

## Fighting Poverty with Poetry

### The Odyssey Project takes humanities to the underprivileged.

Each Wednesday evening, Professor **Emily Auerbach** goes on an odyssey. Leaving her office in Lowell Hall, she travels some thirty blocks south to the Harambee Center in one of Madison's poorest neighborhoods. With her she takes what she believes are the tools of survival — the poetry of Blake, Wordsworth, and Shakespeare.

These are vital not only for Auerbach, but for her students, the participants in UW-Madison's Odyssey Project. They may not have much in common with their counterparts on campus: all have incomes near the poverty level, most are single parents, and none is in a UW degree program. To outside eyes, what they seem to need most is practical help — vocational training, childcare, access to health facilities. But,

Auerbach insists, this is short-sighted. The best tool for fighting poverty, she believes, is poetry — and philosophy, history, art, and music.

Now in its second year, the Odyssey Project aims to offer the benefits of a liberal education to some of Madison's poorest residents. People come to learn, and if they finish the yearlong course, their reward is six credits from the UW's Integrated Liberal Studies Program.

Of the twenty-four students who graduated from Odyssey's first year, three have been accepted at UW-Madison, ten are students at Madison Area Technical College (MATC), and one is enrolled at Madison's Edgewood College.

One of those former Odyssey students, **Denise**

**Maddox**, says that the program helped give her a goal in life. She had graduated from high school without being able to read, she says, and "I'd always felt dumb." But Odyssey opened her eyes to the ideas of Socrates and Thoreau. Now she's enrolled full-time at MATC

springs from her own background. "One reason I have a passion for this is that my parents came out of poverty through education," she says. Her father immigrated to America after fleeing the Holocaust, and her mother grew up in Appalachia. They met as stu-



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"I thought college was beyond me until I ran into this project," says **Joe Robinson (right)**, who works for Head Start. "I learned more about myself than anything else, and it gave me the confidence to go on." Robinson, who participated in Odyssey last year, has recruited his brother into the program.

and hopes to work toward a career in writing.

"I want to write people's stories, to speak for those who can't write for themselves," she says. "I've lived with abuse and hunger and learning deficiencies and dyslexia. I understand people like that. I want to write down how they feel."

Auerbach says she's been impressed by the support the Odyssey Project has received. "I'm so privileged to be joined in the classroom by a whole team of distinguished UW faculty members," she says, noting the contributions of **Jean Feraca, Craig Werner, Laura McClure, Marshall Cook, Kathleen Sell, Gene Phillips, Booth Fowler, and Nellie McKay.**

Auerbach explains that the motivation behind Odyssey

students at Kentucky's Berea College, an institution that was founded to educate the poor.

Both eventually came to work for UW-Madison, her father as a professor of zoology and her mother as a medical librarian. "Only through education can you break the cycle of poverty," says Auerbach. "It opens the door for whole families."

The Odyssey Project is Auerbach's attempt to pass that gift along. "When people ask me why we bother with the humanities, I remember an eloquent statement of my mother's," Auerbach says. "The poor, she told me, are closer to issues of justice and struggle, so the humanities have more meaning."

— *John Allen*

The Geology Museum has a very different idea of what the term **Rock Concert** means — but that's just what it's calling the April event in its Stony Muse series. The concert will feature the oldest known terrestrial object, a bit of the mineral zircon found in Australia, as well as a performance by the band Jazz Passengers. The group will play music composed by Roy Nathanson especially for this occasion — a collection of words and music that will explore the idea of "deep time" and answer the question What is 4.4 billion years? The Stony Muse is a series of events that feature intersections between geology and art.

Throughout the spring, the Elvehjem Museum of Art will be exhibiting the ceramic work of **Don Rietz**, who taught at the UW from 1962 to 1988. Some seventy pieces, created over the last forty-four years, will be on hand.

The **Wisconsin Film Festival** will run in Madison from March 31 to April 3, and once again it will feature competitions for students and for independent or emerging film-makers with Wisconsin ties. For the festival schedule, visit [www.wifilmfest.org](http://www.wifilmfest.org)

Wisconsin's impact on show business is highlighted in the documentary **Wisconsin Born and Bred: the Entertainers**, which was shown on Wisconsin Public Television in February and which may now be seen on the digital cable network Wisconsin On Demand. The program highlights the accomplishments of Daniel J. Travanti '67 and Jim Abrahams '70, among others.