

# Perspectives... on the Journey

Student Open Circles at McMaster University



## Reflecting on 10 Years

"CVA was a great part of the time I spent at McMaster. It allowed me to go and meet people outside of our campus and experience the Hamilton community. It also allowed me to feel part of this big web of volunteers on campus. It allowed me to see that every little bit helps and adds to the big picture. I would really like to thank you for making this possible."

— Asha Aggarwal, alumni

"Thank you so much for giving me the space to grow and become the person I am today. It has been an incredible gift."

— Elisa, student

"Open Circle and CVA have definitely supported me in finding my inner voice, by giving me a safe space for reflection and discussion. My volunteer experiences with CVA have helped me form my future career goals and broaden my perspective on life. Thanks!"

— Sonika, alumni

Although I have to say I found CVA's emphasis on reflections to be a tad awkward at first, I can now say that this emphasis was what kept me volunteering for 4 years. University life can get overwhelming and it's easy to push volunteering aside to attend to other tasks. Now that I've moved onto another program at another university—I'm glad to say I'm still volunteering and making a difference.

— Jihye Han, alumni

Thank you Open Circle for being such an important part of my university experience. I cherish the memories and the amazing friends I have made."

— Jacob, alumni

## From Isolation to Connection

by Marybeth Leis Druery

"I don't like it when people say we're so connected today through social media and technology. It's communication but not *real* connection," declares 'Dara' as we brainstorm ideas at our winter retreat planning meeting. 'Sahil' continues: "I know what you mean. I can be messaging my friends all day, but then when we get together, it's sort of... awkward." I'm surprised by how candidly these five students, who haven't met until very recently, are opening up to each other. As we continue brainstorming, our conversation revolves around themes of longing for connection and renewal. They talk about how simply coming to this planning meeting and connecting with others from Open Circle and Community Volunteer Action is such a refreshing reprieve from their usual school demands.

Pew Research Center reports that cellphone owners between the ages of 18 and 24 exchange an average of 109.5 messages on a normal day—that works out to more than 3,200 texts per month.

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## Volunteering is Serious Fun!

by Richa Sud, Community Volunteer Action (CVA) student facilitator



My name is Richa and I am in my fourth year at McMaster University. I became involved as a CVA volunteer last year with ten other McMaster students volunteering at the Homework Help Club with recent immigrant youth in downtown Hamilton. Since the youth did not have English as their first language, it was a priority for us to help them out with English so they could perform well in high school. Many of them aspired to enter into university or college upon graduation so they were anxious to learn from us about how they should go

about the process. The friendships we built and the smiles and conversations that we had were always heart-warming.

This year I am facilitating a group to volunteer with Bennetto Public School, where we help out every week in the classroom with which we were each matched at the beginning of the term. After watching the Homework Help Club facilitators last year, I decided I wanted to take on more responsibilities and to grow as an individual and a leader. Facilitating a CVA volunteer group has greatly helped me learn to better handle stressful conditions. Understanding the issues faced by student volunteers like me, who have to juggle school work and extracurricular commitments, it is important that I am a support to the volunteers and motivate them to stay committed to being at Bennetto School every week. Preparing reflection questions and activities for our discussions after volunteering is not only fun but also gives me satisfaction to see the volunteers in my group share their feelings and open up about their struggles. We learn to respect others and to give equal opportunity for everyone to speak.

At Bennetto School, I am volunteering with a Grade 3 class and have come to learn a number of things from the children. I help them one on one with their reading and also help the teacher with any other activity that she has planned for me. At first not having had much experience with young children, except my own little brother, I wasn't sure how the experience would be. But through time I have come to realize that it's never the same experience. Every week we see a new dimension to the same picture. The kids have their ups and downs—sometimes they are bright and cheerful, and then at other times they are angry or gloomy. And then I have also seen them exchange stickers and bracelets and give second chances to each other while playing games and being kind to each other.

I receive constant warm and sweet hugs from many of these children. Sometimes what can be so simple as a hug when received and given with no expectations, can make the kids and, I won't lie, me feel special! There is so much love every time I visit the class. Giving them constant encouragement and having a nice and interesting talk with them really brightens my day.

As much as the experience is enjoyable I also understand the serious side of what I am doing. I have come to know children who have behavioural issues or are unable to perform optimally compared to the rest of the class. Since the teacher is unable to provide individual focus to each child who needs attention, I hope that the little extra help that I provide makes a difference. Without this encouragement and confidence, there could be bigger concerns emerging in their lives later.

Being a psychology student myself, I aspire to help individuals by applying what I have learned. I am really interested in helping young children with issues that they face at home or at school. Since it's my last year at Mac now, I will be applying for social work and also counseling psychology programs. Either way I will be more than happy to work every day with children who need some love and a little help.

I would like to genuinely thank Student Open Circles for providing this opportunity to me and to many other CVA volunteers at Mac to live this wonderful and nourishing experience through our university life.



**Above:** Cooking with students at an Open Circle retreat—an opportunity for building community, experiencing spiritual practices, and to reflect with others who are also asking questions about deeper meaning in life. **Left:** Jeff and students displaying the "bridge" they built in our CVA volunteer orientation to symbolize the connections students are building through service. This group tutors recent immigrant youth at YMCA.



## Poverty in Hamilton by Christina Pugliese, CVA student facilitator

Christina's reflections are inspired by the service and discussions that she is involved in through our weekly CVA volunteer groups throughout the city.

It is probably difficult for any of us to imagine choosing between shelter and nourishment. Yet for 18% of Hamiltonians – nearly one in five people – this decision is a daily reality. Contrary to popular assumptions, poverty is not an individual problem or a personal choice. Rather, it represents a deeply rooted failure of our economic, social, and political systems.

Poverty is an intergenerational issue that breeds desperation and frustration, and that contributes to poor health and lowered life expectancy. Poverty is increasingly common in subgroups of our population. For example, in 2005, 50% of recent immigrants were living below the poverty line in Hamilton, followed closely by unattached individuals (41%), female lone parents (39%), Aboriginals (39%), and visible minorities (34%).

Poverty is a complex problem which requires more than a single solution. The first step towards ending poverty is a collective recognition that its victims are not solely to blame. By abolishing these stereotypes and working together as citizens of Hamilton, one day, we may be able to make poverty history in our community.

### Continued from page 1 – From Isolation to Connection

Students who regularly hang out in the lounge we turn into a weekly Tech Free zone expressed similar longings when they *begged* us to start up the technology-free space again before classes even began in September! One of our conversations went something like this: “We should have Tech Free days every day. It makes a lot of sense, because I feel like laptops and phones are often just a social convention, a way of feeling less exposed when relating with people. If I have something in my hand then I feel like I’m doing something important and productive, even though in reality it’s usually just facebook... it’s important to take a break so you can notice when your use of technology is good and when it’s taking away from things that are important.”

We see the longing for connection among many students who, on discovering Open Circle, talk about how delighted they are to find a group where they can talk about the search for meaning in their lives. Most feel alone in this pursuit. This is also a common theme in the individual Spiritual Companionship that Jeff and I offer, where some say they feel they are the only ones with struggles. This sense of isolation isn’t surprising given the trend towards less face-to-face interaction between young people. Recently a student mentioned how she’s seen one of her roommates only twice all term. Some student houses don’t even have common living space, having been subdivided into rooms where each lives their own life independently. And the individualized use of technology plays a role. I remember being a little surprised this September when a student shared how difficult it was to not have internet in their student house for the first few days after moving in. She explained how “there’s nothing to do.” When I asked her whether her roommates had found other things to do together, she said: “No – we each just went to campus and downloaded movies and things we could do at home by ourselves so we’re not bored.”

You can see why much of what we do in Student Open Circles is a radical breath of fresh air for many students. Perhaps this is why I often hear them say that they let out a sigh of relief when entering one of our meetings or groups. Simply coming into the space evokes a different way of being. And why it’s significant to hear about the little changes that are being made in their personal lives – like a student who has decided to take time for daily spiritual practice while turning off her cell phone. Or students who are committed to building meaningful friendships with their housemates.

Students are also finding deep connection in our experiences of volunteering together, interacting with peers and with those we serve whose stories are often quite different from our own. As Richa’s story illustrates, we discover ourselves as part of a greater whole through service. Recently we had a discussion night on the documentary *Fierce Light: where spirit meets action*. Here Archbishop Desmond Tutu talks about Ubuntu, a South African concept that translates as “I am what I am because of who we all are” and speaks to the fact that we can’t be a human in isolation. “A person who understands this,” he says, “does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that they are in a greater whole, and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.” He concludes, “What dehumanizes you, inexorably dehumanizes me. And what elevates you, elevates me.”

Thank you for your support as we create spaces where students realize their connection to a greater whole through opportunities to serve, to connect with peers, and to find guidance on their spiritual journey.



**Above:** Community Gathering at ON March of Dimes where Christina facilitates a volunteer group to work with adults with disabilities.

**Below:** Josh (right) from Open Circle initiated regular drum circles this term. **Bottom:** The circle quickly grows as the drumming takes place out in public around or in the student center.



### An Update on our Finances

We are grateful for the generous support of many friends who make the work of Student Open Circles possible. Financially, we are at a deficit of \$5,340 for the current year which highlights the fact that, like many charities, we are heavily dependent on a strong finish to the year in order to continue to provide support to McMaster students and the larger community. While much of our support has come from friends like you, we’ve also had to rely on one-time grants from foundations, and so we are recognizing the need for on-going individual support that will sustain us through each month of each year. Our current goal is to strengthen our regular support base through raising \$500/month and we are about half way to our goal. Thank you to all who have responded so far!

## Student Open Circles

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### How to Donate:

If you would like to make a tax-receiptable donation, 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

Greeting cards, prints, and original paintings by Marybeth are available at StudentOpenCircles.com/art, with all proceeds supporting Student Open Circles.