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ODYSSEY ORACLE

CELEBRATING THE GRADUATING CLASS OF 2021



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ODYSSEY GRADUATES

CLASS OF 2021



BETSY ALFARO

I remember doing the Odyssey interview while I was at work. I did not know what to expect. I remember thinking, what will they ask and how will I answer? I was nervous and, in a way, happy it was over Zoom since I am shy

when I meet new people, but Emily and Kevin made it very easy to answer questions and did not judge. After the interview, I went back down to my desk and hoped for the best. My co-workers who knew I applied all knew I would get a spot, but I was very doubtful because of a habit I have of blocking my own blessings.

When I found out I got a spot in the project, I was very excited to see what this new adventure would bring and could not believe it. I started to think about how I would manage two kids and also being a student. This journey definitely showed me to believe in myself more, not to block my own blessings, and to give myself more credit. It was hard to juggle being a mommy and student, but I am glad I was part of this journey with Odyssey. I wish we could have done real live classes to see my full potential as well as how far my classmates could go. I appreciate all the tutors, and I know my girls will miss their red goody bags. I am thankful to Emily and Kevin for giving me the chance. Now it is only up from here for all of us.



TAWANIA ALSTON

Wow. 2020 was quite a year. Who knew that one year ago our whole world would change so drastically and we'd have to adapt to it? This last year had many ups and downs—more

downs than ups—but there are some things that kept me sane. I came to the point in my life where I was just existing. You ever have that feeling? Like you're not doing bad, you're not doing good, but you're just floating around maintaining what you have and the spark in your life is missing, your feet are starting to drag, and life is starting to pass you by while you feel like everyone else's is progressing—that's how it was.

I thought to myself, I could be doing so much more with my life, but how do I change it? First step was school. I remembered this program my friends used to tell me about (Breonna Hawkins '19 and Aerial Bailey '20) and decided to apply. I was so excited when I actually got accepted. I finally had something to look forward to, the chance I was looking for to further my education and give my life a push in the right direction. Now here we are today, and I'm so happy that I'm still a part of this program. I admit now, looking at my time in this program, I wish that I had participated more, that my homework was in every week ON TIME, and that I was able to meet all of you in person, but I'm extremely thankful for everything this class has helped me accomplish and learn. I see exactly why they call this class the Odyssey Project because it was a journey that was filled with hardships but also some great experiences. I can't wait to see what's in store for me after this, but my next goal is to continue schooling and eventually get my bachelor's in social work.

Until then, thank you so much. To the staff, you all are utterly amazing. You genuinely care about the students and make every effort to keep us on track while making sure we have everything we need. To my sisters (Yvonne and Brianna), I am so proud of you both (and Asia). You are a huge reason I didn't give up and why I pushed my way to the end because I couldn't wait to say we all are Odyssey Alumni of 2021. To my family, thank you for supporting me and

cheering me on in everything I do. To my daughter, you can be anything you want and more; the sky is the limit! It doesn't matter how long it takes or how hard it is, power through and never give up. Cheers to a great year, a great class, and meeting great people!



CALVIN BALENTINE

Thank you, Odyssey class participants, students, staff, tutors, all. You guys came at the right time. I needed to make some changes that were more about unfolding Calvin than adjusting Calvin. The

thing about unfolding yourself is that you have to dig deep into yourself, grab discomfort, and snatch it out. Odyssey allows the space to dig into Calvin, grab ahold of the hate, anger, and pain, the resentfulness, low self-esteem, and self-hate, and pull it out in a way that doesn't destroy me or others. For that, I'm forever grateful. Thank you!



SARINA BENFORD

When the pandemic started, it really gave me a chance to reflect on my life. I had just started working from home, pulled my six-month-old out of daycare, and had taken on teaching my eight-year-old

virtually. Things were chaotic, to say the least, but we grew to have a routine and got used to the change for the most part. I look back and realize that I tried to really embrace having all that unexpected time. I grew a garden, started biking, went camping, bonded with my children, walked my dog more, and self-reflecting. I realized I wanted more for myself, and when I set goals, I accomplish them. I wanted to go back to school and get a degree. After hearing about the Odyssey Project and how they help their students by giving them a chance to succeed without the feeling of barriers, I applied for their fall course. I am so happy that I did, and I have been so inspired by the classes and teachers I have had throughout the year.

I'd like to thank my uncle, Brian '07, who inspired me by being one of the best success stories I have heard come from Odyssey. Having him close to me through this course after my dad passing is something I hold close, and it really means that much more to me knowing he believes in me just as much as I know my dad did. I want to thank Char '06, also; she has become my second Aunt Char, as I have the most amazing aunt who is also named Char. Ms. Char, you are just the sweetest woman and I am so glad to have met you through this program. Thank you, Emily, for having such a great program, giving me a chance, and helping me feel like I truly can reach my goals.



SOUAD BIDAR

Since 2016, I haven't stopped dreaming of joining UW for a moment. It was much too hard for someone like me, being a single mother and a foreigner, alone in the US!—until the day I met Kossiawavi Elo

(Odyssey '20) at my work in 2019, the only person I could speak French with here in Madison. This remarkable person has become my best friend; she has done me so much service, the best of which is when she told me about the Odyssey Project.

At the beginning I could not believe it because, for me, integrating into UW remains a dream that takes a long way, a lot of work, and especially too much money. But thanks to Kossiawavi, I learned that I should never let a dream die on the horizon. A big thank you to my dear friend Kossiawavi.

Then comes the big day, the day of my interview with Mrs. Emily. I did my interview with Mrs. Emily and Kevin. I was not sure that I would be admitted; at the present moment I am writing these words and I cannot believe it, that part of my dream is in the process of coming true. I realized how far I was from my dream when I approached it.

I wanted to thank you with all my heart, Mrs. Emily, for the support you have shown me throughout this journey. I believe that without you, integrating

with the Odyssey Project would not have been possible. Your courses as well as your help have been invaluable to me and allowed me to progress, evaluate my level of English, and enrich my culture in general. I sincerely thank you for all of these things.

I also wanted to thank Kevin, Adelina, Emily Azad, Mrs. Karen, Char, and the whole Odyssey team without forgetting all the guest professors who have agreed to share their knowledge with us. Thank you so very much.



ANJELICA BROWN

A single mom living in a pandemic, I decided to apply for the Odyssey Program, not knowing that classes would be meeting over Zoom. I had heard about this program from a family member who once was in the program (cousin Victoria Patterson '17). I remember having my interview to get accepted into the program with Ms. Emily and Mr. Kevin. After the interview, I thought for sure they would overlook me because I felt I didn't answer the questions the right way. A few weeks went by, and I got a call from Ms. Emily saying I was accepted into the program. I was so happy to start this journey. Once I found out it would not be in-person classes and that it would all be over zoom, my anxiety kicked in. I thought I couldn't do this class over Zoom having an autistic son at home and running a daycare in my home. But look at me now, nine months later; I stayed strong and didn't give up.



TISHA BUTLER

It was a time for a change. In June 2019, I was in a personal development cohort class and I read about all the graduating classes of Odyssey. I started thinking about going back to school. I want to be a social worker, but I didn't have the money to pay for schooling. I saw that it said "free college credits,"

so I applied. I got accepted into the Odyssey program. We were supposed to meet face-to-face, but because of COVID-19, we had to do it online and virtually. I was scared that I was going to fail. But I knew to fulfill my purpose I needed to hang in there. With great staff and great classmates, I was motivated, and here I am now graduating.

Emily helped me with doing the virtual format. She was patient with me and she was considerate of what I was going through. I also want to say thank you to Brian and Karen. I told Karen what I was going through with my kids. She recommended me to Brian, and he talked to me about resources I could get. My classmate Sarah helps me, especially when I am so behind. She says, "let's go to your house, and finish it together." She pushed me. Even now she texts me and asks me what else I need to get done. My kids have also been really encouraging me. They also let me know that they are proud of me going back to school. This was important to me to go back to school so my 16- and 14-year-old can see it's possible.

I liked Martin Luther King, Jr.'s I Have a Dream speech because it let me know that I have a Dream, too. I still have a dream, even though I lost myself, and his speech made me realize that my dreams still would go on, even though I was in a dark space. It made me realize I still have a dream, even though it was so buried. My dream is to get back to fulfilling my purpose. That's my passion and it makes me feel so bubbly inside. Just talking about it makes me excited.

When we did the play A Raisin in the Sun, I volunteered to read. I loved that play. Baron, the acting coach, was excited, and his excitement got me to push myself. His energy passed onto me. Even though I am an introvert, I threw myself into it. I came out of my shell and pushed myself to do it. I did better than I thought I would do it. I thought I was an actress. It felt good doing that because I usually don't do something like that.

I attended almost all of the classes because I felt like I was getting one step closer to my goal. I go to sleep and wake up thinking about the work. I don't

know what the next step is going to be. I want to become a social worker. With my own struggles in life and not having anyone, I started reaching out to my community. I started to learn that they could help me, and the social worker who was helping me made me so interested in becoming a social worker. I am into helping people, especially single moms like myself. I want to reach out to people and give back to people like myself, single moms with kids. I like doing research that helps people get their lives in order.

I also like encouraging people and lifting people. If someone is down, then a person who smiles can lift them up. I would like to start an organization for single mothers with disadvantaged kids who are troubled, and we would get together and support one another.

I would advise someone starting next year to "Keep Going." The staff we have really encouraged us to keep going. It was hard to give up with all that encouragement from the staff. They believed in me more than I believed in myself. I thought if they can believe in me, why can't I believe in myself?



CASHAE DAVIS

My name is Cashae. I started the Odyssey Project in September of 2020. I would say I'm a very humble, quiet, and busy person. I felt like I really needed to start focusing on more important things

in life. I did some research, found the Odyssey Project, did my phone interview, and here I am.

When I first started the Odyssey Project, I wasn't expecting it to be so well laid out. I say this because we had our entire classes on Zoom. I've learned so many things in this class. I learned it's good to put what you're thinking or feeling on paper. I learned that it can make you creative in so many ways, from writing a poem, singing a song, or drawing out art. All of the history from MLK to

Malcolm X was a refresher, a very interesting topic to go back and dive into.

Between work, being a part of this project, and caring for my kids, I cannot believe I have made it this far. The Odyssey Project staff is so very supporting in everything they do, always giving that push to succeed and to never give up, because at a point I wanted to give up. I am so thankful for all of the Odyssey staff, and a huge huge shout out and thanks to Emily Auerbach. On my worst days, help was always there. You don't have to be overwhelmed and can work at your own pace. Huge thanks to the Auerbach family. They are such amazing people that gave us all this gift of being a part of Odyssey. Most of all, the story of the Auerbachs was very touching and my absolute favorite. Another favorite part out of the class was the role playing [from plays] between classmates on Zoom. I honestly cannot believe I'm graduating. This is something so huge to me! The Odyssey project is amazing!



PARIS FOSTER

Before Odyssey, I thought I wanted to be a nurse, but taking these courses and meeting all these amazing people, I changed my study to law. This program helped me see the bigger picture in life.

I've been really turning dreams to reality. When they talk down Paris, bless up.

2017 changed my life forever... I didn't know I bossed up heavy dough: Londyn Paris Hatcher, for real, my daughter. She is three now, born on August 10, 2017. I prayed for Londyn. My mom, Lolita '13, and sister, Prodajae '15, took this class before me. I never listen, but lately I've been listening and learning, and because of that I have something money can't buy. To my sisters, Londyn's godfather, her father, his mom, Maria, and family that won't let me give up: I love y'all. I have a really strong support team.



SARAH GALINSKI

Sassy single MaMa of a FOUR PIECE SPICY TRAVEL CREW! Super large and in-charge personality. Bold and beautiful leader to few...we may be TINY, but we are definitely mighty. Some days I feel grey like an

elephant, other days I feel as GIANT as an elephant where NOTHING can stop me. When I reflect back on my year, it has been tumultuous to say the least...I am truly grateful for every second of every day of every week of every month, of the entire year of 2020! It sure was a doozy of a year, though. I AM GRATEFUL! The spirit of gratitude has brought me the strength to persevere. I AM A CONQUEROR!

Heyyyyyyyyyyy, ya'll, LOL I just wanna say WE MADE IT! There were so many trials and tribulations for so many of us, but we did the damn thang and PUSHED on through. We learned about how our Royal Ancestors had been Marvelous from jump...literally freeing themselves. I loved learning how we were NEVER oppressed people but brilliant WORTHY trailblazers. I LOVE MY HUE, HOW ABOUT YOU? You all are the bomb dot com, and there's NOTHING you cannot do, ya hear me?!!! NOTHING!! My goals are HEAVY, as heavy as a baby elephant (268 lbs. to be exact). OLLY OLLYY OXEN FREE, free your mind of your GOALS, are you free? Stay with me...It's as easy as 1,2,3...share the wealth! Last but not least, I gotta thank my four-piece spicy travel crew, ya knew! I can't forget to thank MYSELF! I also wanna thank you all for your time and presence, I appreciate you for being present with me and my Crew, Class of 2020/2021! Check out the view!



ERIKA GONZALEZ

Being a young mother is HARD, but I have to make things work no matter what, and sometimes that means my needs do not always come first. I have always wanted to attend college, but not qualifying for financial

aid meant that I had to come up with the money

myself, which meant that dream needed to be put on hold. When one of my friends would not stop talking about Odyssey and how she loved being a part of the class, I asked her a bunch of questions and was excited to apply, which I did that night. I remember when I found out I was accepted into Odyssey, I was sitting in my car, tears immediately going down my face as I talked to Emily, who was giving me the good news. I felt like after five years of not being able to afford school, I finally had the chance to go back and do something for myself.

I would like to thank my family and my partner for always motivating me and having my back during hard times. Without their support, I would not have made it. I would like to thank everyone who helped us, the Odyssey Class of 2021. I learned something valuable from everyone that attended our Zoom calls.



VALERIA GORDON

I have been doing pretty well for myself, as far as my jobs and living situation. But I wanted more excitement. I was working at an assisted living home, and this lady named Tina was always coming into work all excited and full of brightness, a smile from ear to ear.

So one day I asked her, "Why are you so excited all the time?" She stated that she was in this class called the Odyssey Project, and how it changed her way of living and seeing things in the world. I asked her for the information and followed the steps, and here I am.

I am very proud to be an Odyssey Project student. It has been such a blessing being able to work with Professor Emily and the rest of the crew. It has been a hard for me due to my family issues and due to COVID, so at times I was not able to attend a few classes, but they were all there for me, and with determination I made it through. I will refer this program to the whole wide world. Thank you so much, Odyssey Project! Thank you so much, Professor Emily.

**BRESHA GREEN**

I was nervous going into Odyssey because I'm terrible at speaking in front of a class and childcare has always been an obstacle for me. I knew going into Odyssey during COVID would be another challenge

because I do better in a classroom setting. I strongly dislike Zoom, and having my three kids during Zoom was very difficult. After I tried to give up, Emily told me to stick it out and I did. Thanks, Emily, for not letting me give up!

I would say to someone who is thinking about joining that Odyssey is a great opportunity and learning experience.

**MELISSA HERRIGES**

Lost in a whirlwind of work was my life when I interviewed for Odyssey. There never seemed to be enough hours in the day. Burning the candle at both ends seemed like child's play to me. Burning the candle at

both ends and the middle was all I knew. A life full of work while raising three teenagers, serving the community and church seemed like a cake walk. Having to let Odyssey go after fall semester of 2019 was a wakeup call for me to make some changes in my life. I am truly thankful for how this class opened my eyes to see that I was piling too much onto my plate.

My children have supported me every step of the way and have had a chance to see me as a student and lead them by example. I would like to say thank you to my children for supporting me and giving me time to do this for me. Thank you to my friends who encouraged me to keep going when it seemed like I would never be able to finish this class; you kept me motivated and moving forward.

**KWAN HOGAN**

This last year has been both rough for me and also a blessing. Though I have struggled with money, transportation, or even with schoolwork, there have been voices in my head that tell me

not to give up. These voices are from the people in my life that cheer me on and guide me through the clouds of confusion. My mom, who pushes me to be my best self, makes me work as hard as I can on every task. So does my sister Kira, whose drive and determination in her own schoolwork inspired me to get back into school. Also, my "Aunt" Ozanne Anderson '08 is the one who told me about Odyssey. She actually was in the class as well. These few people, plus hearing all the beautiful and touching stories from my classmates, really helped me open up and go for gold with my schoolwork, and I want to thank them for that.

I've learned a lot this past year. I knew that I had an acting spirit, but with the help of Professor Baron, I feel like my comfort level with acting in front of others has changed greatly. When we were discussing slavery, the topic would bring up a lot of anger in me. But the way we broke our discussions down really brought to light in me how we have to keep telling our kids the story of our ancestors. Education is power, and if we lose it, we are bound to repeat history. Not only that, but my eyes were also reopened to the wonders of poetry—not just reading, but also writing, it's a good way to express yourself.

I just want to thank all of the instructors; with their help, I no longer have a fear of my future. I was always telling myself I was going back to school, but I was scared I wouldn't finish like the last time. I now know that all depends on my drive and determination. I don't plan on giving up on my dreams of being a musician and owning my own business, and with the help of Odyssey, I have the tools to succeed in reaching my goals.

**HENRY IRISSON**

I first heard of Odyssey through a former student at Odyssey. She encouraged me to apply, but I never did. I was like, “Nah, they probably will say that I am not able to apply due to my political status.” I follow

Odyssey on and off on Facebook, and I noticed a guy who I know that is in the same boat as I am currently. Then I said, “Yes, why not?” So I went ahead and applied in the early summer of 2019. Unfortunately, I was rejected at the time [because the class had been closed the day before]. To be honest, I went into a deeper depressive state for a little while, thinking to myself, “Forget it, I have always been rejected at UW, so I don’t even know why I applied.” Fortunately, Emily sent me an email sometime in the late spring or early summer in 2020. I reapplied, and I said I was still interested in being part of the program.

I had my interview, and I still remember I was doing an odd job during the eye of the pandemic, cutting trees down, and I went to take a break for my interview while thinking: “Me... cutting trees when I consider myself a tree hugger? What?” After my interview, I was so happy, and right there and then it hit me. I learned that I needed to be in this program in 2020 and not the year before, and I needed to be rejected the year before. Why? Because I believe that everything comes at the right moment in life. Now I don’t see myself thinking what it could have been to be a UW student because now I am, and I feel amazing. I feel especially amazing to be part of this amazing program, where I’ve met folks from all walks of life, and without a doubt the wonderful faculty and staff truly want to help people get back on their feet.

Now that I am in the program, I want to get back on track to get my bachelor’s. I feel awake, ready, and with so much thirst for victory. Victory, as in finishing my degree, as it has been a battle throughout all of my life. Thank you, Odyssey; thank you, Emily, faculty, and staff, and thank you UW for finally giving me an opportunity; this is all on you.

**JESSICA JACOBS**

I have always been a person who loves to learn. Even as a child, you could find me in my bedroom hibernating, reading a book on the weekends when the other kids were outside playing. My mom always impressed on me

how important education was, and you could always find her with a book in her hands as well.

It was rough growing up in our home. Many others can relate to the horrors and traumas that come from growing up poor and in a dysfunctional family. I had to witness and was also a victim of many traumas that this lifestyle will bring about. I had grand ideas of travelling the world and learning other cultures as a kid. After all, I am a Sagittarius, lol. I would never have pictured my life would lead this way. As an adult, I can look back now and see the cards dealt to people like me; it is very hard to break the cycle of addiction, trauma, and poverty.

So, yeah, the cycle was not broken by me. And when I came into this program, after living through the hell I lived through, I was afraid of failure. After all, I’ve proven several times in the past that I could get my s**t together but could never keep it together.

So, the fear of failure played a big part in the beginning for me. However, here I sit, about to actually graduate. I went through a lot too in this process, but all the staff worked with me and helped me so much. From catching COVID, relationship problems, moving, changing jobs, and emotional stress, I still made it through! I was determined not to give up on myself. I am so grateful for the help given to me to see me through till the end, and now I plan to continue my education, moving into social work so that I can help people coming out of prison achieve the goals and dreams they have for themselves. I want to thank every staff member, teacher, student, and tutor for making this program the way it is. I have much gratitude for you all. Thank you for giving me a chance—because you did, I gave myself a chance too.



BRIANNA JOHNSON

When I first heard about the Odyssey Project, it was through friends on Facebook. At the time, the pandemic had started and I was out of work and struggling. Looking at my peers and seeing their progress definitely made

me want to join. My friends spoke great things of their experience and how many new things they learned. When I applied to Odyssey, I had no clue my sisters had also applied until call backs. Tawania and I were talking over the phone one day, and she happened to mention it. That's when I let her know I did too, and she told me about Yvonne. Being in the Odyssey class has been a blessing. Not only are we learning about new things, the community aspect of it has been so inviting, from the tutors to Karen, Char, Brian, and Emily with all the love and support.

It's crazy to know what the Auerbach family went through and dedicated to our group. It gave me the opportunity to learn and grow. I wasn't sure I would be good at writing and just learning overall. It had been eight years since I was in school. As time went on, I started learning more and more. It made me realize the value of education and how big of an impact it has on my life. This year has been rough, but learning more about Malcolm X, art, music, and new literature has inspired me. Odyssey gave me a stepping stone to college because I was unsure. Thank you to everyone in Odyssey for teaching me; your time and efforts went a long way. To my classmates, your stories, poems, and writing I will forever cherish. Some of you made me laugh, cry, and think in ways I hadn't before. Thank you, guys, for that, and I'm truly going to miss you, Class of 2021.



YVONNE JOHNSON

Hello and good afternoon, staff, family, friends, my fellow graduates. I'm happy to be a part of the class of 2021. For some, you have completed your journey, and for others like me,

you're a big step closer to getting there. Hi, I'm Yvonne Johnson, and I'm here to say: you did it. We did it. I did it.

Twelve years ago, I would have never thought it was possible. Being this young teen mom going through this crazy world had me thinking I was in a game of Jumanji. I know, right? But I really did. I was fooled by the world itself, so I thought. Yes, my journey was hard. I cried, I screamed, and sometimes even shouted, but no one could hear me. Coming out of high school as a young teen mom, I had no idea where I was headed, but time kept going; I still had no idea, and time kept going. I told myself it's time because of my little humans I call "my children": four of them, to be exact. They are my headache but also my strength.

Even though I felt like giving up when I was scared to ask for help or to speak up, being in this class has toughened me up so much now that I'm not alone. No matter how big, tall, or what color you are, everyone has their hard times, but we keep fighting, and this was no easy fight. We made it through a scary time in our lives. I am happy to say COVID did not win, and I'm thankful to be here with you all and my sisters in this Odyssey Class of 2021. It was an honor knowing you all; thank you.



FEATHER LLOYD

To all my Odyssey family, I love and appreciate you all. Being in this class with you all has been refreshing. I enjoyed the company, push, and encouragement from staff and classmates. The support from

everyone was great. Being able to have discussions on common literature with so many different points of view and different perspectives is a unique experience. An Odyssey is exactly what I am on, and this is just a stop. Thanks for all the support and motivation. The last few years have been a whirlwind of change, growth, and challenges unimagined. My family is my rock and my hard place. I love them unconditionally, and they are my motivation for everything. This Odyssey is far from over. I will

be forever grateful for this stepping-stone in my Odyssey, and I am looking forward to the new passage that awaits.



FARREN MCDONALD

There have been some dark moments in the past year. I was drifting, angry, confused and generally becoming lost. In work, I was stressed to the point of alcoholism; outside of work, I was desperate to the

point of madness. I was homesick, lonely, alienated, and completely unfulfilled intellectually. I felt like my brain was dying one tired, dive-bar laugh at a time. When I started the Odyssey, I promised myself I'd approach every assignment as openly and honestly as I could. I've mostly achieved that goal. But for everything I've put in, I've received far more in return.

It's not an exaggeration to say it's given me a new lease on life. Fifteen years ago, my personal development was warped violently, bulging out mindlessly across relationships, years, and even continents. I consider that chapter closed now. The changes I see in myself are momentous. I can't even list them all, but will try.

As of today, I haven't had a drop of alcohol in over 100 days (and counting). I'm 20 lbs. lighter.

I've applied to numerous colleges, and while I didn't get into many of them, I finally penetrated the baffling process and became much more proficient in describing who I am and where I'm going without having to resort to fluff or floral B.S.—a truly invaluable skill.

My writing has improved dramatically, being both technically stronger and more versatile. But I've also learned that putting a little bit of your honest soul at stake is what really connects with people. It's not perfect, but I'm working on it.

I've returned to playing music with an entirely fresh mindset. My book is nearly finished. I'm finally, FINALLY learning how to drive. I've been accepted

to the drama class, enrolled in MATC, and intend to transfer for a degree and go on to do a master's.

I no longer allow my mental state to be thrown off by minor setbacks. I put my heart into things and leave the ego at the door as much as I can. I'm not afraid of asking for help, nor afraid to admit I have problems.

I put all this down to the Odyssey's therapeutic focus on self-reflection and identity. The process is everything I didn't get in my own education and has reignited my passion for learning. I needed that push, that little bit of support. I needed someone to look at a piece of my writing and say, "This is good; you're not just a crazy person working in isolation."

It's put a wind in my sails, and I don't intend to ever lose that momentum again. I can't thank you all enough. To crib one of Walt Whitman's lines: "I, now thirty-five years old, in perfect health begin, hoping to cease not until death."



MICHELLE MCKOY

I was stuck in a job that gave me no satisfaction nor joy. It was the same routine day by day. I needed a change. I was living paycheck to paycheck praying that nothing went wrong, so I wouldn't have to extend myself

by working two or more jobs again.

Then, one night, I heard my friend Ron Burford '20 talk about the UW Odyssey Project. I could hear from the excitement in his voice how he loved his classes. I asked him about it. After hearing him talk, I knew I had to get in!

I remember how nervous I was to send in the application for Odyssey. I did not think I was going to get in. Thank God, my coworker, Corey, made me send in the application. Here I am, March 2020, a UW Odyssey student. I am really enjoying Odyssey, but it is not easy. I work full time, take care of grandkids, and still volunteer for the many committees I am involved in. There are times when I am in class as well as babysitting my four grandsons.

Luckily, my grandsons will sit on my lap and join in the class quietly. No matter if I make every class, I know this journey with UW Odyssey is the change I needed and prayed for.

I would love to thank my UW Odyssey classmates for being so open and welcoming. I loved reading your stories in the Oracle and connecting with all of you in class. I have learned so much from all of you. I hope one day to meet all of you in person.

I would also want to thank both my daughters, Andrea and Symantha, for their support. I was nervous about going back to school. Both daughters gave me encouragement and have been a huge support for me. I also want to thank my friend Aida. Every morning she listens to me talk about homework or school and has given me the support I need to finish this class. I am so blessed to have support from family and friends. I could not have completed this journey without you.

I do not want to forget to thank all the UW Odyssey staff! Emily, Kevin, Emily, Christina and Char, all of you have made going back to school fun. There is nothing but love and encouragement from all of you. I will miss all of you!



STEPHANEY OBI

I had just moved back to America with my children, but I was determined to provide a stable life for my family. A friend referred me to the program and, after learning about it, I knew it was right for

me. Completing this course has not come without its challenges, as I am an adult learner with a full-time job and children, and then all the changes were compounded because of COVID! Nonetheless, I made it!

I graduate from this program a stronger person, realizing that nothing is impossible when I am determined to succeed and dedicated to the process behind it. This course not only provided education on the topics, but it provided hope that I can go even further in my education and career.

I want to thank my family for their support, my children for being my motivation, my classmates for engaging me, and my instructors for challenging me because this Odyssey course opens doors and provides limitless opportunities.



ASIA PEARSON

The year 2020 brought me many losses, some I may never be able to get back. It also brought me new beginnings for which I am grateful to be a part of! I had heard of the Odyssey program a few times

before I decided to enroll. Even after I filled out my application, I was so nervous. The thought of going back to school after a decade had my stomach in a knot.

Then I interviewed with Emily and Kevin and immediately felt welcomed. Prior to enrolling I had just lost my job and found out my lease on my apartment was not being renewed. It felt like the whole world was closing in on me. I considered withdrawing my application with all that was going on, in fear of having more on my plate than I could eat. After speaking with Brian and Karen, I knew that I had to stick to the program and see it through. They encouraged me and uplifted me at a low point in my life.

That's what Odyssey has been for me: a journey that many others have taken with me. On that journey I learned that I am not alone. No matter how hard things may get, I will always wake up and give the day my best effort. Take the risk or lose the chance.



BURNETT REED

To my family and friends, I want to say thank you for your continued support. The journey has just begun. I want to thank God the most because I've overcome so many things in the last year, and without you, I'd

be lost. Also, super shout out to our teaching staff.

1000% greatness; I can't explain how appreciative of all of you I am for filling our hearts, minds, body, soul. Without you all, we wouldn't be trying to better ourselves. Big ups to everyone who helped out with tutoring (I know I had so many questions, lol). Big thanks/shout out to all the students in our 2021 class. I think meeting everyone was the best thing to me. This class has made me want to know each and every one of you personally (let's link the party soon—6 feet of course). I'm so grateful for all the uplifting this program does. I'm salty it's ending, hope to see y'all again soon.

Big shout out to Karen, Kevin, Brian, Emily, Baron, Char, Keena, Em, Christina, Bob, and also Emily's Mom. You guys need to get a Grammy for your effort, time, patience, and respect shown and given. Phenomenal job staying with us through this difficult time. Thank you.



DELISHA SMITH

In the middle of a pandemic, being in a dark place while expecting a baby put a toll on my body. I was betrayed and unemployed, with bills piling up to the sky.

A 35-year-old single mother of three boys, high risk, and expecting my fourth son, saying I was overwhelmed was an understatement. I was due months before starting the Class of 2021 Odyssey program. My mind was all over the place, not knowing what to expect. I already had a lot going on. My support system is very thin. My anxiety was through the roof. I am all that I have.

Being a part of the Odyssey Project centered me. I read into things differently with more positivity now. With all that I had going on, this program gave me hope. I took the leap to take my career further and become a CNA. Listening to my fellow classmates sharing their stories, pouring their hearts out, helped me not feel so ashamed of my own story. And I am very thankful for that.

I would like to thank Emily and Kevin for looking

past my many obstacles and giving me a chance. I would like to thank Karen and Brian for occupying my boys' time with a creative space. I also would like to thank Bob Auerbach and his late wife for coming up with such an amazing idea of this program. Just like you guys' story, this program has touched my heart in so many ways. I am very thankful for the opportunity. Again, thank you all!



THEDORA SMITH

A state of emergency was how Odyssey found me--a new graduate from Madison College with a learning disability, no job, and anxiety. The corona virus for most has been difficult, but for me, it was a

calm after the storm. It caused me to retreat and search within and get quiet; Odyssey took me by the hand and led me to a new path, one that I feel supported in. Every week Kevin and Emily hosted the Zoom and I felt more assured that I was in the right hands with Odyssey. For that I'm always grateful. You have left me better than where you found me.



DANA STOKES

I was always curious to learn. I would rollerblade to school if I missed the bus. I was in a program called Gear Up where I would get college experience, and I went to Whitewater for the summer. We went

to the John Hancock building, Six Flags, and extracurricular stuff other than getting into trouble. That was my curiosity strike with learning.

Soon after school I had kids. I didn't want my kids to not see me learning. I tapped into yoga, and I tapped into learning more.

I like the Odyssey Project so much because they have a program for kids as well. I really want to run my non-profit with a great team one day. I'm all about teamwork!

What I would say to the next class is to never give up, especially when you feel like you're out of breath or out of gas, just keep going. It's hard doing it all alone, but me knowing I'm going to have a career is just making me not give up until I'm satisfied. Thanks to all my classmates for all the nice things y'all said about my writings and poems. Thanks to the teachers that called me and had meetings with me to finish homework; it means so much to me. Thanks to all the aides and tutors for showing up and helping out as well. We couldn't do it without them giving me that extra push or direction. Thank you.



FALESHUH WALKER

Sitting in my office, looking out of the window, knowing and feeling like I should be doing more with my life, I applied for Odyssey Class of 2020 out of curiosity but was not aware that I had missed the deadline. Unfortunately, I

received a letter advising me that it was too late in the year for me to be considered. This same letter contained a handwritten note encouraging me to apply again for the next year. I did! The timing could not have been any better when I did get the opportunity to participate (Class of 2021).

For quite some time, overcoming adversity felt like a reoccurring theme in my life. Odyssey allowed me to shift my focus onto something positive. I got the opportunity to interact with beautiful people I may have never known otherwise. I also read literature I would not have tried on my own. I even got to witness real life dedication by watching my classmate Diane keep pushing no matter what.

My main goal in being part of the Odyssey Project was for me to have my children be there to see me finish something that I started. I just wanted to show them that no matter where you are from, who your parents are, or what you think you can't do, you absolutely can if you try. I am grateful, and I thank anyone and everyone I have crossed paths with, whether our interaction was positive or negative. You were a part of my journey, and I could not have made it to where I am without you!



SUNNI WALKER

This has been a tough year for all of us, whether it was with COVID, depression, being laid off, etc. I had Covid in August and got really sick. I was forced to move back home to Chicago because of it. Daycares and

schools were closed. Even if I hadn't gotten sick, who would keep my son while I worked? I had to stay with my mom for months because it was hard to find a place due to Covid. I got discouraged so many times but never gave up. I lost my aunt, and it was really hard. Because of Covid, we couldn't have a big funeral and be there for one another.

My support system got me through this year. I would like to thank my family, Emily, and Brian for calling and being supportive. Whenever you are going through hard times, keep telling yourself things could be worse. Keep pushing to fulfill your dreams.

In the midst of a pandemic when I had Covid and was really sick, had to stay with my mom, and battled depression, I still managed to get a job at the #1 hospital in the Midwest. That wasn't enough for me, so I searched for something better. I got offered a better job with more pay, better benefits, and closer to home. You can do anything you put your mind to.



DIANE WALTON

We celebrate classmate Diane Walton for her incredible perseverance and dedication in the face of medical setbacks. She dictated poetry by phone from her hospital bed and sent texts of gratitude

from hospice care. She wrote about love, nature, her dog, jazz, and many other topics, and she starred as Mama in the play A Raisin in the Sun. A gentle, humble spirit, Diane motivated students and staff as she fought hard for her right to remain a lifelong learner.



KEYANNA WILSON

Age 24, a mother of one, and a work-in-progress. When I first heard about the Odyssey Project, I was already looking to become more involved in school. I thought to myself that this would be a good step

towards accomplishing my school goals and moving forward to gain a degree in nursing. It was not just a good step but also a great learning experience. I came in with this I-know-it-all attitude, only to realize I didn't really know much at all. Being a part of the Odyssey Project gave me more understanding of myself and some of my own selfish ways. Some days I realized how shy I have become, and how uneasy it was to speak up via Zoom meetings. But the time that Baron showed up and did all those exercises with us, it felt like we all were one whole group. That was fun! Then listening to everyone read scripts of *The Raisin in the Sun*, I felt like I was at an actual play. All my classmates encouraging each other and cheering each other on made things even more at ease for me. It seems like the time in the class went by so fast, and we are already to the end of this semester and graduating. Congratulations, Class of 2021; we did it!

I would like to give a big thank you to Emily for such a beautiful program and experience throughout the class. Also, for being very encouraging to everyone to get their homework completed and for being understanding on how tough things could be for us. I'm thankful for the whole Odyssey team for all their support throughout the program—for Tuesday night tutoring, and for always being there when needing help with homework. I would like to thank Yolanda for introducing me to this program and encouraging me to sign up. She did say it would be fun. I thank my classmates for being encouraging and always having humor during the time we spent in class together. I thank my family for encouraging me during my interview with Emily and Kevin. Standing in the background was much needed because I was nervous. Odyssey Project was a much-needed class for me, and I could say

Odyssey has made a good impact on my life. I'm going to continue my journey finishing out strong and proud. To anyone who enjoys taking classes, I highly recommend this one.



SHIQUITA WOODS

I was patiently waiting but nervous for a response from Odyssey because I had missed the opportunity the year before. When I got the email/call, I was beyond excited because I wasn't sure if my

interview to be a part of the program had gone well or not.

Knowing that I got accepted was truly a blessing not only for me but my daughter as well. My daughter and I will now also graduate a month apart, which is a great accomplishment for both of us. We're so excited to share these moments together.

Being a part of Odyssey gave me a drive that I had lost for a little while, considering personal circumstances. It has given me the strength that I needed to keep pushing forward and not give up, regardless of this turmoil going on in the world right now.

The fact that we were able to be open with each other, share experiences, and know each other also played a big part in this journey. I'm thankful to have met everyone in class, including our very helpful instructors who guided us along the way.

My goal moving forward is to take my knowledge and experience with me to produce a better outcome for my future. I'm really looking forward to being a successful young African American lady, who will eventually be a role model for children and other young adults around the world.

So, I just want to say, thanks for everyone who played a part in sharing this experience. You all are great, and I wish everyone the best. Love, Qi.