



# Student Open Circles

*Perspectives Newsletter – May 2017*

This year Student Open Circles celebrates 15 years of service! We started on this journey in response to students' need for safe spaces to explore their big questions and to serve together; spaces that welcome the full diversity of their backgrounds and life experiences. Young adults need a place to explore their personal, spiritual, and societal concerns. 15 years ago, world events pointed to the need to build bridges of understanding, as September 11 and its aftermath created suspicion and fear between groups on campus and beyond. And this need is even more pronounced today! As much as ever, we need young people who reflect deeply about who they are, the values that they live by, and what their own unique contribution is towards a world that embodies compassion instead of fear.

As we reflect on 15 years of changed lives, we are grateful for the many people who support the work of Student Open Circles – some from the very beginning and many who have joined us since – thank you for being with us on this journey. We hope you are inspired by these stories of how your support is making a difference to students, the Hamilton community, and across the globe!

*Marybeth & Jeff*

## Growing Into Myself

*by Sohana Farhan, student and volunteer group facilitator*

My journey with Student Open Circles began in my second year of undergrad when I started volunteering at the Inasmuch Women's Shelter. At that time, I was starting to feel burnt out with the hugely academic focus of university, and I wanted my university experience to go beyond books. I was rushing through the student centre one day to get to my next class, when the Student Open Circles CVA volunteering booth caught my eye. I decided to stop by later on in the day and joined the Inasmuch volunteer group. I saw this volunteer opportunity as a chance to make my semester more meaningful. I was excited to get a chance to serve the community and to explore and learn more about Hamilton.

At that time, I never knew how much I would learn about myself through this experience. I found joy in serving and wanted to get even more involved. I challenged myself to go outside of my comfort zone and stepped into a leadership role as a facilitator for a volunteer group. From then on, I became more and more involved with the reflection activities that Student Open Circles provides on campus. I recently participated in the Becoming Yourself Series, which was the catalyst for changing the way I perceive myself. All these experiences had a reflection into my daily life, where I grew to become a more accepting, confident, and compassionate person.

My second-year self would have never known how significant of an impact Student Open Circles would have on my life. I'm very glad that I came back to the student centre that day to stop by the volunteering booth. Marybeth and Jeff's positivity, patience, and open-mindedness made this journey of growth possible and I am truly grateful to have them as mentors. I know that in the future, Student Open Circles will continue to help others grow into themselves and serve the needs of the community.



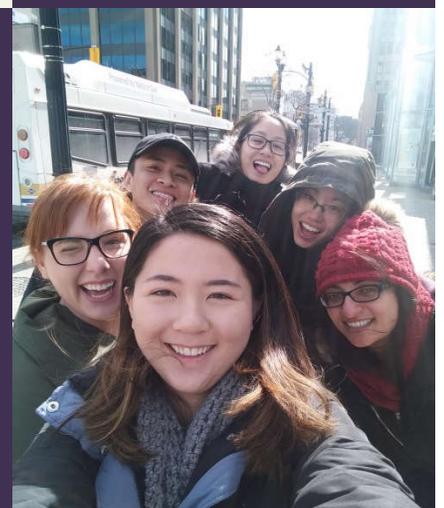
*The highlight of my volunteer work was realizing how much help is needed around every community. This experience made me realize that everyone, regardless of where they live or who they are, will need help at some point in their lives. It is important to put others first, and always be kind because you never know what they are carrying around.*

*– volunteer with Beasley Breakfast program group*



*Left: Sohana (front, 2<sup>nd</sup> from right) at our end of term social event*

*Right: Saturday Morning Soup Kitchen volunteer group selfie*



# Celebrating 15 years of changed lives!

by Kala Grant, Student Open Circles alumni and board member



Student Open Circles has been positively impacting McMaster students and the Hamilton community by developing thoughtful, caring, and initiative-seeking leaders for 15 years!

From one small group of weekly volunteers, the initiative has grown to over 300 students in more than 20 weekly groups, giving 10,000 hours of service each year. At minimum wage, this equates to more than \$110,000 of benefit to the Hamilton community. Wesley Centre Soup Kitchen, Welcome Inn Community Centre, YMCA immigrant youth homework clubs are just a few of Student Open Circles' high-impact community volunteer placements. Student Open Circles works with the community to place McMaster students in these positions and help them develop responsible leadership practices and skills.

The impact of Student Open Circles is not only taking place locally. Its impact is spreading all over Southern Ontario and the globe (Waterloo, Tehkummah, and Afghanistan, just to name a few) with previous students heading back home to volunteer and create social initiatives in their own communities.

Our recent 15 year anniversary crowdfunding campaign was a great success, raising \$5,867 to continue the positive impact of Student Open Circles! Alumni posted messages of support from far and wide. One donor wrote: "I used to volunteer with Student Open Circles when I was a student at McMaster. Not only did they have a huge array of volunteer opportunities within the Hamilton community, they ensured that each group of volunteers was equipped to facilitate thought-provoking conversations every week about increasing one's awareness and connection to the world around us. While helping in shelters, breakfast programs, after-school support, etc. we were asked to link it with meaningful dialogue and conversation with other students and community leaders. This made me a better listener, critical thinker, and it increased my compassion for those around me. They showed me that doing small things with great love could really change the world. I really hope some of you will consider even a small donation to an organization that really was the starting point of why I became an educator."

Another alumni donor said, "Greetings from across the world! Thank you for everything. Student Open Circles absolutely changed my life and helped me understand what community was." Originally from Pakistan, Shahan Tariq studied biology and psychology for his undergrad at McMaster and has returned home. He's currently working on his masters in clinical psychology. "Ideally, I'd like to end up working with the UN, World Health Organization, or Doctors Without Borders developing programs to incorporate emergency trauma therapy in the sense of psychological first aid on the scene after a tragedy happens, whether it's natural disaster or terrorism. I want to do something that lets me help people firstly. That's my basic underlying motivation or life purpose. Student Open Circles asked me the right questions that allowed me to figure out my path. Now it's just a matter of spending my life to achieve it... easier said than done, but I am committed."

Student Open Circles helps students to gain the most out of their experiences by providing workshops, weekly groups for reflection and meditation, and individual spiritual companioning. Students from all backgrounds meet in a safe and respectful environment to clarify their life goals and to develop habits and skills that will enable them to thrive.

Thank you for the significant difference you are making through your support!

*Student Open Circles asked me the right questions that allowed me to figure out my path*



*Student Open Circles volunteers give 10,000 hours each year serving at risk children and youth, adults with disabilities and at shelters*

## Student Open Circles

Canadian Charitable Registration 891444309 RR0001

### How to Donate

Student Open Circles relies on the generosity of individuals and groups. To make a tax-receiptable donation, please make cheques payable to Student Open Circles. Online donations, automatic monthly support, donations of stocks and mutual funds are available at our website.

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