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The Odyssey Project

In Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*, Greek hero Odysseus struggles to return home after the decadelong Trojan War. His journey, itself a 10-year battle, is fraught with mythical and mystical creatures and monkey wrenches thrown in by the likes of Greek gods Poseidon and Helios.

Twenty years pass by the time Odysseus makes it back to Ithaca and to his wife, Penelope, who's had troubles of her own. With Odysseus presumed dead (it's been two decades, after all), she has been beset by a group of unruly suitors competing for her hand in marriage.

Odysseus's peregrination — and the trials of those at home awaiting his return — speaks metaphorical volumes to the twists and turns anyone's life can take. It is particularly relevant to the troubled teens at Los Prietos Boys Camp in Santa Barbara, who have embarked on their own odysseys in search of their own Ithacas and an understanding of their places in the world.

Serving as guides and navigators are [Michael Morgan, professor of theater arts at UC Santa Barbara](#), and eight UCSB undergraduates and new alumni who make up [The Odyssey Project](#). Now in its fourth year, the annual summer program brings a group of boys from the camp to UCSB over the course of six weeks to produce and perform their own version of Homer's "Odyssey."

Finding Ithaca

The program began in late June and concluded on Aug. 3 with a performance — to a packed house — at Center Stage Theater in Santa Barbara. Along the way, the boys wrote a script; learned dance, movement and mime; got coaching from professional rapper Roc\$tedy; practiced the craft of mask making; and learned new ways of inhabiting the world.

“I’ve always wanted to combine the classics with contemporary issues,” said Morgan, who teaches voice in UCSB’s Department of Theater and Dance.

“Marginalized people have, for me, always been a very important issue in terms of making sure they get heard. I’m a voice teacher and I have a mission to help people get heard. I was fortunate to have a group of students and youth who wanted to get involved in this project.”

Participants began the process by immersing themselves in writing and drawing.

“We look at the ‘The Odyssey of Homer’ basically as a kind of template,” Morgan explained. “We don’t necessarily follow it letter by letter, but we look at events and themes and we look at how they relate to everyone’s lives.” The created text is interwoven with that of Homer.

One of Morgan’s goals with The Odyssey Project is to provide the teens with a real hands-on experience. That means offering guidance and understanding but also holding them accountable for their various parts. “There’s a lot to learn,” he said. “These teens don’t often have the opportunity of knowing what it’s like to be groomed or to be actually cared about by a group of expert teachers and mentors working with them, energizing their creativity.”

A Transformative Experience

The Odyssey is a huge epic with a lot of drama, some of which parallels the teens’ own lives. Morgan cited the fight sequence that occurs at the end of the play when Odysseus returns to Ithaca and confronts the suitors. That sequence relies on choreographed martial arts and gives the boys, many of whom have a history of violence, an opportunity to see martial arts as a spiritual discipline. “The fight scene becomes more about personal transformation than beating your enemies,” Morgan said.

Transformation is key to the boys’ success. “It can be very scary for them,” Morgan said. “When they first walk in, they’re in a completely foreign environment. It’s a college campus; it’s a theater. But usually through the process, they lose that fear.

They tend to bond with the UCSB students and realize that although we're different, we have a lot of issues in common. They start to feel a comradeship."

The bigger issues, Morgan added, have to do with life outside The Odyssey Project environment. When the teens go back to the camp, they can get in trouble. "And they do get in trouble," he said. "And sometimes that can have really damaging and scary effects on the project. Because if they're pulled from the project, that means we don't have an actor, and that creates a lot of difficulty. It's hard to reconcile those two things."

Morgan learned that firsthand. When the program started in June he had nine boys from Los Prietos. By the final rehearsals in late July, he was down to five. Of the four who left, one was released; but the others simply lost the privilege of participating.

A Collaborative Approach

Los Prietos Boys Camp is situated north of Santa Barbara on 17 acres in the Los Padres National Forest. It serves boys ages 13 to 18, who, on recommendation from the Santa Barbara County Probation Department, have been sent there instead of to juvenile hall. Offenses range from robbery to assault and battery, and sentences range from 120 to 180 days. They earn their release via participation and good behavior.

The goal of the camp, which highlights discipline, respect and responsibility, is to help residents become productive members of the community. With a no-nonsense but gentle approach, The Odyssey Project plays right into that. "The value is priceless," said Laurie Holbrook, director of Los Prietos Boys Camp. "The young men who elect to participate have a great deal of courage. They enter this project with minimal knowledge of what is in store, yet they meet each challenge and learn things about themselves they never knew existed.

"The boys realize they are not that much different from the young adults they share the experience with," she continued, "and also that they are valued by the students and the community who comes and watches the show.

"It's a remarkable transformation to watch a group of young man begin to see what they are capable of achieving and begin to believe that they can achieve more," said Holbrook. "This is one of the missions of the Boys Camp — to show them just how capable they are. When opportunities such as The Odyssey Project come along and

that goal is achieved, there is nothing more gratifying. The boys are hesitant to participate, yet once they meet the students, Professor Morgan and all the other artists involved, they're hooked."

Morgan perceives his work and that of Los Prietos as a great collaboration. "The camp really is rehabilitative, and I see my theater as rehabilitative theater," he said. "It's therapeutic and transformative."

It's also the most rewarding experience he's had as a teacher, he noted. "This particular project for me is really about giving voice to people who don't think they have a voice or aren't always heard in society," Morgan said.

Life Lessons

For the UCSB undergraduate students who participate, the experience is equally powerful. "It's a life-changing experience," said Dani Hernandez, a three-year veteran of the program, who graduated in June with a bachelor of fine arts (BFA) degree in acting. "My favorite part is always watching the boys bloom, and watching that confidence boost. And they start having fun and playing around and you get to see they're just boys. And there's still a lot of hope for them."

BFA junior Tyler X Koontz had no idea what to expect when he signed on for The Odyssey Project, but "I'm just blown out of the water by how great this program is, how diverse the talent is and how amazing the show is," he said. "I'm working with these great kids who didn't realize they have a voice and can use theater as a means to express themselves."

"These boys are extremely talented," said Zurian Zarate, a BFA senior who returned to The Odyssey Project for her second year. What have they taught her?

"Appreciation," she said. "It's helped me see even more how privileged I am and how lucky I am to have grown up in the circumstances I did. These boys have gone through so much at such a young age."

Of everything Zarate has done in her college career, The Odyssey Project is something "I'm never going to forget and I'm never going to let go of," she said. "It's just the way that you're able to look at humanity and look at yourself, and the way this particular project pushes you to look beyond the lenses that society creates. There's immense power in a project like this."

About UC Santa Barbara

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