



[New \\$3 million endowment will enable UW Odyssey Project to continue to combat inequities](#)

July 9, 2020 By [Lisa Bauer](#)



The UW Odyssey Project class of 2020 during a visit to the Chazen Museum. **DAVID GIROUX**

In the midst of a highly insecure time, the University of Wisconsin–Madison [Odyssey Project](#) secured \$3 million in gifts, a base for the future of Odyssey and its transformational work in breaking the cycle of generational poverty through access to education. Odyssey graduates, over 90 percent of whom are students of color, have journeyed from homelessness to UW–Madison degrees, from incarceration to community leadership.

“In these uncertain times where COVID-19 and, for much longer, systemic racism has plagued our world, knowing that the UW Odyssey Project has a sustainable future gives me hope as we try to forge a new, equitable world,” says Brian Benford, a 2007 Odyssey graduate and Odyssey Success Coach who’s also been an educator, activist, and Madison alder. “Education will play a critical role in transforming marginalized people’s lives to offer a better chance of reaching their full potential.”

Thanks to a \$500,000 gift from the Pleasant T. Rowland Foundation and 15 other major pledges over a five-year period, Odyssey raised \$1.5 million, matched by John and Tashia Morgridge for a \$3 million endowed distinguished chair to continue its transformative work.

Now heading into its 18th year, the award-winning Odyssey Project takes a whole family approach, giving adult and youth learners increased confidence through reading, writing and speaking. Odyssey participants say the program helps them find and use their voices.

“Odyssey was the single most important decision I have made in my life,” says Corey Saffold, a 2006 Odyssey graduate who is the director of safety and security for Verona Area School District and a member of the UW System Board of Regents. “Odyssey taught me that I had a voice and then showed me how to use my voice. It’s one thing to receive education; it’s a whole other thing to receive inspiration while receiving an education. That is what sets Odyssey apart.”

With the new \$3 million in gifts, the Odyssey Project will create a distinguished chair named in memory of Odyssey Director Emily Auerbach’s mother, Wanda Auerbach, who made it out of dire poverty in Appalachia through her love of reading and a free education at Berea College.

Many Odyssey graduates have met Wanda Auerbach. “Wanda is the catalyst,” says Rene Robinson, a 2008 graduate. “If not for her background, achievements and the educational background she impressed upon her daughter Emily, there would be no Odyssey.”



Wanda Auerbach, center, with her daughter Emily, left, who directs the Odyssey Project and husband Bob, right.

UW–Madison Chancellor Rebecca Blank echoed admiration of the Odyssey Project and Emily Auerbach’s determination to give others the chance her mother received.

“Emily Auerbach’s commitment to her students has changed the lives of generations of families in our community,” Blank said. “I can think of no better way to recognize this achievement than by honoring the woman who taught Emily to love learning – her mother Wanda. I want to thank Pleasant Rowland

and the Pleasant T. Rowland Foundation for their incredible gift, the other generous donors who helped Odyssey reach its goal and John and Tashia Morgridge for offering matching funds because of their belief that an endowment is a gift that lasts forever.”

In addition to the Pleasant T. Rowland Foundation gift, Odyssey received major donations from three other organizations – the Oscar Rennebohm Foundation, The Roots and Wings Foundation and the Friends of the UW Odyssey Project, Inc. – and [individual donors](#).

“We’re so grateful for the multi-year pledges made by this generous group of donors, and for the inspiring matching gift from John and Tashia Morgridge,” says Odyssey development director Jenny Pressman. “These endowment funds will help ensure Odyssey’s future while we continue to seek support for current program needs. We can now focus on addressing student needs such as technology access, something which has become particularly important for our students as COVID-19 upends their lives and moves classes online.”

The Odyssey Project has empowered more than 450 low-income life-long learners and 150 of their children and grandchildren to find their voices and reimagine their futures.

“I love to write, create and make positive decisions that uplift people out of systemic poverty,” says 2006 Odyssey graduate and Odyssey classroom assistant Char Braxton. “My story will show other Odyssey students that they can achieve their dreams no matter what obstacles they endure.”

Link: <https://news.wisc.edu/new-3-million-endowment-will-enable-uw-odyssey-project-to-continue-to-combat-inequities/>

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