

Perspectives... on the Journey

Student Open Circles at McMaster University

Did you know?

- Student Open Circles began almost 10 years ago in the fall of 2001, originally under the umbrella of the Welcome Inn Community Centre, and became a registered charity in 2003.
- Community Volunteer Action had 5 weekly volunteer groups in 2001 (at Inasmuch, LAF, STAR teen program, Welcome Inn Youth drop-in) and now has 28-30 weekly groups each year. Look for our 10th anniversary edition newsletter in August!



Fast Facts about Community Volunteer Action (CVA) & Open Circle:

- 330 students giving over 9,700 of annual service, which at minimum wage is approximately \$100,000 of benefit to the community!
- 300+ students involved in weekly discussion groups & events

Students Speak...

There is so much poverty and so many mental illness issues in Hamilton, but as McMaster students, these issues are often neglected because we live in this bubble on campus. Getting to go out to the Hamilton community with my CVA volunteer group and see how these issues affect lives really helps me to take notice and do something to help.

– CVA student facilitator at Welcome Inn's Learning and Fun (LAF) after-school program

I still think of Open Circle often; even though I was only involved for a short time, I found what I learned about self-awareness has contributed so much to everything I've done since.

– Open Circle alumnus

Most of us want to know that we matter, that our lives are significant, and that there is hope for the future. Many of the young adults that we know often find themselves teetering between despair and hope as they look at the challenges facing our world and wonder if one person can make a difference. In this letter we invite you into the personal journeys of several students and one graduate as they search for meaning. As we walk with these young people, we are grateful for the many people like you who offer support and encourage us in sustaining hope. Thank you! – Jeff and Marybeth

Longing for a Better World

by Marybeth Leis Druery

"I am only 22 and I weep for the future," Michael* shares as the discussion unfolds in our weekly group. This week we're exploring social justice as a spiritual practice and students are invited to share an issue that they care about.

We begin the discussion group with the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., who said that "Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals." This sparks conversation about suffering — why our society tries to avoid it, and whether being involved in social justice always feels like struggle. Out of the issues students have brought with them, we explore the impacts of genetically modified foods, overpopulation, personal experiences with depression, and our world's looming crises of resource depletion and climate change. Anxieties fill the air, one student sharing his fear that "we're all just going to die." Discussion flows into questions of why these issues are present in our world and what we can do about it.

Just before some run off to class, I inquire: "How does being involved with these social issues relate to your spirituality?" In response, Evelyn* shares: "For me, social justice was my



Wearing masks we created at the Open Circle Winter Retreat in response to the questions: "What masks am I wearing that keep me from being authentic? What prevents me from being more of who I really am?"

path into a spiritual journey. I started learning about social issues and at the same time reading about spirituality and religion. It was part of my journey of looking for meaning. Seeing all the needs in the world led me to look for a deeper source of hope and action."

Others open up about how their spiritual journey frees them to question the status quo and find purpose in life that reaches out with compassion for others. Some share how for them hope is found in trusting that they are co-creating with God, looking for small signs of change and trusting that the Divine hasn't

abandoned us but is partnering with us in bringing healing to the world.

And Michael tells us that it's through his spiritual exploration that he is learning to trust that a better world is possible. Perhaps weeping for the future is part of his path to hope.

*names changed



Breakfast together at our annual Winter Retreat. Through discussions, creative expression and spiritual practice we explored our theme of: "What are the stories you were raised with? How has the story of consumerism shaped you? What story do you wish to live by?"

Volunteer-A-Thon 2011



Top Left: Exploring the web of issues that connect us during reflection at the end of our day of volunteering



Top Right: Marissa with students cleaning and sorting donations at Eva Rothwell Resource Centre



Bottom Right: Marybeth and students having fun chopping vegetables (and modeling hair nets!) at Wesley Centre Soup Kitchen

Rebecca Vettivelu volunteered with Community Volunteer Action (CVA) while she was a McMaster student and graduated in 2009. She facilitated weekly CVA groups at Adventures in Art, Bennetto public school, LAF (Learning and Fun) after school program, and Inasmuch women's shelter. She is currently teaching in York Region. Here are her reflections on how her involvement with CVA has shaped her...



Rebecca, second left, participates in our CVA leadership training with other group facilitators.

I will always be grateful for my time volunteering in the Hamilton community with CVA not only because of the experience and people I met but also because of the lifelong skills I was able to develop during that time. Learning to communicate my thoughts, critically analyze social conditions and work in a team setting have all contributed greatly to my life after graduation. Since leaving the McMaster community I have had a deeper appreciation for the reflection that we did at the end of each volunteer session. As a facilitator, the training I received really taught me the meaning of leadership and cooperation and how integral it is in forming a cohesive team of dedicated volunteers.

After undergrad I was determined to make volunteering a lifelong commitment. Unfortunately, once I moved back to my hometown, I found that there is really no other organization quite like CVA which provides opportunities to get connected with communities in need while offering the social benefits of volunteering weekly with a group. I have found opportunities to volunteer in my local community but I am still looking for

an experience to match the deep social, emotional and intellectual connection I was able to have as a part of CVA.

Despite this setback, I have found my interaction with the people involved in helping those in need has left me a far more sensitive and introspective person. In pursuing my career in education, CVA has contributed greatly to my ability to relate to the students that I encounter every day. I have more patience, understanding and compassion towards my students. I've also come to realize that the negative behaviour witnessed in the classroom often is a result of issues outside of school (for example, missing breakfast every morning or living with difficulties at home). CVA has made it possible for me to appreciate on a much deeper level the gift that each child brings to this world and has permanently changed the way I approach education. Thanks CVA!

Student Open Circles receives Community Service Award

This spring, Student Open Circles was honoured with the "Community Service" Award by the Hamilton-Wentworth Occasional Teachers union. Here's an excerpt from the awards presentation:

When our local developed our community service awards, we recognized that we don't operate in a vacuum and ... that we could learn a great deal by seeking out those with kind hearts, those who would apply themselves selflessly to making change and showing compassion, understanding, and respect for all. Student Open Circles is a fine example of what it means to be caring committed citizens. It is a local charity that promotes community volunteering among McMaster University students as well as on-campus forums for students from diverse backgrounds to discuss their personal values, deeper meaning and social justice concerns. The Community Volunteer Action wing of the group coordinates over 300 Mac students to volunteer weekly at agencies throughout Hamilton. Students are role models and tutors for many students within the Hamilton Wentworth School board and are serving in the breakfast program at Dr. Davey School and are classroom assistants at Bennetto school, along with many other afterschool programs.



CVA volunteers read with children in the Reading Buddies Literacy program at Pinky Lewis, a new CVA volunteer group this year.



Volunteers at Inasmuch Women's Shelter weekly give moms a break every Monday and Friday, caring for children at the shelter through playing games, reading, and sharing craft activities.

Leah Schwenger, principal of Dr. Davey says: "Members of Open Circle have volunteered in our Breakfast Program for the past 3 years. We have about 35 members who help out. They arrive early in the morning before 8:00 a.m. – in all sorts of weather! Our program could not run without their help. Our students love them. They help with food prep, food serving, clean up...but most importantly as wonderful role models to our children. They sit and eat with the children, talking to them about this and that. They make the program resemble a family sitting down to breakfast before a busy day. How often does this happen in our busy lives? Because of Open Circle our Breakfast program has become so much more than a way to make sure kids are fed."

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.

www.StudentOpenCircles.com