

As Seen In  
**Madison**  
magazine

# BEHIND THE ODYSSEY

**How one college course  
is transforming lives**

*by* **EMILY AUERBACH**

PORTRAITS BY CHRIS HYNES

**QUITE A CLASS:**  
For Sherri Bester, the Odyssey Project has helped her to “open up the endless doors to education, freedom, empowerment and hope.”



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**ineisha Scott remembers running out** of the house in the middle of the night with no shoes on, scared, hiding to get away from the abuse and drug use overrunning her home. As a young man, Corey Saffold found himself racially profiled. Sherri Bester suffered from PTSD and anxiety so extreme she got severe panic attacks during tests.

These three Madisonians faced personal struggles and obstacles that often seemed insurmountable. Fortunately, they also each encountered a class syllabus that included Plato, Whitman, Dickens, Shakespeare and Toni Morrison.

And they embarked on paths to success beginning in a classroom in the library on the south side of Madison.

Scott, Saffold and Bester are all graduates of the Odyssey Project, a free humanities course offered through UW–Madison’s Division of Continuing Studies and English Department to adult students facing economic barriers to college. Each year, the Odyssey Project gives thirty students free tuition, textbooks and childcare—and access to life-changing discussions of literature, philosophy, history and art led by UW humanities faculty.

Ten years ago when I launched this program with the help of my Wisconsin Public Radio colleague Jean Feraca and a team of other UW faculty members (Craig Werner, Marshall Cook and Gene Phillips), we hoped our challenging two-semester course would not only give students six UW credits but also help them find a new sense of power.

Since then, three hundred adults have walked through the doors of our classroom. Some

of our students have moved from homelessness to UW degrees and on to graduate school, from incarceration to meaningful work in the community. Whole families have been transformed.

Tineisha Scott, a single mother of three who identifies herself as African American, Caucasian and Native American, was one of the thirty students accepted into the first Odyssey class in 2003. She combined her six Odyssey credits from UW with coursework from MATC and went on to Edgewood College to earn a bachelor’s degree with honors in psychology.

“Both my parents were addicted to crack cocaine. My father was in and out of prison,” says Scott. “I was born in Madison and I wanted to change the cycle of poverty in my family. I became the first college graduate in my family and out of all my friends.”

Last year, Scott also became the first Odyssey student to earn a master’s degree. She now works as a marriage and family therapist, a social worker and a coordinator at a shelter for women and children.

At home, Scott’s eighth grader is an award-winning student already visiting colleges and talking about her future, and the younger siblings are thriving, too. “My educational success has already had an impact on my children,” she says. “The Odyssey Project helped me build confidence in myself, gave me inspiration and offered me a support system—something that was so foreign to me.”

Like Scott, Corey Saffold’s path to success was blocked by a lack of confidence. “My mindset was my biggest obstacle,” he says. “I didn’t believe in myself. I didn’t believe I was smart enough.”

Along with his twenty-nine classmates in the 2005–2006 program, Saffold spent two semesters discussing challenging works of literature, philosophy and history. He read Emily Dickinson, analyzed the Federalist Papers, wrote poetry, acted out scenes from *A Raisin in the Sun*, discussed Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” and visited the Chazen Museum of Art. As a class assignment, Saffold wrote an editorial about the unbalanced incarceration rate of black men in Wisconsin. He saw his article published in the *Wisconsin State Journal* and heard Wisconsin Supreme Court Chief Justice Shirley Abrahamson



**SNAPSHOTS OF SUCCESS:** (clockwise from above left) Tineisha Scott and her family; Sherri Bester with Bucky Badger; Corey Saffold and fellow Madison Police officer and Odyssey alum Anthony Ward; the current Odyssey class.





## A PERSONAL ODYSSEY

“Why would poor people want to take a humanities class?” a newspaper reporter asked me. After answering the question as best I could, I called my mother and got a much more eloquent response.

“Why talk about ‘poor people’ as if they are different than any other human beings?” my mother replied. “If anything, poor people are closer to suffering, injustice, deferred dreams and other topics explored in literature. They need the humanities and will respond more viscerally to what they read, not less.”

Born in Appalachia, my mother grew up dirt-poor without running water. No one in her family had gone to college—or even dreamed of it. My father’s family lost everything when forced to flee Nazi Germany. My parents, Wanda and Robert Auerbach, met at Kentucky’s Berea College, the sole four-year liberal arts college in the country accepting only low-income students and offering free tuition to all. Both my parents went on to earn advanced degrees at Columbia University and to lead professional lives here in Madison—my father as a UW zoology professor, my mother as a medical reference librarian on campus.

Because of my parents’ story, I passionately believe in providing access to higher education for those in our community who have

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refer to it in her address at his graduation ceremony.

“The Odyssey Project showed me that I was smarter than I ever imagined,” he says. “It changed how I thought of myself, which changed how I thought of life.”

A father of two and a local musician, Saffold now works full-time as a Madison police officer while pursuing his bachelor’s degree through Concordia University’s criminal justice program. He serves on the

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**“The Odyssey Project offered me a support system—something that was so foreign to me.”**

– TINEISHA SCOTT

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## BEHIND THE ODYSSEY

*A Personal Mission, continued from page 65*

tremendous gifts but lack the income and the confidence. Every year for the last ten years, I have brought my parents with me into the Odyssey classroom. Their story of escaping poverty through hard work and determination inspires us all.

The 2013 graduation ceremony will be bittersweet. A few months ago, my mother died while leaning her head on her beloved husband of sixty-two years. At the May 8 graduation ceremony, we will award the first Wanda Auerbach Memorial Odyssey Scholarships to past and present students facing adversity as they try to achieve their dreams through higher education.

I know my mother would be pleased, as she made it her mission to help others. ■



### ODYSSEY IN ACTION

For a more detailed look into the Odyssey Project and the lives it's changing, watch this twenty-four-minute documentary that aired on the Big Ten Network, produced for UW-Madison by StoryBridge.tv. Download the Digimarc app and scan the above photo to watch the video on your smartphone or tablet, or find it at [odyssey.wisc.edu](http://odyssey.wisc.edu).

**“It changed  
how I thought  
of myself,  
which changed  
how I thought  
of life.”**

— COREY SAFFOLD





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**BEHIND THE ODYSSEY**

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force with fellow Odyssey alum Anthony Ward, a UW student and father of five.

“People who thought that they would never go to college are now making the Dean’s List,” says Saffold. “Their children do better in school and have plans for college.”

For Sherri Bester of the 2008 class, the Odyssey Project’s draw was the support system that encouraged her through dark times. A survivor of abuse who has mental illness, disabilities and extreme test anxiety, Bester has worked hard to overcome her fears.

The Odyssey Project has, in her words, helped her “break through the glass walls and rusty chains, to unlock the fearful bars and dark cages and to open up the endless doors to education, freedom, empowerment and hope.”

When the UW chose a student to receive a Community Service Award last year, they selected Bester because of her tireless activism mentoring children through the Boys and Girls Club, in after-school programs and in the Odyssey childcare rooms each Wednesday night. A mother of six children, Bester will inspire them all as she walks across the stage of the Kohl Center in May to receive her bachelor’s degree in community and nonprofit leadership from UW–Madison. She has applied for graduate school and feels nothing can stop her now.

Other Odyssey graduates have earned degrees, formed foundations, published articles, won awards, run for office, held art exhibits, acted in plays, mentored youth and started careers. “The Odyssey Project allowed me to unwrap my gifts,” wrote one student. Said another, “Odyssey helped me rewrite the story of my life.”

*EMILY AUERBACH is director of the Odyssey Project and an English professor at UW–Madison. For more information on the Odyssey Project, visit [odyssey.wisc.edu](http://odyssey.wisc.edu).*

**CONGRATS TO THE GRADS!**

*On May 8, thirty new students will become proud UW Odyssey Project graduates. Mayor Paul Soglin will be on hand to offer congratulations, and he will listen as each student comes to the podium and shares something from the class. Students who started out the course so shy they could not speak will proudly raise their voices to family members and an audience of several hundred. The event will take place in the Great Hall of the UW’s Memorial Union from 6:30 to 8 p.m. and is open to the public.*

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