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ODYSSEY



ORACLE

ODYSSEY STRENGTH



Contents

Moments of Courage	2
Finding Plato's Cave Today	16
Declarations of Strength	31
Alumni Corner	36

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MOMENTS OF COURAGE



As you know, my husband had a motorcycle accident in August of 2023. I originally wanted to apply to Odyssey that year or the year before. I never got a chance. After the accident I had to attend to my husband as he had a traumatic brain

injury (TBI). Taking care of someone with a TBI is very hard and sometimes overwhelming. It takes two years for you to fully know the extent of a brain injury.

From that time on, my life was consumed with taking care of him and our children. For two years everything was about them. I slowly felt like I was losing myself into a depression. I love my husband and my kids so much, but I was doing nothing for me. I remembered the program and decided to take a chance and apply. I was very afraid and scared to apply. I was fearful that when I did the interview, I wouldn't be accepted. I also was very afraid to fail. It took a lot of courage to sign up for this class.

I was and am still going through a grieving, painful depression. This has been and still is a long process. Some days I do not want to get out of bed or even come to class. It's hard when you have a range



of emotions going on inside of you every day. My husband was a hardworking man who worked 16–17-hour days sometimes. He was a great dad, and he would've done anything for us. I draw strength from that and use it as my motivation to do what I need to do for our family.

I love coming to class. The feedback that I receive on my homework is further indication that I belong here, that I am doing the correct thing, and that I am doing a great job in the process. **(Paola Damiani)**



One of the biggest moments where I had courage was similar to my story of an endeavor. 2023 was one of the hardest years of my life. During a period of many transitions, I had to have the most courage. Yes, it meant being brave, but also much more.

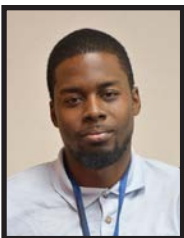
Being held accountable and admitting mistakes was courageous, as was continuing to move forward when faced with so much rejection and challenges. Courage to me meant finding strength and determination to keep going every day despite odds being stacked against me. **(Shaneece Taylor)**



I would say a time of courage was simply waking up in prison for six years of my life. It was very depressing and overwhelming. You couldn't do anything you wanted. You mostly had to eat when they wanted you to eat. If you didn't have any support, it was really bad for you. They didn't feed you enough to even get full; they more like fed you because they had to. Most of the food was nasty.

You had to have a celly [cellmate]. There really wasn't any alone time. You wake up when they tell you and you lock in when they tell you to. It was as if you were a child. The COs talked to you any type of way. Some were racist, some were cool, but some just were dickheads, no matter what. Every day was a battle: fights, stabbings, getting hit with locks. Every day it was something. You almost had to deal with somebody on a daily basis.

The jobs paid you nothing. Imagine working for a month just to get \$30 if not less. Imagine losing loved ones and not finding out for weeks because you were locked down. Every day I had to fight with myself to not crash out, but at the end of the day, I knew I had to make it home to my family. Only the strong survive. **(Johnnell Britt)**



A moment of courage in my life is the day I moved from Chicago to Madison. The day was October

5, 2019, and it also was my first time ever leaving my hometown without family. I wasn't sure what would happen or if any good would come of it. I just felt my only options back home were death or jail. Although I managed to keep out of major trouble, it always followed with more troubles, danger, and bad choices.

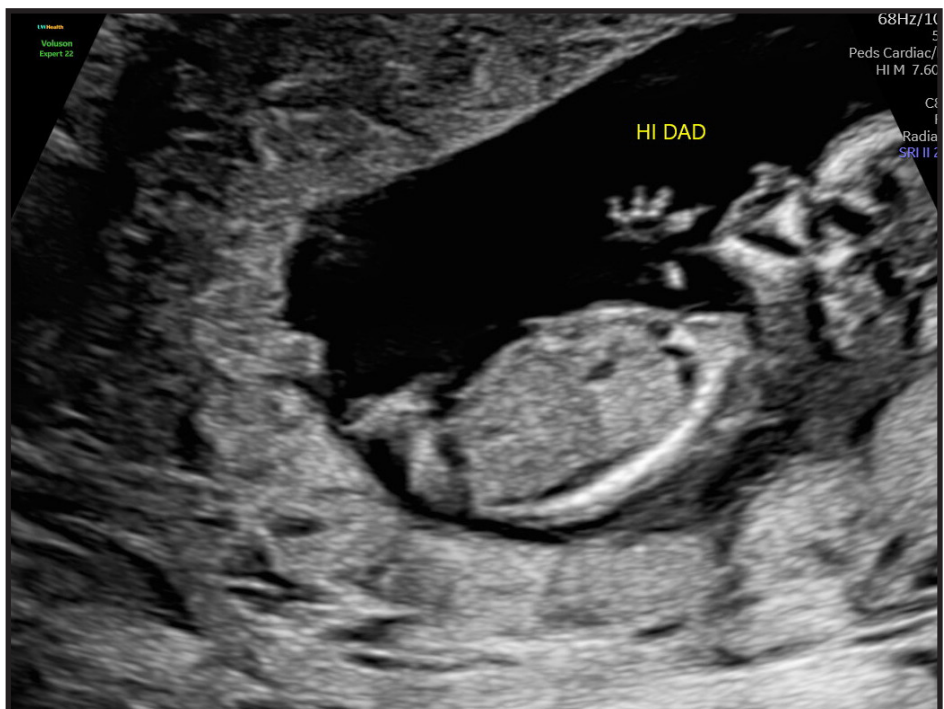
Once moving to Madison, I started working at Burger King while staying at a men's shelter. I wanted to quit and give up and just go back home to what I knew. It would have been easier just to do that, but I chose to be brave and finish the mission. I came with a goal and a purpose to fill within myself.

I pushed forward, and years later I work for the City of Madison, and I have my own place to call home. I'm waiting on my new addition to my life: my baby girl, Knowledge! It took courage to get this far. It's going to take courage and hard work to finish! **(Richard Butler)**



Every day is a moment of strength for me. Just getting up, showing up, and pressing on takes strength I don't always feel I have. I've learned not to rely on my own strength, but to lean on God for the strength to keep on keeping on, to simply

just keep pressing. I need to keep on especially when life feels heavy, which it has been lately, and especially after losing my sister to cancer in April. My courage is found in my faith and in never giving up, no matter how hard life gets, because my kids need me. **(Shakila Woods)**





I was 37 weeks pregnant, at the clinic to check the health of my baby and me. When my doctor entered the room, she asked if I would mind going to Meriter Hospital to get a more accurate reading of my baby's heartrate. I

didn't think much of it because I had to go there after my last appointment for the same reason. When I arrived, things went as normal; I checked in and waited to be seen. A nurse eventually escorted me to a room and set me up with a continuous fetal monitor. My baby's heartrate sounded normal to me, although my blood pressure began to rise. I attended this doctor's appointment alone due to my boyfriend being sick and mother being at work. So, my anxiety started to rise with a small fear of anything going wrong.

That's when the nurse entered the room, stating that they've noticed inconsistencies in my baby's heartrate and that I would have to be induced today. My heart sank and I started to cry. I felt alone and pressured as two more doctors entered the room with more information. At this moment, I just needed to calm down to call my family and doula. Luckily, my doula was already at the hospital with another client and was able to assist me as well. With an encouraging pep-talk from my doula, I decided to put my fears aside and do whatever was needed to safely deliver my baby. The doctors returned to the room, and I assured them I was ready to proceed with the induction process.



Shortly after, I was moved to a birth suite to prepare, and eventually my family arrived to comfort me. The induction process seemed very long, but I remained strong with all the pain and fear throughout the contractions, epidural, and Cesarean. And on the early morning of January 26, 2025, my beautiful daughter was born.

(Serene Boyd)



My courage came with my children. Before my children, I was fearful to ruffle any feathers. They gave me the courage for advocacy. Mount Everest for me was loyalty to compliance. Once I had a child, I needed to break the "inheritance

of trauma." I kept quiet and compliant fearing confrontation. In motherhood, I quickly learned that avoidance isn't an option. I had to be the protector and nurturer for someone else. I learned the only way to stop them from being hurt and feeling neglected was to teach them to have the courage to follow their own path, even if it's not the easy one.

Self-advocacy is the start to having courage. I feel that if you can find the courage within yourself, you can find it to conquer anything that life sends your way. It took courage for me to tackle parenting alone, which often reminds me to never lose my courage because I have lifelong students.

(Kharmen Thomas)

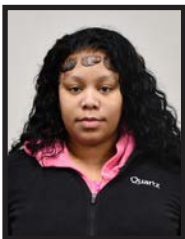




A moment of courage for me was asking for help. There was a time in my life when asking for help felt like failure. I used to believe that strength meant doing everything on my own. I was carrying my struggles in silence and pretending I had it all together/under control. But silence can be heavy! I realized that pride was holding me back more than fear ever did.

The hardest part wasn't admitting that I needed help; it was learning how to receive it. Letting people in meant removing the armor I had worn for years. When I finally opened up, everything started to change. I discovered that real confidence comes from honesty, not isolation.

Now I know that courage isn't about walking alone; it's about reaching out, asking for what you need, and doing whatever it takes to get where you're trying to go. **(Valencia Collins)**



Exhausted and overworked, I know that being a single mother to an autistic child with behavior issues is already challenging enough. Facing homelessness and grief has taken a toll over my mind. I fear losing everything I've worked hard

to overcome to get to this point. This morning, I had to push myself to get dressed. I had to get out despite being tired, being ready to give up on everything. I told myself, "You've come too far, you walked too long to just lie here and let depression get you to lose and to fall. You deserve a win." I forced myself to show up with a smile today to work and to school. In general, I'm here, I'm present, and I can fight these infectious thoughts to keep pushing. **(JuJu Stallworth)**



I've done many courageous things. I show courage every day by being present, showing up for myself, and getting out of bed to face life day after day while battling severe depression. I show courage by speaking up for myself and others, being vulnerable and telling people how I feel even though I hate the feeling of vulnerability. But by far one of the most courageous things I have ever done was getting up pre-funeral and looking at my pops in his casket.

I didn't want to do it; I didn't want to see him like that, but my mom basically guilt-tripped me into it. I thought about it a little: this was my last chance to see him, and I didn't want to regret not doing so. My big sister walked up to the casket with me. I peered over and took a quick glance in the casket. Sadness and intense grief swelled over me. He was puffy, swollen, and very dark; he didn't look like himself at all. I felt my heart shatter in a million pieces. I felt tight all over my body like I was being squeezed by a boa constrictor, and my throat felt as though it was closing. I couldn't breathe. I choked on my tears.

In that moment I felt completely alone, like the saddest person in the world. My knees buckled and my legs felt weak beneath me. This was easily one of the worst days of my life. **(Laura Bass)**





For my moment of courage, I am choosing to write about my experience when my Grandpa Billy passed away. In the beginning of October 2024, I got the news that my grandpa had fourth stage lung cancer and that he didn't have long to live. I was devastated by this news and couldn't believe it. My grandpa meant so much to me. I was very close to him, and my heart felt like it had shattered into a million pieces.

When I was a little girl, my grandpa would babysit me. We would go for walks, and he would take me to the park. He even taught me how to ride a bike! He would come over to my mom's house and make breakfast and hang out all day. He was always very active, and he loved riding his bike. He was always there for me. I felt like losing him was like losing a best friend.

When I found out about the cancer, I tried to spend as much time with him as I could. I have Wednesdays off, and one Wednesday in the middle of November last year, I went to have what would be our last movie day. I had no idea at the time that this was when the worst part of my life so far would begin. That day was very hard on him as well. I put on "A Star Is Born," the version with Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper. He was trying to watch the movie but he was in such bad pain; he was up and down, and it was hard for him to focus on anything. I didn't know it, but at the time his organs were starting to shut down. This was the beginning of the end. I asked him if he wanted me to take him to the ER. He declined, smiled, and said he was just fine. He said that if he felt any worse later, he would call 911. I didn't want him to have to go in alone, but he refused to let me take him.

Eventually I had to go pick my daughter up from school, and I told him I would call him to check on him in a

little while. I finally made it home with my daughter and gave him a call. He told me that he was going to call an ambulance, but that he was okay and would call me in the morning.

The next morning, he called me and assured me he was being taken care of at the hospital. I went to work, and after work I rushed to meet my boyfriend and pick up my daughter. We went to visit my grandpa in the hospital, and he was laughing and smiling and appeared to be okay. We helped him pick out dinner and talked for a while. He mostly didn't want us to worry. He was smiling at us as we left at the end of our visit.

I had hope that this was a false alarm of anything big. The next day he let me and my mom know that the doctors were thinking about sending him to Agrace Hospice. He said they were waiting to hear if there was a room open and wanted to keep him for just a while longer to make sure he was healthy enough for the ambulance ride. Another day passed and things weren't getting any better. My grandpa's condition was worsening and still there were no beds available. My family was visiting on and off. My mom was there the most with me. This was extremely hard on her. She was so lost and sad.

On the third day, we had our last conversation with Grandpa. By the fourth day he was less coherent. His eyes glazed over and he was not able to speak much. I couldn't let him be alone any longer. I

decided I would stay with him in Meriter Hospital until he went to a comfortable more compassionate environment like Agrace. Everyone else had work and school. Luckily my job was very understanding and gave me as much time as I needed. The nurses tried to help make my stay as comfortable as possible. I remember lying in a recliner next to my grandpa in silence, with just the beeps of the machines and faint chatter from the TV. I could smell the hospital food they brought up. I never touched it. I wasn't very hungry considering the circumstances. It smelled of chicken and gravy. I was not interested in



finding out what it was. I just lay there and held my grandpa's hand and told him I loved him and that he wasn't alone. Every so often when it was just me, my mom, and my grandpa in the room, he would shed a tear. It's like he was still there; he just couldn't say anything. His ability to speak withered with every hour that came. It was all happening so fast. We were losing him so fast. He couldn't eat or drink or move. I hated seeing him this way. I felt so powerless and defeated. I wished I could help him somehow. He was in so much pain.



room. It was like a luxury hotel suite. There was a living room area with a futon couch, a giant bathroom, a closet, and a nice patio with a view of a forest trail. I wished we had been there this whole time. The nurses there wasted no time. They came in to tell us that we were now down to a matter of hours. They were certain that he would not make it another day. As a family we came to a conclusion that he was holding on for us. We

thought that he didn't want to die in front of us. So we left to give him some privacy. He was in so much pain and we didn't want him to keep suffering.

On the fifth day, I woke up and went down to the cafe they had there and got coffee. On my way back up to the room, I stopped at the gift shop for some flowers. I bought chrysanthemums because those were his favorite flower. When I got back up to the room, the doctor came in shortly after. She told me that he was not going to make it, and that he might be gone in the next 24 hours. Basically, any minute he could pass. That night my family and I roamed the empty hospital hallways trying to distract ourselves for a minute. We were on a hunt for snacks and a quiet place to sit. We found a chapel on the way, and I may have borrowed some of the extra candles to bring to his room to make it cozy. The nurses giggled at that and had no problem with it. They were very kind and understanding. My family stayed until I got tired enough for bed, and then I slept another night in the recliner next to my grandpa. He moaned in pain all night. I kept waking up checking on him. It was like that every night, he would moan in pain and shake, but this night would be our last sleepover.

The last day he was alive was November 22, 2024. They finally had a bed open at Agrace. They loaded him into an ambulance and warned us he might not make it through the ride. When we got to Agrace, it looked like a resort. It had clean landscaping and cozy architecture that reminded me of a woodland cottage. The nurses unloaded my grandpa from the ambulance and moved him into a beautiful

Shortly after, we got the call. He had passed. We were driving back to Agrace to say our final goodbye, and I threw up from anxiety and cried harder than I ever have. My boyfriend pulled the car over so I could gather myself and finish retching. I entered the room and I laid next to my grandpa in the bed. He was getting cold and I couldn't see him like that any longer. I had to say goodbye. It took courage for me to watch him suffer for that week and stay by his side the whole time. It took courage for me to say goodbye and leave the room at all, and it takes courage to share this. I watched him slowly disappear, and I can't even explain how that feels. I miss him every day.

After he passed, we had to clean out his apartment. By we I mean my mom and me. It was too hard on my sister. When I was unloading his things into my apartment, it just felt wrong. It felt wrong giving anything away, it felt wrong going through his things, and it felt wrong that he wasn't here anymore. I still have his voicemails and I listen to them often. I miss him so much, and my heart is still just as broken today as it was last November. It takes courage every day to not let grief rule my life because it did for a while. I know he wants the best for me and would want me to have happiness and success. I figure the best way to honor him is to make decisions that would make him proud.

(Kiana Galloway)



I have always been a sick person as long as I can remember. My grandmother said I was so sick that I had to learn how to sit and walk all over again when I was a child. I have sickle cell anemia, and it is brutal. I was born with it, passed down by both of my parents.

Sickle cell anemia is when the red blood cells are shaped like crescent moons instead of donuts. This is what causes them to get stuck, and my blood flow gets blocked. When that happens, it causes me to “sickle”; that means oxygen cannot be carried, leading me to pain, tiredness, and many other problems. My red blood cells do not live as long as normal people’s red blood cells.

When I used to live in the Gambia, my grandmother would boil several types of leaves like papaya leaves, mint, ginger, and others for me to drink, and that would help me out a lot. I have been taking medications daily since I was a child, and I still take medicines to this day. The older I get, the more pain my sickle cell gets with tiredness, joint pain, acute chest syndrome, and others.

It is an extremely hard disease to live with because it does affect my daily life. I am in the infusion center or ER every week or every other week to get fluids and pain meds so I can keep going with life. I hope to beat sickle cell someday, but for now, I am doing my best to live with it. **(Tida Drammeh)**



I was scared, but I did it anyway. Opening “Obsessions Beauty Boutique,” a women’s clothing boutique, wasn’t just a business move; it was a leap of faith. In 2021, I opened my first store in West Towne Mall, becoming the

first in my family to own their own business! I had doubts, I had fears, but I knew if I didn’t take the risk, I’d never know what could have been. So, I bet on myself! And that moment, the moment I chose courage over comfort, changed everything. **(Brittany Hughes)**



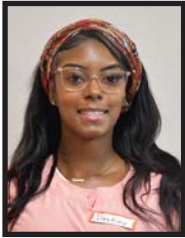
A time I think I was courageous was when I had my first child. I was at the young age of 14 years old. That was a time when I was supposed to be out having a ball with my friends playing sports, riding bikes, etc. and soon to be thinking about college.

When I found out I was pregnant, I learned to my surprise that a lot of girls did not keep their child. Some would do adoption or even terminate their pregnancy. They thought this would be the best in order for them to have a successful future.

I, on the other hand, knew that I would be able to do it. I would be a great mother, and I would be able to finish high school, go on to college, and have a successful life.

To me, being a teen mom is often considered courageous because it involves facing many challenges at a young age, like taking on huge responsibilities, balancing school and parenting, and dealing with social judgment or stigma. Teen moms have to make tough decisions and grow up quickly to provide for their child, often without a lot of support. It takes strength, resilience, and determination to navigate all that while still figuring out their own path in life. So, their courage lies in their ability to keep going despite these difficulties. **(Shataya Hall)**





Twenty-year-old me wouldn't know what to clap for if I was the old version of myself. I am 27 now, but seven years ago

is when I found courage to stand up. A mom of three at just 20, not understanding why I had a 5 ½ year old, 3-year-old, and a beautiful sonogram, I was carrying around stress with a mix of isolation and hidden emotions covering the real with what the ideal should look like. When I was 20 years old, God sat me down and asked me to regain patience and think before speaking.



encouragement to other parents, and to embrace children. To be different is to be seen.

(Destiny Drone)

Just at 20, a new mom of about to be three, I was about to receive what I thought was the worst or most embarrassing news a mom could receive: finding out my child was delayed on the spectrum of nonverbal. My world felt like it was a six-vehicle accident that left some passenger wounded (I was one of the surviving passengers in the story). With little to no understanding what "autism" was, I was embarrassed by all measures. I didn't take my son out in public because I was scared of people staring or talking crap. I put my son in "Birth to 3" when he was late into his third year, so with just a couple months of receiving OT, PT, and Speech, some confidence rose upon me. I knew my son was dedicated despite receiving the diagnosis during the Covid outbreak.

Yeah! You got it: 2020 is when my life changed for the better. With isolation from the public, having to receive all care at home, it brought so much self-reflection to me. I loved what all the providers' support offered. It needed to start with the reflection of the girl in the mirror, being truthful with myself. He is my son, my handsome, smart son. Autism isn't a disability; it's an ability to look at the world inside the box rather than "outside the box."

I gained courage that day. The embarrassment turned into me getting my certification in Special Education in order to learn more, to help build



One day I was riding with my friend Jammal, who asked to get picked up because he got in an argument with his girlfriend. As I pulled up to their apartment, he got in the car and we hopped on the Beltline highway. I watched him as his eyes looked off and then closed. I quickly woke him up and asked him if he was OK. It was like he was on some drugs. His eyes shut closed again, and this time I wasn't able to wake him up.

While driving, I screamed his name over and over again as I pulled up to my apartment. I called out for my friend, a woman who came out to do CPR while we called the police for help. When they arrived, they pronounced his name over and over. They took him to the hospital and doctors thought him dead. But on his way to the morgue, he rose up and he was alive again. **(Larry Grant)**



A defining moment of courage in my life is when the mother of my first son was pregnant and it was time to deliver the baby. I was overjoyed, nervous, everything. I had the feeling of being ready to throw up everywhere. I fainted for at least five minutes. It was so overwhelming, but I was filled with joy to hold my firstborn. **(George Sydnor)**



A moment of courage in my life was when I decided to fire my divorce attorney and represent myself. She kept demanding money but wasn't doing her job, and she treated me with disrespect as if I had no choice but to depend on her.

One day, I realized I didn't have to accept that. I let her go and took control of my own case. It wasn't easy, but I turned to legal libraries, ChatGPT, and Google to guide me through the process. In the end, I proved to myself that you can accomplish anything when you set your mind to it. **(Jacqueline Hawkins)**



When my father was taken away by the jail system, I felt hopeless and scared. But as time went on, it became a moment of courage for me. I had to face the situation, take on responsibilities I wasn't ready for, and find strength I didn't know

I had. I learned that courage is about standing tall when life gets hard. **(Joseph Thigpen Jr.)**



It took a lot of courage I never knew I had to leave that abusive marriage—the place where I depended on him for everything.

With several children relying on me, no extensive education to fall on, limited job skills, and a shattered self-esteem, the thought of stepping away and running away filled me with both dread and determination. How could I survive without him? Where could I possibly go when all I had ever known was that toxic married life? Yet, I could no longer bear for my children to see me defeated, beaten, broken beneath the weight of this pain and fear. I refused to remain bound to this destructive life. Life? I was a dead woman walking, refusing to believe this is the breath God wants me to continue to take in.

I had to leave! But the question I continued to ask myself was where? In the heart of the struggle, God placed a social worker in my path—like a light in the darkness. She stepped in with kindness, guiding me to a property she managed, offering us a fresh start. It smelled good, it looked good, it was good. That place became more than a house. It was a sanctuary where we transformed our home into a place filled with love, safety, and hope. Here, no longer trapped by silence and fear, we spoke the words “I love you” with both honesty and sincerity. But more than words, we lived them in action unshaken by doubt or hesitation, unconditionally, without fear.

In that home, we pursued the joys and passions that made our hearts sing. It was a place where peace embraced us and faith gave us strength. No one could tear us down there in our home because finally courage had led me to build something new—something beautiful.

God had taken my ashes and made them beautiful. He turned my mornings into joyful celebrations. He blessed me with a beautiful garment of praise instead of despair, and I confidently proclaimed, “This is home!” **(Angel Moore)**



It's hard to say "a" moment because I feel like every day takes courage for me. Every day that God gives me, I take that opportunity to give thanks. Trying to make things better takes courage. I used to struggle with depression badly when I was younger. I had to have faith and courage. To lose two siblings and become one of the main people to help around the house and take on roles takes courage. Helping your mother overcome or just speak life takes courage.

I am a single mother of an autistic son. Everything for him takes courage. I spoke up for him, advocated for him when I was being told "everything is just fine." It takes courage to get him the help he needs to accomplish goals and beat odds. I have missed days of work or not had work because of making sure to be at therapy and doctors' appointments. There are just so many times in my life where there are moments of courage. I struggle every day, honestly. I'm built of courage. I hope to always believe things will get and be better. **(Tikoya Gilmer)**



A moment of courage that deeply impacted me was when I finally stood up for myself in a situation where I had often stayed silent. For a long time, I tended to prioritize keeping peace over expressing my own needs, even when it left me feeling overlooked. One day, after being unfairly criticized for something beyond my control, I calmly but firmly spoke up and explained my perspective. My voice shook, but I felt a sense of strength in simply asserting my boundaries.

That experience taught me that courage isn't only about defending others. It can also mean defending your own worth. Standing up for myself reminded me that self-respect often requires vulnerability and that choosing to speak honestly is a quiet but powerful act of bravery. **(Antejiah Greer)**



The moment I felt the most courage was when I cut my son's umbilical cord. I was going through a wave of emotions. Going through labor I kept thinking to myself, "You got this," even though I was scared out of my mind. Battling the thoughts in my head and the pain I was enduring was challenging. I did just about everything to ease my labor, from hot baths, to bouncing on a ball, soothing music, and cutting the lights out. But when the nurse came and said this is the last time that she'd be able to offer me the epidural, all I could think to myself is "the pain is going to get worse." I was stunned but agreed to getting the pain medication.

A few short pushes later, my son had arrived. At this time, I was overwhelmed with joy. When I was whimpering with my son in my arms, a nurse asked who would I want to cut the umbilical cord. Without thinking, I said, "I'll do it." And that I did. I remember the nurse handing me the metal scissors and me realizing what I had just agreed to. I cut the cord and pulled my son in closer to me, welcoming him into this world. **(Roché Palmer)**





Growing up, I was extremely attached to my mom's older

sister, so much so that I called her Mom. She and I were inseparable. Her name was Mary, and she was the most caring and loving person you will ever meet. In early 2000 while we were moving furniture around, she hurt her back. It turned out she had cancer, and at the time it had spread to most parts of her body. She battled cancer for three years without letting us kids know just how bad things had become.

In 2003, a week after my birthday, she lost her battle with cancer. My world had ended. One way I can describe the feeling is like the color faded from the world when she died. There are still some days when I miss her so much it hurts, a pain so unbearable that crying will just not ease it. Despite the pain, I get up every day with purpose because of her. All I want to do is make her proud wherever she is. **(Viwe Mpurwana)**



For a long time, I felt like I was searching for something I couldn't name. I woke up, handled life, and did what I had to do, but it felt like I was moving without direction. I wanted more, even if I couldn't explain it. One day, I slowed down and really listened to myself.

There was no noise, no opinions; just me. I paid attention to what made me feel calm, what made me smile, and what I kept coming back to even when I was tired. And slowly, I realized that was my purpose. It wasn't forced; it was fit.



Once I understood what I was meant to do, I started moving differently. I woke up with intention. I set goals that actually meant something to me. I took small steps, but every one of them was mine. I felt proud of where I was going and in the way I carried myself and believed in my future. I found my purpose, and with it I found peace. Now I walk forward with confidence, knowing that I can do it.

My purpose doesn't end when my reach my goals; it grows with me. Getting into school and accomplishing my education is something

I've worked hard for, but my purpose goes deeper than that. I want to learn, grow, and use my education to make a difference. My purpose is to become someone who inspires others to keep pushing. Education is part of my journey, but my purpose is the light that keeps guiding me to keep growing, helping, and becoming the best version of myself. **(Cquemiah Clark-Richmond)**



Well, I have a lot of these moments of courage in my life I could talk about. I think one of the craziest was my sophomore year of track season. I was a pole-vaulter, which takes a lot of courage itself to do. But as a part of initiation to

the varsity squad, you had to take a leap of faith. This entailed all of us climbing to the top of the bleachers in the gym, which normally reach to about the ceiling, and jump off, landing on the pole-vaulting mats. We were at least three to three-and-a-half stories high, so there is definitely a fear factor. But we all did it successfully and multiple times at that. And no, the coach was unaware of this, but we did go on to be the best pole-vaulting team for three years straight. **(Shelton Murphy)**



The morning that I decided to restart my health journey wasn't dramatic or loud; it started quietly, in front of my bathroom mirror.

I had just stepped off the scale and instead of sighing or walking away like I used to, I stood there

and looked at myself, really looked. My reflection showed a mom, still healing from two c-sections, carrying the weight of stress, long nights, and years of putting everyone else first. But beneath all that, I saw someone who still had fight in her.

That day courage looked like tying my sneakers and showing up for myself, even though my body felt heavy and my confidence was shaky. It was deciding that small, imperfect steps still counted. I didn't start with a fancy gym membership or a strict meal plan. I started with a walk around the block, pushing twins in the stroller while my oldest rode ahead on her scooter. The sun was warm, the wind soft, and for the first time in a long time, I felt alive in my own skin.

Each step reminded me that courage isn't only about big, life changing decisions. Sometimes it's choosing to begin again when no one's watching. It's showing up for yourself when it would be easier to give up. That morning, as sweat ran down my neck and my girls laughed in front of me, I realized I wasn't chasing a number on a scale; I was reclaiming my strength, one small act of courage at a time. **(Roncal Riley)**



It was the new year of 2016. I decided to walk away from a long relationship that no longer served me. This was my high school sweetheart, my first love. It was hard to let go of that "first one." Up until that moment of clarity, I was truly miserable. I was waiting for my partner to get his act together and love me correctly. He never wanted to be "official"; I was a secret kept. He wanted to have his cake and eat it too.

I had lost so much during this relationship. I lost a child, friends, and myself. Depression came over me. I cried more than I smiled.

In April 2015 his grandmother, whom I viewed as my own, passed away suddenly. Shortly after, my two beloved cats passed away as well. My support system, my safety net was gone, leaving me devastated and grieving alone. No support was ever truly given when I needed it most.

Finally, enough was enough. I grew tired of the manipulation, lies, cheating, and pain. I vividly remember sitting at the edge of my bed saying to myself, "It's over." That was the first moment of clarity I had. Even though it was a scary feeling, I knew it needed to happen. Starting a new path is tough but it's incredibly worth it. I let go of that relationship and rebuilt myself and my life. My mother always said, "Let your anger serve you well." **(Lisa Brown)**



On a cold winter morning, I was getting ready for another day of work. As I began getting dressed, my stepmother, Laura, came into my room to talk to me. She began talking about my dad having a rough night and how he had not eaten since yesterday afternoon. My mind began to wander to a memory that feels like a lifetime ago, replaying only the words the doctor spoke, "It's stage 4 nasopharyngeal cancer." The look on my dad's face burned into my eyes, as I sat there silently not saying a damn word! How I wish I had asked something, but I sat like a coward not uttering a single sound.



As I zoned back in, my stepmom started to tell me my dad has been throwing up blood and does not want to get out of bed. I interrupted her and asked, "Do you want to take him to the hospital?" She replied, "Your dad keeps ignoring me, saying he just wants to sleep." I began to worry but remained standing as I listened to her tell me, "He won't eat or move since this morning." As I tried to sound calm, I slowly told her, "We need to take him to the hospital now." My stepmom looked at me as she grabbed my hand in hers and said, "I need you to help me get your dad to the hospital."



began to lose hope—hope that he would ever be cancer free, hope that this would ever pass, and hope that he would ever come back home. Shaking these thoughts from my mind, I walked over to the window and pulled the curtains back, letting the light fill the room.

As my eyes took in the sight of my dad, sorrow filled me and broke my heart. His once strong figure was now a shadow. All that it filled was now weak and frail. He was

I looked up at my stepmom staring straight into her face, and I realized she was deathly pale and very afraid. I gently let go of her hand and began walking upstairs, each step becoming heavier than the last one. I paused as I reached my dad's room. I took a deep breath, making sure I was void of emotion and looked completely relaxed as I stepped inside. My eyes began adjusting to the dark room, as the only light was seeping ever so slightly from behind the curtains. I looked towards the bundle of blankets on the bed, and there I saw my dad's head sticking out. I stood at the edge of the bed as I asked my dad, "Apa, estas bien (dad, are you ok)?" my dad only groaned and mumbled as he turned to his side. I again asked more loudly, "Como te sientes apa (how do you feel dad)?" This time he hoarsely responded, "dejame Laura (leave me alone)!"

I walked over to his side and told my dad we needed to go to the hospital, but he was not responding coherently. At that very moment, I knew we had to take him to the hospital immediately. I inhaled deeply, repressing any emotion I felt, and took control of the situation. I told my stepmom to gather my dad's clothes so we could dress him and head out. As I waited quietly, my mind and heart started to betray me; for the first time in three years since my dad was diagnosed with cancer, I

but skin and bones, yet somehow I hadn't allowed myself to notice. I took a deep breath trying to find an ounce of courage to not break down and cry. It was like the veil of disbelief had been removed, and I could now see what the cancer had done to my dad. Breaking me out of my trance, my stepmom told me to help her put on my dad's clothes. I decided I would lift him as she slipped his shirt over his head. As I reached over and grabbed my dad's hands, he groaned in protest, not wanting to get up. I told him we needed to go, and we needed his help to get him dressed. He allowed me to lift him and as I did, I felt the weight of a child as I effortlessly lifted him. When we finished dressing him and I told him we must go, he raspily replied, "Necesito peinarme, usar el banos, y lavarme los dientes. (I need to do my hair, use the bathroom, and brush my teeth)." The moment he finished saying this, I began to think maybe he was feeling better.

See, all my life, my dad had never left the house without doing his hair. My dad's hair was special to him, and seeing him follow his same routine assured me somehow. I happily guided him to the bathroom while my stepmom went in to help my dad as I waited by the door. When he came out, he gave me a small smile and said, "ya estoy listo, vamanos (I'm ready let's go)!" I placed my arm out as he grabbed onto me, and we walked down the stairs slowly. My dad paused on the step, turned towards me as he smiled weakly, and said, "estoy bien, mija (I'm ok, daughter)."

As if my mind knew how to distract my emotional response, without thinking I lifted my hand, wiping the excess saliva that fell from his drooping lip. He winced, not because I hurt him, but because this small gesture made him feel weak. My dad was a proud man, and I knew that I had to keep my actions and emotions in check. So, I smiled widely, praying my face did not betray me as I said, “ya se apa te miras bien (I know, Dad, you look good).” I knew I was lying. I knew better than to lie, but I also knew at that moment this was what he needed to hear.

We finally reached the bottom of the steps, and my dad asked if he could sit in front of the sun while I grabbed his shoes. My stepmom moved the chair to the glass back door, and I helped my dad sit. I put his sandals on and stepped back as I watched my dad bask in the sun. He had sacrificed so much for me; there was no way I would not oblige. As my dad sat with his eyes closed, he began talking, “si me llevas me voy a morir. Dejame en la casa. No me lleves! (If you take me to the hospital, I’m going to die. Just let me stay home. Don’t take me!).” My soul broke into a thousand pieces and my emotions crashed into me, causing uncontrollable tears to stream down my face.

Memories of the promise I had made to my dad filled my mind. I replayed the conversation my dad and I had on the drive home after we found out his diagnosis. My dad looked at me and said, “I just need you to do something for me.” I agreed instantly without knowing because I didn’t know what else to do but cry. He looked me in my eyes and said, “promise me no pity, no crying, and no childlike treatment.” I repeated what he said, not knowing if I could keep the promise, and asked my dad if he was sure. My dad said this was all he wanted from me, and I agreed under one condition. I would do exactly as he said, but he had to allow me to help him no matter what. For three years my dad kept his word and asked me for help no matter how small or big the task was. In return, I learned to control my emotions around him until I was able to completely hide them in his presence.

However, hearing my dad tell me not to take him to the hospital or he will die—I finally broke my promise. I could no longer not cry or not feel; three years of emotions and tears broke through. I turned around and faced the wall as I tried to get control of myself, grasping for any strength I might have. My dad suddenly said, “está bien hija. Yo estoy bien. No pasa nada. (It’s ok, daughter. I’m good. Nothing’s going to happen.)” It was as if he knew that I needed strength and gave it to me.

Here my dad, a dying man, still had the strength of a lion and the heart of a warrior. I was so damn proud that this was my dad! In that instant, I knew that I too had the same strength and courage buried within me. Wiping my tears, I slowly walked over to my dad, placing a hand on his shoulder as I told him, “Aquí estoy (I’m here, Dad).” I again told my dad I was right there, and a few minutes later, my dad softly replied, “ya se hija, ya estoy listo (I know, daughter, I’m ready now).” I don’t know how much time had passed before I helped my dad up from the chair. We quietly walked out into the sun and headed to the hospital.

I stayed strong the entire time after leaving the house, and when my dad no longer had the strength, I became his strength. Together we braved the fight against cancer, until his last breath. In the end, my dad never made it back home again. I knew then that that very day my dad had not just helped me find my strength but had given me some of his without knowing. Whenever I feel afraid or discouraged, I look back on this memory, and I am reminded—“I am strong, and I am brave even when I’m weak, afraid, or in pain!” **(Lilibeth Sobrevilla)**



FINDING PLATO'S CAVE TODAY

After reading Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" from The Republic, students found examples from their own lives of times they have been trapped in caves that kept—or are still keeping—them from seeing the light or truth.

Looking back on my life, there are so many instances where I can recall feeling trapped or stuck in a cave; a revolving door even. In the span of my lifetime, I've been in and out of so many caves: from my oblivion of adulthood and it being a complete scam, to being stuck in a cave now with politics. I'm witnessing how many people are oblivious to politics and what's going on in the world right now and what's unfolding right before us. History continually repeats itself because our leaders are not dissecting history and the cause and effect of our past failures and mistakes. They're stuck in a cave, only seeing what's in front of them instead of what's behind and on the side of them.

I used to live in complete oblivion when it came to politics and what governs what and whom. I'm beginning to understand more and more every day through reading, watching, listening, and seeing the free information before me on all the platforms we have available today. What do a lot of things come down to in this country? It comes down to race, wealth, and power, and a lot of power comes from wealth, who you know, and where you came from.

I'm unfolding and dissecting what's going on around me today like the "Big Beautiful Bill" and what that means for people who look like me and people who are living in poverty. What does it mean for the elderly—those who live in a nursing home and rely heavily on our healthcare system—or for veterans and immigrants? What did China's



leader mean when he spoke of the dangerous weapons they possessed, and what would come of the United States because if we struck first we would not have the opportunity to strike a second time? What does it mean for the Americans here who struggle to eat, get healthcare, and barely make ends meet, but then there's 1% of people who hold the majority of the country's wealth? What does it mean for our country to be in debt trillions of dollars but be able to fund/bail out other countries, build a new ballroom in the White House, but not have the funds for its own people when it comes to SNAP benefits, healthcare, and much more?

We are living in a system that's rigged. There are many people oblivious to what's really going on, me included, and what we can do to dig ourselves out of it. Our president: who is he, what has he gotten away with, and how does he continue to get away with it? I've seen other presidents get torn apart and try to get impeached for less. Yes, ignorance is bliss, but being knowledgeable is power.

While I want to continue to dissect politics and what's really going on in the world, the more I learn and the deeper I dive into these rabbit holes, the more depressed and drained I feel. Sometimes I feel deeply saddened and hopeless with the new information I get, and I don't want to know anything else. The amount of evil, greed, and just flat-out inhumane things that go on in this world is just too much to carry because what can I really do? How can I help? What can I do with this information? **(Laura Bass)**

Reflecting on my life after reading Plato's Allegory of the Cave, I realized I was in a cave seven years ago. When I was growing up my mother always had a good paying, dependable job as a Certified Nursing Assistant. As I got older and gained independence, I decided to try out caregiving for an occupation suggested by my mom. I applied to the same facility she had been working at for a year. I enjoyed caring for the elderly and working with her. She taught me a lot of things about working in healthcare and I valued her opinion on things.

After a year, my mother decided to end her employment at our job to pursue a higher wage. I eventually followed her lead and got hired as well. We worked side by side for a year, but eventually I yearned for more. Being that I didn't have any certifications, I got a lower wage than the CNAs. So, I began to seek better job opportunities and wanted the approval of my mother. She's always motivated me to make my own decisions, but the opinion of her and a few friends discouraged me. I was told some of the healthcare facilities I wanted to pursue weren't the best. Although this was the experience of others and gossip, I decided not to apply for any interviews.

because of other people's negative experiences at jobs, I began to feel trapped in a mindset that this would somehow become my fate if I was employed. This mindset occurred for over a year, until I came across an employment opportunity with the State of Wisconsin involving free training to become a Certified Nursing Assistant. Excited about this, I mentioned it to a coworker I knew previously worked for the employer and she had a few negative comments. This time I took what she said with a grain of salt because I knew this was a perfect opportunity to gain knowledge, a certification, and the higher wage I had been wanting.

I went through the applicant process and got hired. Eventually, I completed the training course and received my certification as nursing assistant. Despite the negative input

I was told prior to applying, I enjoyed my new job. And from then on, I vowed to never hold myself back from new ventures based off other's experiences. **(Serene Boyd)**

Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" is about basically being stuck where you are at instead of where you are trying to go. For example, growing up in Chicago, you hear gun shots every day to the point that every day when you wake up you expect to hear gunshots and feel like it's normal part of your everyday life. So when I moved from Chicago, it was kind of weird, like my grandma would leave out of the house and not lock the door. That's not something I'm used to. Or I wouldn't really stand by the windows or patio because that's something else we didn't do in Chicago.

It's important that the prisoners get out of the cave because they will forever be stuck where they are at if that's all that they know. They will feel like it's normal. They only see the shadows, so if they were offered to be able to go towards the light, they probably would've hurt their eyes on the beam of light because of being in the cave for so long. That's the reason we would just rather do the same thing instead of something new: we are used to what our lifestyle is. **(Johnnell Britt)**



A cave I find we all face is that of adulthood. We are mildly prepared with minimal understanding of the heaviness. We are conditioned to believe that adulthood provides freedom to do whatever you want—that if you get a job, house, make money, and start a family, you have reached the jackpot. What is not shared is the fine details and baggage that comes along with it—the ups and downs, self-doubt, and the unknown; constantly rediscovering who you are.

I truly believe I didn't come into full adulthood until the age of 26, around the time my frontal lobe fully developed. Those early years were faced with doubt and a naïve way of thinking. I didn't know proper money management or how to build and maintain good credit for my future. It's overwhelming paying bills, keeping a roof over your head, and maintaining good relationships in both personal and professional settings, not to mention the attempt to stay sane through it all.

The older I've become, the more self-aware I am. I'm at peace knowing my life is not perfect. Lessons along the way have served as a purpose for my life and story. I had to go through it to understand there is not one right way to embark on adulthood. It's messy, exhilarating, and filled with all the things you can imagine. Your journey is your own, and you do not need to conform to what society expects of it. **(Lisa Brown)**

I believe I am still in the very cave I ran from. My cave was Chicago, IL, my hometown, or at least that's what I easily thought. I think I have many caves in my life.

Obviously, the first cave is where I am from. I think my cave was family and friends as well. Most of my family and friends grew up rough and making bad choices, mostly alcohol and drugs. I even obtained my own drinking problem along the way.

As a teenager I was in and out of the hospital due to substance overdose. I took pills and drank Promethazine nonstop! I almost died twice, once at the doctor's and once in Sharks Restaurant.

Once I woke up to realize the darkness I was living in, I chose to leave all caves behind in Chicago. Little did I know, I was stepping into entirely new caves as I was leaving all the old ones.

Although things got better over time, I found myself now homesick and lonely! On top of that, I had come to Madison with my ex and two stepchildren. My ex and all of her problems and issues became my new cave. There was abuse, neglect, and now more drugs and alcohol use than I had ever been around.

Making it out of all these caves is another story all on its own. Although I speak and write very vaguely, I think this speaks volumes to my many caves.

I am currently in my last cave. This stage is me waiting for my newborn. I say this is the last cave because I am scared. I don't know the future. I want to be a great dad—one I never had but at the same time one I know I deserved. I don't want to let my baby down, and I also don't want to let anyone who believes in this next chapter of my life down.

I lived in caves all my life. I'm finally moving out!
(Richard Butler)



Growing up with immigrant parents has brought a cave and shadow-like experience through my childhood into adulthood. Beyond the sacrifices both of my parents made for their family, I've had to make sacrifices and adjustments to accommodate both reality and environment.

I grew up in Evansville, WI, which is predominantly surrounded by white people. This led to adjusting our beliefs and culture to better fit our environment because simply being colored and foreign brought a lot of racism towards us. This led me to depression and anxiety as well as identity difficulties.

Learning to readjust daily between life behind closed doors and the outside world was overwhelming. But through it I never allowed it to fully 'change' me. Although my parents almost adopted those traits, I do not hold that against them. After all, you are a product of your environment.

After years of living double lives, we decided to move to Madison, WI. I was always optimistic about meeting other types of people despite my first experience. I eventually met my son's father, who is black. My parents absorbed some racist traits ironically through living in it for so long—not necessarily racist, but it definitely falls under a 'single-story' mindset.

They weren't always fond of my boyfriend at the time, but they tolerated him. Through constant judgment of his lifestyle and personal choices, they allowed him in for me. Years later, our son was born. Everyone pictured my son with a roasted



caramel skin, curly nappy hair, basically a carbon copy of his father. Yet my son was fair skinned, with straight long hair, an exact copy of myself.

This has always made me question if they truly accept that my son is indeed half black or if they see past it because he doesn't 'look it.' I did deal with the same thing with my son's grandma, so much so that she requested a DNA test. And through it all, my son is a mix of white, black, and Mexican. I still feel the slight thought of judgment from others, but through it all, my son is healthy and loved. And for that alone, I must be grateful.
(Stacy Castillo)

I can personally relate to Plato's Allegory of the Cave because, in many ways, I've experienced what it's like to live in the dark and come to light. The prisoners in the cave only saw shadows and believed that was reality. In my life, a lack of education and limited opportunities once made me feel the same way—like I can only see part of the truth.

As I began learning more and opening my mind, I realized there is a whole world of knowledge, understanding, and possibility that I've never seen.
(Cquemiah Clark-Richmond)

I didn't enter the cave to explore. I went there because life felt too heavy to carry. Inside everything was quiet, and for a while the darkness felt safer than the world outside. There was a small pool that promised numbness, and I drank from it not to feel good but to stop feeling at all.

Days blurred, and nights disappeared. The cave felt like it owned me. But one day I noticed a tiny crack of light high above me, weak but real. The shadows whispered, "You're not strong enough." I whispered back, "I deserve the light."

With shaking hands, I climbed. I slipped, I cried, I almost gave up, but I kept moving. And the less I drank, the wider the light became. Eventually, I reached the opening and crawled into daylight, not perfect, not healed, but free. Now, when I look back at the cave, I don't fear it, I honor the version of me who refused to stay there. **(Valencia Collins)**

When I was growing up, my mom had to work two jobs to support us. She got married when we were young. My stepdad wasn't the nicest. He was very mean and controlling. He worked but barely provided for us. Most of his money went to Mexico for his kids.

My mom and stepdad used to fight all the time. My mom was the main aggressor. My stepdad was an alcoholic. He was only nice when he was sober. Needless to say, a lot of my mom's aggression came from the fact that he was always drunk and out drinking with his friends.

I met my daughter's dad at 16 and shortly after I got pregnant. Shortly after becoming pregnant, he became possessive. He isolated me in every which way; he didn't want me to do anything with anyone, not even family. After I had my daughter, he started to put his hands on me. This man was 6 foot 2 and about 250 pounds.

Growing up in the environment that I did, I associated what my daughter's dad was doing with it being ok. My mom put up with so much that in my mind it was normal. When my daughter was about a year, I had finally had enough. One day I decided to fight back and broke my hand in the process. I told myself I didn't want my daughter to go through this.

We went our separate ways, for a little while. Somehow, we found our way back; it was this never-ending toxic cycle. For years this was how it went, but when you don't have the guidance to do better, how can you do better?

Anyway, when my daughter was three, I just had this realization: that if I didn't better myself and the situation, she was going to go through the exact same thing. I left my daughter's dad for good. I went and got my HSED, and the rest was history. I made sure that I applied myself in everything that I did, including being a better mom to her. My daughter will be 18 next year. She is in the process of taking her CNA test, and she is on the student council. She is in Avid and Pathways. She takes honors classes plus duo college credits. She has early admission acceptance into eight UW colleges. She is graduating with her class.

I am so proud of the woman I have become and the woman I am raising. I broke a cycle that was in a family for generations. I escaped the cave, and I didn't look back. **(Paola Damiani)**



One way to apply Plato's allegory to my life is social media. Ever since COVID, I prefer staying home and being on my phone or laptop watching Netflix or being on TikTok. Being outside doesn't matter to me anymore, but I try as much as I can to do outdoor activity. I don't even turn on the TV anymore; I just scroll through TikTok for as many hours as I possibly can in a day. I watch Netflix for hours in a dark room and do not think about going for a walk or opening a window for some sunshine or fresh air. My news comes from TikTok, whether it is correct or not.



I know that some people can be excessively addicted to their phones, which can result in a type of dependency that affects relationships, mental health, and physical presence. Constant connectivity can make people feel addicted, which can have mental effects like elevated anxiety and depression and a decreased capacity for in-person interactions. Instead of passively consuming, I am conscious of the content I consume and how it affects my emotions. I also actively try to focus on the people in my physical life rather than my phone and be totally present with them. I try my best to not be addicted to social media and am cutting down my hours spent online so I don't become a prisoner to my own phone or social media.

(Tida Drammeh)

There have been many moments in my life where I felt as if I were strapped inside a cave surrounded by darkness, limitations, and expectations that tried to hold me still. But even in the quietest, heaviest parts of that darkness, I kept moving. I kept fighting. I kept believing that there was something beyond the walls around me.

Being a mother of three has shaped me in ways I never imagined. My children have been the light that cut through the shadows, the reason I stood

up when it would have been easier to sit down. They watched me struggle, but they also watched me rise. Every step I took was for them as much as it was for myself.

Going back to school as an adult was another part of my journey, one that required courage, discipline, and strength. Balancing life, motherhood, responsibilities, and my own dreams was never simple. But I did it. I showed myself that it is never too late, never too difficult, and never too far out of reach to grow, to learn, and to become more.

I've had missions I couldn't complete and goals that slipped through my fingers. I've faced setbacks that tried to convince me I wasn't capable. But none of it, and I mean none of it, broke me. Every failure became a lesson, every disappointment became a push forward, and every obstacle became proof that I am still standing.

I want this message to serve as a reminder: even when life tried to confine me to that cave, I refused to stay there. I carved a way out. I created light where there was none. I kept my faith in myself, my strength, and the future waiting for me outside those walls.

I am still rising. I am still growing. And I am still unbroken. **(Destiny Drone)**

There are many caves that I see our current society stuck in today. These caves can be things like depression, abusive situations, or even the ignorance of racism. Personally, I have experienced all three of these kinds of adversities. The one that I really struggle with wrapping my mind around is racism. This is the topic I am choosing to write about because of the state our world is in today. Racism has impacted our community deeply and horrifically—from genocide, slavery, segregation, oppression, and societal conditioning to deportation, tearing families apart, and locking people away like they aren't human. I can't help but think about how contradictory the message behind it is and how sad it is to see that some people will never see the beauty of truly learning about a different culture. I also think about how disheartening it is that people don't believe in blending our cultures for something greater.

One personal experience I have had with racism is micro-aggressions. I didn't know at the time that I was experiencing micro-aggressions because I was just a kid. I remember having friends who were white, and they would tell me, "I don't see you as black; you aren't like the other black people." My friends would say it in a way that sounded like a compliment. At the time I thought that I was being complimented. It was eye opening when I grew up and realized that was not a compliment! Being mixed race is not easy; I experienced racism

from many different groups of people. I never felt like I truly fit in anywhere. I am Hispanic and Black, and I don't speak Spanish. I never fully fit in with the Hispanic crowd at school, and I never fit in with the black people because I would get called "whitewashed." It was a lonely feeling, even though I laughed off most of the comments and masked my discomfort well. The divide racism has caused is disappointing. I have always felt like blending cultures is beautiful and that we should accept people based on the person they are and nothing else. You can miss genuine real connections with people by judging them. No one should feel like they don't belong.

I find racism to be contradicting. When we think about colonization, the very people who arrived in America were outsiders themselves. They committed acts of violence, theft, and assault. We have laws for these crimes today. It is shocking how easily humans can ignore their own history. Racism is extremely flawed and unfair. It quite literally makes no sense. I often wonder what makes someone feel as if they really are the superior race.

Blending cultures is a beautiful thing. I believe by blending cultures our society would change for the better because it would create more empathy and a more inclusive and understanding community. We need to step out of our caves and break free from our shackled minds like Socrates was saying.

Once we break free of these limitations, we can see the world in a more insightful way. When we open our mind to other cultures and leave judgment out of it, we start to take a journey towards enlightenment.

In conclusion, we can become better, more intelligent, and intellectual humans by putting systemic racism to an end and opening our minds. By embracing diversity, we can create a society that encourages all cultures to thrive. When we come together, we can create a world where everyone's potential can be valued. America being a melting pot of cultures is what makes this country great, and I wish more people could see that. **(Kiana Galloway)**



The allegory of the cave I would compare to life all around. When we are children, we have such vivid imaginations, ambition, fun, and youth. When you are a child, you believe you can do anything and be anybody. You dream of what life would look like or could be for you and your family. Money is never a big deal as a child.

Once you start attending school, you are sitting for six to seven hours learning basic education: math, science, all of those subjects. You become conditioned to the rules of school, like lunch at a certain time, having fun at a certain time, bathroom breaks. Everything becomes a schedule. We start to lose a little of the spark and curiosity and creativity. We learn to follow rules.

Once you are done with school, you graduate and go to college. Next you get a job to provide, create a family, and just live. Then you grow up, become an adult, and learn for yourself what is actually waiting for you in this “real world.” Figuring out taxes, rent, and insurances, you realize everything taught in school doesn’t really apply to the everyday life. You get a taste of what life is and realize you were oblivious, only taking what you were told or what you could see and using it, but not realizing there’s more.

We start to lose the fun and creativity because now we are working, taking care of children, feeling stressed and overworked. It’s almost as if the standard life they have planted into our heads would be the ones chained in the cave. The ones who still choose to be free spirited, not following society’s norms or in other words breaking the matrix, would be those who are in the light. Bills and work become so important that we no longer care about smiling or the little things that make us smile.

A lot of grownups lose interest in the hobbies they used to have as a child or even before responsibilities came into play. Applying this to my life, growing up I was heavy into art—any forms of art, painting, writing, drawing. I had a big



imagination, and I used to create so many things. Entering into my school life, I was not able to be creative. Once I got into high school, I started to notice a loss of passion for the hobby because now things had to become serious. You had to make sure you got into college and got a job.

Going into college adulting, you no longer have time. But you start to remember there’s always going to be something to be serious but you have to enjoy now. During COVID most of us had the time to find new hobbies and to use our imagination and creativity again. It made a lot of us remember there’s more life to live. I picked up my art again: creating clothes, braiding hair, making vision boards, and doing graphic design. **(Tikoya Gilmer)**

There is a time when I felt like I was in a cave. I can remember going through so many different emotions during this time. I had just gotten out of jail and had nothing to my name. I had to go to a halfway house and try to take care of myself while looking for a job. My friends weren’t around at the time. My mom wasn’t around at that time. I had literally nobody to lean onto, but I kept my focus and I was determined.

I found somewhere to live and was able to get out of the halfway house. I was able to do for myself what I could do before. I was just depressed and lost, but I have found myself by being consistent. **(Larry Grant)**

For years my marriage felt like living in a cave. It was not that way in the beginning: in the beginning, it was blissful, with no worries or doubt found. That was a time when laughter, music, and dancing filled our nights—a time when life was simple. But slowly, somewhere along the line, the hours and minutes crept slower. Laughter faded, warm, exciting welcomes turned into polite smiles, the music stopped, and the silence grew heavy. Soft spoken words turned into yelling, and I could barely recognize the voice that rang in my ears—it didn't sound like the person I once knew. The reflection that stared back at me in the mirror was unrecognizable to my eyes. What once felt like a cozy, warm, safe place became an unknown, cold, empty place.

I would tell myself this was just a phase, nothing is perfect, people change, and love changes shape. We were both young, so I figured this was us growing up together. But deep down, I knew something wasn't right. I knew the light that once shined so brightly it bothered others' eyes was dimming.

This cave was not built overnight, though. It was built by small things; spoken and unspoken words, tired nights and early mornings, responsibilities of children, and forced smiles hiding tears. For a long time, I thought this was just marriage: that everyone drifted into silence; that comfort was meant to replace passion. I convinced myself that emptiness was normal, that growing older together meant losing pieces of who we once were. I mistook endurance for love, I mistook control for love, and I mistook being daunted for love.

Deep down I knew this wasn't right. I always saw a light, a light which cast shadows on a wall which played tricks on my eyes. Over time as the cave became cold, stale and lonely, I slowly started learning new things. I started spending more time doing research online and through social media, joining women empowerment groups, listening



to podcasts, and opening up to family and friends. I quickly started realizing this place was not a home; the people inside were only warm because of the little flame I still had sparked in me—because my hugs were warm like an autumn fire.

After years of fighting, I've finally come into the light! I am no longer blinded by the darkness which was pretending to be love. I no longer mistake shadows for what they are not—I see true love and happiness for what it really is. After years of seeing false reality, I finally see myself. I finally see the world as

it is, the shadows for what they really are, and the light I'd been missing all along. **(Shataya Hall)**

One of the biggest caves in my life has been materialism, the belief that what I own defines who I am. For a long time, I thought success meant having the right clothes, shoes, and hairstyles. I believed people would respect me more if I always looked expensive and on-trend. When I got something new, I felt confident for a moment. But as soon as something newer came out or I saw someone wearing something nicer, that confidence disappeared. I had to keep buying more just to feel enough.

Materialism became a cave that blocked me from seeing my true worth. Instead of focusing on my talents, my personality, and my future, I focused on my appearance and the opinions of others. Social media made this even worse, constantly showing me what I didn't have. I compared myself to people online and convinced myself that once I bought what they had, I would finally feel fulfilled. But it was never enough.

The truth is that possessions can fade, trends expire, and money comes and goes. What actually matters is confidence, purpose, relationships, and self-respect, and those things can't be bought. I realized that materialism was keeping me in darkness, distracting me from developing the things that make life meaningful. **(Brittany Hughes)**

Looking back on my own life, I see many moments silent in dark caves. The caves were shaped by fear to express myself, timidity, and the deep longing for a better life for myself and my children. These caves were walls of silence where I doubted my worth and hid my true feelings, afraid of judgment, rejection, or failure. Like the prisoners chained to see only shadows, I was often confined to what I thought I could or could not do, unable to fully envision the brightness outside.

In those caves, fear was a heavy chain. It kept me from speaking up in important moments of standing firm on my dreams. The shadows on the cave walls were the voices of doubt replaying fears: "You are not enough," "You will never succeed," "You're not smart enough," "This is all there is." It was tempting to accept those shadows as reality because they were familiar and safe, even if they were small and confining. But deep inside, a quiet hope remained: to step into the light and see things as they truly could be.

My desire for a better life for my children became my motivation to break free from these caves. I wanted not only to survive but to show them a life where fear doesn't hold you captive. With every step forward, I felt the chains loosen, the walls grow thinner, and the light become an invitation. The journey wasn't easy, like the freed prisoner. The brightness of truth sometimes hurt my eyes. Now, looking back, those caves mark a journey

from limitations to hope, from silence to voice, and from fear to freedom.

I know the journey isn't over. There are still shadows and caves that need facing, moments of discomfort when the lights reveal hard truths. But each step toward the light I reclaim more of my true self and pass that courage onto my children and their children, hoping they will walk freely, casting off the chains of fear and stepping boldly into their own bright futures. **(Angel Moore)**

The Allegory of the Cave applies to my childhood. When I was born, a lot was expected of me, both from society as well as my parents. From a very young age I knew I would not be able to live up to those expectations and that led to my depression. I knew from a very early age that I was not like other boys and no matter how hard I tried, I could not fit in. I could've stayed in the cave in South Africa, but I saw the light which shone so bright which called me. I followed that light, and now I am here in the US free to be myself and live in my truth. I am free from disappointing my family because I was not what they wanted me to be. Here in the US, I can be any version of myself that I want to be, and I could not be any happier. The thought of heading back into the cave is frightening.

Growing up in South Africa, I could never have imagined that this would be my reality today. From where I come from, this is very far removed. South

Africa has been a democratic country since 1994 when the first free democratic elections took place. Whilst the country has progressed socially, the remnants of apartheid still exist. For a huge part of my life, I equated speaking English fluently with intelligence. In a country with multiple official languages, English was the language of intellectuals. Since being in the US, I have found this notion to be flawed. Mastery of more than one language is a sign of intelligence, not just English. Had I not been exposed to the world, my cave mentality would still exist. I have also come to realize that had I not "left the cave" I would be perpetuating this flawed premise. **(Viwe Mpurwana)**



When it comes to caves, I think I've been in a couple, maybe even a labyrinth. The thought or a better choice of words would be my curiosity. I've always had the insatiable urge to understand how or why things happen. The crazy thing is the more you pique your curiosity, the more you see how many parallels there are to this dimension. You would think the closer you got to the exit, the more you know.

But, in fact, it is quite the opposite: the more you know, the more you plunge yourself into the depths of the darkness of the cave. Then you might have a slightly overwhelming feeling of despair that might come over you. If you don't overcome that despair, then it will engulf you, leaving you stuck living in purgatory. That's just a piece of the aftermath of learning the truth or studying the way the universe works.

It all started when I was seven when I first started looking at the hypocrisies in people and the contradictions of this world. This was due to my grandmothers being church women, with one teaching me the Bible and the other one taking me to church two or three Sundays out of the month. Then at 12 I had my first of many spiritual experiences that were truly unexplainable. This lifted the veil off of my eyes and helped change my perception of reality.

Then as I got older and became a devoted Christian, I started studying the Bible myself more in depth looking for hidden messages. By reading the

autobiographies of Ben Franklin and Isaac Newton, I learned that both said they were obsessed with the Bible, knowing it contains secrets. I also had friends that thought the same and also had spiritual experiences themselves.

Then as I matured into an adult and had a debate with an atheist, we opened each other's mind and our way of thinking was expanded. I would go to college and study world mythology and cross reference everything, which would bring me to the Vatican, so I researched its history and the Pope's birth. I had spiritual shell shock and felt like I was chasing a shadow.

Let's fast forward to present day where I've been studying law and the history of the world. Once I realized how law was created and why it's structured the way it is, it made me realize that every stone I overturned, the more I was left perplexed by the reality that I discovered. It seemed like every truth I uncovered, in reality I wish hadn't. But it's like the movie "They Live": you've got magical glasses on but you can't take them off to unsee the truth. They say the truth hurts but it'll set you free. This is my cave that I'm stuck in, searching for my way out. **(Shelton Murphy)**

Thinking of the Allegory of the Cave reminds me of us as children growing up. Some of us grow up thinking that being an adult or "grown" is the ultimate prize. But is it really? We are blinded by adults having free will. We see them spending money and basically doing whatever they want. I had a tough upbringing, and all I can remember is wanting a way out. I remember as a kid I just couldn't wait to be grown and not have to obey any rules. Obviously, I found out the hard way that there was more than just the picture that I painted in my head.

Also, another topic that this passage makes me think of is my relationship with politics. I feel that we as citizens only know what is put in front of us. I believe there is so much more behind closed doors that we are oblivious to. But as long as we are content or feel that we are "managing," we look the other way without even noticing.



Lastly, when thinking of the allegory of the cave I think of my education journey. For so long I felt limited. At some point in life, I felt that high school was all I was capable of completing. I was embarrassed and ignorant, just like the prisoners. I was scared to try to take the initiative to further my education, only because I went so long thinking that I couldn't. But I refuse to let my cave define me. My desire to want more is higher than my desire to stay caved. **(Roché Palmer)**



the more people tried to help me. I was a prisoner trapped in my illusion, fearful and confused by reality.

I was sixteen years old, young and naïve, when I met a male friend. Our relationship moved swiftly. He was respectful, romantic, and fully mature. Although he was twice my age, I felt like he was the one. Unknown to me, I was

just part of his game. He became a fixture in my life. He was constantly with me from morning to night, never leaving my side.

Plato's Allegory of the Cave reminds me of how poverty can shape the way we see the world. Growing up or living in survival mode can feel like being chained in a dark place/cave, and our reflections are just struggle, fear, and hardship that seem to define who we are or become. For a long time, my focus was simply getting through each day for the sake of a better life, but now it's simply getting through each day for my children and being able to live more for them and me.

But as I began to slowly but surely heal and put faith in God, I'm slowly starting to step out of this darkness. The light was unsettling at first because being truly free requires you being responsible and facing uncomfortable truths. Now, I understand that the shadows of my past do not define me and my journey but motivate me to find the courage to become the better version of myself and also inspire others to walk towards that light, too.

(Roncal Riley)

I have lived through many situations where I myself was stuck in a cave convinced by believing that it was better inside. I was confused and confined for a couple years of my life. I refused to believe what was beyond the light was better than the sweet dark ignorance in which I had found comfort. I found myself running for safety farther inside

Things took a turn for the worse when I asked for some space. He became angry and yelled as his hands hit my face. I know I should have sought help, or walked away, but I felt that his apology was sincere and decided to stay. Having witnessed abuse many times in my life, I always swore "It would never be me." After every abuse he came to me pleading on his knees. The "forgive me" begging, with tears in his eyes as he apologized, convinced me he was really sorry this time. Somehow, I stayed and endured what came next.

I was so young and naïve. I was intrigued by his experience. He manipulated my thinking by convincing me he was all I ever needed. He showed me my friends weren't loyal by sleeping with every female friend that I had. He'd say that everyone confided in him, not me, then repeat confidential conversations I had with friends before hitting me. He would beat me relentlessly saying, "Telling people your problems creates opportunities for them to hurt you and take advantage. Please understand I'm only showing you what others won't!" Time and time again, he told me I could not trust anyone, successfully isolating me. He was the first person to break me and make me believe I was worthless. I blindly believed he was the only one that would love me, care for me, and protect me from the cruel outside world. I don't know why,

but I fell for it time and time again. I lost sight of who I was and my purpose in life as I lived in his world. I no longer lived for myself but for this man's intention. I chose to believe the illusion of a love story rather than the reality that existed.

Fear is what kept me in my cave—fear to leave because I had believed his truth of a world unwilling to accept me. His beliefs became my own beliefs. I would not be loved, accepted, or good enough for the world. Only with him could I be successful and happy. I literally and figuratively believed that was the only way I could exist. I stopped thinking for myself and let him take full control. He had won, and he knew it. I gave up and surrendered, thinking of ways to sadly say goodbye to life. Then one day justice was served by a previous victim, and he was finally taken away.

In the days after he was removed from my life, I feared a world without his control. I didn't know how to start living again. I began questioning myself and thinking "what if." What if I lived for myself? What if I didn't need him? I was hungry to learn of a world without him. I felt like the chains that held me in place were finally removed. I could now look around as I stepped forward into the world. Although physically I was out of that cave, my mind was still slowly catching up. I was no longer controlled, but my mind felt restrained.

I remember being so angry at myself that I dropped down and cried. This exact moment came to mind when reading "The Allegory of the Cave." I

understood the different difficulties of being in or out of the cave. I was experiencing life in the living flesh, yet my mind remained in that cave.

It took years for me to break completely free from that mentality and believe in what I know now to be my truth: not the truth created by others' opinion and beliefs, not the truth made solely to benefit someone else's agenda, but the truth that I chose to seek for myself. I still don't know how to describe how I understood, but Plato's story triggered something deep within me. As I was reading, I was overcome with emotions that came with a deep understanding. Staying in the relationship (my cave) was accepting fear. Leaving for the unknown was a new dreadful fear. When I finally moved on, I knew with certainty that I had overcome my fears and uncovered the lies my ex spewed as the truth. After living my life in someone else's world for so long, I learned life is better lived when you seek your own truth. **(Lilibeth Sobrevilla)**

I spent half of my life in a cave, but this cave was a relationship with chains made of control, intimidation, emotional manipulation, and fear, feeling completely isolated from my family, friends, and peers. The thought of facing the reality of my situation kept me bound and imprisoned, ashamed of how I let things get out of control. The thought that every word that was told to me about change and the love that a person had for me kept me bound and chained.

One day the realization hit the embarrassment of my situation. The light shined upon me, displaying the true face of my abuser as a liar, a manipulator who was never going to change, never loved me. The control they had over me instilled fear in me. They caused me verbal and physical abuse. I decided to break free from those chains, take control of my life, run towards the light, free myself, live for me, and build me up. In the process, the realization hit that everything that was said to me about me that kept me imprisoned was an illusion made to keep me chained. **(JuJu Stallworth)**



So, I think my cave would be this class because relearning things can be hard and difficult. Education can be expensive and hard. But with me at Odyssey, I think with me getting tutoring and my teachers helping me and always engaging with me will make sure I give this my all. I am determined to be at tutoring every week to get that extra help, and I am determined to graduate. **(George Sydnor)**

One of the strongest examples of caves is modern day capitalism. In the U.S., people are convinced that hard work leads to financial freedom. They suppress true desires and feel economic dependency.

With capitalism being the cave, the shadows are false promises, and enlightenment is realizing there's more to life than work and wealth. People believe that if they work harder or work more that they'll eventually be free but don't take into account job instability, low wages, or inflation. Mental, emotional, and physical health are sacrificed while "grind culture" is glorified.

Many people spend most of their life working to survive even if they hate that job or it's extremely draining. Talents and passions go unnurtured because the systems (chains) measure worth by productivity, not joy or purpose. Awakenings show up as rediscovering parts of you that have been ignored and neglected.



Outside of productivity and creative/soul expressions, capitalism directly traps people into dependency. Food, housing, healthcare, and more are basic human needs. Rest or refusal to participate are punished by taking away your access to daily needs. The fear isn't the absence of luxury but the absence of stability. People who return to the cave are labeled as lazy, entitled, or even ungrateful.

Just as the freed prisoner saw the "light" and understood the illusion of the cave, awakening from capitalism's illusions means recognizing that freedom isn't found through work and wealth. Freedom is found through reclaiming time, creativity, and human connection from systems created to keep people imprisoned.

(Shaneece Taylor)

In my life, I've been in a cave when I believed something just because everyone else did. For example, I used to think I wasn't good at math until I actually tried and realized I could learn it with practice. It also helped that I've spent the past six years working with elementary students, which has allowed me to relearn certain techniques. Today I see caves around us when people spend so much time on social media and believe the majority of what is being shown online. At the end of the day, I believe escaping the cave means thinking for ourselves and being open to new ideas.

(Joseph Thigpen Jr.)

Poverty and racism are deeply intertwined issues that significantly influence individuals' experiences, particularly within the context of intersectionality. For African American women, these factors create a unique set of challenges in a society that professes the ideal that "all men are created equal." This ideal often remains unfulfilled for those who cannot grasp or empathize with the lived experiences of marginalized groups.

The relationship between poverty and racism can be likened to the Allegory of the Cave, where societal norms often warp perceptions and experiences. Contemporary issues such as redlining and inadequate access to resources—like quality

education, food security, and healthcare—play a critical role in shaping these experiences. When individuals are forced into survival mode, their ability to envision a brighter future and recognize their full potential becomes severely limited.

Moreover, this systemic manipulation is exacerbated by a pervasive mentality that equates classism with superiority. When those affected by these issues attempt to bring them to light, they often encounter evasion and a lack of genuine engagement. Unfortunately, there is a narrative that suggests some individuals must suffer for others to thrive, leading to a culture where the voices of the underserved are frequently dismissed or questioned.

Despite efforts to become aware of and escape these detrimental cycles, fear seems to drive society into regression. This dynamic creates a divide between those who retreat into the shadows of ignorance and those who seek the light of understanding and progress. Ultimately, this societal divide prevents a collective advancement, perpetuated by a resistance to confront the complexities of inequality and the comfort many find in the simplicity of the status quo. **(Kharmen Thomas)**

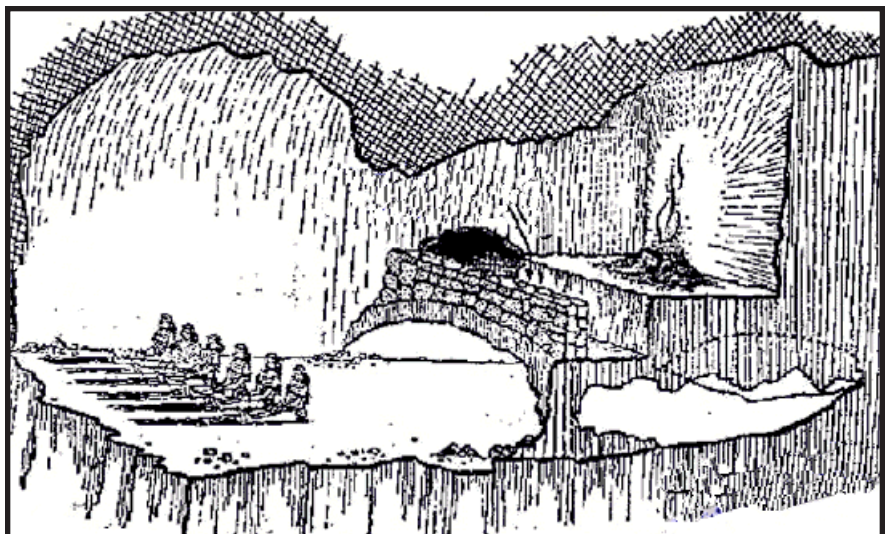
There were times and seasons in my life when I lived in a cave made of grief, self-doubt, and struggle. When my sister Candice passed, the light that I always looked for flickered out. Her voice and her presence were suddenly gone right there in front of me—and I was left standing in a darkness that felt like light would never come through again. Silence wrapped around me like a tight hug I didn't want or like another shadow on the wall.

At the time, I was homeless with my three children, carrying an unexpected pregnancy like a second weight on my heart. Every day felt like searching for safety while fighting exhaustion. I walked through fear with my head up

and chest out because little eyes were watching me. My mind was playing tricks on me, like am I so f**ked up that little people that just started living life have the right to judge me? There was never any judgment, just tiny hugs and big kisses that motivated me to go harder. Hearing “Mommy, you are the best!” made me forget about circumstances. I learned how strong a mother can be when she has no choice.

That was a cave of survival, quiet, cold, and heavy, a place where I wasn't sure if we could grow. But even in the darkest spaces, there was a tiny opening, a breath, a whisper, a reminder that I still had something left inside of me. I kept moving step by step because staying in the cave would mean giving up on myself and the future my kids deserved.

I've seen caves around me, too—people trapped in trauma, fear, poverty, and pain, people living in situations that drain their spirit. I recognize their darkness because I survived my own. Now I am choosing school, choosing growth, choosing healing. These are the ways I start stepping towards the light. Every assignment, every early morning with my four kids, every late-night talk with Jesus for reassurance feels like another brick lifted from the cave walls around me. I am not a woman who entered darkness. I am a woman who walked through it. I am still climbing, but the light is on my face now. And this time I'm not looking back at the shadows! **(Shakila Woods)**



DECLARATIONS OF STRENGTH

I declare that I will show up for myself, even on the hard days. I will continue to be vulnerable even when it's tough. I will continue to fight for my dream of educational freedom —I will get that bachelor's degree that I've always dreamed of.

I declare that I will fight to create a safe space for my peers and continue to create a community where people feel safe to share the most vulnerable parts of themselves, as well as ask for help when they need it.

I declare that today and every day, in the words of Maya Angelou, "I will rise"—with every occasion and at every obstacle sent to destroy me. **(Laura Bass)**

I declare that I will give my all to brighten my future. I hate the thought of just being stuck in life, and I believe there's always room for improvement. That is why I chose to apply to be a part of Odyssey and why I come every week. I will come with an open mind to learn new things. I will read things that I may not understand right away and be ready to listen to teachers elaborate on the texts. I will use my voice even on days I may want to stay mute. **(Serene Boyd)**

I declare that I will do the things that need to be done. I will complete the Odyssey Program. I will do everything I need to do to keep myself in the best spirit I can so that I can stay out of my darkness and not shut down. I will do everything in my nature to be the best father I can be and find a career I can progress from in life. I will avoid anything that can bring me down or force my mind to shut down. **(Johnnell Britt)**



I declare I will rise from the ashes of my pain and take the lesson that has been placed in front of me. I know I can overcome pain and turn it to divine purpose. Each day, each moment builds my evolution. With the support of my community in Odyssey, I channel my hunger and drive to press forward. It is up to me to continue pushing in the work for the dreams and goals I have. Into the unknown I will keep my head held high. **(Lisa Brown)**

Never give up! I will see every mission and goal through to the end. Not only shall I see things through, I will accomplish and succeed! I declare to be the best father/daddy I never had but always wanted. I will not make my child feel unwanted or unloved. I declare I will love myself. I have the knowledge to better my future, so I declare I will use it daily until I can't. I declare more knowledge, more life, and more wealth to my life and family, and I'll use my skills of listening and obtaining to help me get it ALL! **(Richard Butler)**

I declare that I will not allow my current circumstances to hold me back. I have gained great strength and knowledge throughout this year, so much that I have added discipline under my belt. These next few months I plan on not allowing myself to slip up. I have seen that outcome, and it was not a pleasant hike out of it. But I did it. Just like I will complete this course, I will graduate, and I will make my small family proud. **(Stacy Castillo)**

I declare I will become the best person I can be and achieve the goals that I have received. Not only am I strong but I'm confident and positive with what I want my future to look like. I have dreams of being big, and I see me as being somebody one day. I've come a long way, and I'm not stopping until I get to where I want to be. The Odyssey Project is pushing me further into my future, and this push gave me courage and gave me strength. I never thought I would make it, but look at me: achieving all my goals, as you can see. **(Cquemiah Clark-Richmond)**

My strengths:

Resilience

Passion

Tenacity

Love

Courage

Curiosity

Willpower

Assertiveness

Heart

Energy (**Valencia Collins**)



I declare that I will be strong and give this my best. I

declare that I will be an

example for all my children. I declare that when I leave Odyssey, I will embark on another journey to better my life not only for me and my kids but for future generations to come. I declare that I will not give up even when times are hard. I declare that with each passing day, I will gain more knowledge and understanding to be a better me.

(Paola Damiani)

I declare that I will be brave but not fearless.

Although I am aware of my fears, I do not allow them to control my decisions. Being fearless is not what makes me brave; rather, it is my determination to press on despite my fears. The small acts of bravery and the act of simply showing up even when I'm not feeling very motivated or feeling very well are what give me strength.

(Tida Drammeh)

I declare that I will stay committed to myself, pouring into myself more than usual. I will use the completion of Odyssey to my full advantage by articulating my words better so that I will sit in rooms of higher ups. I will not let my inner doubts manipulate me to fall short, and with the support of Odyssey I will achieve all of God's plans with the power to succeed and become a success not only for me but for my kids. I declare retention from everything Odyssey has taught me, through the good and the bad... I will not give up!

(Destiny Drone)

I declare I will find my voice and not let social anxiety rule over my life. I will focus on the good and the blessings that I have received. I will strive to be the best version of myself that I can be. I will work hard and trust God. I will be an amazing example for my daughter. I will prove anyone who has ever doubted me wrong. I will break generational curses and carry my head high. I will give myself grace and forgiveness. I will win at life because I declare it so! **(Kiana Galloway)**

I declare that I will give myself grace, standing tall and accomplishing every goal I have, big or small. I declare furthering my education and taking the writing I have learned into my future goals. I declare the reparations I am owed from the overcoming. I will no longer let the past get in the way of where I am going. I will be the positive example for my son. I will walk across that stage and not let it be the last time putting myself first. I declare I will be in control of my dreams!

(Tikoya Gilmer)

I declare that I will be motivated, that I will work hard every day as I take one day at time, set goals for myself, and believe that I can become whatever it is that I want to be. I declare I will understand myself. I am going for the goal, my heart is in control, and my mind is on succeed. I challenge myself to be consistent, have high hopes for myself, trust in myself, love myself, and take advantage of good opportunity. **(Larry Grant)**

I declare I will:

Complete Odyssey
Continue schooling
Find self again (gain self-power)
Heal (be able to feel and think straight)
Improve health
Come out of money and health struggles
Never be afraid
Never give up
Become closer to God
Have a bigger, brighter smile
Have healthy sleeping and eating habits
Gain a sense of hobbies/self again

I declare I will build a better me, be self-motivated, a quick learner, and confident!! **(Anteijah Greer)**

I declare that I will use my voice. I will speak up and speak out. I will make myself heard when I am in any room and make sure my voice is heard in rooms I am no longer in. I declare that I will seek knowledge from every corner, ask questions when unsure, and state facts when they are unknown. I declare I will show courage to my children so they will know how to stand courageous in times of pain, doubt, and sadness. I declare to always use my voice! **(Shataya Hall)**

I declare that I will not let anything or anyone stand in the way of me finishing the Odyssey Program. Through hard work, consistency, and dedication, I will succeed. I am the captain of my own ship, and I control the direction of my journey. I know that the only thing that can stop me from progressing is myself. So, I choose to keep moving forward. I will not fail.
(Jacqueline Hawkins)

I declare that I will complete the Odyssey program and college with confidence. I will keep doing the things I need to do in order to provide for my children. In the future, I will stand tall and confident with my writings while using the knowledge I have learned. I will use the strength of knowing my reasons for completing the program and being

grateful that I was accepted. My strength is my children. My strength is coming from a home that's no longer home: I was born in Flint, Michigan, and was wiped out by the water crisis. Everything I've been through has given me strength.

(Brittany Hughes)

I declare that I will find my voice! I will no longer be ashamed of the words that I have learned, have achieved, have tasted and believe they belong to me and I belong to them. They will define the best part of me. They will even point out the places I need to change or the people I need to rearrange in my life. Dreams don't die! But nightmares do, and I am determined to walk into my pleasant dreams. My sweet dreams that are promised just for me. No more fear, no more hiding demons I have been battling most of my life. Time to let them go and make the change I desire to see and that my children and grandchildren deserve to see: the strong woman, the courageous woman I was designed to be. I am where I am supposed to be. I'm ready to see me. I'm ready to wake up to me.

(Angel Moore)



I declare that I will never give up on myself. The road ahead may be hard and full of danger, but I declare that I will walk the walk with grace, humility, and determination until I reach my goals.

I declare that I will live in my truth, unapologetically and with no shame. I am a child of God, and I am no mistake.

I declare that I will continue to move forward. Odyssey is simply the beginning, and I declare it will not be the end of the academic journey.

I declare that I will be kind and patient with myself. I have a lot to learn, and I must keep myself focused on my growth.

I declare that I will be the best version of myself. **(Viwe Mpurwana)**

I declare that I will use the faith of a mustard seed to manifest all of my dreams into reality. I will use my strength not only to move mountains but to calm souls. I will use my brain to wake up my sleeping soul family. **(Shelton Murphy)**

I declare that I will become more comfortable with speaking in front of others. I want to be able to give presentations or just speak in front of others without feeling nervous. I want to be comfortable in my own voice. I declare that I will believe in my voice. **(Roche Palmer)**

I declare that I will rise with strength every time life tries to pull me back into old caves of fear and doubt.



I will honor the battles I've already survived and trust the power that carried me through them.

I will keep pushing forward, even on days when I feel tired, unsure, or overwhelmed because I know I am capable of more than what I once believed.

I will choose courage over comfort, healing over hurt, and growth over everything that's meant to break me.

I will use my past as fuel, not chains to keep me stuck.

I will continue to show up for myself with the same love and patience that I show my children.

I will walk into my future with confidence, discipline, and faith.

I will not give up on myself.

I declare my strength to be unstoppable. **(Roncal Riley)**

I declare that I will no longer allow my doubt to limit my capability. I will use my inner voice and strength to guide me to success. I will no longer be scared or intimidated by anything that may be challenging. I declare that I will become the strength within me and be the strong woman I was born to be. Confident, beautiful, and strong willed is all I will allow myself to see. **(Lilibeth Sobrevilla)**

I declare that I will graduate from Odyssey with all my classmates by my side. All of us will be in bliss to learn and overcome obstacles that we didn't overcome after high school. We will get that sense of relief to know we got into an amazing program to help us better ourselves as adults. And for me and my kids, I declare they will have a father that they really can depend on. Odyssey will help me become a better person for me and for the rest of my life. **(George Sydnor)**

I declare that I will challenge myself to push through when things get hard.

I declare that I will approach life through a lens of seeking opportunities for growth, even the hard lessons.

I declare that I will always take advantage of support and resources.

I declare that I will be accountable when harm occurs. It is my job to intentionally acknowledge and repair it.

I declare that I will rationalize fears. Perception can strongly influence the outcome.

I declare that I will be self-compassionate. I deserve it from myself.

I declare that I will build and strengthen community through love and support.

I declare that I will celebrate my wins.

I declare that I will leave no passion starved or unloved. **(Shaneece Taylor)**

I declare that I will finish strong and keep my focus where it needs to be. Staying ahead of the game, I will complete my work before the due date. School always scared me because I used to think I had to be as smart as others or outspoken. Over time, I learned to just be myself and put forth my best effort. Lo and behold, I am more than I thought I was. I am a leader, mentor, coach, uncle, and brother: the list goes on. **(Joseph Thigpen Jr.)**

My declaration of strength is to push myself to strive to be better. It's to remember what I've overcome in my moments of hardships. It's to remind myself to keep a growth mindset in the face of adversity. It is to be strong in being my authentic self. My declaration is my promise to me to never lose myself or forget my voice and the impact it can make. **(Kharmen Thomas)**

I declare that I will:

Keep showing up for myself and my kids even when I feel empty.

Push through every obstacle with the same courage that carried me through shelters, sickness, and heartbreak.



Use my voice, my story, and my determination to finish Odyssey strong.

Give myself grace as I heal from grief, anxiety, and the weight of everything.

Believe that I deserve stability, peace, and success . . . and walk boldly towards it.

Get up every morning with determination, trusting that God's strength will carry me where my own strength feels small.

Keep fighting for the life I promised myself and my children, no matter what tries to stand in my way.

Give God the glory! **(Shakila Woods)**

ALUMNI CORNER

HEZOUWE WALADA '19

In this article entitled “Student’s remarkable journey to starting his undergraduate degree at age 28, living his dream” for UW News on September 9, 2020, Lisa Bauer tells the story of Odyssey graduate Hezouwe Walada. Hezouwe graduated from UW in May 2023, is currently in graduate school for a master’s in public health, and is planning to apply to medical school..



In his village of Koumea in Togo, Africa, 8-year-old Hezouwe Walada watched nearly half of his community—including three of his young cousins—die of malaria in early 2000. He decided then and there he wanted to become a doctor.

But his dream seemed unattainable—his family was poor, the nearest school was far from his village and he didn’t even have shoes.

After 20 years, nearly 6,000 miles and a host of trials and tribulations, Walada started at the University of Wisconsin–Madison as a first-year student majoring in biochemistry this fall, with plans to eventually go to medical school.

“Everything is possible if you are willing to work hard and sacrifice,” says Walada, a graduate of both the UW Odyssey Project and Badger Ready. “All you have to do is believe and keep asking questions.”

From Togo to Madison

As a young child, when Walada made up his mind that he wanted to someday study medicine, he asked his father if he could attend school. He could, his father said, but not before he did morning chores. So Walada woke up 3 a.m., worked on the farm for three hours, walked 15 miles to school then walked 15 miles home at the end of the day.

“When I finished my chores, I started running to school,” he says. “I just really wanted to be a doctor and help people in my village and around the world.”

Walada studied hard and got admitted to one of the best high schools in Togo. He moved away from home and all he ever knew.

“I felt different because all my classmates had nice clothes, nice shoes and money,” he says. “I came there with two shirts, three shorts and one pair of shoes. Even though I was at the top of the class, I felt like I didn’t belong there. I was always sad because I didn’t have anything.”

But Walada persevered and eventually won a visa to go to the U.S. At age 17, he left his country for the first time, alone.

"I was terrified, but I kept reminding myself of my dream," he says. "I knew people needed me to become a doctor. I will never forget the suffering I saw in my village. I still have flashbacks today."

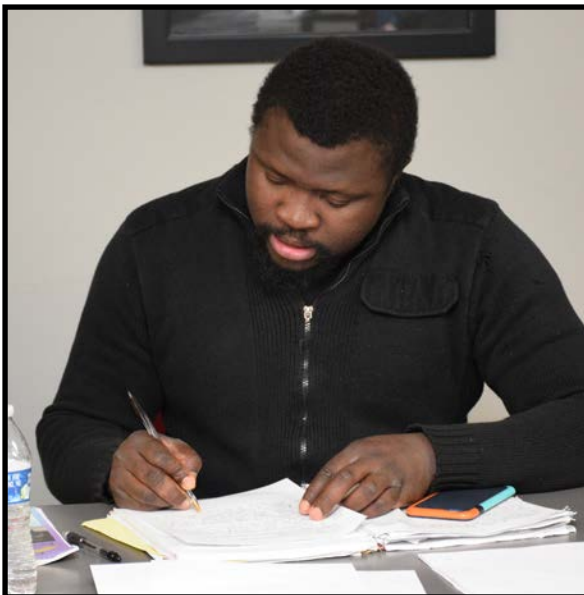
In 2009, Walada made it to Madison. Years before, he'd heard a teacher say that the University of Wisconsin–Madison was a prestigious institution. He did research online and decided to set his sights on becoming a Badger.

But his dream was delayed 10 more years.

Lacking resources and knowing very little English, Walada struggled in Wisconsin. He enrolled at Madison College, but without a stable home or sometimes even food to eat, his education stalled. He started "working like crazy"—mainly as a caregiver—to earn and save money. He met his wife, settled down and they had a daughter.



Walada began to wonder if he could ever return to his dream of becoming a physician, but he refused to give up. Then, someone told him about the Odyssey Project.



Continuing his odyssey

In 2017, Walada applied to the UW Odyssey Project, a six-credit English literature course that helps low-income adults get a jump start at earning college degrees. Odyssey became Walada's reentry into living his dream.

"When I learned that I got into Odyssey, I was so happy," he says. "Odyssey gave me friends, taught me how to be confident and showed me I can defy the odds and make my dream come true. I needed Odyssey to become the person that I am today."

Through reading, writing about and engaging in lively discussions of Emily Dickinson, Martin Luther King Jr, Walt Whitman, Shakespeare, Lorraine Hansberry and more,

Walada found his own voice and found another family in his fellow Odyssey classmates. He heard stories that sounded similar to his own, learned more about slavery and was inspired to fight against injustice and for equality in the U.S. He shared stories from his culture and home country.

"Odyssey was my family, not just school. Everyone was so welcoming, and I felt that I wasn't alone anymore," he says. "Odyssey really taught me about life, about ambition and about how to gain confidence to be what I want to be."

Walada then found another opportunity to keep making progress toward his dream: the Badger Ready program.

Getting Badger ready

In 2019, Walada entered the Badger Ready program, which helps adult students make the transition to college by supporting them through tailored UW–Madison coursework. As a University Special student, and scholarship recipient, Walada, who speaks seven languages, immersed himself in an English 100 class first semester.

“I was so excited that I was finally here, I went to the classroom the night before class and picked out where I wanted to sit,” he says. “I sat there alone in the classroom and thanked God for this opportunity and this journey.”

Second semester as a Badger Ready student, Walada took Biology 130. He was devastated when he got a 50 percent on his first exam. But his Badger Ready advisor encouraged him to ask questions and visit the professor during office hours. He did—after every lecture—and came out of the class with an A.

Walada successfully completed his program requirements in three semesters and was ready to apply as a transfer student to UW–Madison for fall 2020.

“I’m on a mission here in the U.S.,” he says, adding that he does see the injustice in America and vows to work against it. “This is a great country, and if I have an opportunity, I will take it. I want to give something back to this country, to Africa, to the world.”

Closer to a dream come true

As a newly admitted transfer student amid an unstable time, Walada is now an undergraduate majoring in biochemistry with a pre-health focus.

“I am ready,” he says, adding that he’s been studying all summer to prepare for the classes he is taking this fall. “I can’t believe this dream is coming true.”

After his undergraduate studies, Walada wants to attend UW–Madison’ School of Medicine and Public Health to study cardiology.

Where does he see himself in another 20 years? His dreams remain big and judging by his path so far, anything is possible: “I hope to help my country make changes to the medical system, maybe I would help other communities around the world, too, through Doctors without Borders.”

In the meantime, Walada plans to enjoy his time at UW–Madison, getting involved in a pre-health group, social justice organizations and with the Black community. He wants to relish his achievements, continue to work hard and pay it forward.

“You cannot understand how thrilled that I am to be a student here,” he says. “My advice to people fighting for their dreams is believe in yourself. Seize opportunities. Fight for your moment because it is going to come for you.”



A Heart For Africa

from On Wisconsin Magazine, Summer 2025

Hezouwe Walada '23 had his sights set on being a cardiologist, but he made an important pit stop soon after he graduated from UW–Madison: to lift up the entrepreneurial spirit and improve the lives of the less fortunate in Africa.

Born in Togo, Walada is the executive director and founder of the Africa Forward Initiative (AFI), which is devoted to giving Africans the resources they need to lead better lives, whether they're founders of a start-up or villagers seeking help to build a new well.

"Food insecurity, lack of access to clean water, educating the youth with proper schools — these are all issues we seek to address," says Walada.

AFI projects work by giving African entrepreneurs microloans, sometimes as low as \$80, to help them with the next phase of their business. These applicants come from a large swath of African countries, from Togo to the Ivory Coast to Sierra Leone.

A low interest rate ensures the entrepreneur isn't burdened with heavy fees, but it also serves a dual purpose: interest payments fund, for example, youth projects related to farming or wells in underserved communities.

Another widespread community solution, School for All, provides vulnerable children with school supplies and assists struggling families with the cost of education fees.

"I knew I wanted to be a doctor to help fix some issues in Africa, but I had to go deeper than that," says Walada, who credits the UW's Odyssey Project for supporting him during his freshman year at the university.



Long before he set foot on U.S. soil, Walada saw firsthand how he could make a difference. When his village in Togo was decimated by a bout of malaria, he was driven to work in the health care system. "I was motivated to make some change, so much so I could barely sleep," he recalls.

During his time at the UW, he was inspired by many mentors. "I'm fulfilled to have so many people help me at school and give me the opportunity to do what I do now," Walada says.

Up next for Walada is a summer trip to the African countries where the Africa Forward Initiative operates. He also intends to take his MCAT at some point in 2026.

"I want to work with the heart," says Walada of his cardiovascular ambitions, "because I've always been fascinated by how this small engine in our body is so important to all our functions."

UNAPOLOGETICALLY ME

By Adrienne Farrow '25

There's a lot that I am
 There's a lot that I want to be
 This is real life, no pause, no delete
 I have failed so that I could learn to succeed
 I have been put at the end of the line
 So that I could learn to lead
 I have learned there's no shame in falling
 As long as you get back up and continue daring greatly
 But at the end of the day
 When the battle is won
 And the enemy has accepted defeat
 I'll speak aloud about my trials
 And sing for you my testimony
 So with self-assurance
 I'll hold my head high
 And speak to the masses with glee
 Telling them a story from my past
 About a different version of me
 How I overdosed and almost died
 But a voice inside said open your eyes and breathe
 I was humbled, and started trusting
 Laying everything at his feet
 After countless hours, days, and weeks
 I stopped saying and started doing
 It's the actions of vulnerability and accountability for me



So now all I see is light
 And the source of it is me
 Shining brighter than a star for all to see
 Now I take pride in my talents
 I cater to what Adrienne needs
 It's the praying, the coping, the standing
 even when I'm weak
 It's the focus and my drive
 As well as being a mother to my seed
 So I look in the mirror
 Eyes opened to see
 Air in my lungs to breathe
 These simple things almost lost to me
 I'm here, I'm alive, and unapologetically me.
 (An Overdose Awareness Poem)