

Perspectives... on the Journey

Student Open Circles at McMaster University



2009/10 Highlights

(from the past year)

- Many volunteer groups and Open Circle discussions continuing into the summer
- Student volunteers transformed through experiences with people and situations they otherwise wouldn't encounter
- Students seeking guidance through individual spiritual companionship with Marybeth or Jeff, listening to deeper meaning in their lives to find an authentic life path
- Deep community forming in volunteer and discussion groups
- Open Circle being chosen out of 230 student union clubs for the MSU Club of the Year award

2010/11 Hopes & Plans

(for the upcoming year)

- "Holding spaces" in our discussion and volunteer groups, events, & retreats
- Kicking off the year with a weeklong series of events on the theme of "Renew yourself. Improve our world."
- Tech Free day, inviting students to "unplug" from constant media input to take time for reflection
- Expanding our volunteer groups through answering the request of many agencies for more groups
- Students inspired towards lifelong service and contribution

Thank You!

It takes many partners to make the work of Student Open Circles happen. We are deeply grateful to all who support us through volunteering, encouragement, prayer, financial support, and with donations of supplies and services. In particular, we wish to recognize our individual donors along with Hamilton Mennonite Church, St. Paul's Anglican Church, Allegra Printing and Imaging, St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, the United Way, the Hamilton Community Foundation, and Service Canada.

Holding Space

by Marybeth Leis Druery

You may have heard about a bank in Toronto that recently installed a siren to keep homeless people out of their ATM shelter. Problem was, no one in the neighbourhood could sleep and the bank was fielding complaints around the clock. For me this story highlights that if something is unwelcoming for anyone, it is unwelcoming for everyone. In Open Circle and Community Volunteer Action (CVA) we invest a lot of energy towards being welcoming, working to remove barriers in our on-campus discussions and as we move out into the community to volunteer.

When we asked students this summer what they'd most like to communicate to new students at our first events in September, they talked about Open Circle being a group where we are building community that includes everyone. That it's a non-intimidating space where you can be free, open, and where no one has all the answers.

To hold these spaces, we ask each newly formed volunteer group and discussion group to participate in setting their own guidelines. *Respect, confidentiality, listening without judging but rather listening to deeply understand, freedom to choose which questions to respond to, and willingness to participate* are the most common principles voiced by students. Periodically we check-in on how we're doing with the group's guidelines.

In addition, we train and mentor student leaders in creating spaces for diversity, facilitating inclusive discussion, and in being people who listen deeply. Recently at one of our student leader training meetings, we referenced Parker Palmer's *A Hidden Wholeness*. Palmer describes circles of trust as places where our soul shows up and asks the question: "What sort of space gives us the best chance to hear soul truth and follow it?... Just like a wild animal, [the soul] seeks safety in the dense underbrush, especially when other people are around. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out. But if we will walk quietly into the woods... the wild creature we seek might put in an appearance. Unfortunately, community in our culture too often means a group of people who go crashing through the woods together, scaring the soul away... A circle of trust is a group of people who know how to sit quietly "in the woods" with each other and wait for the shy soul to show up. The relationships in such a group are not pushy but patient; they are not confrontational but compassionate; they are filled not with expectations and demands but with abiding faith in the reality of the inner teacher and in each person's capacity to learn from it."

Out of this, student leaders reflected on questions such as: *What principles and practices within your volunteer group help to create this sort of circle of trust ...for the volunteers? ...for the people you serve?*

I like to think of what we are doing in Student Open Circles as "holding space." Space that becomes sacred when everyone is respected and listened to, everyone's contribution and gifts are valued, and trust is offered. It is a place where you see students building bridges across the lines that so often divide us about very deep and personal issues.

Holding this space creates the fertile soil for spiritual growth that flows out into healing larger societal systems. In this letter you will find glimpses, in the students' own words, of what is sprouting and growing in this soil. Thank you for the many ways in which you support us in holding these spaces!



Above: Team building at a training meeting for some of our 40+ CVA volunteer group facilitators



Left: Get-to-know-you games at the Open Circle summer term kick-off potluck in Jeff and Marybeth's home

Katrina's Story

In my five years at Mac, it wasn't until my second last semester that I encountered Open Circle. Browsing the tables in the student center last fall, I came upon Jeff Druery's warm and inviting smile. He invited me to join a guided meditation occurring right then, right there, in the midst of the student center atrium. Feeling nervous but intrigued, I reluctantly agreed. Looking back now, it was a quantum leap of faith.

During that one moment in the student center, I got a glimpse of something extraordinary. Letting go and giving in to the present. I felt the expansiveness of just being. I felt clarity. I felt something I had never experienced before and it was enough to get me hooked.

I started attending Meditation Circle weekly and I was astonished at what I found: a place where students commune regularly to find moments of peace and stillness amongst the busyness of everyday life. Every week, we share high and low moments, practice different spiritual practices and share our spiritual experiences. The space is always comfortable, the people accepting and the atmosphere reenergizing.

Since then, meditating regularly has opened up a space in my life that contrary to a void, leaves me with a sense of lasting peace and fulfillment. I am now along a spiritual journey I had no idea existed just 6 months ago.

Open Circle has provided the foundation for me to begin my spiritual journey. Had I not been ready, it would have not touched me so deeply, but had it not been there, I would not have grown so profoundly. The most wonderful thing about Open Circle is meeting a diverse group of people who share in the commonality of spiritual practice and the realization of something deeper in life. These qualities result in powerful interactions that serve to restore faith and hope for our world. Open Circle provides a valuable community service, creating the space for sharing and for spirituality that is essential to our lives as human beings.



Justin's story:

My name is Justin Chow and I am a CVA group facilitator for Learning and Fun (LAF) – an afterschool program at Welcome Inn Community Centre designed to foster relationships with at-risk youth in the North End of Hamilton. I have learned a great deal about North Hamilton in my experiences at LAF, and have seen with my own eyes the effects of homelessness, poverty, and hunger that still ravage this community. Every Monday since September, our group has worked on creating bonds with these youth by working with them one-on-one in a relaxed atmosphere where we can freely converse about anything while interspersing this “fun time” with homework (or at least attempting to!) I come back each week to LAF because I want to be able to say that I played a part in changing a child's life for the better. What is most rewarding is seeing the changes that occur in the youth themselves. Seeing a child who was struggling with behavioural and learning issues in September suddenly sit down in January and quietly work on math with a mentor is a very gratifying experience. LAF has helped not only the youth, but I believe our McMaster student volunteers too, mature and develop in a way that is inexplicable – on my part, I simply can't find the right words to describe how much I've grown in character in my time here at LAF. Volunteering here has been such a joyous experience that it has almost become a guilty pleasure coming every week – so much so that I can hardly call it volunteering!



Welcome Back Marissa!

In our last newsletter you met Marissa, who as a student was a volunteer group facilitator and served as a committee member with our Board. Now that she has graduated, she is joining our staff team as a full-time intern with our Community Volunteer Action (CVA) program. She will assist us in coordinating and mentoring over 330 students to volunteer weekly in groups throughout Hamilton. Her help is much needed as CVA has continued to expand beyond current capacities. This position is initially funded through a Service Canada grant and ongoing support is needed for her to continue beyond this school year. Here's a note from Marissa:

Hi Everyone, my name is Marissa. This is a very exciting time in my life, as I have recently graduated from McMaster with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology, am ready to start my life outside the classroom, and am very excited to be welcomed by Marybeth and Jeff into the organization that has changed my life in such a large way.

I began volunteering with a CVA group at the Eva Rothwell Centre back in 2008, and chose to facilitate a volunteer group of my peers at the same place the following year while I worked closely with Marybeth and Jeff as a Work-Study student assistant for CVA. And so another academic year is about to begin and, although I won't be a student, I am able to help make a difference in the Hamilton community and still keep my ties at McMaster. I am very excited to make CVA more known in the McMaster community, and help more students like myself who feared leaving the university bubble to serve those in need in our city.

For someone who knew after they graduated that they wanted to help out in the Hamilton community, the best place for me is Student Open Circles, as volunteering makes a difference in everyone who is involved. I can't wait to work closely with Marybeth and Jeff and help make Hamilton a place I am proud to call home.



CVA appreciation event

Above: community building with students who volunteer in weekly groups throughout Hamilton
Below: (from left to right) Jeff, Prashy, Marybeth, Debi, Asha, Arum, Marissa, and Melissa



Book us for a Workshop...

Marybeth and Jeff are available to present workshops on topics related to Spiritual Growth, Creativity, Young Adults, and Social Justice. They also offer individual Spiritual Direction. If interested, please contact Jeff or Marybeth for more information.

Student Open Circles

Charitable Registration No. 89144 4309 RR0001

P.O. Box 57292, 2 King St. W.
Hamilton, ON L8P 4X1

905-528-1221 x4

Marybeth Leis & Jeff Druery:
LeisMB@mcmaster.ca
jdruery@mcmaster.ca

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Purchase greeting cards, prints, and original paintings by Marybeth in support of Student Open Circles at our website or at www.ContemplativeArt.co.cc

www.StudentOpenCircles.com