

YEAR 23, ISSUE 1

SEPTEMBER 3, 2025

ODYSSEY



ORACLE

WELCOME, CLASS OF 2026!



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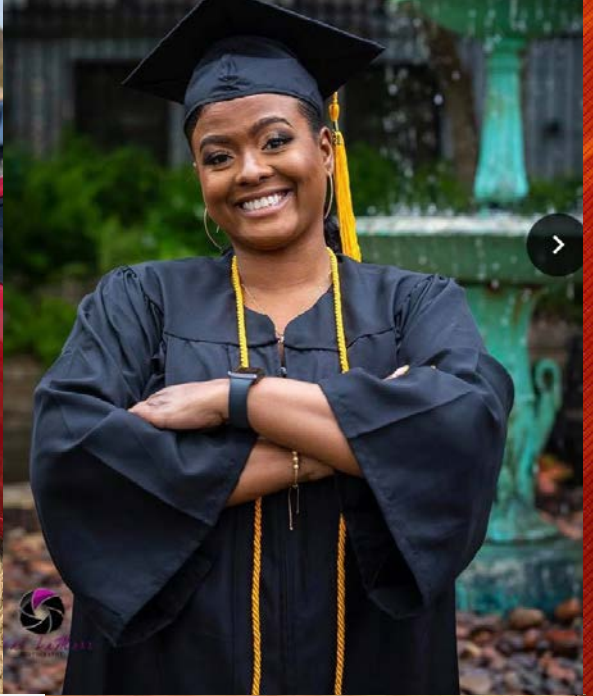
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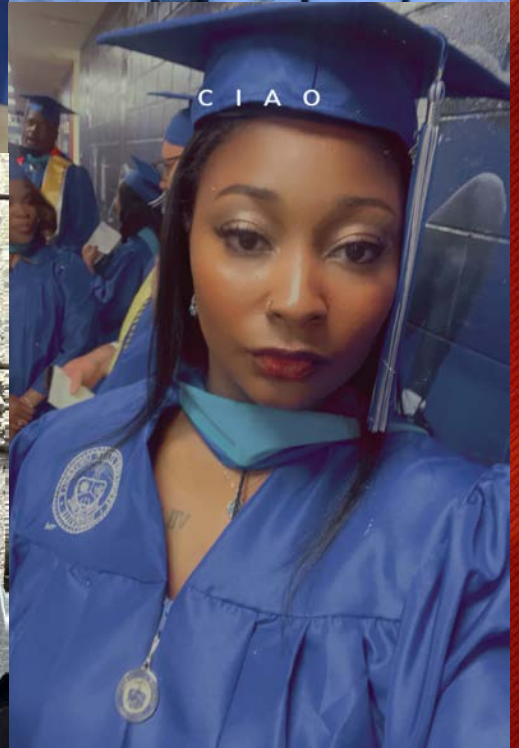
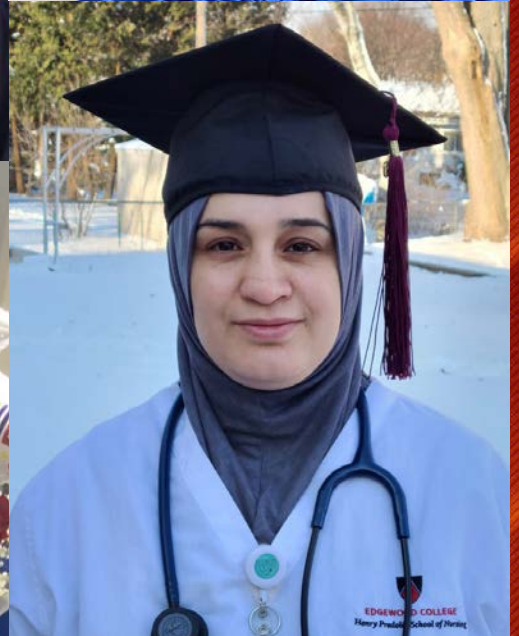
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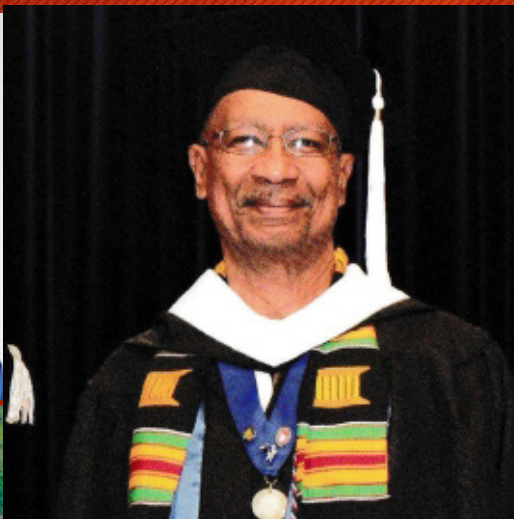
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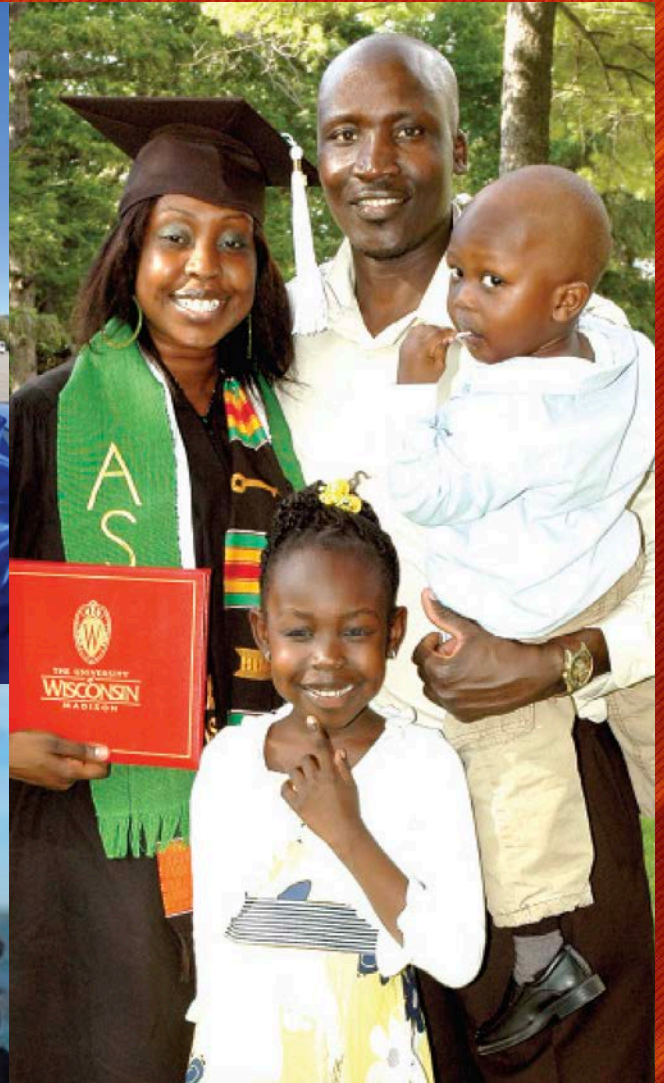
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Pictured on pp. 1-8 are some of our many Odyssey graduates who have earned associate's, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees from Madison College, UW-Madison, Edgewood, and other schools: Shaimaa Ahmed '16; Zeynab Ahmed '14; Sherreallyum Allen '05; Keena Atkinson '10; Brian Benford '07; Sherri Bester '08; Michelle Bozeman '11; Char Braxton '06; Lavern Brown '09; Michelle Brown '05; Kegan Carter '04; Luci Chikowero '14; Dominique Christian '09; China Moon Crowell '13; Yolanda Cunningham '12; Cameron Daniels '07; Jelissa Edwards '16; Jayvonna Fleming '16; Tom Gardner '08; Otis Harris '09; Molinda Henry '07; Kiara Hill '11; Tiffany Hite '04; James Horton '08; Yasmin Horton '08; Jessica Jacobs '21; Rhonda Johnson '09; Shaquida Johnson '12; Milli Lau '14; Shanita Lawrence '09; Joanna Lopez '05; Josephine Lorya '08; Michael Lozano '11; Ricardo Marroquin '19; Tasha McKenzie '10; Krista Mellott '20; Adrian Molitor '18; Ahmad Nahas '17; Shirley Norman '04; Moriah Parker '20; Nicole Barnett Pecku '09; Lolita Phillips '13; Jaleah Price, Odyssey Junior; Edwina Robinson '11; Sahira Rocillo '15; Simone Rogers '17; Mustafa Saed '16; Umaina Saed '16; Corey Saffold '06; Cherri Sorrells '17; Robert Taliafero, Beyond Bars '19; Kala Taylor '16; Marisela Tellez-Giron '16; Mai Neng Thao '16; Dauntrea Vance, Odyssey Junior; Hezouwe Walada '19; Anthony Ward '04; Mary Wells '07; Sarah Wells, Senior '24; Jayda Woods, Odyssey Junior



LETTERS TO THE CLASS OF 2026

Dear Class of 2026:

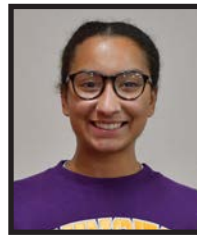


Picture yourselves in a room filled with the most mysterious, charismatic, and loving women, men, and friends. Now, imagine yourself sitting in a room where your voice roars and slowly blossoms into a kaleidoscopic flower; where stories become a vibrant song or sorrowful melody; a place where your family is safe and engaged in fun and creative learning activities. Odyssey's spirit is magnetic. Somewhere between reading William Blake's "Songs of Innocence" and Maya Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman," each assignment gave poetic justice to my voice, melting my emotions into notions of hope, faith, courage, and sorrow, while rapt in grace.

Odyssey broke a generational curse in my spirit; a curse I believe to be self-imposed. Practicing self-oppressed tendencies of repressing my words, worth, and mirth nearly destroyed my faith. This curse kept my dreams and purpose hidden, like a meek flower in the spring; but every rose has its thorns, and I decided to sharpen them instead of cutting them. In class and through the assignments Mrs. Emily gave us, I was given the chance to write stories of love, pain, and untold melodies hidden within me.

I remember the night I started my "Self Portrait" assignment! The image in my mind was perfect and every detail in my canvas was intentional, which made me treasure Odyssey with sincerity. Odyssey has personally gifted me with curiosity to learn about everything and to write fearlessly. The truth I can share about my experience is through my writing and the work printed in the Odyssey Oracle. The love you will receive is humble and genuine. It was an honor and privilege to be part of the graduating class of 2025, and I will honor the memories. Where do you picture yourself in May 2026? Not sure? Good. That's Odyssey.

(Angelica Alvarez Valenciano)



This is the time to look within yourself and say, "I can do it!" I first walked into this program thinking I couldn't do it and I wouldn't finish. I had no idea who any of these people were, and it was very off putting, but I knew

we were all here for the same thing—to better ourselves. No matter what you are going through, your classmates, teachers, advisors, whoever, will be there to support you! Open up and let them in. Everyone in this program is truly kindhearted, and they just want what is best for you. Be grateful that you have this opportunity because there is someone else who would love to be in this position. They gave you an inch and you take the mile—to your success.

I want to thank Emily, Kevin, Christine, Brian, and more. They were so understanding and supportive through the whole process, such great people. I have made the best memories, and Wednesday nights are always something I look forward to. My classmates are amazing, and I love every different perspective. We all opened up and created great friendships throughout this program. Take a breath, look at everyone, and take it in. They are strangers now, but they will be your family by the end of the year. **YOU CAN DO IT! Best of luck! (Kyianna Baker)**



Hi you, smile. Everything you're feeling I've felt. This will be a very special time in your life. So just relax and smell the newness—your books, pens, backpacks, laptops, and of course all the friendly staff.

Even if you're going through a sad day or not so good start of the week, please come to class because you will for sure have so much fun learning. It's so intriguing. You will love your lessons, homework even. All I can say is you got this, and if you need a friend, I'm near—as is everyone at Odyssey. Now let's go!!! **(Tiffany Brenston)**



Hello, Class of 2026! First off, I want to say congratulations. This Odyssey course has been such an amazing and remarkable moment in my life. I have been involved with Odyssey since I was a teenager in Odyssey Junior. With

all the amazing people you'll meet, you will create a forever family.

What I have learned from Odyssey is so unforgettable, with all the different stories we've read and written about. We have learned about all these people that are legends until this day, still being talked about. Odyssey is a course that

will teach you that your life struggles are just temporary. If you put one foot in front of the other and believe in yourself, it will be possible. No matter what is going on in your life, stay focused.

It's an opportunity to make changes in your life and really get you to know your dreams and how to start chasing them. What is important in your life is the moment and the people around you.

I've been through so much trial and tribulation in life physically and mentally. With perseverance, I was able to achieve what I thought I wasn't capable of. It's the discipline and focus to get to success and a brighter future. I want to be a great role model for my children, my siblings, and my family. Believe in yourself and pray about all your struggles and anything you're going through. Talk to God about it.

Use the help that Odyssey provides to get your homework done.

Look forward to going to class and seeing Professor Emily and all the different people involved in Odyssey. Odyssey is an amazing team of all different people, and you will meet new people from different backgrounds.

You got this! Do your best in this. It's definitely worth it. Stay blessed. **(Qu'Anna Caffey)**





Heyyyyyyyy, Class of 2026!!!!!!
Welcome to the start of a new beginning and your way to a brighter future. I want to start by saying heyyyy, I'm Eleanor Ceaser. I'm ending this class strong, and wanting to continue to grow with the Odyssey Program is that fire!

Be very happy that you got chosen to be a part of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I mean they make it SOOO hard for us not to be able to succeed! Special thanks to Emily and her husband for getting this program started and focusing on minorities and on less fortunate people who have great ideas and futures that, with a little help, will get them soaring to the sky with the goals they are knocking down. This is the place where you can stop and say, "Thank you so much, God, for letting me get chosen for this opportunity."

Really, I remember the day like it was yesterday, getting that phone call from Emily and being sooooo happy that I got chosen! It really made me feel special and like God was saying, "Here, Ellie, this is the time to invest in yourself. Go make me proud." I was jumping, screaming, and literally



tears came to my eyes knowing I got accepted. I kept hearing nothing but amazing things about this program, and I was soo happy I took the chance! I took this opportunity and did the very best that I could. I showed up every day and never missed a day to engage, do homework, come to tutoring—you're going to succeed! So go ahead and scream, jump, and yell—this is a great opportunity. It changes my mood, and I am happy to say, "I can't go—I got school. I have to do homework. I'm getting ready for my graduation." Just like, wow—Eleanor, this program is one of the best opportunities I have had!

Remember there is no wrong answer, and if you are going through something don't hesitate to talk to the wonderful staff. I know people just say, "Hey, I'm here for you if you need anything," but this group of teachers really means that. If there's something that is stopping you from coming to school, they will help if they can. Do not hesitate to go to the tutoring every Monday—it comes with food and child care, and I would say take advantage of it and go every chance you get, especially with the homework you feel you're not really getting. Come in on Monday and they will help you with it. Just show up to class every Wednesday with good energy and participate and you will not fail!!!
WELCOME, CLASS 2026!!!! BE NICE TO MY STAFF, OKAY!!!!!! (Eleanor Ceaser)



If you are reading this letter, it is because you are now sitting in the seat I sat in a year ago. Welcome! Welcome to the journey, the adventure, the Odyssey Project! Feeling nervous? So did I...but don't worry, the class sessions come alive with stimulating activities and brilliant professors and alumni guest speakers! One thing I can guarantee, especially if you are sitting in the seat I sat in – your heart will become enlightened, you will be inspired to grow more. You will catch the Odyssey fever! So, sit tight, have a bite, enjoy the night, and know that everything will be alright!

Congratulations! And here's a toast to your success and prosperity moving forward! **(Timothy Comer)**



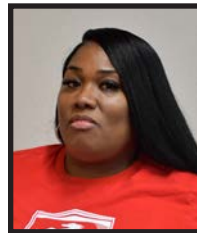
What's up, Odyssey Class of 2026?
Welcome!!

First off, I'd like to recognize and celebrate each one

of you for deciding to dive back into your education and commit to the idea of self-growth. People love to talk about how they're gonna do this, or gonna do that-- but here you are taking action, which shows tremendous courage. I know things might seem intimidating and a bit overwhelming (especially on this first day), but trust that inner voice that led you here. Remember that you were hand selected from over a hundred applicants for this one-of-a-kind opportunity! I promise you're on the right path.

It might sound a little cliché, but it honestly feels like just the other day I was sitting in one of those chairs on the first day of class, feeling that mix of uncertainty and excitement, reading over the encouraging letters that the Class of 2024 had written us. And now here I am a few weeks away from our graduation ceremony and feeling sad that the year is almost over. I also am feeling incredibly grateful for everything Odyssey has done/ continues to do. As I revisited the class of 2024 letters, I noticed a really strong sense of connection that wasn't particularly there at the beginning of the year. I now grasp the weight and sincerity of each one of those letters because that's exactly how I'm feeling with the year about to wrap up. In no time it'll be spring of 2026, and I genuinely believe you'll be feeling what I am right now—a sense of appreciation and warmth that stems from the spirit of what this program truly is, along with all the amazing people who make it possible.

Odyssey redefines the sense of what a community can really be, and I'm excited for each one of you to experience it. Welcome to the Fam, Class of '26!!
(Dillon Dahlk)



I joined the Odyssey Class of 2025 as a mother of six and a grandmother of two. I graduated high school over 25 years ago. I had no idea what Odyssey would be like for me. I was nervous about going back to school, but I'm so happy that I did! Odyssey has opened my mind to endless possibilities that I had lost interest in. I am reenergized and optimistic. I want more. I have an overload of ideas again, and my future is bright and clear. I would suggest Odyssey to anyone looking to further their educational career or anyone looking for a fresh start in life. I am very grateful to have had this experience. I wish you all the best on your future endeavors. **(Gela Docks)**



All things, good things told and spread about the Odyssey Project are true. Your life will change; you yourself and your mind will expand. Everyone involved in the program—the teachers, students, and everyone up, down, and around—

want nothing more than for you to transform into something, someone successful. I will say also release yourself in your writing. If you're a single mom, homeless, just got out, no matter your background, tell your story! **(Brianna Español)**



When I walked into this room, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. I came with an open mind and an open heart, and from that moment on everything I needed to do was made clear.

The road I traveled wasn't easy!

Sometimes I was dead dog tired. Sometimes work felt like too much, and sometimes I couldn't tell if I was coming or going, but one thing was certain—if I kept showing up, if I kept asking for help, if I kept being vulnerable and honest, I was going to make it to my goal.

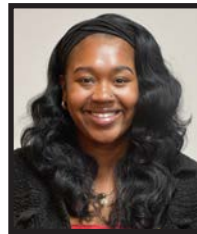
No matter what happens, show up to class. When I showed up, I slowly formed a family with my classmates. When I showed up to tutoring, I always left with a smile and feeling lighter. School became my safe space, a place where I could come and truly be me, a place where others uplift me and where I get to help uplift others. This was a place where I have a solid support system of amazing teachers and counselors who would help me with anything.

If you don't take anything else from this letter, please take this: all you have to do is show up and be the most authentic version of yourself. Reach out when you're struggling and work as hard as you can. This class is transformative if you let it be. By the end of this class, you won't believe how amazing and talented you truly are! Rock it out, Class of 2026! **(Adrianne Farrow)**



This class is the best. When I first signed up, I was hoping I wouldn't get picked and was very nervous. After the first class, I was locked in, ready to learn and see

what this class had to offer. The teachers in this class will push you, motivate you, and want you to succeed. From Zoom to the room, it's just one big family where everyone is a teacher and student. **(Jamal Jackson)**



I was once in the same position as you are now—unsure of what to expect, and not knowing if I'd really be able to challenge myself in this way. Believe me when I say it really was a challenge, but it's the most rewarding journey.

Throughout the next two semesters, your thoughts and opinions will be questioned and revised, and you will be pushed to new limits.

For me the most challenging part was making the time to get things done. In between life's problems and pain, I found it difficult to find the importance of completing my school projects because of my own life and mental health.

The best advice I can give you to succeed is just to keep showing up. Your dreams are worth nourishing; your goals are worth pursuing. The last thing I'd like to say is make the most of your time with the people around you, and don't be afraid to speak up and say your piece. I assure you most of everyone around you is just as anxious as you may be. You are all in this space together. I don't know you, but I am proud of you. Congratulations for getting into Odyssey! I wish you the best in your journey. XOXO **(Aaniyah Jefferson)**





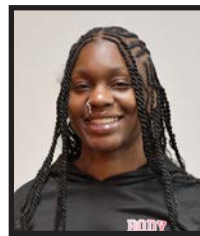
First and foremost, let me congratulate you on getting into Odyssey! You are about to embark on one of the most exciting journeys in your life. As someone who has recently stood in your shoes, I want to take a moment to encourage you and inspire you as you prepare for this chapter. Through this chapter, life will test you, throw curve balls, and even make you feel that it is pushing you past your breaking point, but as hard as things can get, whatever you do, don't GIVE UP. Odyssey is filled with moments that will not only challenge your mind and perception but will also shape you in a more positive angle.

There will be nights of lack of motivation to complete homework, moments of doubt, and even times where the pressure feels overwhelming, but remember this—every challenge you face is an opportunity to grow. Keep pushing forward, believe in yourself, and never ever lose sight of your dreams. Some of your classmates will become everlasting friends, and make sure you cherish those friendships. Take advantage of every opportunity, and don't be afraid to step out of your comfort zone. The world is full of endless possibilities, and Odyssey will open that door for those possibilities and maximize your full potential.

I am telling you that whatever you do, work hard, stay focused, and do not be afraid to reach out and

lean on staff for support. Ms. Emily, Mr. Kevin, Mr. Brian, Ms. Christine, and all staff are all amazing and so helpful. Thinking about the love and support they provide almost brings me to tears. So, with that being said, embrace every moment. The memories that you create now will stay with you forever. And at the end at graduation, take pride knowing that you worked hard and earned every bit of the success that is coming your way.

Wishing you all the best on this journey ahead.
YOU GOT THIS!! (Gloria Knight)



Be patient with yourself and understand everything doesn't have to be perfect, but it will slowly come together. When I first started, I thought one day a week would be so easy—easy to keep up, everything would be turned in on time, making it to every class would be just a walk in the park, and in the beginning it was. Once my personal life started to get to me, school got hard, but the best part is I never gave up. I was able to come to anyone on the staff for help, and every time they delivered and helped the best way they could, and I couldn't be more grateful!

This was my test, and I plan to go into fulltime classes. The effort I put in to make sure even if I was late the work was done shows me everything I need to continue my journey. It's important to keep pushing and never give up because the benefits and the feelings are awesome! To know I'm about to walk across the stage while my family is watching me is the best feeling ever and will push me to want to do it again and again. I am here to tell you as someone who absolutely hated school, this was rewarding! The knowledge, the people, the love, the food, the energy, and the hard-working teachers and tutors are honestly people you don't want to miss in your life. Please take this opportunity to put your best foot forward and understand there is so much more to life. This is just the beginning. **(Crystal Lee)**





Welcome to Odyssey! Congratulations on being accepted and taking your first step to further your education. You may be nervous sitting here on your first day, but trust me there is nothing to worry about. Emily is the best. She will be there for you every step of the way! I can honestly say Odyssey was life changing and helpful in sooo many ways. I'll never be able to thank Emily enough for giving me this wonderful opportunity. In this class your voice will be heard, you'll make many new connections, and you will be tested. So buckle up and get ready to turn your thinking cap on. You've got this!

(Mariya Lucas)



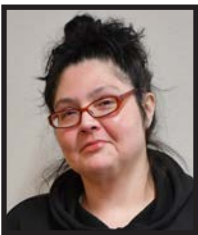
With fulfillment and a heart filled with gratitude to Odyssey, I write to welcome you with a sense of responsibility and as a means of giving back. This program is not an insurmountable barrier giving its demands; it sure tests your

resilience, but let it! For it takes commitment and determination to weather the storm of the program, but an assurance would be that it will all be worth it in the end. This I have come to know, and as such I'm grateful for who I've become thus far. It's your time to shine! **(Alfusainey Manjang)**



Let me start out by saying congratulations—not only for being admitted into the Odyssey Project but also for taking the time to invest in yourself. With that said, throughout this course be open to anything and everything.

With the endless amount of confusion, anxiety attacks, tears, headaches, and life problems that you may endure, **STILL SHOW UP**. Lastly, good luck on any future endeavors and make sure you continue to **SHOW UP FOR YOURSELF** today, tomorrow, and every day! **(Alexis McClain)**



You are worthy and deserving. Don't second guess your decision to join the Odyssey experience. For some of us, myself included, joining was out of my comfort zone. Whether you are shy, have anxiety, or are uncomfortable

in social situations, pushing yourself out of your comfort zone is necessary. In this situation it was definitely worth every minor discomfort. You will definitely gain the confidence and courage to further your educational interests. Congratulations! "If there is no struggle, there is no progress." — Frederick Douglass **(Vanessa Martinez)**



Congratulations on your new journey. This educational program perhaps marks the beginning of institutional education reparations for you. If you are in the Odyssey project, the education system has likely failed you. The more you

learn, the clearer it will become that you deserve everything Odyssey offers. Your education with Odyssey is not a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity; we must come together to create more reparations. Once your head is above water and your feet reach the land, look into the water and extend your hands. **(Mickey Mestiza)**



Last year in September, I was sitting in this exact class, which kind of felt like being surrounded by a bunch of strangers that I must admit is my family now. I will say I was kind of nervous. I did not really know what to expect for real, or what I was getting myself into, but I did know that I wanted more and was open to different things than what I was used to. Taking this class did just that for me. Come with an open mind to learn and be willing to take advantage of everything the class has to offer.

The work started off a breeze for me, and then it kind of got a little rough, but remember there's nothing you can't get through. Whether you're stuck or just want to get out, please come out to tutoring. It's so great—they make it impossible to not be able to understand the homework, or what you are reading. Even if you don't have your homework, come to class! Here at Odyssey, you're in great hands, like Allstate, lol. No seriously, every single person here at Odyssey is great. Good luck, Class of 2026, you guys got this. **(Valvree Mosely)**



This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Take a moment to congratulate yourself for taking the initiative for starting the program. Embrace it! Sometimes we raise the bar so fast, moving on to the next milestone or achievement.

Slow down and enjoy the now. The most rewarding thing from being in Odyssey is being present, to fully experience what's happening now—not yesterday or a week from now. Before you know it, you'll be exactly where you're meant to be. Ease your mind and enjoy the ride. **(Daija Pigram)**



Welcome to the Odyssey class!

This is going to be an amazing journey. Attending this class, you can't do anything but grow. You will learn skills and improve your confidence.

In the beginning of class, I had a lot of hurdles to jump over, and most people do. That's normal. Everybody around is truly happy to help and encourage you in the best way possible.



I've fallen behind due to work and personal life issues and I've felt discouraged, but there was no reason to feel that way. Lean on the support from staff and peers! Through all the battles I'm glad I didn't quit and I stuck it out. I'm very happy to be the second generation in my family to graduate. I was even in Odyssey Junior, which is also an amazing benefit for parents.

Enjoy your time and pay attention! **(Lailaini Reed)**

Be happy, be proud, and be loud! Out of 100



applicants you were the chosen one! I am so happy to congratulate you and welcome you to one of the best journeys of your life. Odyssey can be very overwhelming and scary honestly, but I have faith in the 30 of you. You will

overcome those emotions and beat the odds. I was in your shoes just a few months ago, and now I am graduating from Odyssey. You will meet amazing people, and the friendships and bonds you make will make you such an amazing person. There's so much support around you. Take advantage of it and never lose hope...I wish you nothing but best, Class of 2026. **(Tiana Richmond-Lee)**

You have overcome challenges that would have stopped many in their tracks. You've faced life's storms, health struggles, losses, job changes, and the weight of starting over, but through it all, you never gave up. You kept going, and now here you are, stepping boldly into a room and program designed to elevate voices like yours, to ignite change through education, and to open doors you were always meant to walk through.

This moment is more than a milestone: it's a reminder of your strength, your purpose, and your unstoppable spirit. The Odyssey Project welcomes you and is lucky to have you, just as you are lucky to have them.



Welcome to Odyssey! This class will for sure be one of the best journeys yet. Be proud of yourself for making it to the seat that you're sitting in now. If I could give you some good advice, it would be show up to class no matter what!

Even without homework, your course reader, or even a pen – show up! Take this from someone who faced one of the biggest hardships in life while trying to complete the second semester. Take advantage of the wonderful staff and all of their knowledge. They truly want you to succeed. Time is going to fly, so make sure you give your all and try your best. It will be VERY worth it in the end! **(Ashli Smith)**

As you begin this next chapter, hold your head high, and remember they are here to help you succeed. Take advantage of this amazing opportunity. You are walking proof that hard roads lead to powerful places. You've earned this. You got this!

So, take a deep breath, soak it all in, and know this: you are not just a part of the Odyssey Project. You are the very reason it can continue to exist. Have fun, be a sponge, and ask questions. Congrats, friends! **(Corrie Thomas)**



Congratulations and welcome, Class of 2026. I am so blessed to be able to sit in this spot and write to yet another Odyssey class. I want

to celebrate you and your acceptance into the award-winning UW-Madison Odyssey Project! This is not just an academic achievement—this is a triumph of perseverance, courage, and resilience.





First off, I'd like to congratulate you on your acceptance in the UW Odyssey program. You may be thinking, "This is the stroke of luck I've been waiting

for." Assure yourself that this isn't a matter of luck or lottery. You were hand chosen by a group of individuals that see the potential you carry and the many things you can achieve. Thanks to the amazing staff, I can say that I am on the right track to establishing the collegiate career I've always dreamed about. "If only I had the opportunity to." Well, now is that opportunity.

Here are a few pieces of advice that I feel may help you along the way.

1. You haven't been in school for a while now, so there will be an adjustment period. Starting school doesn't mean the world around you stops. It is ultimately up to you to integrate school, work, and home life into one cohesive unit. I suggest finding a routine that allows you to balance all three while leaving some time for yourself. Recovering from winter break will be a slog. Give yourself a day or two before returning to class to get back in your groove.

2. There will be a plethora of opportunities to get out and experience things you may have never paid any attention to, or that you ever thought you'd enjoy. Take the free opera tickets. Go to the orchestra. Sit in on the public readings. This is your chance to learn outside of the classroom, as well as to rub elbows with some big names.

3. In my opinion, the hardest part of our curriculum was anything that involved me talking or writing about myself. I felt as though I knew everything there was to know about "Me," but often I found myself discovering something new about myself or confronting things that I assumed were long behind me. With that being said, I think it is important that you embrace all emotions you may encounter,



be they your own or the outpouring from your new friends... I mean classmates. This is a class that teaches more than what can be found in your course reader.

4. Don't freak out. These are kind, understanding people that are willing to help with your best interest at heart. You're in good hands. But do your work 'cause Mrs. Emily will get'cha!

I look forward to seeing y'all in the halls of our little home... I mean campus. Feel free to say, "What's up!" Again congratulations. You're a Badger now. "Yuh dun did good!" **(Dan Thomas)**



Welcome to the family. I know you're feeling nervous and wondering about your place in all this. I'm sure this is your first step into finding your path towards success. But I am here to assure you that you have nothing to

worry about. The people you are about to meet are some of the best humans you're ever going to come close to. This is a safe space, and these people care about you. They have your back. They want to see you win. I promise from now until next May, you will be filled with love and support. Step out of your comfort zone and open up. Put your all into your work and the people around you. Good luck, be great, and keep going!!!

(Janessa Weichmann)



Welcome to Odyssey. You may feel anxious or scared, but that's okay. I know that feeling. Over time, you learn that this is a safe place where we all come to learn and talk about Plato, or a poet named William Blake. You will read

Martin Luther King's letter (which I never knew was so long until I took this class). You will learn about Frederick Douglass, grammar, and words that sound the same but are different. You'll also learn how to dig even deeper and find the meaning of things. You learn a whole lot—not just from the readings but from the people around you. Odyssey is most definitely a journey that I am very glad I went on.

If I had to give a piece of advice, it would be: Don't give up, no matter how hard it gets. You have a lot of people within Odyssey who are on your team and who will support you in whatever you need. It is a lot of work, and it takes time, but it is worth it—you learn a lot, and you meet a lot of people.

Anyways, good luck! I believe in you. You GOT THIS, Class of 2026!!! **(Abby Wilson)**



I know some of you might be extremely nervous right now, looking around the classroom seeing so many unfamiliar faces and some that might be familiar! Please do not fret...you soon will become so comfortable

with your classmates and your teacher and all of the staff. Please throw yourself into this journey. Everyone is so willing to help, listen, give advice, etc. Soon you will be looking forward to Wednesday nights.

Odyssey was nothing shy of a blessing for me, and I'm sure you will be saying the same by the end of your Odyssey! Use this program as a stepping stone if you have other goals for your education. I hope you get the full experience. Ask questions, embrace everything, and you will be just fine! Welcome to the beginning of this chapter. **(Ladella Wilson)**



I am 61 years old, will be 62 May 13th. When I first started this class, I thought I was more nervous because of my age. But when we started the first day of school 9/4/24, I didn't know if I should be in this class. It was like they

were going to laugh at me. I am too old to be here with the younger people in the class. But I was determined to make this class. I studied hard and went to tutoring every Monday because I wasn't going to be laughed at at my age. But what I have come to learn is that no one is judging you or making fun of you. Everyone makes you feel like family, and we all work together. Emily and Kevin make sure no one fails. All you have to do is come to class, show up no matter what, and you will get it. If I can make it with no blood flow on the right side of my brain, I know without a doubt you will make it.

So, with that being said, welcome to the Class of 2026. I pray you guys pay close attention and get involved in the class. Always participate in class and even in tutoring class.

Good luck, God bless, and congratulations, Class of 2026. **(Sable Wright)**



ALUMNI CORNER

DON'T QUIT

BY JOE ROBINSON '04

My advice to the new Odyssey class is don't quit. No matter how hard it gets, don't quit.

When you get off work at 5:30, and you only have 30 minutes to get the kids situated and get to class, don't quit.

When you get stuck in the middle of writing a paper or doing a project, don't quit.

When you find out that your father has cancer and has to have surgery and treatment, don't quit.

When you have circumstances that occur that make you miss a class and you get behind on your work, don't quit.

When you feel as if you're not getting anything out of a particular subject, don't quit. When people tell you you are wasting your time, don't quit. When your car breaks down, and it's twenty below outside, and the only way to get here is on the city bus, don't quit. When your spouse is complaining that your five children are driving her crazy every Wednesday night, don't quit. When one of your classmates makes you feel stupid for voicing your opinion, don't quit. When your boyfriend or girlfriend accuses you of cheating on them because you had to turn your cell phone off during class, don't quit.

And if you get to the point where you just can't find any more motivation to force yourself to keep coming to this class, my advice is to call Emily, and I guarantee you that she won't let you quit! There were many times that I wanted to just give up, but Emily would not let me. She believed in us more than some of us believed in ourselves.

Finally, I would like to say that, the first couple of weeks, I was in class trying to figure out, what is the catch? Why are these people offering us this course for free? There must be a catch. I found out what the catch was. Each one of the teachers was trying to trick us into believing that our lives would somehow be better if we completed this Odyssey class and then go on to graduate from college. I guess I must be a little naïve, because I fell for it, hook, line, and sinker.



Joe Robinson with classmate Tineisha Scott, who earned her Master's Degree at Edgewood College



Joe Robinson with his family

WE ATE DOG FOOD

BY ALICE MCDANIEL '09

WRITTEN FOR KEVIN MULLEN'S
ODYSSEY ALUMNI COMPOSITION CLASS



... You can only write about what you feel and know really. I know that my mom was not a high school graduate, but no one else would have known that unless she told you herself. She was a very well-versed, super-intelligent, beautiful, spiritual, and loving woman.

My dad, on the other hand, could hardly read or write. He has lived most of his life with those limitations. He is a very funny, kind-hearted, spiritual, and good-looking man.

While in the care of my dad, my four other siblings and I ate dog food. That is what we were told some years later, and our mom confirmed that story. You are probably wondering how that happened. Well, I will tell you what we have been told.

My dad went to the grocery store. He was in the canned goods section, or so he thought. He looked at the picture on the can of some corn beef hash. "Ha, ha!" he said and grabbed it.

When my mom arrived home from work, she asked him if we had eaten yet. His reply was "Yes." My mom asked him, "What did you feed the children?" He said, "some hash." For those of you who have never eaten it and never want to, hash, according to Webster's Dictionary, comes from the French *hacher*, to chop, and means "to chop up meat and vegetables for cooking; usually a baked mixture, a muddled mess." She asked him again, "What did you say you fed them?" My dad replied again, "Hash. The cans are in the trash can."

My mom went to the trash can. As she lifted each of the cans out, she screamed at my dad, "You fool! You gave my children dog food, with your 'no reading' ass!" It goes without saying that he was not asked to go shopping for groceries again.

***We ate dog food,
but we were rich.***

My parents didn't have the opportunity to complete their education due to obstacles. My dad was from the small town of Stamps, Arkansas. By the age of four, his mom was now a single parent. His father had left them. As the oldest of her two sons, he was now the man of the house. He went to school on a regular basis only up to the third grade. He had to work in the fields, either having to stay home or be pulled from his class at school whenever it was time for crops to be harvest.

Mother was from a large family of eleven and also from Arkansas. She got to go to school every day until she met my dad. With her parents' permission, they got married a year later.

They moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin several years later along with their two daughters. During their marriage they had some economic struggles. It was not for lack of ambition and determination and drive. Both of them would work—Dad as a laborer and Mom as a waitress or maid. I remember she would wear a black and white uniform when she rode the bus to the eastside of the city where the rich people lived. . . .

Both of my parents instilled in their children that we should do our best at whatever we chose to do in life. “‘Can’t’ is not a word,” my mother would say. We could not use it at all as an excuse or reason not to go for things in life, like getting an education. . . .

Education is the key to freedom, to advancing your world. Wealth is not only of material and financial means; it is also knowledge.

We ate dog food, but we were rich.

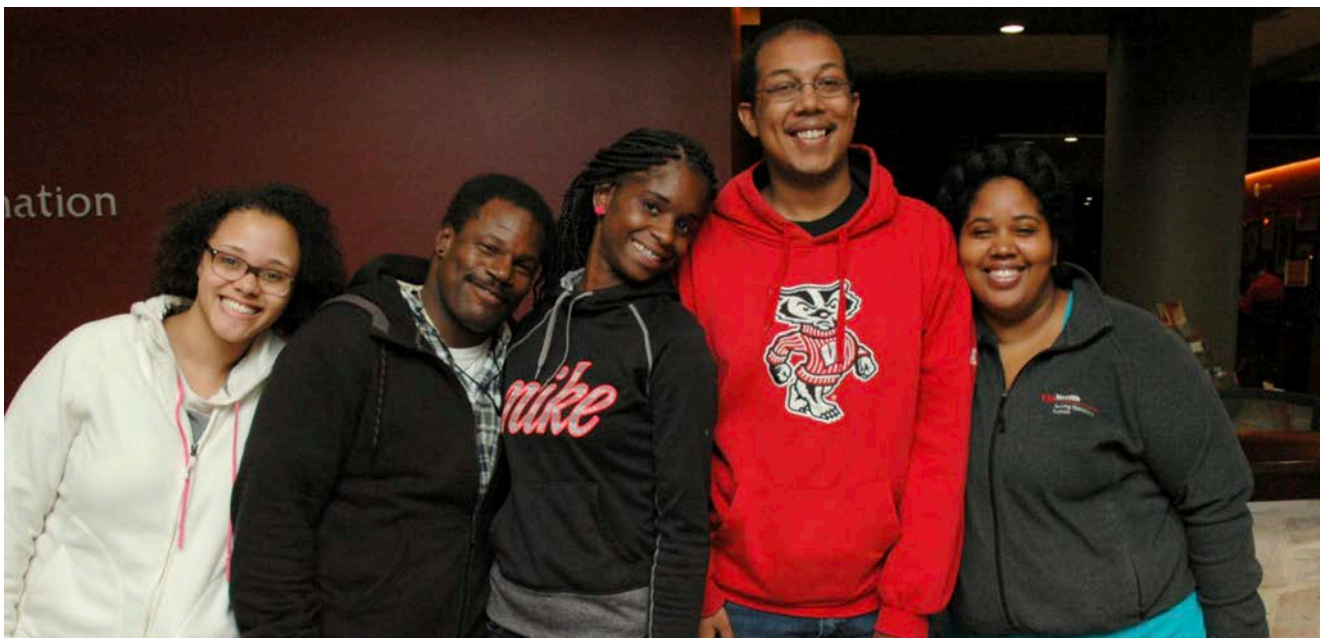
ODYSSEY POEM

BY ANTHONY JEFFERSON ‘17

Odyssey is the pencil of life with which we can erase past regrets and rewrite our future.

Every “word” formed solidifies our resolve, those periods at the end a proud stamp of success.

Sentence by sentence, we forge a new tale.



SPECIAL ODYSSEY MOMENTS



UW Chancellor Mnookin at Odyssey's 20th anniversary celebration; Jasmine Banks '13, Keena Atkinson '10, Josephine Lorya '08, and Hedi Rudd '12 received YWCA Women of Distinction Awards; Stanley Sallay '07 and Tosumba Welch '13 meet *Just Mercy* author Bryan Stevenson; Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway pronounces April 20, 2023 "Odyssey Day" citywide; Brian Benford '07 emceed Concerts on the Square.



TV personality Tavis Smiley and scholar Cornel West taking Odyssey students out to dinner during their Poverty Tour; Senator Tammy Baldwin meets Brian Benford '07, Char Braxton '06, and Dominique Christian '09; scholar Henry Louis Gates with Kegan Carter '04 and Josephine Lorya '08; Yolanda King (daughter of the late Martin Luther King, Jr.) with Emily Auerbach, Juanita Wilson '07, Pamela Holmes '04, and Denise Maddox '04; author Jelissa Edwards '16 on cover of BRAVA Magazine.