

# Perspectives... on the Journey

Student Open Circles at M<sup>c</sup>Master University



## Did You Know?

Kids are going hungry. There are enough kids in Hamilton (using the food bank) to fill 370 classrooms. — Tom Cooper, Director of Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction

Hamilton Food Share reported in March 2013 [that] 1,067 post-secondary students used local off-campus food banks. — Hamilton Spectator (in addition to the on-campus food bank)

## Students Speak...

Community Volunteer Action has opened my eyes to the social issues in Hamilton a lot better than reading any article would. It has given meaning to my volunteer work, and I think that in years from now I can see myself still working with under-served populations. — Cheryl Young, student CVA Facilitator at LAF Afterschool Program, Welcome Inn

I have learned through volunteering that it's okay to not have the answers. I hope that the kids we work with will come to know that they are special and valued.

— Heather O'Halloran, student CVA Facilitator at the Beasley Breakfast program

## Student Open Circles' Youngest Supporter



Ezra Davids raised funds this past summer with his cookies and popcorn stand. His parents Colleen and Robin, former students in Open Circle, tell us "He's very excited to do it again, but we'll wait for warmer weather!"

One of the most exciting parts of accompanying young adults on their life and spiritual journeys are those moments when a person discovers more of who they really are: what they are passionate about, the things that concern them, and what gives them hope. Or when they realize how their life can make a positive difference; when they discover the particular issues or people that they care deeply about, the unique gifts that they can contribute, and where they will look for support as they live out their calling.

We hope that you are inspired by the stories in this newsletter as students share their moments of discovery and growth. Thank you for your support of Student Open Circles — it makes a big difference for students and for the many people whose lives they touch. — Marybeth and Jeff

## Catching Fire in the Hamilton Community

Warning: Movie Spoiler Alert!

by Arum Choi

Arum has volunteered with Community Volunteer Action since 2007 and is currently facilitating a CVA group that volunteers each week at a women's shelter.

After watching the first movie in the Hunger Games series, I was deeply thinking about its plot, characters, and even imagining myself in the primary role of Katniss Everdeen for several days. What would I have done in her situation? Could I be that strong and brave? In the harsh world of the Hunger Games, there is a wide socio-economic gap between the Districts. Some Districts live a lavish and wasteful lifestyle while others struggle to meet basic survival needs and are required to work hard to support those in the more well-off Districts. Katniss volunteers as a tribute for District 12 because it is the only way to protect her younger sister from a game between Districts of fighting to the death. Katniss survives until the very end with another tribute. However, only one can survive. That's the rule. The brilliant idea of both survivors is to eat poisonous berries together, so that there would be no winner or loser, and this action prompts the game-makers to change the rules of game (just in time to save both tributes!). The second movie, Catching Fire, shows how this further helps spark a revolution in the Districts.

After watching this movie, I realized that media is a really powerful tool because it made me want to engage even further in social action in addition to my volunteering in the Hamilton community. I approached this fantasy movie as an invitation to go deeper into social justice issues rather than escaping from reality. These stories are interconnected with social concerns that we see in our own communities and the world, where there is a vast gap between the rich and the poor. For example, food consumption between Districts was very distinct: one community suffered from food deficits while another was surrounded with vast quantities of food. This is not just a made-up story in the movie. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (2012), approximately 34 million tons of food were thrown away in 2010. We generally over-consume food which contributes to increased obesity rates in children and adults. However, 20% of the population in developing countries is affected by chronic food deficits according to the Food and Agriculture Organization (2000). For those of us who have had little experience with poverty it is hard to picture that someone could die because of malnutrition, simply having no food.

As part of our facilitator training in Community Volunteer Action (CVA), we went for a walk to explore the downtown Hamilton community. We were given a mission to find a meal for less than \$3. It was a simple task but a very difficult one. For some of us, when we buy food for a meal we do not usually think much about the cost. We buy whatever we feel like eating on that day. Also, in this exercise, most of us wanted a meal that was nutritionally well balanced but the price was too high. In the end, we got a hotdog on the street. That was the only option we had. In order to complete the task we had to sacrifice something like a preferable food choice or our usual eating habits. When I watched the movie I recalled that challenge, and how we were in a similar situation as Katniss in the movie, although she was brave and strong to fight injustice and take action.

Without volunteering in the Hamilton community through CVA, I would not have been able to reflect after watching the movie. Volunteering educated me in both head and heart and helped me to become a thoughtful, committed, and active citizen. I still doubt myself that I could accept death to change the rules like Katniss did. However, I believe that hope for change in the face of injustice can spread like fire through our community work. Only experience will wake you up to be conscious of social issues and to take action. I want other students to volunteer with CVA because it makes a difference, both in the community and in themselves.



Arum (left) and her group of CVA volunteers visit a local women's shelter each week where they spend quality time in the playroom with the children who are staying with their moms at the shelter.

## Googling for Guidance by Elise Desjardins



Hello, my name is Elise! I am a 2nd year Life Sciences student, and I have been involved with Open Circle since February 2013. Unlike most students who get involved during Welcome Week or after seeing posters on campus, I discovered Open Circle at 2 a.m. on a Tuesday. I had been going through a difficult journey with spirituality and, in a state of wild frenzy, I googled the words "McMaster spiritual guidance and reflection". Or something along those lines. So that's how Open Circle and I first crossed paths. If there's one thing my life has taught me, it's been to appreciate the perfect timing of experiences and individuals that you meet on your journey, and so I know wholeheartedly that I was meant to find Open Circle. There's something so mysterious and beautiful about asking for something, and receiving in ways that you never expect or could have imagined.

That morning I emailed Marybeth to set up a meeting for spiritual companionship. I had no expectations about what this experience was going to be like. I certainly had no idea that my experiences in Open Circle would change my life and the person I was going to become. I just had to trust that life knew what I had been hoping to find, and life was willing to present me with something even better.

It's difficult to find the right words to explain just how much Open Circle has contributed to my life. It baffles me that I can find words to explain mundane moments, but none to capture the life and light of the experiences I've had with this club. Finding Open Circle was like being in a really dark forest, and then coming to the edge and discovering the brightest sunrise. Being involved with this community has been like living a life where every day feels like the first day of spring, and summer, and autumn, and winter all rolled into one. This constant feeling of growth, and wonder, and purpose. I hope these words can justify what I've lived.

Open Circle has made my campus feel like home. Through participating in our winter retreat, planning events on campus, or taking the Personal Discovery courses, I feel included in a community of remarkable and awe-inspiring individuals, whose presence in my life is so very humbling. This community offers support, guidance, reflection, and most importantly, a shared value of awareness, spirituality, gratitude, growth and individuality. This community has helped me find and nurture my light and my home within. Open Circle provides this space where I can live authentically and creatively, and be accepted by others who understand my journey and have experienced similar intentions. I stay rooted and grounded by going to Reflection Circles, like Meditation circle which helps me find meaning and growth in the messy ins and outs of my life. Creativity circle inspires me to be artistic and to build a world and dreams that are in alignment with my values, and that will help me become a better human being.

Every day, I have this deep and flowing gratitude for Open Circle. For helping me live a life of continuous sunrises, and noticing the wonders of this world.



*Following our Winter Retreat (pictured here) one participant blogged: "Last weekend, I participated in an Open Circle retreat Find Your Home Within ... The retreat setting was a cozy cabin built in the mid-1800s, surrounded by long snow-covered fields and nature (with never-ending trails), warmth from wood burning fireplace and a tech-free environment (little or no use of phones or laptops). ... We participated in Journey Circles where each person shared a story about their life journey for ten minutes. We were fully present to them and listened compassionately. ... We all chose to embrace and radiate trust, vulnerability, acceptance, patience, peace, openness, and compassion towards each other and ourselves. ... This retreat has been one of the many more spiritual awakenings to come."*



## Student Open Circles

### How to Donate:

Student Open Circles relies on the generosity of many individuals and groups. 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, and donations of stocks and mutual funds are available at our website or through CanadaHelps.org.

Jeff's CD's and Marybeth's art, prints, and greeting cards are available on our website, with all proceeds supporting Student Open Circles.

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