

YEAR 21

MAY 1, 2024

ODYSSEY ORACLE

CELEBRATING THE GRADUATING CLASS OF 2024





We are the Odyssey Class of 2024!

We have worked as a telemarketer, special education assistant, bus aide, cook, steel factory worker, snake charmer, CNA, loan advisor, dental assistant, cashier, construction worker, optician, bartender, barber, baker, chef, chocolatier, prison officer, bank teller, forklift driver, artisan, hotelier, bookkeeper, waitress, tutor, personal care technician, housekeeper, caregiver, youth restitution counselor, phlebotomist; holding jobs at Hy-Vee, Woodman's, Clean Power Landscaping, April Aire, McDonald's, Chipotle, IHOP, Nordstrom, Cheesecake Factory, Madison Children's Museum, Exact Sciences, and nursing homes.

We hail from Madison, Wisconsin; Chicago, Illinois; Minneapolis, MN; Cleveland, Ohio; Myrtle Beach, Florida; Seattle, Washington; Bar Harbor, Maine; and from Mexico, Burkina Faso, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Laos,

With ancestors coming from Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Georgia, Arkansas, Missouri, California, Louisiana, Texas, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Mexico, Haiti, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Greece, England, Ecuador, Laos, and "somewhere in Africa,"

Speaking Spanish, English, American Sign Language, French, German, Laotian, Mooré, Kichwa, Castilian, Patois, and Slang,

Worshipping as Baptist, Catholic, Jehovah's Witness, Pentecostal, Apostolic, Muslim, Lutheran, Cosmovision, Buddhist, nondenominational, and spiritual.

We call ourselves productive, driven, educated, tired, fuzzy, warm, hyper, quiet, passionate, happy, funny, shy, gentle, brave, strong-willed, beautiful, intentional, focused, direct, introverted, sweet, old, nice, kind, upright, caring, outgoing, courageous, reliable, curly, weird, busy, outspoken, charismatic, classy, free-spirited, fearless, short, fragile, crazy, inquisitive, graceful, loving, handsome, mysterious, unsure, unbalanced, smart, ambitious, loyal, dedicated, loud, honest, sensitive, and fun.

We are the Odyssey Class of 2024!



UW ODYSSEY PROJECT CLASS OF 2024 GRADUATION CEREMONY

WEDNESDAY, MAY 1, 2024, 6-7:30 PM
GREAT HALL, MEMORIAL UNION, MADISON, WISCONSIN

ORDER OF EVENTS

INTRODUCTORY MUSIC

Bob Auerbach, Piano

WELCOMING REMARKS

Emily Auerbach, Odyssey Executive Director

Kevin Mullen, Odyssey Director of Adult Education



RECEPTION

Greetings from Bucky Badger

Refreshments

Photographs (Hedi Rudd, Odyssey '12)
and More Music!



PRESENTATION OF THE 2024 FRIEND OF THE UW ODYSSEY PROJECT AWARD

Pleasant Rowland and Diane Ballweg, philanthropists

PRESENTATION OF THE ODYSSEY CLASS OF 2024



ODYSSEY GRADUATES

CLASS OF 2024



DONTAEVA ACKLIN

I would like to start by giving gratitude to my beautiful mother [Tineisha Scott, Odyssey '04]. I have to be completely honest, this woman is the reason why I applied

for the Odyssey Program. She is my rock, motivation, and biggest fan. Thank you, Mom. I love you more than my words can express. Secondly, I'd love to thank my professors who have given me knowledge and new skills. Special shout out to Emily for taking a chance on me and my classmates for sharing their stories, allowing themselves to be vulnerable, and always supporting one another. Lastly, I'd love to give myself grace for taking a chance, working hard, and becoming the young lady I am today! We all walk in our journey, and I'm blessed Odyssey was in my path.



CARISSA ANDREWS

First, I want to thank each and every staff member that takes part in Odyssey; you each played a crucial role in our development this year, and you are greatly

appreciated. At the start of this year, I was unsure of where I was going personally, resting in Carissa, the mother, not the woman. I will always be a mother, but Odyssey sparked the fire in me to think about who I am again. I'm looking forward to the next stage in my Odyssey because now I feel secured and sure of a promising future. Being surrounded with so many people who look different but have so many similar experiences has encouraged me in so many ways and made me comfortable in this class!



LUCAS BENFORD

Thank you for your presence on this day of celebration. You are in a community full of compassion, creativity, and curiosity—may you feel that energy in your core. We

have endured through the dark nights of the soul to arrive here, at the spring of renewal. Our hearts are brimming with gratitude—thanks to Emily and Kevin and the whole tribe of hard-working and loving individuals that make the program go. We thank the donors and fundraisers, the educators and tutors, and the UW-Odyssey members past and future. Odyssey helped remind me of my worth and power. I'll forever be grateful for this gift.



JASMINE BENSON

I want to thank Dominique Smith [Odyssey '23], my sister who referred me to Odyssey. I thank my soul tribe for moral support and anybody who gave me a ride to and

from class after my car accident. The Odyssey staff were consistently supportive and warm week in and week out. My Odyssey graduates, we did it, and I am so thankful for you all being with me on this journey.

"In Odyssey, group therapy meets a humanities buffet. ...With full stomachs we could now nourish our body of knowledge and sate our thirst for wisdom."



**DANIKA BETHEL-JOHNSON**

Hey everyone! My name is Danika (pronounced Duh-knee-kuh). I'm a mother of three beautiful children, Da'Mari, Tre'Nique, and Tre'Den.

I'm in a loving relationship with my children's father, Tremane. Currently, I am enrolled in the Human Resource Management program at Madison College and will graduate in two years or less. I want to thank my mother for keeping my babies while I work every day. She's my rock, and I owe her the world. A huge shout out to my partner in life, Tremane. Tremane, throughout my journey in Odyssey you pushed me to be the best me I could be. When I needed time to do homework, you were there. When I needed rest, you were there. When I wanted to just give up and was overwhelmed, you reminded me who and what I'm doing it for. You are always there, and you are my best friend. I love you so much for it all. Thank you! Thanks for reading, and thank you, UW Odyssey!

**MIA CANNON**

What I cherish the most about Odyssey is it tested my discipline. Many obstacles attempted to stray me. I got Covid, I was diagnosed with a very large kidney stone that

required surgery, but that didn't make me give up. I fell behind many times, but I got caught up. A huge part of feeling able to do so is the immense amount of support within the safe space of Odyssey. I've attempted school many times, but life always got in the way. But for the first time, I started something and finished. Odyssey gave me that.

**VERNELL CAULEY**

I would like to thank my lord Jesus Christ from which all blessings come. I would like to thank my mother for choosing to walk several blocks while in labor to bring me into this world. I believe that walk while in pain serves as a testimony of my plight. I would like to thank my children for always standing by my side unconditionally. Last but not least, I would like to thank my failures for pushing me into success.

**TAESHIA CLARK**

Through this journey I have to give thanks first to Odyssey for the opportunity. And then my spouse, my kids, my residents, and the friends I've gained from Odyssey. In the beginning I didn't know what my purpose for Odyssey was. I was shy and really had a lot going on in life. But every class opened me up more and made me find purpose. This is for sure not the ending but a new beginning because it doesn't stop here!

**MEKICIA DAVIS**

Thank you to my family, my significant other, and my children. I didn't understand the potential I had, and I appreciate Emily always pushing me and encouraging me to continue on the path of hard work and dedication. I want to send a special thank you to my late father, who always believed in me and trusted my vision even if it didn't always make sense. I know he wouldn't have been anywhere but here today if he had the chance. I'm grateful for the opportunities I was granted and will never forget Odyssey.



**ANDREA EVANS**

Today marks a significant milestone for me as I close this chapter of the Odyssey Program. This was an amazing journey. As I embark on new adventures, I will

remember the lessons I've learned and the friendships I made during my time at Odyssey. As I move forward, I will always carry with me these lessons, friendships, and values. I know I have the potential to make a positive impact on the world, and I have no doubt that I will shine brighter than before.

**ALEESHA FLOWERS**

I am a biracial woman in my late 40s with seven children, ages 32 through 10 years old. My oldest daughter, Cheyenne, graduated Odyssey in 2019. I couldn't be

prouder of the amazing woman she has become. I am proud of all my children.

Odyssey has been the best opportunity that has helped me find myself and where I want to be in the future. I'm no spring chicken, but every day is an opportunity for happiness, greatness, and growth.

First, I would like to thank Emily. No words can express my sincerest gratitude that you chose me

"Odyssey is a kaleidoscope because you get something new every time you look. We learn new things, share new things. No matter how many readings, no matter how many classes we have, we still learn something new every week. No matter what, the 'picture' is never the same."

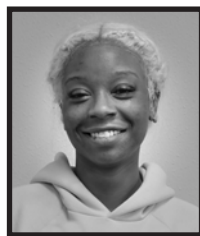


for your 2024 class. I believe God put you in my life at the right time. I will forever cherish the class and staff of 2024. Thank you to all the staff, teachers, alumni, and donors who make this program possible for so many people. My classmates, thank you for sharing your stories with us all. We all are deserving of the brightest and happiest futures! Stay humble and blessed.

**ANDREYA GAVINS**

First, I want to give honor to my lord and savior Jesus Christ. Also, to my children, my parents, my siblings, and all those who believed in me. I want to thank

Emily for choosing me to be a student for Odyssey and every single staff that I see join us and assist us, every step of the way. To my fellow classmates, we did it! Let's keep going!!

**SHA'NIGEL GOODWAN**

As I stand here on the brink of a new chapter in my life, I am filled with gratitude for the incredible journey that has led me to this moment. My name is Sha'nigel,

and today, I proudly graduate from the UW Odyssey Project.

Looking towards the future, I am excited to follow my passion and open the first Black-owned bakery here in Madison. It is a dream I have nurtured and cherished, and I am eager to share my love for baking with the community.

Reflecting on my time in school, I can confidently say that this class has been my favorite. It has not only enriched my knowledge but has also opened my heart to new experiences and perspectives. In this class, I found more than just classmates - I found a family. Each guest who graced our discussions, whether an actress

or a college professor, left an indelible mark on my journey.

Their stories and insights have been a wellspring of inspiration for me. They have taught me that no matter the challenges we face, perseverance and determination are key. As I look back on this chapter of my life, I am filled with gratitude for the lessons learned and the friendships formed.

To my fellow graduates, I offer this piece of advice: never lose sight of your dreams, no matter how many obstacles lie in your path. Take breaks if you must, but always keep moving forward. It is the journey that shapes us, and as long as we reach our destination, the struggles along the way will have been worth it.

As I step into the future, I carry with me the memories of this class and the invaluable lessons learned. Thank you to all who have been a part of my journey. Here's to new beginnings and the endless possibilities that lie ahead.

Congratulations to the Class of 2024! Let's make our mark on the world and create a future that we can all be proud of.



MIKAYLAH HARRIS

As I sit and think about who I will dedicate this to, I realize I would like to dedicate this to myself. Not to be corny or anything, but it took some time before I came to the realization that if it was something that needed to be done for someone else I would do it right away, but I always seem to put myself last. But I did it: I put doing my homework first, I put showing up to class first, even when I had only four hours of sleep the night before because I had a seven-month-old baby when I started. No matter how



"I have gained a community. It's encouraging seeing my classmates open up and come out of their shells."

hard it got, how much I wanted to give up at times, I kept going. I showed up for myself, and I actually completed something that meant a lot to me. I will keep going, I will not give up because deep down I know I will one day get that master's degree I always wanted to ensure that my son and I live a great life.



SYNQUAR HARSTON

Thank you to my mom [Tiffany Harston '09] for constantly beating every obstacle thrown her way. I've been her shadow throughout her life, so I know firsthand not graduating high school and choosing a path opposite from the traditional paths we were raised to believe is right. She has overcome abuse, being homeless, being broken in ways I couldn't comprehend as a man. She overcame all of that with the lives of three children and three separate wagons of trauma. I've seen my mom fail hundreds of times. There were times when I even doubted her ability to break the habits that kept her in the same cycles. But I stand up here with confidence to say she graduated college. She graduated nail school. She's been happily married for 15 years now. And she now teaches others her gifts. I love you.

**CIERRA L. JACKSON**

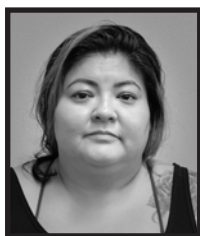
Thank you, Odyssey staff, for your unwavering dedication and for creating an environment where dreams are nurtured and futures are shaped. You have made a

lasting impact on my life, and I am forever grateful. Many times, I wanted to give up, but the staff along with God literally carried me through. I would say I don't know how I made it, but I do! I kept coming, I kept pushing, and I didn't give up. Walking through the rain isn't easy. It's the rainbow after that's the reward.

**BLANCA LAINE**

This came to an end! Odyssey Project is a journey I will remember the rest of my life. Before Odyssey I was wandering in a road with a dead end. Suddenly I

discovered this program through a Facebook post from my friend Aida Inuca (Odyssey '23). At that moment I was a little afraid to apply to the program since English is not my first language, but the different stories of the past students and how their lives really changed helped give me the motivation to embark on this journey.

**ROSANNA LARA LOPEZ**

Odyssey helped me to get to know myself, to peel the layers of myself. I would

like to thank my mother for never giving up on me and knowing I will make it even if my journey was different from others. I would like to thank my son Julio for inspiring me to go back to school. My classmates, all of you, thank you for the best fellowship. All of you have a special place in my heart. Best classroom I will never forget, thank you.

**GIANA MASON**

I want to thank the woman who introduced me to this experience, who encouraged me to apply: Yasmin Horton '07. I want to thank Professor Emily Auerbach for

being one of those rare teachers who has the gift for seeing her students. She saw something I could not yet see within myself, and it is because of that validation I have found my voice. I want to thank myself. I am living life on better terms—my past is no longer something to be ashamed of, but rather a testimony. Odyssey has opened my eyes to the woman God intended the world to see. She is courageous. She is proud, and she has a story to tell.

**TANISHA MILLIGAN**

At the start of Odyssey, I was shy and timid, not knowing anyone and scared. Now look at me, raising my hand to read and go up in front of people. I want to thank

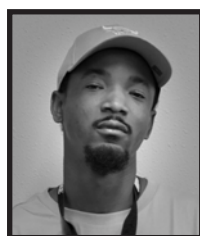
my three children, Jamyia, Cardell, and Jo'Carri, and my friends and family who never let me give up on this journey. I want to thank the staff that put up with the best class ever: Class of 2024. A huge shout out to my classmates. Thank you for being y'all and getting through this journey together.



"Today, I have confidence, I have direction, and I understand my core self. Odyssey is a compass that directed me to my true north."

**SOULEYMANE NIKIEMA**

I would like to seize this opportunity to express my profound gratitude to the whole Odyssey Project family for this incredible journey. I'd also like to thank God, my family, and my classmates. I am from Burkina Faso—This program not only gives me a life changing opportunity, but it also facilitates my real integration into society! The Odyssey Program's impact on this community is real, and I am one of the lucky beneficiaries. Long life to the Odyssey Program family! Long life to the Odyssey Program!

**TERANCE NIX**

First, I want to thank my best friend, John. He put me on and told me about this program. Next, I want to thank my fiancée. She struggled with me on this whole Odyssey. She pushed me when I didn't think I had it in me to keep going. I also wanted to thank all the people in Odyssey that helped me with housing when I didn't know what to do at the time. Every situation that I have been through has changed me.

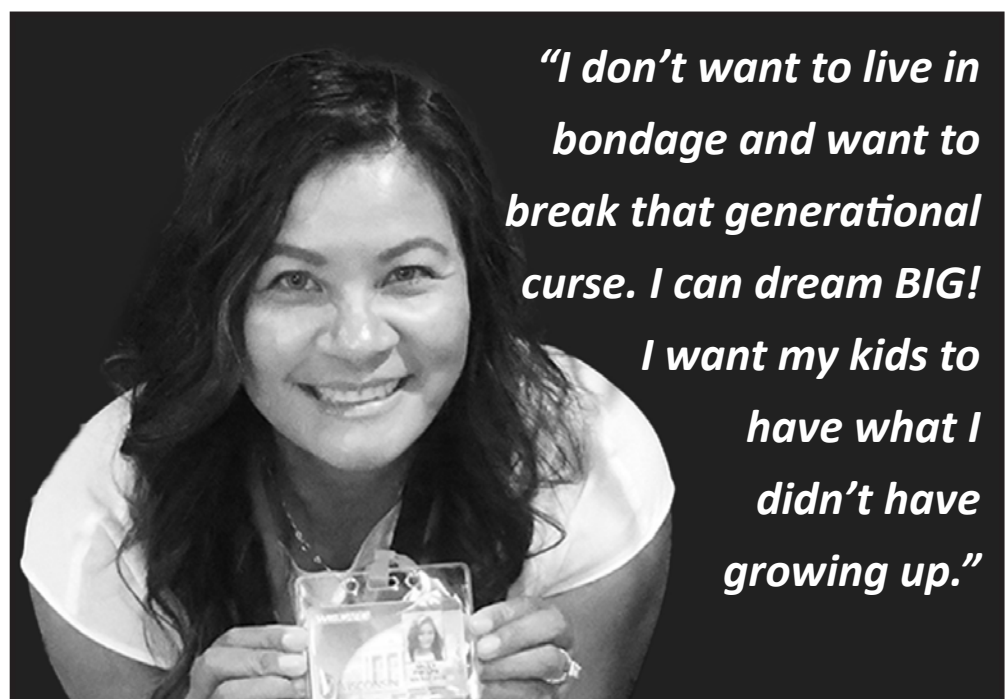
Everyone here in this room has something to do with this accomplishment today.

**SALLY PHELPS**

First and foremost, I want to thank God for His blessing and grace. I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for Him. He works in a mysterious way in all our lives. I am very grateful to be a part of the Odyssey Project and Emily for giving me this opportunity. I never thought I would ever be going back to school again. I never felt so excited about coming to class as much as I do with Odyssey. Each week is always something to be excited about. We learned about different writing techniques, art, music, history, philosophy, and literature that I never knew about before. I never felt so intrigued about learning, especially when we have guest speakers that come to our classroom to talk about different subjects and have class discussions and all the laughter, which makes the class full of excitement and lively. I sure will miss it.

Odyssey has become like home to me. Thanks to all the amazing staff for the warm welcome with open arms of love and support. Also, thank you to Kevin

for holding a tutoring night and all the volunteers that came in to help us. If it wasn't for that, I don't know if I would get through the class. So, thank you, thank you! Odyssey is the most memorable class I've ever had. I sure will miss my classmates and all the laughs we shared. I wish you all the best in your next endeavor. Last but not least, I want to thank my partner and my children for being supportive and patient with me not being around much. I hope I made you all proud.



**ISIAH PICKETT**

First, I want to thank my late mom for the motivation to keep pushing me forward. I want to thank my girlfriend Aly [Alyanna Cooper '19] for

believing in me and helping me get here. I want to thank my kids as well because without them I wouldn't have the courage and strength to do this and make it here. I believe if I make myself better it makes y'all better, and y'all are my reason for living!

**RODNEY POE JR.**

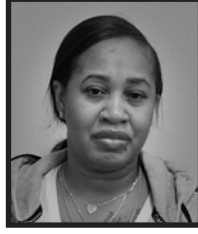
Thank you, Emily, for giving me a chance. My application was late, and I pretty much didn't make the cut, but she made an exception for me. That tells you

a lot about the type of person she is. Thank you to all the Odyssey staff for your support and believing in every single last one of us. To my classmates, thank you for sharing your stories, thank you for the endless laughs, and thank you for your hard work. You guys have really made this class more enjoyable. We came in as strangers and are leaving as family.

**KIMBERLY RODGERS**

I want to first and foremost give thanks and gratitude to God for allowing me this wonderful opportunity to become a student

of the Odyssey Project. I am so grateful to have learned the tools to better my writing. Odyssey has given me the confidence and push to pursue my career. I have already started working on my admission to return to college this fall of 2024. This year has been a long journey, one that I will continue to pursue with the support of Odyssey.

**MARCY TIBBS**

Wow! Tonight is bittersweet...First, I want to start by saying thank you God for always being the head of my life. Second, I want to thank Odyssey and all of the staff involved. Thanks

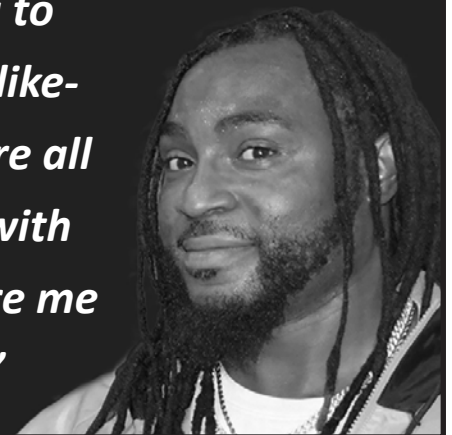
for giving me the opportunity to be a part of this life-experiencing journey.

I want to thank my mother, Jacqueline, for always supporting my decisions no matter her trials or tribulations. I thank my aunt Stephanie and my cousin Ebony who never judge me but always give an encouraging word. To my sister Andrea who I know always has my back from the hospital and all, I love you girl. I want to thank my children, Ahjuanni and Nasir, because I do this for you guys, and I love you the most. To my grandma, thanks for always calling me to check on me and my children; I love you. To my baby brother in heaven, I know this isn't the big one, but thanks for always smiling down on me and letting God's light shine upon me. Your death has pushed me to become a better me. Last but not least, my two brothers, Christopher and Demontay, you two challenge me beyond any measures, and for that, I'm a better me. Thank you all.

**AMANDA VON BEHREN**

Before starting Odyssey, I really had no feeling of purpose or sense of direction. I've taken a few stabs at college but never really was successful. Being a single mom of six

"It's very encouraging to be around a group of like-minded people that are all starving to do better with their lives and reassure me I'm on the right path."



who had my oldest at the age sixteen, I put any aspiration of mine on hold. My oldest is now graduating, and I feel like it's my time to figure out my path. This was my steppingstone.

Thank you, Emily, and all the other teachers for everything. Every encouraging word and pat on the back didn't go unnoticed. You all made me feel back on top. Thank you to my kids! First and foremost, my beautiful babies! Anijah, Dre'Jean, Dae'Vion, True, Rae'sel, Sincere, and A'Nadiyah, Mommy did it! Thank you to my mom and dad, my baby Coco, all my sisters, and anyone else who has sent the love! I've reached the end of my Odyssey.



ENDIA RENÉE WALLS

These Wednesdays that I've shared with the staff and class have been absolutely amazing. So I'm thanking you guys first. This experience has made me challenge myself and think more on what my future could be. I also want

to thank my children because this is who I do everything for, and I want them to be as proud of me as I am of them. I'm saddened that this journey is coming to an end but so thankful for all the people I've grown to love and cherish. I want to let you all know I love y'all so much.



RONALD WATSON SR.

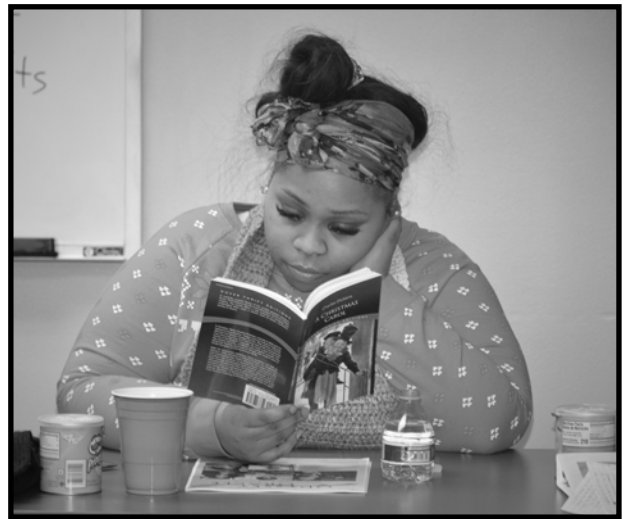
I am Ron Odyssey (journey). My journey has trapped me in a cave for nearly forty years. I lost my identity. I didn't know who I was or where I belong because I was buried so deep in the dark. I was afraid of being judged, so embarrassment, shame, and guilt kept me balled up in a fetus position. A glimmer of light appeared, and I was able to reach the tip of my finger towards the light. I felt a light touch of someone, and as this person began to assist me out of the cave, more people came along. Here I stand continuing to a bright future.



ODYSSEY'S SIX PROGRAMS

ODYSSEY COURSE

Each year since 2003, 30 adults facing financial barriers embark on a transformational two-semester journey empowering them to overcome adversity and achieve dreams through higher education. All students receive free tuition, textbooks, materials, childcare, and dinner and are registered as UW-Madison special students. Through lively discussions of literature, philosophy, history, theatre, music, and art in a classroom in South Madison, Odyssey students not only gain six UW credits in English Literature but also acquire skills in writing, reading, and critical thinking, a stronger voice, and greater confidence in themselves and their futures.

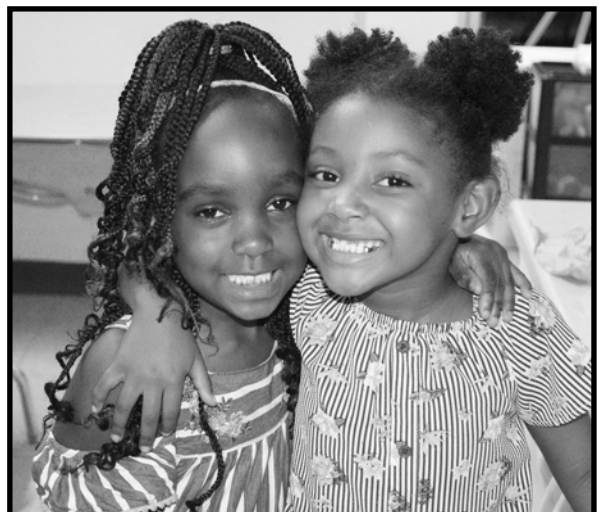


ONWARD ODYSSEY

If Odyssey helps to light a spark within students, Onward Odyssey feeds this flame through programming and wraparound services for its over 600 alumni. Odyssey supports its graduates through advising, tutoring, targeted courses, and financial resources as they pursue college degrees and other dreams. Onward Odyssey offers a supportive learning community that leverages the strong relationships that Odyssey Project alumni have with each other and with faculty and staff as they continue their education. Graduates of Odyssey have gone from homelessness to bachelor's and master's degrees; Onward Odyssey supports alumni both academically and personally throughout their journey.

ODYSSEY JUNIOR

Through a weekly literacy and arts enrichment program for children and grandchildren of Odyssey students, Odyssey Junior gets the next generation excited about learning and more hopeful about their futures. While their parents are in class, roughly 50 children and grandchildren of Odyssey students participate in an enrichment program designed to develop their interest and confidence in self-discovery and expression through the arts, reading, writing, and speaking. Odyssey takes a multigenerational approach to learning, encouraging families to view all its members as "college bound" with gifts to unwrap. Odyssey Junior serves newborns ("Baby Badgers") through teenagers.





ODYSSEY BEYOND BARS

Odyssey Beyond Bars teaches life-changing credit-bearing and noncredit UW-Madison courses to students incarcerated in Wisconsin prisons. Students in prison improve their academic and communication skills, gain greater confidence and perspective, and receive academic and financial advising designed to help them succeed when they re-enter their communities. Like the community-based Odyssey courses, Odyssey Beyond Bars courses provide a newfound sense of hope and an on-ramp to higher education for adult learners. As Victor Hugo observed, “He who opens a school door closes a prison.”

ODYSSEY SENIOR

Odyssey Senior offers enrichment to Odyssey students 60 and older OR a 60-or-older relative (parent, grandparent, aunt, sibling, etc.) of an Odyssey student. This program offers a warm-hearted, encouraging way to capture the unique stories of Odyssey elders. Students create (via writing or speaking) individual stories, read brief samples from autobiographical writings by Malcolm X, Maya Angelou, and others, learn how to do oral history, interview each other, and publish an Odyssey Senior Oracle making history come alive.



ODYSSEY BEYOND WARS

Launched in Fall 2023, Odyssey Beyond Wars serves veterans who might be challenged by their transition from military to civilian life, are looking for an engaged community of peers, and would like a jump start in furthering their education. All military veterans -- regardless of time in service, deployment history, disability status, or discharge status -- are encouraged to apply. Graduates earn six transferable college credits in English at no cost and without using any VA benefits. This program is open both to Odyssey alumni who are veterans and to veterans from the community who have not completed the core Odyssey course.

In addition to our six programs, we offer the **ODYSSEY FAMILY LEARNING CENTER** out at our South Madison Partnership Space, 2238 S. Park Street, with tutoring, music lessons, advising, child enrichment, and family activities. We depend on a whole team of tutors, volunteers, staff, partners, and donors to make our programs succeed. If you are interested in learning more about any of our six programs and the Family Learning Center, contact Emily Auerbach at emily.auerbach@wisc.edu or 608-262-3733.

LETTERS TO THE CLASS OF 2025

Dear Class of 2025,



Don't give up and give yourself grace. This sounds easier said than done, but trust that those daily affirmations/reminders hold power, just like all of the words we speak hold power. Lean on your family and friends when times get hard. I know

exactly how it feels to carry the load all alone, and that is exactly what I did this semester in school, which caused me to be stressed out. I wish I would have leaned on my family and friends sooner.

You will grow tremendously throughout this course. Take in the information, pay attention in class, and LISTEN! Engage in the classroom and don't be afraid to share with your classmates your writings. Don't worry, future Odyssey students, you got this! With faith in yourself, you can get through anything! (**Dontaeva Acklin**)



The first thing I can tell you is not to let this opportunity pass you by. Odyssey is a journey, yes, but one of plenty of enlightenment! There will be days where you question why you are here, if this is right for you, etc. When you feel those

emotions, ask yourself: Do I want to grow? Take your time easing into the class but not too much because before you know it, you'll be in my spot not wanting this year to be over.

As with most things in life you'll be challenged, but do not give up! Every educator genuinely wants to help you become a better version of yourself! Hold yourself accountable for the effort you put in, and you will do just fine! Communicate, participate, and reciprocate!



At the beginning of the year, I was excited, but as life events unfolded, I started to lose that. Here I am with three weeks of classes left and I have come full circle. I'm excited again for what is ahead. I have truly gained new friends and a new family! My advice is to appreciate the opportunity! You will love the class, the activities, and the people you engage with. Think out of the box and give yourself the fire and desire to grow, learn, and change. Class of 2025, claim your victory ahead of time! You have all the support you need here at Odyssey! (**Carissa Andrews**)



Sometimes I like to take a moment in class and look around the room at all the beautiful faces. Some classmates are listening intently, and others are taking notes or letting their minds wander outside of the classroom where the needs of life can feel a hundredfold and heavy, but here in our classroom we have our little oasis...our intellectual paradise.

You have come here, across the desert where nobody let you drink when your lips were parched and cracking. You have crawled from deep dark caves where blind white beasts licked their lips and the sun was never allowed to shine. You have swum across choppy waters that chilled your heart and robbed you of your breath. You are here, now. You've made it. You can only be here...now.

Now, I want to congratulate you, and your ancestors want to congratulate you, and your highest purpose wants to wrap you up in the biggest hug and fill you with so much joy that you can barely breathe except to gasp out a little prayer because you made it. You got yourself here and you are worth it. F**k anyone who said otherwise and forgive them for their emptiness.

You've heard it time and time again: you get out what you put in. Set aside the time for the readings and do your homework. The homework can be challenging, but it is less of a challenge than the coursework you'll find in a traditional college class, and doing the work will help prepare you for whatever is next, whether it be college or your next big goal.

Come correct - this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity so do everything you can to take advantage of it. If there is anything in your way—mental health, addiction, poverty, ignorance, toxic relationships—recognize what has held you back in the past and plan on doing anything and everything you can to address your obstacles. Know that there is help and support in the Odyssey community and beyond. The Odyssey community members will do everything in their power to guarantee you succeed; your job is to try your hardest and ask for help if you need it.

Finally, be as present as you can be in class. I mean, turn your phone on "do not disturb," take a moment to clear your mind of any distractions, and get ready to tuck into a buffet of ideas, thinkers, and powerful conversations. Be proud that you've arrived here and thank yourself for making this investment in yourself. Trust the process. Show up. Amaze yourself at how far you've come when you graduate in May. Lots of love and joyous energy for your Odyssey. **(Lucas Benford)**





You made it. Congratulations! Yes, Emily is really that cool. The entire staff at Odyssey holds you down, by the way. The support you receive from staff is unmatched and will be so unexpected. Dinners are cool, the stipends are better, but the

love and support you get from your Odyssey family is unmatched.

There are days that storms are heavy in life, and you walk into class with smiles and Ms. Emily with a top hat on quoting Scrooge or Bob at a piano. Walking through an art museum getting your own personal tour learning about new art and cultures. The day you get your University of Wisconsin I.D. badge. I felt like a rapper getting their labels chain on signing day. Doing projects that help deal with your past to be better for your future. Reading Plato, Socrates, Frederick Douglass, Langston Hughes, and I could keep going. All I have is gratitude and appreciation for Odyssey, and if you believe in yourself and the opportunity you have been given, you will too. Good luck and be great! **(Jasmine Benson)**



Welcome to the beginning of your educational journey. I'm going to be honest when I say that I had no idea what I was stepping into when I applied

to be in this program. But I can say that it was the best decision I ever made in my life. Everyone in the Odyssey program is welcoming and warm. Everyone wants nothing but the best for you and to help you achieve your educational goals. Even when you feel at your worst, and you want to give up, DON'T! Emily wouldn't allow you to do so even if you tried. You can't leave Kevin out as he is a rock for the Odyssey program and an all-around amazing person who actively

advocates to help you be the best. Be prepared to have your photo taken by the other Emily A. ("Em" Azad) at the most random times as well. This class is fun yet serious! Be unapologetically you and have an amazing semester! You will not regret it. **(Danika Bethel-Johnson)**



How do you feel? You've accomplished the first step of a huge change in your life. You may not feel like it on day one, but your classmates will be a part of you forever. The journey you're about to take is absolutely amazing! I wanna tell

you it will be easy, but I would be lying, I will tell you this, you'll come out a better person after the class is over. You will grow so much from learning discipline, going out of your comfort zone, and being tested in ways you'd never imagine. My best advice is always show up and don't be afraid to ask for help! it won't take you long to realize everyone genuinely has your best interest and the greatest of intentions. If you do your part, they will do theirs. I wish you the absolute best, and I would also like to say I'm proud of you for taking the first step. Good Luck ☺ **(Mia Cannon)**





What a special day this is for you. I first would like to say I'm so proud you decided to step out on faith and courage to take a step for change. What an honor it is to be hand picked out of many applicants. This shows you are special and chosen to sit in that exact seat.

When I began this "Odyssey" of my reentry to school, I wasn't sure at first what I was going to take from it. A month prior of the first day of class, I was struck by a car while bicycling, leaving me with a broken tibia, seven screws, and a metal plate in my leg. So, it's safe to say I wasn't in the best condition. I allowed many thoughts to discourage me of the possibilities this program had to offer. Thoughts due to age and life circumstances led me to believe it was too late for me even to consider school. However, the love and support I received was overwhelming. They made me feel at home, and that was just what I needed. Those discouraging thoughts were soon defeated with thoughts of hope and purpose.

I believe we are all on this earth for a reason. Although you may not be sure of that reason yet, just keep going; there are no coincidences. You are right where God wanted you to be at this time in your life. Keep the faith and courage, and I'm sure you will succeed. **(Vernell Cauley)**



Everybody can't come, not even the old you. Hundreds of applications a year, but you proved to Odyssey why it should be you. An opportunity for the next level, a desirable network, new friends, and a place where they welcome you with open

hands. Here at Odyssey, the outcome from the plan depends on you. Some have no clue, but with the support from Odyssey, you'll pave the way and create a journey that's just for you.

Being raised in broken homes, being a minority in places you thought you belonged, being judged by



things you thought were right and others thought were wrong. Questioning yourself, who am I? What am I to do? Am I good enough? And for some the question is: What makes the next better than you? Well, in Odyssey they'll explain and educate you and have many looking at life in a different way. So always remember that attendance is important, don't miss your beat, make sure you're one of the thirty in a seat, it's only once a week. And if you fall short, just show up for tutoring. What can I say, this is an opportunity that can't be beat. Monthly stipends, 1-2 days no cooking, and six free credits from a top university. Wake up, don't sleep! **(Taeshia Clark)**



Odyssey class can be overwhelming, scary, and uncomfortable. But you should know that you deserve to be here, and Emily chose you for a reason. I can't put into words what you'll experience in Odyssey because it is life

changing. The people you will meet and the stories you'll hear will have you hugging a total stranger. Odyssey is a journey, but it's a journey that you create and continue to build beyond this room. You may have times when you want to give up, but just know that what you're doing is setting you up for a future worth living. **(Mekicia Davis)**



This is the beginning of one of the most important journeys of your life. I am happy to congratulate you and welcome you to Odyssey.

I think that you have made a very wise choice applying for the Odyssey Project. I really enjoyed my experience at Odyssey. It is truly a special place. I had no reason to be afraid of this opportunity, and you do not have to be afraid either. As I sit down to write this letter of advice to you, I realize how strange it is because I was in your shoes not too long ago. You might be nervous as you enter this next phase of your life, but it is OK. What is not OK is letting your fear or nervousness keep you from trying new things or taking chances that come your way.

Odyssey is the time for you to figure out what you want to do in life. No one expects you to know as soon as you set foot in the room. I really hope you enjoy your time here at Odyssey. Everyone here is friendly, welcoming, and more than willing to help. They want you to succeed, so do not be afraid to ask questions!

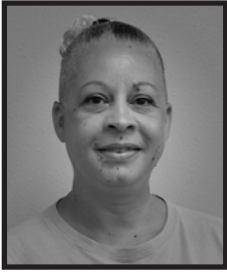
When I found out I was accepted into the Odyssey Program, I was so excited. I was also a little nervous and did not know what to expect from the program. I was thinking to myself, am I going to be

able to juggle working two jobs, being a single mother of five, coming home from working and having to do my motherly duties, then once I get done finding a way to set aside some time to complete my homework? I knew that most days I would just want to lie in bed and enjoy my me time, but I knew that I couldn't. I had homework that needed to get done.

I know that procrastination might get the best of you as it did for me sometimes, but you have to fight it. Work your hardest and make sure you come to class, even if it is just one of those days and you are not in the mood and do not feel like coming. You just want to stay in bed. Turn things in on time. You have the opportunity to make new friends, even learn more about who you are. Some days will feel like a challenge, and you may feel like something in class is challenging you as well, but don't let that feeling take over. There is childcare set for you on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Make sure you attend tutoring and get your homework done. Don't wait until the last minute to do your homework. Do your best not to fall behind. If you need transportation, just ask. All the resources are here! All you have to do is ask.

Trust me, nine months will go by extremely fast. I promise you that during your first semester, you will get adjusted quickly and will consider Odyssey your happy place. It's a great experience, and I am forever grateful. You won't regret coming here. You have so many resources that there's no way you can fail, as long as you try your hardest. Remember this: you are the chosen one. You have been chosen to attend Odyssey. Just try your hardest, make sure you believe in yourself, and do not be afraid to get help when you need it. Study hard and have fun! I wish you the best on your new journey. Once again, welcome to Odyssey. Good luck! **(Andrea Evans)**





This Journey, this Odyssey, will be the best! Coming on your first day, you may feel nervous or shy, maybe unsure of what to expect. I'm going to tell you to expect nothing but greatness, comfortableness, and having a voice! You will not be shy by the

end of the year, guaranteed. Emily's big heart and wonderful classes make you eager for the next class.

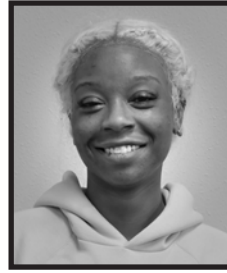
A couple important things to always make a habit of is make every class. Your presence is very important, even if you are not done with your homework. Take advantage of tutoring. Kevin is amazing and I will always appreciate his insights and inputs on my assignments. The entire Odyssey staff are all very supportive and available for anything and anyone. You will make friends and learn a lot. Then boom, you're graduating!!! Congratulations, Class of 2025, and I wish you all the best from here on! **(Aleesha Flowers)**



Life may be tough, and things will get rough. There will be bad days, it may all seem like a haze. I myself became pregnant [with twins!] and there were days I just wanted to sleep and do nothing. But I knew I didn't want to fall behind, and being

successful is my dream.

So, I understand there will be bad days. But through it all, always, always stand tall. Giving up is not an option. Never turn your back and run. Through good times and bad, through happy times and sad, as long as you keep moving, you'll never stop growing. Always be kind, support each other, and be on time! **(Andreya Gavins)**



As you embark on this exciting journey, I want you to know that you are extremely lucky to be here. Each one of you was individually handpicked to be a part of this special voyage, and that speaks volumes about your potential and capabilities.

You have been chosen because they see something unique in each and every one of you. You have the power to achieve great things and make a positive impact on the world. Remember, you can do anything you put your minds to. Believe in yourself, work hard, and never underestimate your own potential.

One piece of advice I have for you is to always come to class with an open mind and a willingness to learn. Education is a powerful tool, and by actively engaging in your studies, you will unlock countless opportunities for growth and success.

Embrace this opportunity with enthusiasm and determination. The journey ahead may have its challenges, but I have no doubt that you have what it takes to overcome them. You are here for a reason, and that reason is to shine bright and make a difference.

Welcome to the family, and remember, the sky's the limit! **(Shanigel Goodwan)**





Welcome to your first day of class, I know some of you are thinking you may not be able to do this. Class, you may be going through a lot in your personal life, but please know you can. There are a lot of supportive staff members who will be there every step of the way. You

will never feel alone, and if you are, Emily always says, “Feel free to text or call me,” and she means it.

The bonds and friendships you will make throughout this journey will not only open up your eyes but also help you take the steps to better yourself and push you to go get that degree that you have always thought about but put aside because you may have not known where to start or how to start.

My one request is that you don’t give up and take this class seriously because you were chosen for a reason. This is your time to not prove to others but to yourself that you are worthy enough of a degree no matter what. **(Mikaylah Harris)**



Congratulations on this new chapter of your life. Breathe, relax, and bask in this moment. Be grateful and take advantage of this opportunity. This is what Odyssey was built for—to take hold of your destiny and replenish you with the tools, community, compassion,

tears, connections, and the uncomfortability that’s going to greet you soon. Put forward your best effort in all aspects in life, even if it presents itself being insufficient to you personally. Address assignments with confidence to convey your passion in your journey. You never know who’s listening! **(Synquar Harston)**



Congratulations on being accepted into the Odyssey program. I’m so very proud of you! First, I want to start by saying, don’t be afraid to ask for help and, NO MATTER WHAT, show up for class. I don’t care if your hair isn’t

done, if you’ve been yelling at the kids all day...it doesn’t matter, COME! You’ll feel much better, I promise you.

Odyssey is a family. Our classes are made up of diverse individuals with different strengths and interests. Get to know people, learn names, create a new family because it’s possible. Don’t be afraid to ask questions and seek help when you need it. The Odyssey program offers incredible resources, from knowledgeable professionals to supportive staff. This year we even got an advocate that works directly with MATC. Get to know her (Christine Cina)—she’s great!



As you navigate through your Odyssey journey, remember self-care is important. The work may seem intense just like anything else in life we’re not familiar with...but take breaks and don’t forget to always celebrate yourself. Remember you are somebody because you made it. Now take this opportunity, and make sure the world remembers your name.

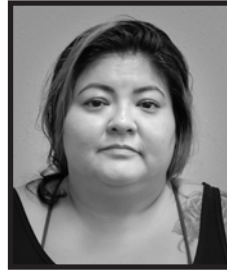
(Cierra Jackson)



Your time has arrived, your destiny is written. Odyssey is a journey you will remember forever. Congratulations! You are the chosen one between hundreds of applicants, and this is not a miracle or coincidence: this is a result of your

perseverance and your determination to change your life and raise your voice. Probably, you are right now sitting in the same seat that I was, wondering if this will work out for you. Believe me, this will work out because you are not alone anymore if that was your case. Odyssey Project offers you innumerable resources that will help you to explore your hidden potential. Furthermore, you will have the support of a terrific Odyssey Team like Emily, Kevin, Brian, Sarah, Em, Duke, and more that will not allow you to give up.

Continue and enjoy every single moment of this opportunity and the energy of your classmates and instructors because this experience will go by in the blink of an eye. You will miss it so badly at the end of the program. I am happy this Odyssey Project family is growing more and more, and you are part of this family. Keep always pursuing your goals, your dreams, the decision that brought you here, that will help you to determine your success. Welcome again, new Odyssey students 2025. This is your time. Your time is bright. **(Blanca Laine)**



You came, you grabbed, and you conquered. You are worthy to be here whether you know it or not. You're in for a ride, a lot of mind explosions, a lot of unknowing and knowing. This is truly an odyssey, so much enlightenment and one showing

true raw self-discovery and vulnerability that your classmates will grow on you and will find that all of them have a place in your heart to take with you! Have fun, laugh, cry, don't be afraid to ask for help. And you will have Kevin next to you on Tuesdays to save you mentally and emotionally. Kevin is a phenomenal teacher and Char is so caring, making sure everyone is fed and has a tutor, and Brian and Duke show up to overcome obstacles. Emily is breaking barriers for education for us, for you. This is your new class family and fellowship that you will never forget. **(Rosanna Lopez)**



If you are sitting in one of these chairs, reading this Oracle, then that means Professor Emily Auerbach saw something in you that moved her. You will blink and this transformative experience will be over. I had a rough start and almost

convinced myself to drop out entirely. I struggled from September through October to find my footing. It had been 10 years since I had tried school, and I found myself reverting back to my substance use because of this newfound stress. I reached out to Brian Benford, our Odyssey Success Coach, and I am so happy I did.

Everyone you see here wants to support you. They will not let you fall down or even fade away. That is how much they love you. When I walked into this room last September, I didn't have very much love for myself. If you relate to that, this class will illuminate whatever light has gone dim within you. It certainly did for me. Don't be afraid to put your heart and soul into your writing. This class is a beautiful opportunity to put things down on paper that perhaps you never thought you would share.

Take advantage of every single writing prompt. This class will help you heal.

Above all, there will be moments when you will be tired and you will feel restless and want to go home. But please remember, not everyone got picked to be where you are sitting, and Emily picked YOU.

(Giana Mason)



You made it to be the next Odyssey class. Here are a couple of things to know. Always stay on top of your homework. It might get stressful at times, but remember why you were chosen for this opportunity. Ask for help and go to tutoring. Don't be

ashamed: they are there to help you. Last but not least, don't be afraid to speak up and participate in class. And remember the 30 of you just became a family. **(Tanisha Milligan)**



My name is Souleymane, and I am from Burkina Faso. I was a part of a wonderful journey in the company of great people. As you know, even good things come to an end, but the tasty memories, the sensations of terrific moments last forever. It is

with great pleasure that I address you through this writing. This essay is an expression of my humble opinion about the Odyssey Project.



The Odyssey program is like an oasis in the middle of the desert. It is an exceptional journey full of learning provided by experienced and selfless staff. The environment provided is peaceful, friendly, and serene— everything is set up to make perfect strangers become friends and even family— respectful and willing to work together despite their differences. Odyssey staff is like a family of nice and altruistic people who work tirelessly to help you become a better version of yourself— and open new doors.

There is a lot of interesting information to learn— you will rediscover yourself and discover talents that you have— but were not aware of. You will explore multiple fields such as literature, art, history, philosophy, writing, etc. You will have the support of excellent and dedicated professors/tutors— advice, and teaching from prominent guests. You will also get access to resources such as childcare, moral support, counseling, food, books, transportation and more— in brief, you will receive everything you need to pursue your education and bounce back in life.

However, to make this program work beautifully and reach its goals, you will have to put in some work— no matter how much help you get, to succeed you need to be committed and work hard to do your part as a last piece of the puzzle. Stand up firmly— seize that lifetime opportunity as a steppingstone to give life to your dreams. All you must do is to free your mind from any prejudice, any lack of self-

confidence, any fear you may have—and empower yourself with an unwavering determination to change your life. Be ready to challenge yourself and exceed your limits— never forget that you have all the support you need and make sure you use it—make yourself available to come to class, it is primordial— always friendly and enriching.

Despite challenges, and no matter the sacrifices—the sublime result at the end fills us with indescribable joy of accomplishment— many have done it, we did it! You also can and will do it—So, relax and enjoy your journey.

(Souleymane Nikiema)



Today is the day that will change your life. I just wanted to ask you, are you ready? I wasn't, but you don't have to be. All it takes is to be willing. My first day, I was so

nervous I could have fainted, but to be honest that was every class session. Besides that, every class session was worth going to, and you might feel how you feel that very first day. I almost made the mistake to not come back to class and give everything back that I received that day, like the laptop and the books. The next week, I was going to fold like Walter from *A Raisin in the Sun*, and if you're as lucky as this class, you'll be reading that book.

I want you to know this program absolutely helps you face your fears, chase your dreams, and capture your goals. It's just up to you to take the journey. Everybody in the Odyssey family will help you with anything they can. They give you absolutely everything to succeed and nothing to fail. Just remember the first step. Just come to class. Everybody knows life happens, but so does success. Today is your time. **(Terance Nix)**



First of all, CONGRATULATIONS! You're the chosen one. This is not your ordinary class of school you're in. This is going to be the most memorable journey of a lifetime. I guarantee it!

This is where strangers come together and become a family. There's no judgment, nothing but excitement in class every week. Come as you are, no matter what you're going through in life. We all have obstacles, but don't let that stop you from coming to class or be discouraged. You're in good hands. You have an amazing staff that will help and guide you every step of the way. It's time to come out of your shell. It's your time to shine to be the person God created you to be. Enjoy this journey! **(Sally Phelps)**



Odyssey helps you become the best version of yourself. It helps you open up and see the world through a lens that had been shattered. It allows you to start putting it back together. You're surrounded by people who are supportive and have similar roller coaster lives. Odyssey gives you a safe space.

I really looked forward to every single Wednesday. Being surrounded by all 30 classmates and Odyssey staff makes you feel like you can endure and find your purpose. The guests are tremendously amazing, inspiring, and powerful. It's not only just a great opportunity for schooling, but it's also a place where you find your path, build your path, and walk your path.

You are surrounded by 30 people that come from very different backgrounds. However, as they begin to speak and as you begin to learn, you realize that you guys are more similar than you could even imagine. I originally thought walking in to the class I would be judged or misunderstood, but it was the complete opposite experience.

You guys will have way more in common than you think. Just be open to it and accepting of each other. You'll see it helps you open up and find your voice. Odyssey helps you find your path, and you will see a little bit clearer as it guides you to get to where you

want to be. You will learn how to become the best version of yourself and embark on your new next journey.

I'm so grateful and extremely honored to have been given the opportunity and the privilege to be a part of such a powerful program and even more extraordinary people. All the guest speakers, trips, plays, and museum showed me that I needed to be here in these moments at this point of my life.

While you take this journey, embrace every moment and don't take it for granted. I promise you won't forget it. No matter how hard it gets, don't give up. Come to Odyssey with an open mind, free heart, and open spirit.

You're gonna gain so much by the time it ends. You're gonna be a different person but in the best ways possible. So thank you again personally to the staff and the students. And I wish the future class as much success as my classmates and I had.

(Isiah Pickett)



Embrace and be thankful for the opportunity you're being given. With that being said, congratulations! You're going to experience and learn so much you probably didn't expect to or learn in high school. The most exciting part about it (or at least

for me) was that I had fun with it. All thanks to Mrs. Emily, who will not let you give up; trust me, I tried, and I am so happy that I didn't.

Off the bat, just come in, be yourself, don't be judgmental because everyone has a story just like you, and lastly just give it your all. The Odyssey Program isn't here to just help you slip through the cracks. What I have learned is that they really want to see you reach your full potential. You're going to meet people with maybe the same story as you who have overcome, or on top of that you might be going through that same story with your classmates. Another way it's one big family, and myself personally, I couldn't be happier to be a part of it. Welcome to the Odyssey family! **(Rodney Poe Jr.)**



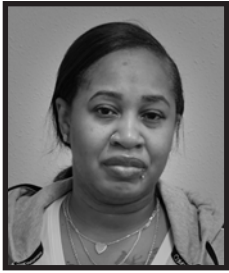
First and foremost, I give thanks to God for allowing me this opportunity to be part of the Odyssey family. I truly welcome all of you (class of 2025).

I have always felt that education is very important. I have been

stumbling throughout my education journey, taking small steps to large steps, taking shortcuts, struggling, trying so hard not to give up.

Odyssey has offered sustainability for me to overcome the barriers in my life that have blocked me from completing my education. Since Odyssey, I feel more comfortable with my writing skills, self-esteem, and growth within myself. I learned from Odyssey that no matter what, come to class, and if possible, never miss a day. This will help prevent you from falling behind in your classwork.

Because of all the great support that Odyssey has offered me, I had no barriers to stop me from getting the education I received. Thanks for the transportation, childcare, nutritious food, tutoring, dinner with all of my Odyssey classmates, activities, all of the awesome events I attended, and a loving and respectful environment and much, much more. Odyssey has been one of my best inspirations that I have experienced in my life. This has been a great journey for me and my new Odyssey family. I love you, Odyssey, for life! **(Kimberly Rodgers)**



Wow! You made it, welcome. I'm so happy that you made the decision to further your education. Get ready to embark on an odyssey that will change your life and others around you. First and foremost, you have gained a family of angels which includes staff and

new students. Always remember to embrace and care for those around you because you never know that the next person is going through or feeling. This may take you quite a while because you never know the connection you may have to them. Take this class and this year seriously, and remember that you have help no matter what the situation is. Always finish your homework because it is easy to fall behind. You have the most amazing people within this program who, no matter what, will be only a phone call away. Never be scared to be open and loud or to express how you feel. Remember we are family no matter the race, sex, age, or where you come from. Again, welcome and I hope you enjoy every part of Odyssey as you embark on this new journey with family and friends on your journey to success. P.S. Remember a closed mouth does not get fed. Open up. **(Marcy Tibbs)**



When I first started Odyssey, I was so nervous. Being a single mom and working full time, I never thought I would have the opportunity to dig my brain again with school. This program has all the tools to guide you to success. You will quickly see after the first

class how everyone turns from a stranger to family. Every class pushes you more to think outside the box. There are so many opportunities to do things you have never done before without facing judgment. Don't be afraid to use your voice. Raise your hand and be involved. Make sure you open up to the teachers because they really do care (they aren't just talking) LOL. Also, attend tutoring... Kevin and his team of tutors are ready to help.

This opportunity has given me hope again—the confidence to get back in school and apply myself. I know that it's NOT TOO LATE for me to do better for MYSELF! Emily and her team will be there for you every step of the way. Now buckle up and do the damn thang! Welcome to the family, Class of 2025! **(Amanda Von Behren)**



Let me start by saying you're on your way to one of the best journeys that you'll encounter as a student. The staff and support that you will be given is like the love of a family that is well blended and shows unconditional love. You will

meet classmates from all different walks of life, not knowing that in many ways you're so much alike. Don't get discouraged. Some days will not be easy, but know there's always help from the staff to your classmates. Keep pushing through because at the end you'll have accomplished a goal that can open more doors and opportunities. I wish you nothing but success and that you achieve your highest potential. I'm proud of you even though we've never met. Enjoy this experience and make us proud. Love always.

(Endia Walls)



Welcome to your continuous journey. My name is Ron, and I am an older (59) student in the class. What I would like to say is not to put too much pressure on yourself. That's exactly what I did in the first semester, and in my opinion, I

didn't do a good job. Writing is not my strong suit. Tell a story, wonderful; however, putting it on paper is like jumping in a lion's den. Don't be afraid to give a wrong response during in-class discussion. Myself, I tend to learn better actually hearing; it gives me a better understanding than reading. It's about coming together as a unit to keep everyone safely aboard.

Of course, if you're like me, you're not going to understand 90% of the reading in the beginning, at least I didn't. This is where common sense comes into play. We do understand right from wrong. Odyssey is a journey! In this class, I was given the opportunity to examine my past and present. My odyssey was/is about life. We all have a purpose and I have discovered mine. The road hasn't been easy, more bruises and scars than one person should endure. Now my journey is ahead of me, and I know now where the road leads. Make friends with yourself and you will never be alone **(Ron Watson)**

MEET THE ODYSSEY TEAM FOR 2023-2024

ODYSSEY PROJECT AND ONWARD ODYSSEY

Executive Director: Professor Emily Auerbach

Director of Adult Education: Professor Kevin Mullen

Program Manager: Emily 'Em' Azad

Odyssey Assistant Program and Development Manager:
Sarah Lensmire

Odyssey Coordinator: Christina DeMars

Odyssey Assistant Coordinator: Gwendolyn Coale

Odyssey Success Coach: Brian Benford Odyssey '07, UW MSW

Odyssey Navigator: Christine Ellen Cina

Director of Development & Community Partnerships: Jenny Pressman

Budget Manager: Roberta 'Bobbie' Wang

Odyssey Ambassador: Char Braxton '06

Oracle and Yearbook Designer: Beth Auerbach

Photography: Dynae Allice Photography, Emily 'Em' Azad, Gwendolyn Coale, Christina DeMars, Sarah Lensmire, Hedi Rudd '12, Kevin Mullen

Odyssey Teaching Faculty: Nidia Banuelos, Erin Celello, Christy Clark- Pujara, Jean Feraca, Baron Kelly, Gene Phillips, Ben Shannon, Craig Werner

Financial Advising: J.P. Pfund

Odyssey Guests: Keena Atkinson '10, Bob Auerbach, David Auerbach, Bill Banfield, Marlon Hall, René Robinson '08, Patrice Rushen



Onward Odyssey Guests: Emily Auerbach, Doug Bradley, Will Brockliss, Steven Espada Dawson, James DeVita, Eliot Finkelstein, Leah Freemon, Mel Hamond, Charles Konsitzke, Kevin Mullen, Brendon Panke, Gene Phillips, Yvette Pino, Kevin Ryan, Scott Schultz, Sri Vamsi Matta, Craig Werner

Odyssey Interns and Student Hourly Helpers: Johnny Escobar, Zawadi Ozulamoi, Jamie Rousseau Karl (Social Work Intern), Eliza Tool, Lily Watson

Odyssey Facilities: Brenda González (Director of Community-University Engagement), Tanika Apaloo (Assistant Director), Candace Patterson (Coordinator), UW-South Madison Partnership

Class Meals: AAUW Monona-Madison, Michelle Bozeman, Bobbie Wang and Mary Circle/St. James Lutheran Church

Volunteer Tutors: Holly Brooks Anderson, Denise Oyuki Castillo, Mariza Francis, Colin Hemme, Stanley Jackson, John Morgan, Moses Oluwanifise, Carol Poore, Jen Rubin, Mara Schroeder, Tori Tiso, Keena Tripple, Seth Umbaugh, and Jay Whitehead



Partners: Chazen Museum of Art, Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra, American Players Theatre, Madison Opera, Four Seasons Theatre, and University Theatre

ODYSSEY JUNIOR

Odyssey Junior Director: Karen Dreyfuss

Odyssey Junior staff: Angie Bazan, Brian Benford '07, Ellie Breitfeld, Leigh Button, Ron Burford '20, Christina DeMars, Raquel Diaz, Jerome Dizon, Laura Evans, Jerome Flowers, Arantza Giron Cruz, Erendira Giron Cruz, Marisol Gonzalez '17, Karla Holguin, Talina Lopez Ruiz, Michelle Mack '22, Mackenzie McDermit, Deshawn McKinney, Zawadi Ozulamoi, Geraldine Rivera, KaBao Thao, Patricia Vera, Haley Weaver

Odyssey Junior volunteers: Amy Basel, Valenzia Cina, Carol Heins-Daniels, Riley Lynch, Aanika Parikh, Prisma Ruacho, Chris Wagner, Becky Wheeler, Jaden Zuzinec

Odyssey Junior partners and guests: Badger Precollege Music Program (Leo Artuno Quintero, Carrie Backman, Jeanne Hammes, Susan Hope, Liz Olson), Briarpatch Youth Services (Gary Davis), CEOs of Tomorrow (Roxie Hentz), Cultural Connections Art Collab (Pat Dillon, Terrance Adeyanju, Ella Justice), Doctors Ought to Care (Greta Olson, Noah Pollard), Drum Power (Yorel Lashley), Go Team Therapy Dogs, Literally Arts (Jamie Henke, Dr. Hailey Love), Madison Circus Space (Hildy Bee, Quinn Jiles), Madison College Goodman South, Madison Public Library (Nate Clark, Rachel Lavender), Madison Reading Project (Gloria Heiss, Melissa Hornung, Ella Rogers), Madison Youth Choir (Lynn Hembel), UW Madison Dance Department (Chell Parkins), UW Madison Kinesiology (Morgan Shields), UW Madison Multicultural Student Center, UW Space Place (Kay Kriewald)



ODYSSEY BEYOND BARS

Director: Peter Moreno

Associate Director: Jennifer Fandel

Academic Program Manager: Taylor Kirby

Program Coordinator: Rachel Ritacco

Success Coach: Mike Exum

Research and Outreach Coordinator: Pearly Wong

Instructors/guest lecturers: Jean Feraca with Jerry Hancock, Jennifer Fandel (Columbia Correctional), Kevin Mullen (Oakhill Correctional), Dana Oswald (Racine Correctional), Rosemary Russ (Oakhill Correctional), Ben Shannon (Oakhill Correctional)



Guest faculty: Carmen Alanso (Oakhill Correctional), Emily Auerbach (Oakhill Correctional), Theresa Duello (Oakhill Correctional), Eliot Finkelstein (UW librarian), Leah Freemon (UW librarian), Alex Stark (UW librarian)

Volunteer Tutors and Storytelling Coaches: Anne Durst, Jaime Edwards, Jennifer Fandel, Nestor Gomez, Jimmy Gutierrez, Danielle Hairston-Green, Hannah James, Susan Kaye, Megan Kennedy, Taylor Kirby, Brendon Panke, Vignesh Ramachandran, Jen Rubin, Seth Umbaugh, Kevin Willmott, Pearly Wong

Academic and Financial Aid Advisors: Mike Exum, JP Pfund, Karen Ripley, Martin Rouse, Sarah Stilp

ODYSSEY SENIOR

Instructor: Emily Auerbach

Guests: Takeyla Benton '10, Erin Celello, Kevin Mullen, Jen Rubin, Craig Werner



DIVISION OF CONTINUING STUDIES

Jeffrey Russell (Dean & Vice
Provost of Lifelong Learning)

Hope Simon (Associate Dean
of Administration and
Finance, Budget & Financial
Reporting, Human Resources
& Payroll)

Colleen Johnson (Director of
Development & Business
Engagement)

Andy Richardson (Assistant
Director of Administration &
Finance, Budget & Financial Reporting, Business Services & Operations)

Integrated Marketing Communications Team



FRIENDS OF THE UW ODYSSEY PROJECT, INC.

Board of Directors

Alison TenBruggencate (President)

Don Miner (Treasurer)

Christy Clark-Pujara

Jean Feraca

Brenda González

René Robinson '08 (Secretary)

Theodore Widder, III

Executive Director

Emily Auerbach

Advisors

Emily 'Em' Azad

Colleen Johnson

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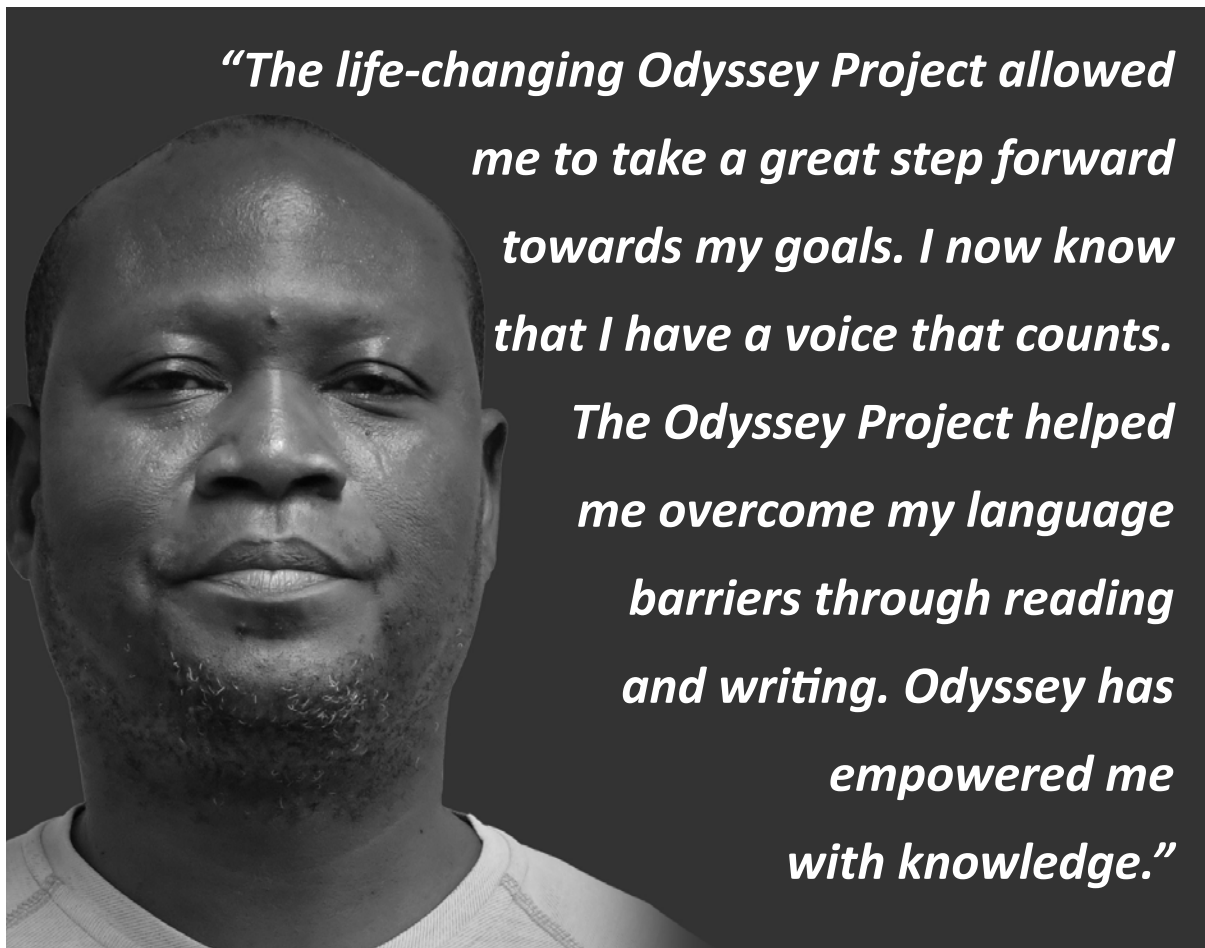
Roberta Wang



JOIN THE UW ODYSSEY PROJECT

To be eligible for the Odyssey Project, you need to:

- be at least 18 years old
- have a high school degree, G.E.D., or H.S.E.D. prior to June 1, 2024
- have financial need (income near the federal poverty level)
- possess the ability to read challenging books in English
- make a commitment to attend classes regularly



Email Emily Auerbach at emily.auerbach@wisc.edu with questions or for an application or apply online at www.odyssey.wisc.edu/apply/.

PLEASE SUPPORT THE UW ODYSSEY PROJECT

Odyssey changes lives. The following accounts enable us to help Odyssey students, graduates, and families with both their educational and personal expenses.

THE ODYSSEY PROJECT FUND

This fund supports academic programming, including tuition, textbooks, and other expenses associated with Onward Odyssey, the core Odyssey course, and Odyssey Beyond Wars.

*THE FRIENDS OF ODYSSEY FAMILY FUND

This fund supports Odyssey Junior and Odyssey Senior, funds tech access for students, helps families with basic living expenses and unanticipated emergencies, and funds Odyssey's greatest needs. *This is also our most flexible fund.

"Odyssey has opened up my brain so much. It makes you hungry to learn more. After this program, I feel like I need to feed the beast!"

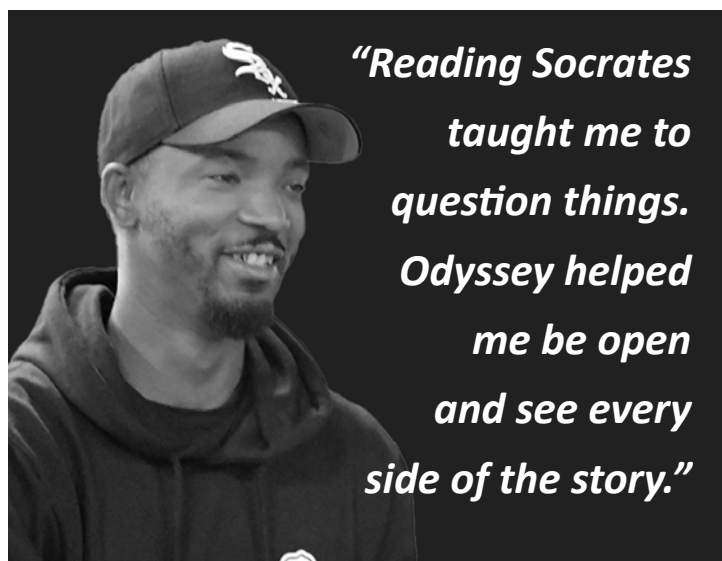


THE ODYSSEY BEYOND BARS FUND

This fund supports Odyssey's academic programming and opportunities for learners in Wisconsin prisons.

To see a list of Odyssey's endowment funds, please visit odyssey.wisc.edu/support.

Find uwodysseyproject on:



WAYS TO GIVE

Online: odyssey.wisc.edu/support

By check:

make payable to UW Foundation.
Please be sure to write the fund name on the memo line.

Mail to:

UW Foundation, US Bank Lockbox Box
78807, Milwaukee, WI 53278-0807

By phone: 800-443-6162

To learn more, contact Jenny Pressman at jenny.pressman@wisc.edu, 608-287-8216.

MEMORIAL AND HONORARY STUDENT PRIZES

LISA MUNRO TWO-GENERATION SCHOLARSHIP

To honor career counselor and social justice activist Lisa Munro, former UW-Madison Dean of Students Mary K. Rouse proposed a two-generation Odyssey scholarship in Lisa's name. Mary Rouse also helped fund the scholarship along with some of Lisa's relatives and friends. Lisa's husband, Dick Goldberg, recently endowed this scholarship to ensure it can be offered to future generations. Awards go to an Odyssey alum and his or her child or grandchild.

The 2024 winner is Otis Harris, Jr., Class of 2009. Otis has combined fatherhood, school, ministry, support of his siblings, and multiple jobs as he makes his way toward a degree. He describes himself as overcoming adversity and driven by a desire to set a powerful example for his children. Otis will use part of his two-generation scholarship to provide customized lessons for Penelope, his five-year-old daughter who loves music and the arts but has severe hearing impairments. Otis hopes to pursue a degree in business and to establish a company that helps others gain employment.



SHARON STARK SCHOLARSHIP

Sharon Stark and her late husband Peter Livingston established a Sharon Stark Scholarship in honor of Brianna Livingston-Lengyel, their granddaughter. This award covers the costs of books, materials, wraparound support, and other expenses for one Odyssey student each year. Sharon commented, "I've long admired Odyssey's mission and accomplishments. It changes lives. When my granddaughter encouraged me to support low-income women of color more directly, I knew right away that Odyssey was the right fit given my passion for education. Creating a scholarship fund is a great way for me to help one student every year as she moves forward with her educational dreams."

Over Zoom, Sharon met Blanca Laine, selected as the 2024 Sharon Stark scholar. An indigenous woman from Ecuador, Blanca credits Odyssey with helping her find new motivation for education. Blanca writes, "Odyssey has brought me hope and faith to believe in myself and come out of the shadows that exist only in my imagination. I don't feel alone anymore because I am surrounded by awesome instructors, classmates, and tutors. After Odyssey I am hungry for more achievements in my life because I know what my potential is now."



WANDA AUERBACH MEMORIAL PRIZES

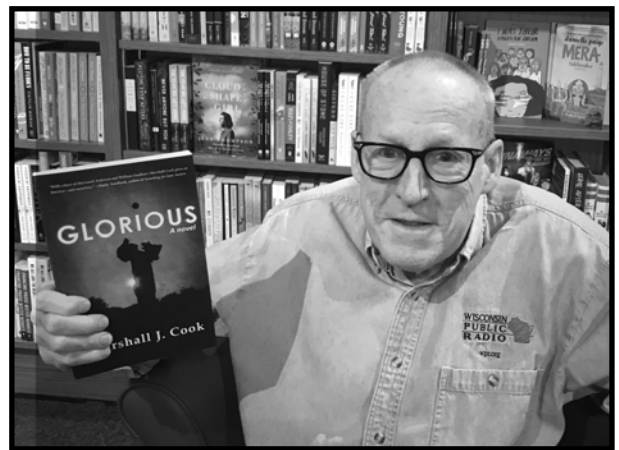
Wanda Auerbach (1927-2012) believed passionately that the richness of a liberal arts education should be available to all, regardless of income or background.

Born poor in Appalachia without running water, she became the first in her family to attend college. After graduating as the valedictorian of Berea College, she earned advanced degrees and became a reference librarian.

A devoted wife, mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, Wanda Auerbach was an ardent supporter of the UW Odyssey Project. In her name, the Auerbach family established an endowment to support prizes to all graduating students each year.

MARSHALL COOK MEMORIAL PRIZES

Professor Marshall Cook (1944-2024) was an award-winning teacher adored as “Coach” by hundreds of UW Odyssey students. He imparted a joy of language and a belief in humanity. For the first 18 years of the Odyssey Project (until his health declined), he shared his enthusiasm for language and writing with over 500 Odyssey students. Odyssey alumni rave about him: “Because of Coach Marshall, I wrote a book.” “Coach made me love malapropisms, spoonerisms, euphemisms, and all kinds of other words.” “Coach was THE MAN, the kindest man I ever met.”



Marshall was a prolific writer, publishing over 30 works of fiction and non-fiction and hundreds of feature articles and short stories. He was a guest on Oprah and edited a newsletter featuring the work of other writers as well as his own poetry, fiction, and non-fiction.

Marshall’s family describes him as an active church volunteer, avid jogger and biker, baseball fanatic, and lover of pets. Marshall was beloved by friends, students, coworkers, and family alike for his kindness, humility, and humor. Students fondly recall him wearing baseball jerseys into class or a shirt that instead of “Athletic Department” said “Arthritic Department.” He will be much missed. We honor his memory and the generosity of his family and friends by awarding prizes in his name to each graduating student.

MORE SCHOLARSHIPS FOR ODYSSEY STUDENTS

Students in our Class of 2024 are Evjue, Brittingham, or Anonymous Committee scholars through sponsorships by those organizations. We also gratefully acknowledge scholarships from The Business Forum of Madison, the Rotary Club, and the American Association of University Women (see next page). To sign up for our monthly e-newsletters highlighting the successes of our alumni as they go on to win awards and earn degrees many were told would not be possible, visit our website.

To donate to an existing scholarship fund or to create a new one in honor or memory of someone special in your life, please contact Jenny Pressman at jenny.pressman@wisc.edu or 608-287-8216.

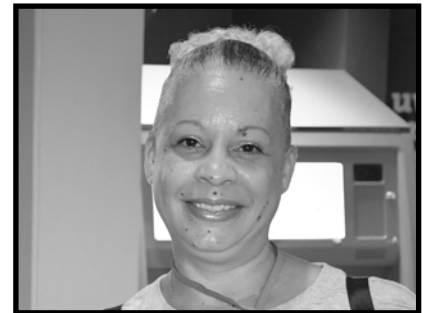
AAUW SCHOLARSHIPS

We thank the Madison/Monona chapter of the American Association of University Women for generously awarding scholarships to women continuing their education at community colleges in the fall. Below are brief biographies and photos of the four 2024 winners.



Zawadi Ozulamoi is a graduate of our Odyssey Junior program now completing her first year at Madison College. Next year she will complete her associate degree through the Liberal Arts transfer program at Madison College. She plans to apply to UW-Madison to pursue a bachelor's degree in nursing. Zawadi's mother, Josephine, came to the U.S. as a refugee from war-torn Sudan, attended the UW Odyssey Project in 2008, and went on to earn both her bachelor's and MSW from UW-Madison. Zawadi hopes, like her mother, to enrich the lives of those in the community and wants to set an example for her three younger siblings. Her youngest brother's neurodivergence fueled her interest in brain science. Josephine wants the AAUW to know how grateful she is for their support.

Aleesha Flowers is a current member of the UW Odyssey Project Class of 2024. A mother of seven children ranging in age from 10 to 32, Aleesha learned about Odyssey through a daughter who graduated from the program several years ago. Aleesha has just been accepted into the Liberal Arts transfer program at Madison College for Fall 2024. She lives paycheck to paycheck as a barber and has suffered great losses recently, including both her parents and her brother, but she is determined to pursue her bachelor's degree, write an autobiography, and inspire her family.



Thedora Smith graduated from the UW Odyssey Project Class of 2021 during the pandemic. She is a pre-nursing student at Madison College and has a passion for improving the outcomes for Black mothers in Dane County. Racial disparities in prenatal care and infant mortality point to a great need for better medical care and support. As a single mother who also cares in her home for a client and her baby, Thedora struggles to make ends meet while continuing at Madison College. "Odyssey gave me empowerment, support, and motivation," Thedora writes, and she is determined to go forward towards her end goal of becoming an OB/GYN.

Keely Nelson-Gray graduated from the UW Odyssey Project Class of 2023 while pregnant with her third daughter. Having survived a difficult childhood while her mother battled drug addiction, Keely initially went down the wrong path but experienced firsthand how helpful and influential a caring social worker can be. She hopes to become such a social worker herself in the future and work with at-risk children. Keely is taking classes at Madison College in the Liberal Arts transfer program and hopes eventually to earn her master's degree in social work. She will become the first in her family to graduate from college and says she wants to break generational curses.



FRIEND OF THE UW ODYSSEY PROJECT 2024 AWARDS

This year we honor two local philanthropists for their transformational gifts to our program. Both have supported Odyssey's mission for a long time. Four years ago, they joined forces with 14 other major donors to build the Wanda Auerbach Endowed Chair through a Morgridge match. And this past year, Pleasant Rowland offered a million-dollar match to build Odyssey's Future Fund, the largest gift in the program's history. Diane Ballweg created a double match by offering a half-million-dollar gift of her own. By the end of December 2023, Odyssey had a new two-million-dollar endowment to secure its future.

Philanthropy literally means *love of humanity*. Both Pleasant Rowland and Diane Ballweg show their love of humanity by supporting hundreds of local charities, arts groups, youth programs, and community projects. We are so grateful to them for choosing the UW Odyssey Project for one of their life-changing gifts.



Pleasant Rowland: "I marvel at the way the Odyssey Project has helped adults who were once homeless and labeled 'not college material' go all the way to college degrees and careers helping others in our community. Throughout my life, I've believed that reading is at the heart of all achievement, making the American dream possible, so I'm delighted that I can help more families break a cycle of generational poverty and reach their dreams."

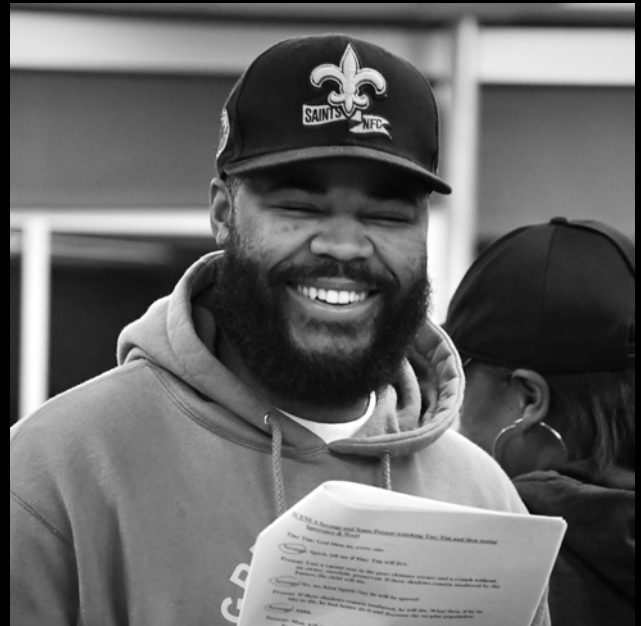
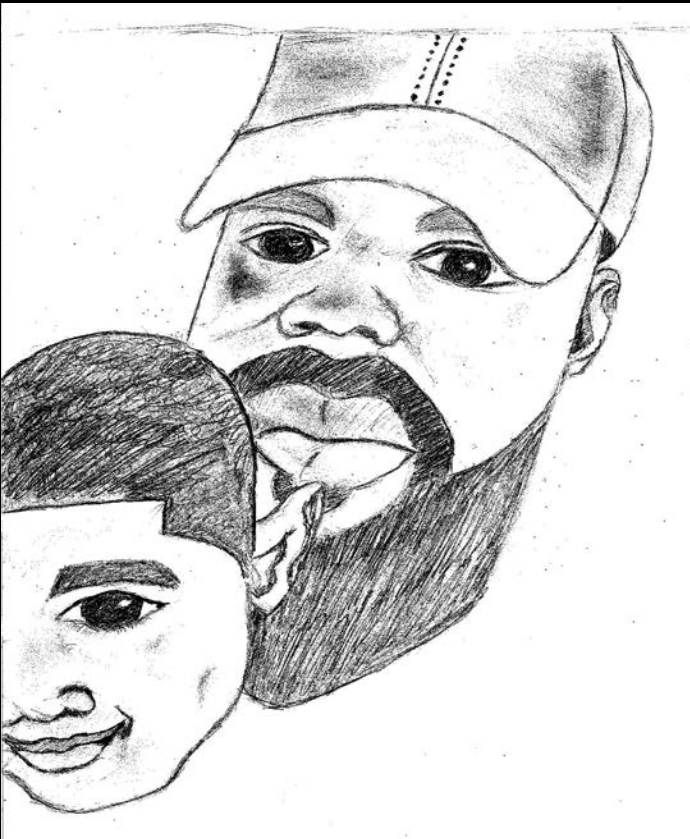
Diane Ballweg: "Nelson Mandela said, 'Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.' Odyssey focuses on education but also knows that health, housing, and other factors are crucial to success. One very impressive attribute of Odyssey is their creative spirit, personal expression, and loving inclusion of the total family over multiple generations in their plan for success."





Odyssey is a Kaleidoscope

**The room we inhabit one night a week
Holds a space for a spectrum of voices
Just waiting to splash the world
In a picture never been seen
Our stories shaped us individually
Gave some of us grey undertones
With quiet intrigue
The room we inhabit provides
a swirl of shades
Ever seeing each other more deeply
Honoring our present and our past**



**"My son has started this whole
journey for me making me into the
man I am today."**

~ Rodney Poe, Sr.



"Sunflowers stand up straight with petals that grasp out for the sky. I want to continue to stand up straight and grasp on to all the limitless amounts of knowledge and opportunity. I am a sunflower."

~ Mia Cannon



"These cracks on my face are forever symbolizing how the World tried to break me . . .

I'm broken but yet free . . . A child of God, I'm Me."

~ Vernell Cauley

