

# Perspectives... on the Journey

Student Open Circles at McMaster University

## Highlights of a Decade

2001

Student Open Circles begins  
CVAG begins with 5 volunteer groups

2002

Simplicity Circle begins

2003

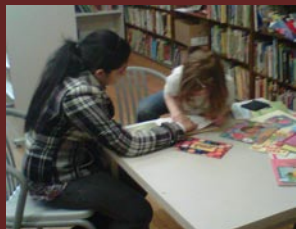
Student Open Circles receives charity status  
Spiritual Journey Circle begins

2004

First Hungry for Change  
Positive Action Circle begins

2005

Meditation Circle begins  
CVAG expands to 29 weekly volunteer groups



2006

Listening to Life discussion group begins

2007

Red Door Coffeehouse begins

2008

CVAG drops "Group" from its name to become CVA

2009

Open Circle receives MSU club of the Year award

2010

Tech Free for Change begins

2011

"Community Service" Award from Occasional Teachers Union  
70+ student facilitators

For more, go to [StudentOpenCircles.com](http://StudentOpenCircles.com)

"Thank you for the depth of community, opportunities for personal and spiritual growth, and helping me live and grow my commitment to social justice. My journey is different and richer as a result."

- Carly Gaylor,  
Open Circle & CVA Alumni,  
executive director of Welcome  
Inn Community Centre  
in Hamilton

## Student Open Circles Turns 10!

by Marybeth Leis & Jeff Druery

Anniversaries are a time to look back and notice – how we got to where we are, what's happened along the way, and how it's made a difference in our lives and those of others. More than ten years ago, Jewel's song "Life Uncommon" hit the air waves and we've been performing it ever since. Her lyrics invite us to: "Lend your voices, only to sounds of freedom. No longer lend your strength to that which you wish to be free from. Fill your lives with love and bravery and you shall lead a life uncommon." As we reflect on 10 years with Student Open Circles, what have been the sounds of freedom? How have people been inspired to live lives uncommon?

Certainly many people in need in our community are experiencing sounds of freedom as their lives are touched by weekly volunteer groups. Think of all the children at after school programs and breakfast programs who are having opportunities opened up for them. For some it's as simple as starting the day with a healthy meal so that they can concentrate and do well in school. They have individual mentors who care for them, give them undivided attention every week, and help them to shoulder the burdens they carry in their young lives. And think of those people living with disabilities who, through friendships with Community Volunteer Action (CVA) student volunteers, experience the freedom of having more independence and connections to the world outside their lodging home. When I think of living a life uncommon, I think of students taking time out of their busy lives to spend a few hours each week with people living in homelessness. People who are given dignity through attention rather than the dismissal they so often experience.

Students on campus as well as tasting freedom as they are encouraged to discover who they really are – by reflecting, trying spiritual practices, and discussing together with others from diverse experiences. They are finding the support they need to live out of their own deeply held values in the midst of many outside pressures. Many students in discussion groups or individual spiritual companionship move from feeling lost and alone to finding hope in connecting with others and then recognizing that they can be part of influencing change in the world.

We now invite you to turn your imagination forward to the next 10 years to where freedom might continue to resound. Where will this life uncommon continue to be noticed? Imagine the teen who stayed in school because they had the support of these tutors, continuing to thrive and live a life of fulfillment that ripples out to every one of their relationships. Who are they being empowered to become?

Imagine the many alumni moving out into the world and finding ways to live out of their deepest values. We hear regularly from alumni who are spread across the globe, whether impacting overseas communities struggling with poverty or serving right here at home visiting an isolated senior each week.

And as we move into the next years, we are also being invited to offer support and resources to others who are inspired by what they see in Student Open Circles and wish to initiate similar work in their communities – so imagine with us the possibilities as this vision continues to grow.

So many of you have made these past 10 years possible – through volunteering, encouraging, and financially supporting. Thank you for being part of this 10 year journey with us and for walking with us into the next 10!



## Transitions in Student Open Circles



Just over two years ago, I walked into an unknown yet surprisingly calm and peaceful office, filled with books, artwork, and beautiful decorations. At the time I would never have thought that now two years later I would still be a part of the organization and working in that office. Two years ago I came to be interviewed for a Work Study Position as a student at McMaster University, and became involved helping Marybeth and Jeff organize and coordinate Community Volunteer Action. In August 2010, I was given another wonderful experience by Marybeth and Jeff and was asked to join them full time as the CVA Volunteer Coordinator Intern.

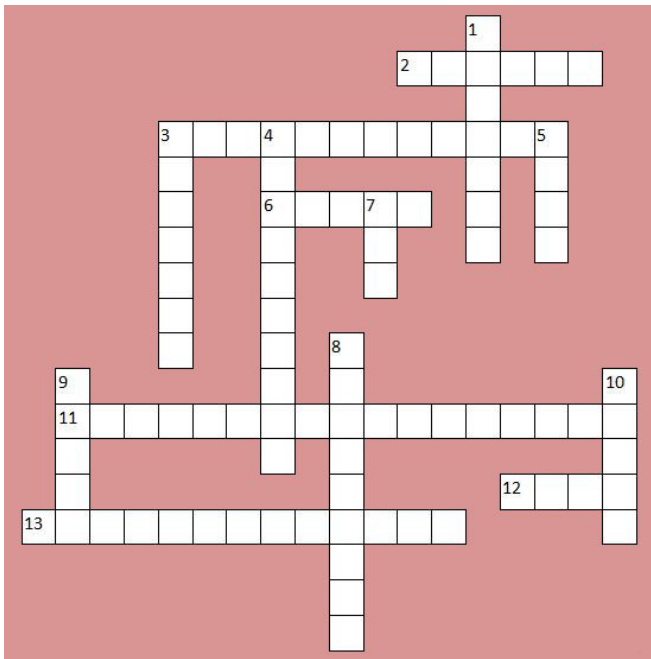
Now a year later, things have once again changed. Similar to Community Volunteer Action, come September it brings new volunteers, new agencies, and new experiences; I am off to find new experiences amongst a new school. I am now off to Teacher's College at Redeemer University while working part-time with at-risk children at Eva Rothwell Resource Centre (where I first volunteered with a CVA group), and I have would like to thank Student Open Circles for giving me such amazing experiences.

As I look back on my experiences, I have learned so many things that I will hopefully be able to take with me as I teach future generations. Some are more practical like planning ahead and organization, but others are deeper such as the way I view children. My experiences have allowed me to really change the way I view children, and respect each as an individual. There are always stereotypes about children in certain areas having worse or better behavior, but in the end a child is still a child and they all need to be validated and heard. I hope that through my experiences that I will give each of the children I work with a space to listen as well as a space to be heard, and to know that what they say does matter to me.

So thank you all for allowing me to share a part of my journey with Student Open Circles, and I wish nothing but continued success, happiness, and love for all of you. - Marissa



We would like to introduce you to Maureen Elliott, our new (CVA) Intern for the school year who is helping us to coordinate and mentor over 300 students to volunteer in weekly groups throughout Hamilton. Maureen's experiences this past year serving with Canada World Youth in Nicaragua and western Canada have deepened her understanding of the importance of her work with Student Open Circles. She's excited to be involved in creating opportunities for young people to serve and grow in compassion as they become more conscious of social justice issues. She says that her service experiences have taught her to question the status quo (such as society's perspectives on how much we need), to see the importance of valuing each and every person as we build community together, and to trust that working together on local issues ripples out into larger scale change. This position is made possible by a Service Canada grant designed to give young people an opportunity to gain experience and mentoring as they discern their next life steps. We are looking forward to working with Maureen this year as she brings her gifts to the community and as we learn from each other about what it means to be instruments of healing in our world.



**Down**

1. Which population will one of our new CVA volunteer groups work with this fall?
3. Which church partners with us to host the Exam Study Space?
4. What is one unique aspect of CVA weekly volunteer groups?
5. Where will CVA volunteer groups be tutoring recent immigrant youth this fall?
7. How many years has Student Open Circles existed?
8. What is one reason that students enjoy the weekly tech free zone?
9. How many years ago did CVA (Community Volunteer Action) change its name from CVAG (Community Volunteer Action Group)?
10. How many years ago did we host our first Hungry for Change dinner?

**Across**

2. How many CVA groups volunteer with at risk children?
3. What is one topic of interest to students participating in Open Circle discussion groups?
6. This fall marks the Red Door coffeehouse's \_\_\_\_\_ year
11. Which church community has supported Student Open Circles from its beginnings? (2 words)
12. How many weekly volunteer groups were there when Student Open Circles began?
13. From whom did Student Open Circles receive a Community Service award this year? (2 words)

**Reflecting on 10 Years**

Alumni and students reunited in May to celebrate our 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Here are some of their reflections from our "Fill in the Circle" wall along with greetings sent from afar.

*Volunteering in CVA groups has shaped me into the individual I am today, a globally conscious, community-oriented social activist that will not stand idly by while poverty and violence strangles our society. You provided me with the opportunity and awareness to act and for that I am grateful to have been part of this organization. I have no doubts that CVA will only flourish in the future and here's wishing CVA another successful 10 years! — Kevin Wang, CVA Alumni*



*Congratulations on the 10th anniversary of Student Open Circles! And my deep admiration for your visionary leadership and ongoing commitment to the wellbeing of*

*students. I celebrate your courage 10 years ago to question some things, and strike out on "the road less-traveled" in order to birth something as vital as the concept of what came to be known as "Student Open Circles". Joy for the ongoing journey!*

*— Julie Bender, Past Reference Group Member*

*Thank you Open Circle for providing and continuing to provide a space for individuals to grow in body, mind, and spirit. I hope to continue to be a part of such a great group of people.*

*—James, Open Circle student*

*For those of you who don't know me, I was one of the people involved in Open Circle when it first became Open Circle many many years ago. (I'm starting to feel a little old). I recently had some time to reflect on what community means. I experienced living with groups of students when I was a single student at McMaster, and then deliberately chose to co-house with another family for a few years in Hamilton with my own family, before recently moving to a rural community out here in Eastern Ontario. The topic of "community" came up with my wife a couple weeks ago, as we were discussing the differences between rural and urban living. And I must say that my mind went to Open Circle right away, as I reflected on my experiences. As I said to my wife - what I have learned over the past 10 years, is that community is really an attitude; a frame of mind. It doesn't matter whether you live in the same house as other people, in a neighbourhood in the middle of a large city - or if you live out in rural parts, with only trees and deer as neighbours. It's about coming together with other people, learning about each other, sharing ideas, working together, eating together, laughing together, exploring new ways of doing things, being welcoming, open and accepting, and creating a sense of trust and togetherness - trying to understand the bigger picture. Open Circle truly provided me with that frame of mind, and every once in a while I miss that amazing sense of trust and togetherness that was created during my years within Open Circle, even as I strive to try and create that sense of community wherever I go.*

*— Brian DeWolfsmith, Open Circle Alumni*

**Answers Key for Crossword** – Down: 1) Seniors, 3) StPauls, 4) Reflection, 5) YMCA, 7) Ten, 8) Community, 9) Three, 10) Seven  
 Across: 2) Twenty, 3) Spirituality, 6) Fifth, 11) HamiltonMennonite, 12) Five, 13) TeachersUnion (Hamilton-Wentworth Occasional)

**Student Open Circles**

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For tax-receipted donations, please make cheques payable to Student Open Circles. For monthly or other periodic support, you may choose to send a group of post-dated cheques. Online donations, automatic monthly support, American receipted donations and donations of stocks and mutual funds are available at our website or through CanadaHelps.org

Purchase greeting cards, prints, and original paintings by Marybeth in support of Student Open Circles at our website or at [www.ContemplativeArt.co.nr](http://www.ContemplativeArt.co.nr).

**[www.StudentOpenCircles.com](http://www.StudentOpenCircles.com)**