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Professors give low-income adults a 2nd chance at life

By Celeste Garrett, Tribune staff reporter

Lori Parker was an unemployed Rogers Park resident and former drug addict who had dropped out of college two decades ago and shut the door on higher education.

Then she answered what seemed to be a too-good-to-be-true newspaper ad offering free philosophy, literature and art history classes taught by elite university professors in her neighborhood.

Now, she and many of the approximately 90 graduates of the Illinois Odyssey Project, a college-level humanities course for low-income adults, say the course was life-altering.

As Odyssey starts its fourth year next month, 40 participants have earned college credit, four have gone on to college, at least 15 have gone on to college prep courses and at least a dozen have improved their employment.

Odyssey, a statewide program, is part of an international alliance of programs based in New York, where organizers say 44 percent of participants nationally do not finish the free course.

But 41 percent of the students, who have included immigrants, ex-convicts, the homeless, and disabled people, go on to college to improve their lives, national organizers say. The New York program began eight years ago and has spread under different names to 3 cities in the United States, Mexico and Australia.

"It has completely opened my mind to the various elements of the human Gestalt--that means the complete human experience," said Parker, in her 40s, who completed the Odyssey course in May and now works as a grant writer for a non-profit organization.

In Odyssey, professors from DePaul University, Northwestern University, the University of Chicago, the School of the Art Institute and Shimer College in Waukegan go into neighborhoods to bring the humanities to poor residents who have been "cheated" out of opportunities, organizers say. Applicants are chosen after they write an essay about why they want to attend, but few are turned away.

"The goal is simply to give everyone the opportunity to experience the riches of the humanities, the things that make us human," said Phoebe Stein Davis of the Illinois Humanities Council, which provides \$175,000 a year in funds, on-site child care, transportation and books for the project.

Odyssey is affiliated with the national Clemente Course, which began in 1995 when author Earl Shorris was researching

a book on poverty. Shorris took his research to **Bard College**, a liberal arts college in upstate New York, and persuaded administrators to start a program with 31 poor students at the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Center in Manhattan.

Much of the success of the programs across the country is anecdotal, but Bard College reports that 56 percent of those who enroll throughout the nation complete it. About 80 percent of that group earns college credit, and about 70 percent of them go on to college, according to Bard statistics.

The U.S. Department of Education has provided more than \$500,000 to Bard to distribute nationally for the program.

"At this point in my life, I would not have had any aspirations to go to college if not for the Odyssey Project," said Rod Mathis, 40, a Chicago graduate who moved to Memphis, where he successfully applied for financial aid from LeMoyne-Owen College and was able to enroll for the fall semester.

To qualify in Illinois, students must be able to read and have an income of \$24,000 or less as head of a family of four or \$18,000 or less as a single person. The course is offered at the Howard Area Community Center in Rogers Park and at Ariel Community Academy, which serves the Bronzeville area.

For eight months, students read works by Socrates, Henry David Thoreau, Sandra Cisneros, Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison. The most powerful part of the class, however, is the critical thinking and writing they do, students say.

"This course helped me to see that there's so much more to life than your little area," said Pennie Brinson, 44, of Humboldt Park, who is disabled. Her poetry was submitted to a statewide contest while she was in the program in 2002, and she won a \$1,000 prize, organizers said.

Next month, about 60 new students will be accepted in Chicago, 30 in Springfield and 15 in the more rigorous second-year "bridge" course for those who want to make the leap to college.

"I always tell people that my college career went up in a purple haze of smoke," said Parker, who completed the ridge course in May and is applying to colleges to finish her theater degree. "I realized along the way that I could hold my own with any 20-year-old."

But not everyone makes it through the Odyssey course. Davis said about 30 percent end up dropping out "almost always because their jobs, family and just real life get in the way."

There are no grades given, said Debra Mancoff, professor at the School of the Art Institute, but discussions are always lively.

"These students are so hungry to share in the world of culture," Mancoff said. "In that way Odyssey is very different from anything I've experienced in more than 20 years of teaching at the university level. "

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