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ODYSSEY



ORACLE

INTRODUCING THE CLASS OF 2026!



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ODYSSEY CLASS OF 2026



Laura
Bass



Serene
Boyd



Johnnell
Britt



Lisa
Brown



Richard
Butler



Stacy
Castillo



Cquemiah
Clark-Richmond



Valencia
Collins



Paola
Damiani



Tida
Drammeh



Destiny
Drone



Kiana
Galloway



Tikoya
Gilmer



Larry
Grant



Anteijah
Greer



Shataya
Hall



Jacqueline
Hawkins



Brittany
Hughes



Angel
Moore



Viwe
Mpurwanda



Shelton
Murphy



Roche
Palmer



Roncal
Riley



Lilibeth
Sobrevilla



Juju
Stallworth



George
Sydnor



Shaneece
Taylor



Joseph
Thigpen Jr.



Kharmen
Thomas



Shakila
Woods

FEELINGS ON JOINING ODYSSEY

I felt heard, seen by God. With all the trials and tribulations my family has been going through, I felt God hadn't heard all my prayers. When I received the news, I felt a freeing feeling like the shackles were unlocked and I would finally be able to follow a dream I thought would only be just that, a dream. **(Laura Bass)**

Blessed! I felt very grateful and beyond blessed to have been accepted into this class. I'm very excited to come every week and learn. Overall, I'm excited to see what the future has in store for me. **(Serene Boyd)**

I felt good knowing I got picked out of 100 applicants. **(Johnnell Britt)**

Honored. I know this is a special privilege to be a part of. Reinstilled HOPE for a better future, not only for myself but my family. It was a solid reminder to never give up on your dreams, goals, and aspirations. **(Lisa Brown)**

I was shocked. **(Richard Butler)**

I remember clearly sitting in my car by Brittingham Park with a close friend. We were venting about life and our current mental state at the time, which was rough. Mid-conversation, I received a phone call. I remember as soon as I heard "We'd like to welcome you to the Odyssey Program," I smiled from ear to ear, eager to tell my friend sitting next to me that I had an opportunity! **(Stacy Castillo)**

I felt blessed. During that time, I was having a hard time in life where I felt that I was failing life. I was going through some really tough times, and I prayed to God every day to show me that life is what I needed. I didn't think I was somebody. I didn't think I was being heard, but God answered my prayers. **(Cquemiah Clark-Richmond)**



When I got accepted into the Odyssey Project, I was overwhelmed with joy as this is my second year applying. Glad to have this opportunity and a chance to further my education. I also feel a bit of anxiety, thinking I may not be smart enough, embarrassed that I might fail. But I know that nothing's more powerful than me and all I can do is the best I can do. That is what matters the most. **(Valencia Collins)**

I was super nervous when I did the interview. Then when I found out I was accepted, I was happy. Honestly for weeks all I could think about is wondering if I made a mistake. Am I good enough to be here? Being here today, I am super stoked, excited, and ready to embark on this journey! **(Paola Damiani)**

I was very excited and nervous at the same time. For example, what if I can't understand the poems or the books we are reading because it has been a while since I read any books or poems? I thought maybe this is my second chance, and I was also second guessing myself. I don't want to disappoint anyone or waste anyone's time. So, I am here to try to succeed! **(Tida Drammeh)**

I was overwhelmed with joy of finally being able to be something and do something in life. I never graduated high school, so being accepted, I feel honored. **(Destiny Drone)**

I was so honored to be chosen. I know that there were a lot of other people who wanted this opportunity, so I felt so grateful to be accepted. I also felt very excited to learn and be around like-minded others. I am excited to be inspired and challenged to think deeply and intellectually. **(Kiana Galloway)**

I was overwhelmed with joy. It felt like a new start for me to start catering more to me. I was also excited to know my son was able to attend.
(**Tikoya Gilmer**)

Happy. These are some of my favorite subjects.
(**Larry Grant**)

Felt like a second chance in life. God is standing near me. I need to keep pushing. (**Anteijah Greer**)

I felt joy, felt like a new beginning was about to start. I feel like this class is going to be so beneficial to my life. (**Shataya Hall**)

I was so excited, like I am now, but a little nervous. Life is lifing, but I know I can and will push through. Thank you for picking me. (**Jacqueline Hawkins**)

When I learned I got accepted into this class, I was overfilled with joy. I knew that this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and was excited to be a part of it. (**Brittany Hughes**)

Truly couldn't believe that I was picked or even considered. But I am so elated to be here to be a part of this. I have a little hope right now that I can become all I dreamed of when I was allowed to dream. (**Angel Moore**)

Excited at the possibilities before me. Inspired to do more with my life than I have been. Grateful at the opportunity to change my current circumstances. (**Viwe Mpurwanda**)



I was ecstatic and overjoyed. It feels like the stars are aligning in my life. So it's just an extra boost of motivation for me to stay focused.
(**Shelton Murphy**)

I felt excited. I felt that I was turning over a new leaf and starting an important chapter of my life. I also felt nervous of the not knowing.
(**Roche Palmer**)

Excited, overjoyed, shocked. (**Roncal Riley**)

I was nervous, excited, and shocked. I honestly didn't believe I was accepted, but I was grateful for being accepted. Afterwards, I was giving myself a pep-talk and telling myself I can do this (because I felt socially unprepared). (**Lilibeth Sobrevilla**)

Overjoyed, happy, nervous, excited.
(**JuJu Stallworth**)

Emily called me in the middle of the afternoon. I was so excited for the opportunity.
(**George Sydnor**)

I felt happy and excited to join the Odyssey Project. It felt like I had something to look forward to as my life continues to transform. (**Shaneece Taylor**)

I felt really good getting the acceptance letter. The fact that only 30 people were being picked had me really nervous. I am very grateful for this opportunity. A major plus is that I can bring my kids! (**Joseph Thigpen Jr.**)

I was excited for the opportunity and interested to see what opportunities would arise.
(**Kharmen Thomas**)

When I first learned I had been accepted into this class, I was excited but also feeling nervous. I was excited because I had made a big step and was accepted but nervous because I didn't know what I was really getting myself into. I am not the best writer, but I want to become better because I express myself best through pen and paper. I also want my kids to become their best at expressing themselves verbally or on paper. (**Shakila Woods**)

ARE YOU A WRITER?

Yes, I am a writer because I feel everything has a story and I have to give it. I have a journal and I write anything, everything. Especially when I'm feeling emotions deeply. I feel like when I write it's freeing. I'd rather write my feelings than speak them. **(Laura Bass)**

I believe I am a writer. I always favored English and reading more in school growing up. I think I'm good at getting my thoughts and point across well when I'm writing. **(Serene Boyd)**

I'm in the middle with the decision. I feel like I can write and also might have things to work on. I hope to gain things I didn't know so I can use it in the future. **(Johnnell Britt)**

Yes, I am a writer because I know words can transcend through time. It has served as a form of therapy when life gets too loud. There are times, I do not believe I'm the greatest. Always open to improve those skills. One day I will look back to see my progress and I will be proud. Through writing I work through the fear I have in my voice. To quiet the loud thoughts circulating my mind.

Honestly, I feel I'm somewhere in the middle of being a writer and not. I'm reluctant to share, but yet post inspirational words through social media. **(Lisa Brown)**



Yes I am a writer. I believe I am because I can talk, type, or write for hours explaining my life. **(Richard Butler)**

Yes, I am a writer because I am passionate about words. I am a believer of manifestation and truth through my thoughts. To know two languages and be capable of connecting with a wide range of people to me is a blessing. God blessed me with a voice and emotions and I live to share that. **(Stacy Castillo)**

Yes, I am a writer. I just want to be better at it meaning not saying the same things over and not using "and" a lot or "because." **(Cquemiah Clark-Richmond)**

I can be.

I'm not sure if I'm a writer but I know I can be because I want to learn and I can do whatever I put my mind to. **(Valencia Collins)**

No, I am not a writer because I feel like I lack creativity. I want to expand my vocabulary and expand my creative thought process. **(Paola Damiani)**





Yes, I am a writer because I can communicate better through writing than speaking. I wouldn't say I am a good writer though. **(Shataya Hall)**

I am not a writer. I speak much better than I write, but I want to learn to express myself better on paper. **(Jacqueline Hawkins)**

Yes, I am a writer because I have very good conversation/communication skills. I can deliver a vision through words. **(Brittany Hughes)**

No, I do not consider myself as a writer because I struggle with that a lot. I like to expand my vocabulary. Understanding things may take time for me to understand. Sometimes I am a slow learner. **(Tida Drammeh)**

No, I'm not a writer because I'm not fluent with my words or know how to properly express within written text. **(Destiny Drone)**

No, I am not a writer yet because I simply don't write much. I use art as an outlet. I'd like to write more, I just think I need to expand my vocabulary. **(Kiana Galloway)**

Yes, I would view myself as a writer. I have always found writing a release to express my emotions, to keep track of plans. In school I always received good grades on essays and other writing assignments. As a kid I used to write poems and some books (short stories). It's also a goal of mine to write a children's book about my son or dedicated to him about children on the spectrum. **(Tikoya Gilmer)**

I am not a writer because my handwriting is not great and my spelling is not great. As well sometimes I overthink and am unable to understand what I'm writing about even though it's coming from me. **(Larry Grant)**

No, I am not a writer because I never opened up to writing things out. Never had much faith in self but pushing to know more with another chance to shine. **(Anteijah Greer)**

No, I am not a writer because it's hard to place all of my feelings, fear, anxieties, and failures down on paper only because I will realize that I do exist, that my feelings do matter, that I have a voice and an opinion. **(Angel Moore)**

Yes, I am a writer because I find art in the way I express myself.

Yes, I am a writer because I find it easy to express my feelings in writing rather than verbally.

Yes, I am a writer because I have a lot to say. **(Viwe Mpurwana)**



The answer to “do I think I’m a writer?” is yes, I know I’m a writer. I started writing poetry, then graduated to writing music of all genres. I currently have a book that I’m 12½ chapters into that I plan to finish this year. They say the pen is mightier than the sword, so I learned how to fence with a ballpoint. **(Shelton Murphy)**

Yes, I feel that I am a writer because I love to do it. I love to express myself and I feel that writing is the best way to do so. I may not be the best writer or put all of my punctuation in the right spots, but I can get it done. I love journaling. I try to journal at the end of the week to reflect on the past. I also feel that I am a writer because it comes natural to me. **(Roche Palmer)**

Yes, I am a writer because that’s usually how I express my thoughts/myself. I journal every day. I love to reflect on what I had previously written and see how far I’ve come. **(Roncal Riley)**

Yes, I am a writer and I think it started because I wanted to rewrite my life. When I was little I would write about things that happened but would change the outcome by writing what I wanted to actually happen. I was introduced to diaries and I would vent in writing. I learned to express myself through writing even as an adult. It’s easier to write than to use my voice, which is a good and bad thing. Overall, I love writing because you can read it to your liking. I hope that made sense. **(Lillibeth Sobrevilla)**



I’m not a writer. I think I lack imagination also don’t know how to put certain things in a sentence. **(Juju Stallworth)**

No, I am not a writer because my penmanship is terrible. I would like to learn how to write more and get to know everyone. **(George Sydnor)**

I do not consider myself a writer. Although my mind is constantly rushing and theorizing, I struggle to settle on what to actually put down on paper. The idea of writing brings out the perfectionist in me. **(Shaneece Taylor)**

Yes, I feel like I am more of a writer than not. I have stories for days—pain, joy, heartache, you name it. Not very good at punctuation but I could write a book if I had to. **(Joseph Thigpen Jr.)**

I don’t feel as if I’m a writer. I used to think I was good at conveying through written words in an impactful way until I was told I was “too long winded.” I have abandoned the idea since. I have always gravitated towards music, poetry, and art because they have a way of meaningfully connecting people from all different walks of life and perspectives. **(Kharmen Thomas)**

No, I am not a writer because I struggle with punctuation and spelling so to avoid frustration I don’t write much but I would like for that to change. **(Shakila Woods)**

SENTENCES ABOUT US

Laura Bass

I love to travel. I've been to Jamaica, Japan, Paris, U.S. Virgin Islands, Mexico two times, the Bahamas, and many states in the U.S., Florida being my most frequently visited state. I love Disney! I have been in California, Florida, Japan, and Paris!

I love to cook. It's my therapy and love language.

Family is everything to me! They are of the utmost value, and I never take them for granted!



Serene Boyd

I have a seven-month-old baby girl that I love to pieces!

I work in healthcare and I enjoy helping others.

I love fashion and I used to draw fashion sketches.

Johnnell Britt

I was born and spent most of my life in Chicago.

I'm a very humble dude and I like to stay in my lane.

I like to play sports.



Lisa Brown

I was adopted at the age of four, with my brother.

Cooking (when I want to) is my love language to others and those I value in my life.

I do not have children of my own but love kids. They call me the "baby whisperer."

**Richard Butler**

I'm shy.

I want to further my education.

I have a little girl on the way!!

Stacy Castillo

I have a four-year-old son who is my world.

I am a twin to a brother.

I used to skateboard, which led me to two knee injuries.

**Cquemiah Clark-Richmond**

I am named after my Uncle Cqumy, who passed away at age three.

My favorite movie is Crooklyn.

My favorite history time is the Children Crusade.

Valencia Collins

I am the oldest of my mom's kids (there are only two of us). My little sister Jadon is my best friend.

I don't have any kids, but I have custody of my 14-year-old cousin.

I want my master's in social work.

**Paola Damiani**

I have four kids (17, 8, 5, and 11 months). They make me want to do better and be better for them.

I was born feet first! Per my mom, I "came in ready for the world."

I played soccer for about 10 years. I used to love playing soccer. It was a big passion of mine.

Tida Drammeh

I have one daughter, but I have been taking care of my family full time since I was 17 years old, when my mother passed away. I became the mother of my family and taking care of everyone.

I am divorced from my husband and now am a single mother doing a lot of it alone.

I don't have a lot of hobbies because my free time is limited. I like to stay home and relax in my free time, in my comfort zone!



Destiny Drone

I have three kids (ages 10, 8, and 7). One has autism.

I'm a Medical Assistant.

I'm not good at sports.

Kiana Galloway

I have one daughter (Lauren) and three cats. I see Lauren as my greatest gift to my life, and I love animals.

I love art—anything that involves being creative. I also find it therapeutic.

Music is a big outlet for me. While I do not play any instruments, I have hundreds of songs downloaded that I like to zone out to.



**Tikoya Gilmer**

I am a mother of a non-verbal autistic child (boy) whose birthday is ten days after mine.

I attended college at Alabama State but did not graduate. I started as a Criminal Justice major, but switched to Art (graphic design).

I run my own business providing hair braiding services for children only.

Larry Grant

I have six children, all girls, ages 4, 7, 8, 9, 11, and 13.

I work for the City of Madison.

I enjoy playing football.

**Anteijah Greer**

I work in kidney care.

I'm a mother of three.

I'm a very supportive person who has been through a lot. I walk by faith in God.

Shataya Hall

I have three children, ages 20, 15, and 9, all with very different personalities. They all keep me going.

I was a teen mom, having my first child at 14 years old.

I want to study Psychology. My dream job is a forensic psychologist.

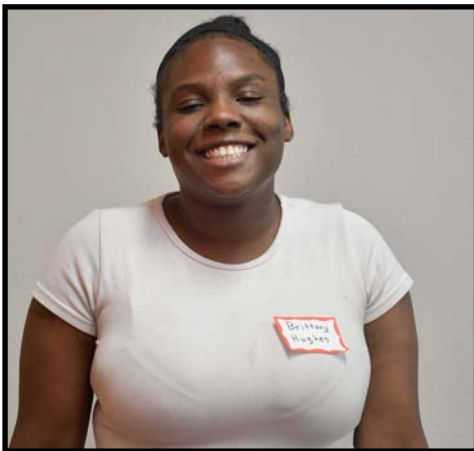


Jacqueline Hawkins

I have three children (28, 17, 15) and two grandchildren (9 and 5). Temiya Lucas in Odyssey Junior is my first grandchild.

My father passed 8/31/25. I'm going through a divorce.

I love singing and dancing even though I can't sing a lick. I love people, all people. My favorite color is yellow. I love bright colors. I love to make people smile. Just call me Ms. Sunshine.

**Brittany Hughes**

Very confident in myself and everything I do.

Always believed I can do anything I put my mind to.

The motivational friend is me!

Angel Moore

I am totally in love with Jesus Christ for He accepts me as I am but desires me to become better.

I love my children. Their children are an extension of themselves. Those grandchildren love me and I endlessly, unwavering, unconditionally love them back.

I enjoy reading, Jazz and Gospel music, and I love to sing.





Viwe Mpurwana

I have no children, but I have two handsome nephews and two beautiful nieces.

I am African [from South Africa].

Politics is my passion. The dream is to be a political analyst.

Shelton Murphy

I have two children—girls 11 and 13. They are my peace and my motivation. My youngest is half Russian and bilingual.

I like to study everything in this world from its history to its creation.

I like to do music and martial art. I am a third degree black belt. I love working on my mind, body, and soul. The best way to describe me is a ninja dragon.



Roche Palmer

I have a twin sister, and my son's dad is also a twin.

I love being outside but I hate bugs.

I am the oldest of seven.



**Roncal Riley**

I have three children (ages 2, 2, and 5) whom I love the absolute most. They are my everything.

I love to cook. I love to read, and I enjoy my time with family.

I love spending time by myself (movies, lunch, and walks).

Lilibeth Sobrevilla

I am a mother of three (twins and a seven-month-old) and a stay-at-home mom. I love being mom and helping my kids learn. I definitely love raising them.

I used to go to college and was working on my bachelor's for biology so I could go to medical school and try becoming a PA in cardiology. I gave it up to come live in Wisconsin to help my dad after his cancer diagnosis.

I love reading, and I've loved it since I was a little girl. It was my escape. Spanish was my first language so I taught myself to read by reading two books in English before I knew what the words meant.

**Juju Stallworth**

I love reading. My favorite author is Janet Evanovich.

I have two older kids as well as my two youngest that are 22 and 20.

I'm very family oriented.

George Sydnor

I have five kids (ages 14, 14, 10, 8, 4). They are the best of me.

I love to cook and try new things.

I am a good father and love to be with my kids.



Shaneece Taylor

I have one beautiful daughter, my bestie Nyla.

I am very passionate about children and youth work. Your children and all children are treated as my own.

I love to eat sweets, mostly pastries or baked goods.

**Joseph Thigpen Jr.**

I have two daughters, Journi and Justyce, and they bring me joy every day.

I have been with my partner since middle school. Thirteen years strong and we make a great team!

Another fun fact is I work with a non-profit organization that places Juniors and Seniors in leadership roles. Specifically, the ones not loving school. It's a fun job and another way to pay it forward, helping the next generation be mentors of services for their community.

**Kharmen Thomas**

I have two daughters (Journey and Jourdyn). We are an unconventional household but very open in expanding our knowledge.

I like unconventional things that make you question in the box thinking.

I can sing.

**Shakila Woods**

I have four children and two siblings that I call my children.

I am the oldest of three and we are all six years apart, so growing up they were like children of my own.

I used to write a lot as a kid but somewhere along the way I lost my passion.



ALUMNI CORNER



MY JOURNEY

BY RENÉ ROBINSON '08

I was born in Chicago, number eleven of fourteen children. At one point in my life, we had ten people in a three-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment. It was lively, challenging, and sometimes disappointing, but never a dull moment. It was family, my family. I didn't have a choice in the matter.

We were poor. How poor were we? We were so poor that my uncle, who worked at the Campbell Soup Factory, would bring us cans of soup that couldn't be sold because of flaws (bends and dents). The cans didn't have labels but contained numbers, which identified the type of soup. We memorized the numbers because we had to. If you didn't know the numbers, you were stuck with the soup no one wanted, which in our house was the tomato soup.

Survival, that was my life. Not only did I have to survive on the south side of Chicago, in the ghetto, the low-end as we call it, but at home as well. Can you imagine fourteen children vying for attention? Fourteen children wanting to be loved? Fourteen children striving to be better than the next?

It wasn't all good but neither was it all bad. We were taught principles, morals, and Christianity. We were required to excel in school. You would think that such an upbringing would produce upstanding and productive individuals, and it did for ten of us. Unfortunately I was one of the four who didn't quite meet the challenge. I was persistent at taking the wrong path and making poor decisions. I had my oldest son at sixteen and was forced to attend a high school for pregnant girls. I married at seventeen and had my second son at eighteen. It was a blessing to have a husband who was also the father of my children (where I come from, that was a unique happening in itself), but unfortunately with that came physical abuse.

I could go on and on about the many ups and downs due to the poor decisions I made over those thirty years, but I want to talk about the good news! I made it out of that situation and relocated to Madison, WI. I got a job, an apartment, then a used car. I joined a church that made me feel at home, and then I heard about the UW Odyssey Project, one of the best decisions I have ever made.

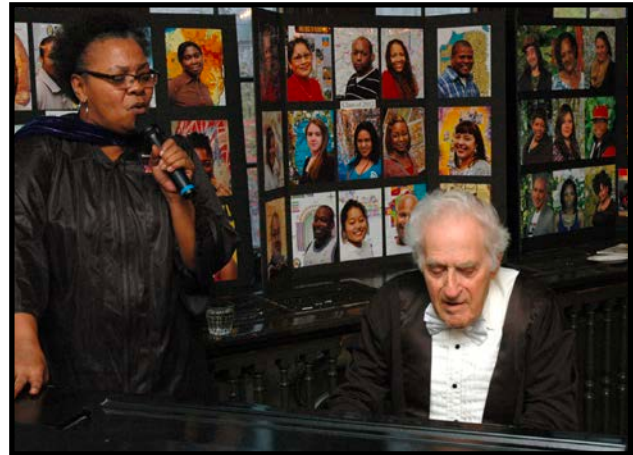
Odyssey is for people just like me; those who wanted to do better but couldn't for whatever reason. Having made so many poor decisions in my life, I feel I'm somewhat of an expert in understanding how easy it is for people to mess up, to make mistakes, and choose the wrong paths.

Odyssey gives you the feeling like the little red engine we read about in elementary school, "I think I can! I think I can!" It releases the "Wow" factor as in "He did that? She did what? Really? They left Britain to do the same thing in America? I didn't know that." Then it begins, the desire to know more, the desire to understand, the drive and tenacity to do better and to critically think, analyze and understand what you are reading. And what's so fantastic about Odyssey, it's generational. I tell people that all the time. Not only does it change the lives of parents, it changes the lives of their children, which will change the lives of their children, etc. Odyssey is a "Mind Opening Experience"!

Before Odyssey, if someone had asked me to write a poem or told me that I would be analyzing Socrates, Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, and Frederick Douglass, I would have rolled my eyes up, down and sideways. But there I was, at my Odyssey graduation, earning six UW Madison credits and reading this poem I wrote about the value of lifelong learning:

My Journey

My journey started about nine months ago.
 How I would fare, I really didn't know.
 Reading, writing for sure there would be,
 But from six to nine PM, that I couldn't see.
 The professors were there for all to meet,
 Outlining History, Humanities, and Philosophy.
 I was scared but I didn't know why,
 Maybe it was the thirty years that had quickly gone by.
 Getting acclimated was a little rough at first,
 But soon thereafter to read books I would thirst.
 See, prior to Odyssey, I didn't read.
 All the info I got was from the TV.
 But things have changed, mainly the screen
 From the TV to the computer, I'm now a Google Queen.
 My journey, my journey, who would have thought
 Would be the beginning of me being taught,
 Being taught the importance of opening my mind,
 Instead of sitting around wasting my time.
 Thank you, Odyssey, for choosing me,
 I've found knowledge, my greatest discovery.



René Riffs on Plato

I believe the prisoners in Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" are us: people, human beings in general. It has nothing to do with race, economical or educational status; I consider those sub-caves. We have all been fettered (shackled and chained) from generation to generation. We have been taught how to think and what to think. The expansion of our mind has been limited to our surroundings. We have been made products of our environment by our communities, our neighborhoods, and our upbringing; we were all born in a cave.

The cave is like a one-sided coin: seeing only one side. If you are born rich, do you know what it is to be born poor? If you are born poor, do you know what it is to be born rich? The importance of getting out of the cave is to find out what's on the other side of the coin; such as Socrates' example of going from the darkness to the light. I believe every human being in this world is dealing with some form of darkness, whether by force or choice.

We need to walk towards love, passing by hate. We need to walk towards courage, passing by fear. We need to walk towards "I can," passing by those infamous words, "I can't."

René performs as a musician, motivational speaker, and dramatic reader (Sojourner Truth, Maya Angelou, and others) in church, at community events, on the radio, and for every Odyssey class, and serves on the Friends of the UW Odyssey Project Board of Directors.

I LOVE ODYSSEY

BY JUANITA WILSON '07



Juanita (1936-2019) inspired her granddaughter Isis to graduate from Odyssey, too.

I love Odyssey because before Odyssey I always felt like an outsider when I was among a group of people. I now feel that I can contribute to the conversation and feel that I am no longer a slow learner. I feel that I can accomplish whatever I set out to do. I am happy most of the time now.

I am going to be a lifelong learner.

I feel that I am not alone anymore if I need help with a problem. I feel that I am loved by my teachers and classmates. I feel that life is beautiful this year and the rest of my life because of Odyssey. I feel that there will always be help available to me. I feel blessed.

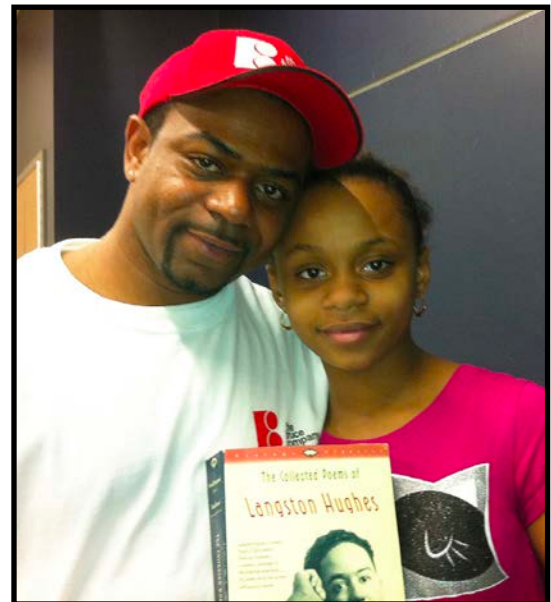
I LOVE MY WEBSTER'S

BY TOSUMBA WELCH '13

I love my Webster's with a great passion and sense of dependency. Webster's has never stood me up, let me down, or led me astray—never! It tells me secrets that sometimes no one else can even imagine. One time I was walking through a path of words and there were blank spots on the path. Out of nowhere, Webster's replaced those blank spots with words, and I was able to continue my walk.



Webster's sat me down one night and gave me an idea that landed me second place in an essay contest answering the question "Why Vote?" I have never known Webster's to be anything but perfect. Webster's has given me 230,000 reasons to be in love with it. I love my Webster's.



Tosumba's daughter Denaria attended Odyssey Junior.