

Bringing Light to
Madison's
Southside Stories

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2004: A Great Odyssey

By Mark Williams

Every Wednesday night for the past seven months 25 people gather at the Harambee center, eat dinner, and meet the likes of Shakespeare, Langston Hughes, Walt Whitman, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

The first class of the University of Wisconsin (UW)-Madison's Odyssey Project took their seats last fall and buckled in for a journey filled with adventure and self-discovery. Denise Maddox, a student in the project, Socrates fan and cook, wants to be a writer. She feels the project has opened a new awareness in her.

"I see the world with a new pair of eyes. I feel like a butterfly coming out of a cocoon. It's making me better," Maddox said.

The next Odyssey class begins in fall 2004 and is beginning to take applications for admission.

The project is inspired by social activist and educator Earl Shorris who started a program in New York City when a prisoner told him that lower income, minority adults needed access to "The moral life of the downtown," concerts and plays, for example. Emily Auerbach, UW Odyssey Project Director, said Shorris believed to make a lasting difference in someone's sense of self

you have to look at the best writings of humankind that deal with justice, courage, and citizenship.

"The standard assumption is if you have people who are homeless or poor you would teach them a trade and they would have no use for Shakespeare or Socrates," Auerbach said. "The humanities can be for many people the first ticket out of powerlessness and poverty."

The humanities taught in the project are literature, writing, philosophy, and history (including art history). The Odyssey Project is free for students. Tuition, books, child-care, and transportation are also all free. Free admissions counseling and career advising are also provided. So are refreshments! Those who graduate the year long program receive six

college credits. To be eligible students need to be at least 18 years old, demonstrate financial need, be able to read English, and have what Auerbach calls a "spark and hunger for learning."

Maddox has that appetite for knowledge and provides good advice not only for future project students but all individuals going on their



Congratulations to the first class of the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Odyssey Project! They will graduate May 26.

Photo courtesy of Odyssey Project

own odyssey.

"Take it one step at a time," Maddox said. "Take the steps you need to take and don't worry about what anyone else thinks."

"Denise realized that after graduating high school she didn't have enough literacy," Auerbach said. "She went back, on her own initiative, and taught herself how to read. Now she reads novels."

In class, other students have shown creative initiative as well. Kegan Carter and Anthony Ward wrote an adaptation of Macbeth set in a Chicago ghetto. Joe Robinson, a Head Start counselor who provides free workshops for a fatherhood group, knows he can do so much more if he achieves the dream of a Social Work degree.

"If it wasn't for the Odyssey Project, it would have been a dream I've would've let go," Robinson said.

He wrote a moving poem about his life and the project, which is reprinted below in its entirety.

The poem captures some of the difficulties in entering college. Auerbach says most African-Americans or Mexican-Americans have encountered discrimination or people who made assumptions on what minorities can or cannot do. In addition to discrimination, finances, family obligations, and sometimes the need to work two jobs all contribute to keeping low income minorities from achieving the dream of going to college.

But the poem also says that achieving that dream can change the lives of a family. Most of the stu-

dents say they read more to their children, and their kids see them as a role model. Their children are proud that their parents are taking a UW class.

A majority of the Odyssey students are African-American single mothers. Auerbach would like to see more men in class. Males in the class say that when in high school they would hide their books in fear of being accused of acting white. The Odyssey Project helps people get their foot in the door and empowers students to believe they can find ways around the past that has blocked them.

"I know that people who are poor can be extremely bright and motivated," Auerbach said. "Their lack of ability to go forward is not their own fault."

The students also have gathered around each other to create a supportive atmosphere to deal with problems. Maddox shows the writer within by capturing the feeling in the class:

"The Odyssey Project is like a big boat, with the teachers our guide and each student is an oar and we all go together," Maddox said.

Togetherness and support characterize the birth of the Odyssey Project in Madison. Jean Feraca, Auerbach's colleague at Wisconsin Public Radio, interviewed Earl Shorris on her show. Feraca felt Madison needed a program similar to the New York City

program. Auerbach, who has done outreach for 20 years, took it from there.

"It was a battle to raise money and institutional support to begin with," Auerbach said. "There was a belief that the Odyssey Project wouldn't meet a need—that people wouldn't crave the humanities. Just the opposite happened, we had 90 applications in the first few weeks."

She's excited at the degree of cooperation in the community for the project. Among those supporting Odyssey are UW partners the Division of Continuing Studies and the McBurney Center. Community allies include the Evjue Foundation, the Wisconsin Humanities Council, the Quixote Foundation, and the Madison Public Library South Madison Branch.

The Odyssey Project gets its name from Homer's *The Odyssey*. It suggests a journey filled with adventure. On May 26, the students have a graduation ceremony with UW-Madison Chancellor John Wiley speaking. For these students the Odyssey ends, but the adventure is just beginning.

For further information about the program and application process for fall 2004, call Emily Auerbach at 262-3733 or Shawn Peters, coordinator, at 358-2969

The UW Odyssey Class: A poem by Joe Robinson

It ain't easy being me
I made my life harder than it had to be
In my early years I didn't have a reason to smile
Growing up in Carolina was very hard for a black child
Higher education in the South
Is something only white children dreamed about
Now I am a father living in the Midwest
And for my children I only want the best
So I thank God for this opportunity that he gave me
I don't know if the Odyssey class is going to save me
I have learned a lot of things and met a lot of people
And I hope that someone that I know can be part of the sequel
I will continue on my journey of graduating from college
And to my children I will pass on my wisdom and knowledge
I want to be the person to show my children what it means
That if you put your mind to it you can always fulfill your dreams