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2009 Odyssey Project Graduation Speech

Proverbial wisdom says that who we are can be defined in one of three ways – (#1) your perception of you - which is obscured because we can justify anything we want to. (#2) Your individual nature – the one that makes you unique. And finally (#3) who others recognize you to be. It is in this latter realm that I humbly come before you grateful for this privilege.

Last September, we left our familiar comfort zones and embarked upon a journey via “The Odyssey Project”. Consequently, on every Monday and Thursday, we opened our minds, formulated our thoughts in regards to the text, and shared our written and verbal ideas. We abandoned the different roads which led us here and concentrated on what we expected to gain from this experience? And now, at the conclusion of the journey, we determine whether this experience met our expectations?

Let’s begin with the gain portion.. Prior to Odyssey, our love for reading limited us to reading subjects WE were interested in. The Odyssey Project broadened our horizons, introducing us to authors we might have never come across on our own.

In our literature class, we explored how stories can deepen our understanding, of love, power and beauty. MacBeth taught us the devastating effects power can have upon some people. Despite the difficult words and phrases in Shakespeare’s Sonnets, we were still able to recapture the depth of love Shakespeare wrote about so long ago. We learned that the Sonnets were written in a RHYTHM called iambic pentameter - who would have guessed Shakespeare had soul. Antingonne relayed the consequences of a leader’s inability to adhere to good counsel.

Janie Crawford of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* found out that love in marriage was greater than property, money and status.

In our Art History class, we studied Egyptian, Greek and Roman art. Our visits to the Art Institute, acquainted us with Polykeitos and his sculptures of the perfect bodies as well as Neo-Classicism, traditional European art and the paintings of Henry Tanner. We learned about the intrinsic way in which the human body was created. For example, did you know that the chin to the top of the forehead and lowest roots of the hair is a tenth of the whole height of the person? While studying the Parthenon, we learned about the Doric, Ionic and Corinthian orders of architecture. We studied columns, friezes, pediments and glimpsed at the Greek Gods, Zeus, Hera, and Athena. Gone are the days when we enter any building unaware of its structure.

Our philosophy class challenged us and produced the most thought-provoking discussions. Since Socrates' public for wisdom had placed him on trial, why didn't Socrates continue his search inconspicuously? What are the benefits of wisdom when death renders no man any hope of accomplishment? Before we could digest *The Apology*, Plato introduced us to "The Republic of the Cave" which called us to focus on the caves in our own lives. Now that we are enlightened, do we have an obligation to aid others out of the cave? Simone DeBeauvoir revealed the words that defined the emotions we sometimes felt. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon spelled out Black's need for approval. He gave us an analysis of an educated black man falling in love with a mulatto girl. The black man was recognized and accepted in the community; however, the mulatto girl stated I don't like Black men because they are not refined. We attempted to embark upon Hegel; HOWEVER, due to time restraints and the very depth of his philosophical mind, we were somewhat bewildered.

In U.S. history, we learned about the brave men and women who helped shape our country by speaking out against injustices. We compared Presidents Washington, Lincoln and Obama's inaugural addresses. Abigail Adams was courageous enough to tell her husband, John, that "the passion for Liberty CANNOT BE EQUALLY STRONG IN THE BREAST OF THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN ACCUSTOMED TO DEPRIVE THEIR FELLOW CREATURES." Josephine Baker introduced us to the Lowell Mills where women worked and lived in dignity and independence. We sympathized with the Indians in the Appeal of the Cherokee Nation as they were forced from the land of their fathers because they did not wish to become agriculturists. Throughout history, we were bombarded with civil rights, human rights, equal rights, individual rights, and women's rights. The question posed was what do we do with all these rights?

Our Critical Thinking class prompted us to rationally think about what was being said. Belle Hooks thought the educational system needed restructuring in a way that Black students would not become bored and disinterested. Why is it then that statistics still show that black children enter school with a desire to learn from kindergarten to third grade and afterwards, their desire diminishes? Is it because black children are not as smart as their counterparts? Or has the current educational system failed them in some manner? The devastating effects of slavery (i.e., self-image, identity and self-esteem) surfaced in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. In Toni Morrison's Nobel speech, she tells a story about a wise old woman who was blind. An intellectual student, comes in and asks the old woman is the bird that I am holding in my hand alive or dead? The wise old woman replies whether the bird stays alive or dead, it is your responsibility. Morrison challenged us to accept responsibility for the language we use and it is OUR responsibility to use language that offers something as opposed to destroying something.

We compared and contrasted documents such as A Letter from a Birmingham Jail to Socrates Apology. We learned how to write persuasive essays that reflect our thoughts. We now know how to state a claim, present the evidence, and substantiate the conclusion.

Now it is time to address the second half of our experience question. Did we meet our expectations? From the brief comments mentioned earlier, we would answer that we not only met but exceeded them.

With that being said we would like to thank our families without whose support, we would not have been able to accomplish this task. We thank our professors, who sacrificed their time and effort to help us not only meet but exceed our expectations. We thank the Board of Directors for their keen foresight in establishing this Project. And finally, I would like to give my own personal “thank you” to each of you for sharing your knowledge and ideas with me and for allowing me the opportunity to share mine with you. Because it was only in the exchange of that knowledge and those ideas that we endured and persevered to reach this goal. We profess that we will continue in the way we have been directed.

Thank you for an outstanding year -- We will never forget you. - and May God bless us all.