**

I felt very excited, like a new door had opened for me to step in and learn new things. **(Natia Saffold)**

I felt excited, optimistic, proud, and eager to learn and experience new things. **(Nina Salisbury)**

It is as if the things I hope and pray for may actually be within my reach. **(Jerome Sanders)**

When I learned that I had been accepted into the Odyssey Project, I was so excited. I felt like I made a step forward, and that is all it takes—one step. **(Marcello Segovia)**

My first feeling was of surprise. I didn't think that I was going to make the class. After that it was a mix of emotions—nervousness, excitement, and I felt overwhelmed. A big part of doing things that make you uncomfortable is the chance to grow and better yourself. With that came the excitement to get started. **(Riley Sessions)**



I was nervous because I wasn't exactly sure what I had signed up for, but I was also excited as I applied, interviewed, and accepted all on my own. I was up for the task at hand. **(Shiloh Simonsen)**

I was very happy. **(Carmen Tinajero)**

I felt grateful and appreciative to be given the opportunity to be a part of this class. There were only 30 spots, and to be able to fill one of those spots makes me feel special. **(Jaison Thomas)**

I was extremely excited and eager to learn and make something of myself. I want to pursue my goals and one day guide others to do the same. **(Savannah Torres)**

I felt overwhelmed, happy, and relieved. **(O'Shane Omar Wilmoth)**

SENTENCES ABOUT US

Everyone always assumes I'm Hispanic and I'm not. I'm black, white, and Native American. I started my own business this year doing financial planning, and I absolutely love it. My son is one, and he's my biggest pride and joy. **(Aerial Bailey)**

I have three young men and lost one. I came to Wisconsin only speaking Spanish. I didn't graduate from high school on time. I ended up going to MATC South for my CNA, finished that first, and then graduated with my G.E.D. **(Margarita Barajas)**

I am currently working on my own book that I plan to publish. I am the only son in my family and the youngest child. I am the first child in my family to attend college, though I didn't graduate from my first attempt. **(Ron Burford)**

I have a six year old who's entering first grade and a one year old. I finished high school ten years ago and Job Corps eight years ago, and I'm ready for this journey. I'm funny and full of life. I just want happiness and peace for myself and my children. **(Arkeia Cameron)**



I took a writing class a long time ago. I was told by my teacher that I'm a good writer with lots of potential, but I'm not sure if that's still the case. I used to write poems when I was younger. I had a poem book. My niece also wrote poems and both my sisters. We're all similar in ways, but we didn't grow up with each other. I couldn't stand dogs or seafood. Now I love seafood and secretly want a small dog. **(Laisha Cooke)**



I'm in a hip hop group called SupaFriends with a few of my friends (including Odyssey grad James Horton Jr. '19), and we host local hip hop shows / open mics in hopes of letting others express themselves through the genre. I've been to college before for graphic design. I just got two new kittens named Peat and Clarence. **(Corey Dean)**

I have three children—Derek, Sha'Niyah, and Cherish. They are the air I breathe. I'm a very outgoing person. I love to dance, listen to music, and make others laugh. I LOVE doing hair and nails, just feeling beautiful. **(Tiffany Dixon)**





I have two kids—one daughter and one son. My daughter still lives in Africa with my mom, and my baby boy is with me in the USA. My baby boy's name is Lucas. He is four months old. I have three sisters and one brother. All of them are living in Togo, Africa. **(Kossiawavi Elo)**



I am a father of four, and my wife (Bettye Emmanuel '16) is my best friend. I am always open to help others, even when my pain is bigger than my highs. That's when I stand firm because it's my stand to give my best. I had a job loading trucks by myself, and it took me a whole month to get my first check. Not wanting to be asked by my wife and kids "why are you not at work?" helped me work through my anger. I believe in me so much that my smiles gives me that power up! **(Rasaki Emmanuel)**

I have three children, 20, 18, and 15, who all are taller than I am. I am a cancer survivor and somewhat shy at first. Being able to help others overcome their barriers and reach their dreams is important to me. **(Melissa Herriges)**

I am five feet tall, and my boyfriend is a foot and two inches taller than I am. I have four brothers and three sisters. I once attended UW-Milwaukee and Peck School of the Arts (two colleges at once) for a year and a half. I love fashion, dancing, singing, traveling the world, and spending time with my boyfriend. My favorite colors are pink and black.

(Jyneeva Hunt)

I have a new baby boy named Michael. I am a preschool teacher. My goal is to become a second grade teacher. **(LaDiá Key)**



I have a two year old son named Kingston. Right now I'm battling the terrible twos. My goal is to become a nurse or funeral director. I love to learn and expand my knowledge. **(Ashley Lee)**

I was born in Chicago Heights, Illinois. I am the middle child and grew up in Madison, Wisconsin. I have two children—Imani, five years old, and Neveah, 11 years old. I am five feet nothing, and I own that! **(Tina Marie Martinez)**



have a dog named Toby. I like to build things like furniture. Cooking is one of my hobbies. **(Elíazar Martínez-Munguía)**



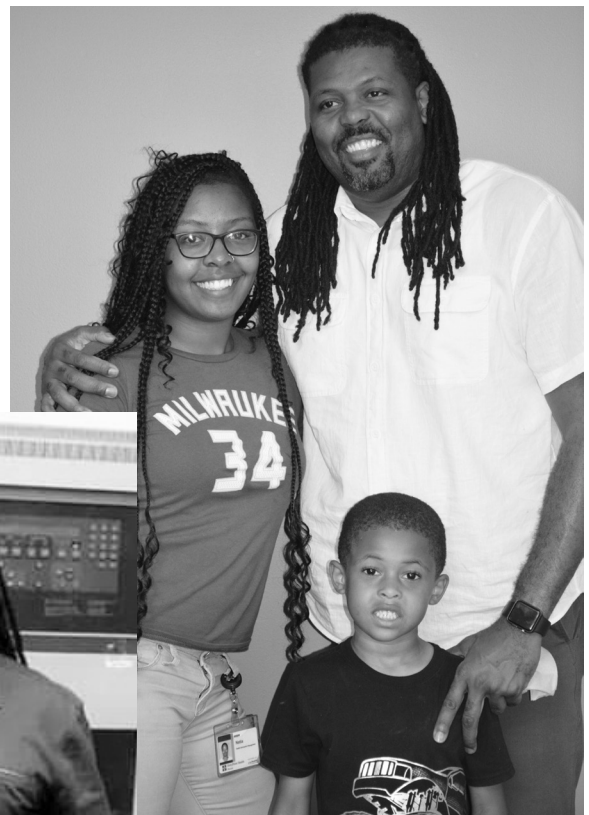
I am bilingual, technically trilingual [and am from South Africa]. It's a mixture of German and Dutch. However, when people speak German I barely understand them (actually not at all), but when they speak Dutch I understand almost everything. Weird? I know. I am a child sponsor for Save the Children.

I've had to work for everything. It's hard. I can't stand disrespect, bullying, and unfairness. If anything, help someone instead of tearing them down. I'm afraid to fail and want nothing more than a better me and better life. I am here to do whatever it takes. I'm committed and hope all of my classmates are as well. Let's do it! I've always got a "let's go and do it" attitude. I'm a great motivator and love to see those around me doing well and succeeding as well. **(Ashton McDonald)**



I would like to adopt or foster a child or children. **(Loché Mothoa)**

I lived in Milwaukee up until two years ago. My high school job was working as a waitress at Pizza Hut until I was fired. I am the youngest of two sisters. My oldest sister is at least sixteen years older. **(Moriah Parker)**



I have an eleven-year-old son, a five-year-old daughter, and a dog named Zoey. My partner and I operate a business installing flooring. I have a brother and sister who attended UW-Madison, and I am excited to follow in their footsteps. **(Kristina Mellott)**



I have two kids that I love and am working to be a better person for. I am recovering from an alcohol problem that's gotten me into legal trouble. I have a very loving family that supports me through everything I do in life. **(Timothy Mosley)**

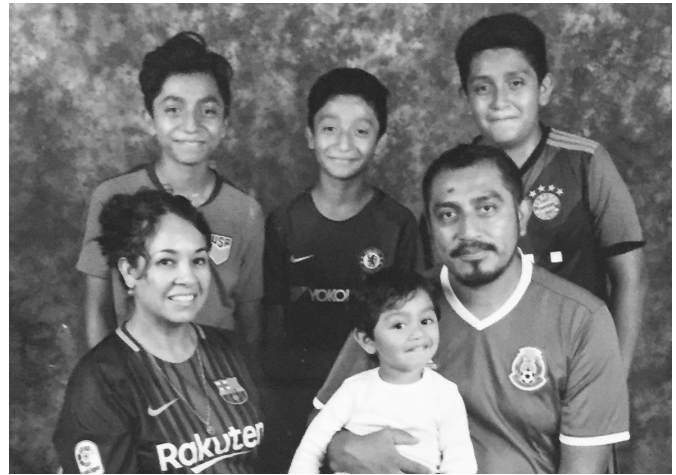
I have a five-year-old boy that's full of energy and keeps Mommy busy. I'm 22 and full of life and excitement. My favorite things to do are to eat, sleep, and give my baby kisses! **(Natia Saffold)**

I have a seven-and-a-half-year-old son whose name is Damien. I have a twin sister named Maura who is half my size. I work as a CNA at an elementary school and give an average of ten ice packs out a day.
(Nina Salisbury)



I LOVE country living and can never see myself moving back to Madison or any other large city. I am in school part time for my degree in early childhood education in hopes that it will give me knowledge and experience that I need to eventually be a special ed teacher.
(Shiloh Simonsen)

I am a proud father of two small boys—Jerome Jr. (four years old) and Quincy (two years old). I am single, and I have been six feet eight inches since the age of 15. I was engaged to be married twice in six years to two different women, only to be the happiest single guy in town. I have done contracting work since 16 and have a host of skills like painting, roofing, flooring, hanging TVs, etc.
(Jerome Sanders)



I have four kids and a husband. We are a total of six in our family, and I am the only woman. My two last jobs closed their business. I think I have just a little bit of bad luck.
(Carmen Tinajero)

I have two children—one boy and one girl. My middle name is Augustine. I have a great job as a dietary aide.
(Marcello Segovia)

I used to spend summers in Missouri working on my grandfather's farm. I've worked with pigs, donkeys, and llamas. I have a little brother who is only six.
(Riley Sessions)



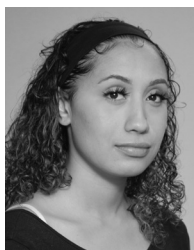
I am the only boy out of my mother's four children. I'm the second oldest, the tallest out of the four, and the only one who still lives at home. I have two dogs, both boys. One is three, and the other is six weeks. One is a bichon frise, and the other one is a teacup Yorkshire. I've never broken a bone, had surgery, been out of the country, or been on a train.
(Jaision Thomas)

I am a recovering drug addict who lost my daughters, got them back, and now has a passion to help others who have walked down the same path. I am non-judgmental and never judge anyone off things I've heard, only by what I see. I had a spiritual awakening that changed my life, motivated me to be the best I can be, and gave me a passion to help others.
(Savannah Torres)

I have two children. Falyn is four years old and in 4K, and Lymmiah, who is my stepdaughter and seven years old, is in second grade.

I used to work three jobs back home in Jamaica, hardly got any sleep, but was willing to do it to help out my family. I was a chicken farmer, didn't have any equipment to get the chickens ready for sale (slaughter, defeathering, plucking, etc.), so I did it by hand.
(Oshane Omar Wilmoth)

ARE YOU A WRITER?



My feelings about writing consist of writing being therapeutic, educational, motivational, and fun in some ways. I would consider myself a writer because I enjoy it and it comes naturally to me. In school, I was always complimented on how good of a writer I am.

I've always been proud of my work but eager to learn how I can improve. I want to write at least one book in my lifetime; I want it to be a drama that motivates one to do better. My writing has opened doors for me as far as getting accepted into Odyssey, getting jobs/interviews from my objectives on my resume, and getting approved for other various things I've applied for. **(Aerial Bailey)**



I'm not a writer. But when I start writing and I'm interested in what I'm writing, I will write. I have a life story to tell, but I just don't. I'm very scared that everyone else might think some kind of way towards me. I don't like to write because of my spelling. But I love

to write. **(Margarita Barajas)**



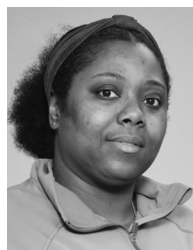
To speak is to write, and to write is to speak. Language and communication is something I have learned and developed over time. As a child, I didn't grow up with people teaching me such a skill. I was even a slow reader and had trouble with spelling words. Therefore,

as I got older I felt as though I needed to work harder and prove that I was able to get better. I am now someone that has become good with words and the ability to connect and communicate with other people. **(Ron Burford)**



I'm a writer who needs guidance and to believe in myself enough to learn myself. Once I ground myself and become more focused on my strengths instead of weaknesses, I like to say I'm going to be a bad, bad woman.

(Arkeia Cameron)



I am a writer. I always believed I was. I used to write poems when I was younger. I stopped. I don't know why. Even though I have a phone and other electronic devices, I still write down goals and grocery lists. There's something about writing that's just better

to me and for me. I've written letters for others when they couldn't find the words. I've written love letters and letters to people I've known in jail to uplift their spirits. I've written long letters so they'd have something to read and pass their time.

(Laisha Cooke)



I consider myself a pretty good writer. I love to share my writing in hopes that I can open the minds of others to other perspectives or just to be entertaining. Something I've written that opened a door was the first social justice poem I wrote in my senior year. That was the poem

that made me love poetry. **(Corey Dean)**



No, I am not a writer. I feel like I have a hard time putting down what I really want to say, and everything is just scattered all over the place. **(Tiffany Dixon)**





I like to write easily the story of my life. I can also imagine a story and write down my ideas in paragraphs. **(Kossiwavu Elohu)**



I believe when I am at the end of this class all tools will be there for me. **(Rasaki Emmanuel)**



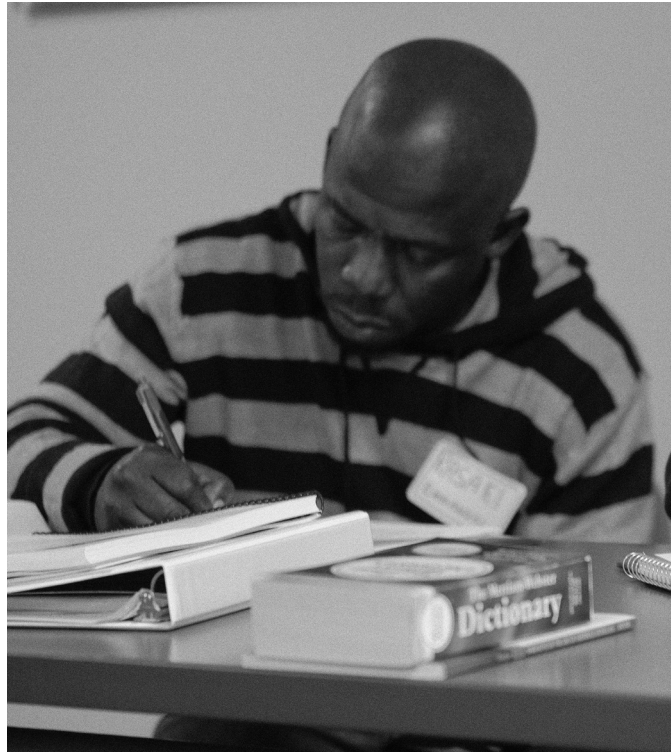
Often times my writing is for work or speeches. I have not written material for use outside of reporting for non-profit funding updates, case management notes, creating programs, policy/procedures, writing appeals for my children's IEPs, and so on.

When I was in elementary school I used to write poetry and look forward to getting back to that as my children graduate high school.

I am very open to seeing what doors this program will open for me and also what new things I will discover about myself. I definitely agree with Art History Professor Gene Phillips about education being a door to infinite opportunity. I look forward to seeing how we all will grow throughout this personal odyssey. **(Melissa Herriges)**



I consider myself a writer. I'm just afraid I'm not where I should be for my age. I've been afraid to write ever since I failed English at UW-Milwaukee twice. I think I have great potential in writing great essays; I just need guidance. Other than that, I believe my strong point is poetry. **(Jyneeva Hunt)**



I honestly do not believe I would call myself a writer. I can speak very well, but putting it down on paper is very hard. In school my biggest problem was spelling, so being marked for spelling really made me not want to write. I

really opened back up to writing because when I wrote the letter to Odyssey and got in, I knew that someone had seen better in me. **(LaDiá Key)**



I'm good with coming up with thoughts and ideas. However, it's so hard to write it down on paper. I love to write poems, but I do not like to write essays. During school, I barely asked for help. Then I faced my fears to open up and started to get help. That's when I felt more confident. I love using different pens to correct my mistakes. During high school, I had to write an essay on why I should be accepted into the CNA program, and it touched my teachers in a great way. I was very excited to join the program to get my CNA license. **(Ashley Lee)**



I like to write because I have a lot of ideas. I like to get them all down on paper. I think writing is one of my strongest skills. I would consider myself a writer because I am OK at expressing myself and what it is I'm trying to get across. I remember writing an essay my teacher was proud of. She said it was my best work yet! **(Tina Martinez)**



I really admire people who have the ability to write poems, books, etc. But for me it is like trying to walk on a thin ice surface—it feels so hard to walk. This is one of the reasons I believe that this program will help me to improve on writing. **(Elíazar Martínez-Munguía)**



No, I am not a writer. I can write. I like to write. Give me the right topic and tools and I'll write you a book, but I could be better and hope to get better. **(Ashton McDonald)**



I do enjoy writing. However, it has been a long time since I have had to put my thoughts on paper. I struggle with finding the right word to use, possibly because I lack the extensive vocabulary to do so. **(Kristina Mellott)**



I wouldn't call myself a writer, but I do have good ideas that I like to play with from time to time. I have problems with punctuation. Sometimes I don't know if I should add a comma or not. I don't know if I have created a run-on sentence or not. Writing is something that I'm eager to learn and willing to be taught how to do in the correct way. I'm also not the best speller, but I'm working on that. **(Timothy Mosley)**



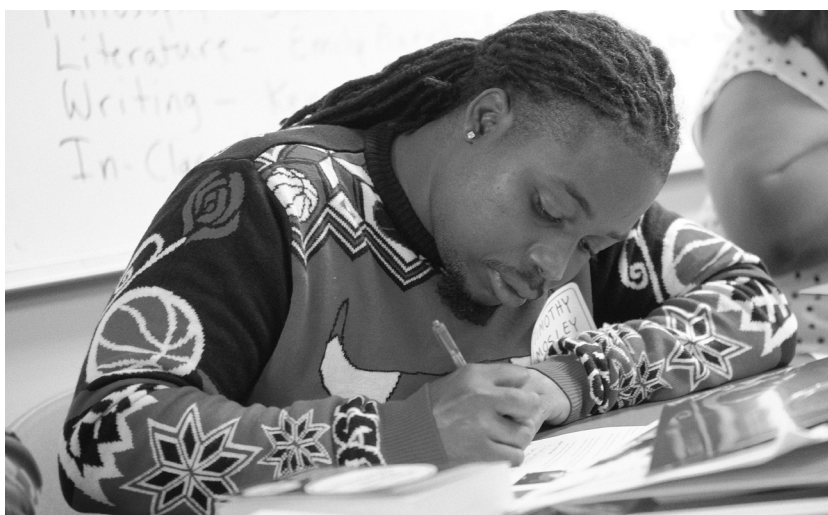
Am I a writer? Maybe in my head yes. In reality? I could be; however, I am definitely out of practice. I used to get a journal at the beginning of each year, and I would write in it every day. I unfortunately stopped writing. I am hoping to get back into writing again. **(Loché Mothoa)**



I love to write. But I do not consider myself a "writer." Anyone can write checks, their name, or a text. But I think being a writer takes creativity. I fell in love with writing in my AP English class. My teacher encouraged free writing and expression of thought. Writing has gotten me into colleges and even given me tasks to write on my mother's behalf. **(Moriah Parker)**



I don't consider myself a writer, but I'm really hoping that can change! I have such a big imagination that can tell tons of stories, but I suck at knowing how to put them together. In school I would fail because I didn't know how to put a semi-colon in a sentence. All of my sentences would be run-on sentences like this probably is right now. That's why Kevin excites me. I feel like he can help me piece my puzzle together to become a great writer. I love writing as a person. I love being creative. If I knew how to puzzle it, I would have a masterpiece. **(Natia Saffold)**



I would consider myself a writer at times. My mom is a writer, so I've been around all types of writing my whole life. She has always encouraged and applauded my writing, which is a big reason I continue to write. I go through periods when I feel inspired and times when I've hit a road block for months, or even years. Sometimes I have so much to say but can't get it out. **(Nina Salisbury)**



I've learned to love writing more than anything else. It's the only form of communication that is equally impactful as speaking;

however, it's greatly empowered by its ability to hold your secrets and passions without showing anyone anything unless they read it. **(Jerome Sanders)**



I do not consider myself a writer and never had the confidence. I can't spell well and have a big fear of reading out loud.

(Marcello Segovia)



I do not consider myself a writer, although I would like to change that. Throughout school I never had an experience that made me feel like a good writer or like it was something I excelled at, partly because I lacked the drive to improve. I think that

now I want to get better, and with the right help I could flourish. **(Riley Sessions)**



I am not the strongest writer. I had many troubles in school throughout all of my years with being able to pay attention, which then led to poor assignments and grades. I have always been able to think of what I want to put on paper, but it never

comes out that way. I have never had the courage to ask for help due to severe anxiety (which I still battle every day), and I am hoping I can outgrow that and strengthen all of my skills. **(Shiloh Simonsen)**



I do not consider myself to be a writer due to my lack of writing in my free time or just in general. I feel if I did more of it, I could improve my skill set. **(Jaison Thomas)**

Bueno, yo no soy escritora, porque creo que para ser escritora necesitas tener muchísima imaginación. Lo que no me gusta



de la escritura es que pienso que tienes que formular bien tus ideas, seguir una secuencia de cosas que no sabría cómo hacer. Pero es muy interesante leer; me encanta. Well, I am not a writer because I think to be a writer you need to have a lot of imagination. What I don't like about

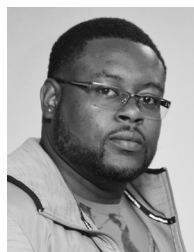
writing is that I think you have to formulate your ideas very well and follow a sequence, things that I don't know how to do. But I love to read.

(Carmen Tinajero)



I have never applied myself to anything in life other than getting my girls back. I'm not sure what I am good at or what I enjoy doing as far as school goes. I didn't grow up with guidance, support, or direction. I never pushed myself and always did the bare minimum. I am dedicated

and eager to apply myself and push myself to do the best I can do. **(Savannah Torres)**



I am not an excellent writer, the reason being I have issues most times getting words on paper. Sometimes even when I get something down, there seem to be errors, and I tend to pull back on my writing. For example, I have it all in my head, but when it comes time to

write it, the words don't seem to add up.

(O'Shane Omar Wilmoth)

ALUMNI CORNER

Finding Bearden and Homer in Chicago

By Robert James '14

Presented at a symposium on artist Romare Bearden's "Black Odyssey" series

No modern struggle would be as important as our Quest for Self-Definition. To define a race, it becomes necessary to examine the past. By choosing Homer's *Odyssey*, Bearden forces black people to ask, "Where are the black heroes of yore?" The question is the prerequisite for the connection of culture removed by chattel slavery. Bearden understood that art was a highway to cultures. He introduces African, Mexican, Asian, and European influences. In this way, art becomes education!

Odysseus represents stratagem, resistance, and character to overcome sorrow. He was unable to save his crew, a dilemma faced by black men often unable to save their own family and friends. Known as a man of many trials, Odysseus has many traits of poor black males. Odysseus's name means "trouble" in Greek, both giving and receiving trouble. Like Marvin Gaye's "trouble man," this theme resonates with all inner-city and heretofore poor men. Odysseus' heroic trait is cunning intelligence manifested as deceptive speech and use of disguise. Now blacks call this "the gift of gab." It takes "cunning intelligence" to survive urban areas like New York, L.A., and Chicago.

My own *Odyssey* confirms Bearden's art. I've had to understand that I am pieces of my mom, dad, grandma, godmom, the Chicago housing projects where I grew up, the time I spent behind bars, and even my family's expectations. As my *Odyssey* (life) unfolds, my collage

changes. Just like art, when you look deeper you find something new or another way to understand what has already been there.

I see connections between Bearden's representations of the monsters in *the Odyssey* and modern day life. The Cyclops could represent the one-sided view of justice, racial profiling, and the way prison destroys men. Medusa can suggest that poverty immobilizes, just as Medusa petrifies whoever she looks upon. The Sirens are hood women headed by grandmothers who tell ghetto tales and raise their daughters to date hustlers. These women condone and support crime; they are the drug



mules and the hideouts. They are the divas and material girls. Circe suggests drug dealing causes one to lose morals, thus turning them into pigs. The Lotus Eaters represent people preferring to use cocaine and heroin. Scylla represents gun violence and the power associated with guns, like Scylla able to take a life in an instant. Scylla had six heads; original handguns were six-shooters. Charybdis represents vice, sucking victims in slowly. Vice can make you totally lose your way. The underworld is prison because sometimes there you find seers like Malcolm X and new ways to get home. Odysseus's adventures happen on oceans, a perfect place to symbolize life's unpredictability in the ghetto.

Just as Bearden was fearless in recreating traditional respected art works, so must I be fearless when facing the stereotypes and societal beliefs of who I am as a black man. Like Odysseus, there can be no doubting, only striving to complete one's evolution. All that matters is reaching HOME, which symbolizes that place of peace within your mind and spirit.

Woman on an Odyssey: Keena Atkinson, Odyssey '10, UW '15

From UW News

Keena Atkinson knows what it means to persevere. Before she became a UW-Madison graduate and was recruited by a major corporation, she was a homeless, single mother. What changed her life trajectory? Many things, including Atkinson's hard work and inner drive to change her life for the better. Another factor was the UW Odyssey Project.

"The Odyssey Project opened doors for me," says Atkinson. "It helped me to believe in myself."

The Odyssey Project helps men and women living near the poverty level to find their voices and get a jump-start on earning their college degrees and finding meaningful work in their

communities. Often, Odyssey Project participants are dealing with addiction, incarceration, depression, or other barriers to education. Participants receive free tuition, textbooks, childcare, and a weekly dinner.

With a child to care for and the child's father serving a 10-year prison term, support from the Odyssey program was essential to giving Atkinson a start. She loved being in a classroom again.



“Toward the end of the Odyssey program, I realized that I didn’t want to be done with school,” she says. That’s when she made a decision to find a way to get a degree at UW-Madison.

Despite her determination to earn her degree, Atkinson knew that her top priority needed to be her son. So, first she went back to school to earn a cosmetology degree to ensure that she would have a job that could support her family while she pursued her college education. Then she began her path toward a bachelor’s degree by enrolling at Madison Area Technical College, later transferring to UW-Madison. That is where the real challenge began.

“I didn’t really have a social life at the UW,” she said. “Everyone’s between 18 and 22.” But, Atkinson eventually found a community on campus at Wisconsin’s Equity & Inclusion Laboratory (Wei LAB).

“That’s where I met the people who were interested in the same issues I was interested in,” she says. “I could talk about things freely with white people and black people. I never had a chance to have those conversations before.”

Through the many hours of work, finding childcare, working, and figuring out ways to finance college, Atkinson kept a profound sense of gratitude for her college experience. “I just appreciate everything I did to earn that degree,” she says. “I earned it, and I’m so proud of it.”



My Odyssey: A Life-Altering Journey

By Eugene Smalls '12

Read at his Odyssey Project graduation ceremony

I was born in prison: my mom was in prison while she was pregnant with me, and she died during labor as I was born. Because of the lifestyle I chose, I was in and out of prison or jail all my life from the time I was 12 years old.

In 1997 I was born again and began a journey with Jesus. In 2011 I began a different kind of journey called The Odyssey Project, setting me free from a life of ignorance and illiteracy. My journey in and through Odyssey has been breathtaking and life altering, and I am blessed beyond my imagination. I am in Odyssey, and Odyssey is in me. I went from a drug-addicted, alcoholic, drug-dealing, and gangbanging thug to a hardworking man of God who visits and preaches to those who are behind bars. Hallelujah!



Odyssey Behind Bars

By Eugene Smalls '12

It was exciting, and it was exhilarating. The room was electrifying in anticipation. We were all sitting in a circle, and I almost expected Emily to walk up out of the shadows.

There were 40 men at Fox Lake Prison hand-picked by Chaplain Deborah Melchar. There were men from every walk of life. Some were black, some were white, some were lifers, and some were going home in a couple of weeks.

The one thing they all had in common was that they heard about the Odyssey Project, and they wanted in. They said, "Don't leave me out!" All 40 men participated, and all were eager to read out of the Odyssey Course Reader. Everyone turned in their homework and looked forward to reading and discussing the text reading or homework. Never in my life have I seen so many men so eager to participate in a school activity.

The volunteers—what can I say about them? None of them were new to prison, although none were convicted of a crime to get there. All were just as eager to be part of the Odyssey Project behind bars. There was Jean Feraca (one of the founding members of Odyssey), who brought Odyssey into the prisons. Jean has a love for Socrates and "The Allegory of the Cave," and she brings Socrates, Plato, and "The Allegory of the Cave" to life. Then there were Ruth, Janis, Gail, Elizabet, Jerri, and myself (Minister/Chaplain Eugene Smalls), along with Chaplain Deborah Melchar and Activity Director Chuck Gove.

The 49 of us came together in one accord on a commonality: the love of philosophy.

ODYSSEY PROJECT PROVIDES HOPE FOR IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

by Dean Robbins for UW News



"If I had not been in the Odyssey Project I would not be where I am today," says Josephine Lorya-Ozulamoi, a refugee from Sudan. "I would have been in a dark place. But instead the Odyssey Project shed a light into my life, and I am on the road to success."

The University of Wisconsin-Madison Odyssey Project is a free college humanities class for adults near the poverty level, helping them achieve their dreams of higher education. Over its 14-year history, Odyssey has attracted many immigrants and refugees from all parts of the world. These students enrich the class with their varied perspectives, just as multicultural newcomers have always enriched the United States.

"Immigrants broaden the definition of America," says Odyssey Project director Emily Auerbach. "They make us look at our own history and values through fresh eyes. When we find common ground in class, such as writing about dreams for our families, it breaks down all kinds of walls."

The 2016-17 Odyssey class provides a melting-pot vision worthy of Emma Lazarus, whose poem "The New Colossus" graces the Statue of Liberty with its image of "huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Indeed, "The New Colossus" is a key part of the Odyssey reading list. The poet's words have special meaning for Odyssey students who've journeyed to America for the promise of liberty and justice for all.



Joy left Trinidad and Tobago in search of tolerance for homosexuality. She arrived in New York City with \$100 in her pocket and Martin Luther King's words ringing in her ears: "Free at last, free at last!"

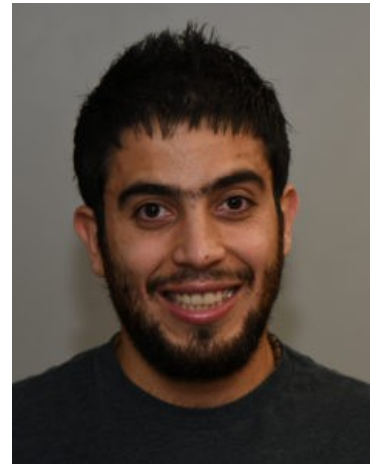
"It was a dream come true, and I felt like I belonged," she says.

After working for many years as a custodian in Madison, Joy hopes to continue her education and find more fulfilling work. She sees Odyssey as a step in the right direction.

"I will expand my mind and expose myself to many different perspectives on life," she says. "This is a journey that will open up new opportunities for me."

Ahmad planned to study dentistry in his native Syria. But war intervened, and Ahmad received a visa to pursue his education in the United States. After several semesters at Madison College, he applied to the Odyssey Project to improve his writing and find a community.

"Since I am alone in America without my family, I wanted to be around people," says Ahmad, who was recently granted political asylum by the Department of Homeland Security. "Odyssey will keep me going forward to pursue my education."



Grisel emigrated from Mexico at age 15, entering Madison's East High School with no English skills. Since then she has dedicated herself to serving the community and is currently board president of Nuestro Mundo Inc., which promotes cross-cultural education. She was chosen as one of Brava Magazine's "Women to Watch" and received the Centro Hispano Ilda Conteris Thomas leadership award.

Grisel entered the Odyssey Project to improve her reading and writing skills and to find motivation for earning a college degree.

"I know I can do a lot more to serve our community by preparing myself educationally," she says. "The Odyssey Project will help me grow professionally and as a person."

For inspiration, these current Odyssey students can look to Lorya-Ozulamoi, who emigrated to the United States after escaping the war in South Sudan. Lorya-Ozulamoi's experience in the 2008 Odyssey class provided the springboard for an undergraduate degree, and now a graduate degree; in May she will earn her master's in social work from UW-Madison. She plans to embark on a career of helping refugees.



Lorya-Ozulamoi had a rocky road to completing her degrees, marked by financial hardship and bureaucratic obstacles. But she persevered with assistance from the Odyssey Project.