

## **Downtrodden adults gain edge from classes in arts, literature**

*April 4, 2004*

**BY MELANIE COFFEE**

Some have lost jobs. Others have been on welfare or struggled with drugs, but twice a week, they sit down together here and talk for hours about Socrates and Shakespeare in classes known as the Odyssey Project.

It's their chance to catch up on missed opportunities.

"People in the Odyssey Project feel so inadequate because of their lives and their poverty, there is just this confidence that they get from being able to share an idea about art or literature," said Claire Sherman, a student in the program. "You go from being sort of an outcast to someone who's sort of a little bit in the know."

The free program started in New York in 1995 and spread to more than 30 other cities, including two classes in Chicago and one in Springfield. Students start in the fall studying Plato and Claude Monet, and by the end of the eight-month course, they have covered philosophy, art history, literature and U.S. history for college credit.

All of the programs target adults living below the poverty level, but they vary from city to city. In Illinois, classes of about 30 students each are taught by professors from the University of Chicago, DePaul University and the University of Illinois in Springfield.

"The dedication that comes from our students is amazing because a lot of them have been through a lot of hard times, and I think our course is one of many steps of an upward spiral with their life," said Tom Balasz, the director of the program's class on Chicago's North Side.

About 62 percent of those who enroll finish, according to Bard College, which issues six hours of credit for those who pass. Of that group, 71 percent enroll or plan to enroll in college.

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