



Student Open Circles

Perspectives Newsletter – August 2017

What is enough? Am I enough? These are questions that students feel but often run from. In Marlene’s words, many are “exhausted and disillusioned by the endless stressors and often superficial norms of university culture.” The feeling that *there is something wrong and it’s me* is reflective of the larger culture where there’s so much competition to look and act and succeed in a certain way. As the student’s story below reflects, “keeping ourselves busy is so often a veil that we use to hide from having to consider the questions that lie deep within us.”

We are grateful for your support as we companion many young adults who are tired of all the striving to be enough. You are giving Marlene and her peers the opportunity to be “seen, heard, supported, appreciated, and transformed,” and “creating a world with more depth, purpose, and compassion.”

Marlybeth & Jeff

Student Open Circles mentors and empowers students from diverse backgrounds in personal and spiritual reflection, community service, and leadership development

- 21 weekly teams of volunteers
- Over 300 students give 10,000 hours of service each year
- Over 150 students involved in weekly Reflection Groups, Events, Personal Discovery Courses, and Retreats

Tired of All the Running

Open Circle student

Keeping ourselves busy is so often a veil that we use to hide from having to consider the questions that lie deep within us or the truths that we’d rather not face. It’s easier to persist in a perpetual state of motion than to stop and embrace the vulnerability that comes from within. But, without taking time to pause and reflect, our life is much like the cloud of dust we kick up behind us as we race to our next destination—a series of fleeting moments that quickly disintegrate into nothingness.

I was a victim of this “busyness” for many years—throughout my time as an undergraduate and well into my years as a graduate student. Oddly enough, though, life has a way of slowing us down when we most need it, and for me it certainly did as I ran head-first into some major changes and challenges in my life. Some of the things I was facing made me question who I am and what I stand for as a person. They made me lose the self-confidence that I used to be so proud of. They made me seek validation from others instead of from myself. And, they instilled in me a deep exhaustion. I was so tired of all the running.

But, through it all, there was always a tiny flame deep down inside of me that kept burning. It was the light that kept me going when all around me there was darkness. It was hope. It was strength. It was courage. And it

gave me the will to carry on even though there were times when I really didn’t know how I would.

For me, Student Open Circle’s Becoming Yourself Series was a step in my own journey towards reigniting the

fire within me. It gave me the time to take pause in my life and to reflect on some very important questions around who I am, what my values are, and how I enact and would like to enact them in my daily life. And more importantly, it reminded me that I am not alone in my journey and I am not alone in my courage—we are all connected by our shared humanity.

The most important work that I will ever do is not that which is tied to papers, presentations, or even the grandest of accolades. It is instead the work that I must do every day to tend to my inner flame—to nurture it when it’s just a glimmer, to sustain it when it’s a fire, and to love it always, no matter its state. As I do this, day in and day out, I become who I truly am, letting my authentic self shine strong and bright.

Our first and foremost task is to faithfully to care for the inward fire so that when it is really needed it can offer warmth and light to lost travelers.

☞ Henri Nouwen ☞



Volunteers Helping Kids

“One of my favourite experiences with the Student Open Circles volunteer group was when we took the youth ice skating at the Hamilton Waterfront. For most of our children, this was their first time putting on skates. Without hesitation the volunteers took youth members one by one onto the ice. The children were overjoyed to be “skating” with the help of the volunteers. On any given day we may have 30 children attending the program. With extra support from the volunteers, we are able to spend more quality time with individual youth. The outcome has been fantastic: children that have been reserved and shy, are becoming vocal and more involved. It is wonderful to see the children become more enthusiastic about activities because of encouragement from the volunteers.

— HARRRP YouthCreate staff

The Magic of Living with Purpose

by Marlene Malik



I discovered Student Open Circles as I headed into my first year biology lecture wherein I found myself exhausted and disillusioned by the endless stressors and often superficial norms of university culture. A poster on the bulletin board outside the hall showcased various reflection circles, one being a meditation session. I sporadically attended a few meditation circles, in complete awe that there were other people at McMaster interested in and committed to spiritual growth and cultivating self-awareness.

In my second year, I began volunteering with the Learning and Fun After School program for at-risk children in the Hamilton community through Student Open Circles. I had been fond of volunteering from a young age but had never given much thought as to why service, especially in your own community, was so powerful and meaningful. Each volunteer session ended with group reflections facilitated by a student facilitator and through these I found myself becoming increasingly comfortable with being vulnerable in sharing my thoughts and feelings and more aware of the significance of my experiences with the children. I continued to volunteer for the duration of my university career as I witnessed the positive impact of the bonds we developed with the children. It always felt incredible to direct my energies toward something so meaningful and to spend time with such kind, creative, and bright children.

I later completed a Personal Discovery Course facilitated by Marybeth during a time when I was reconsidering my values and the career I'd felt drawn to since I was younger. The reflection and work weaved into the course led me to learn so much about myself, the magic of living with purpose, and the amazing journeys that others were on. One lesson I learned on an experiential level was how the process of personal discovery is ongoing throughout our lives, wherein our potential for expansion into compassionate, aware, and luminous humans is as vast as we allow it to be.

In my final year, I joined the executive student team for Open Circle and found myself growing into an open, accepting, and unconditionally kind leader due to the positive influence of Marybeth, Jeff, and the other students I was fortunate enough to collaborate with.

The value Student Open Circles has brought to others and myself in our university and the Hamilton

community cannot be overstated. In fact, I find myself limited by language in attempting to express the magnitude of subtle and profound ways in which I have been seen, heard, supported, appreciated, and transformed and in which I have had opportunities to be the same source of goodness for others. Marybeth and Jeff have been beacons of warmth, wisdom, conscientious leadership, and boundless support throughout my time in Student Open Circles. I am exceptionally grateful to have been a part of such a gorgeous community rooted in an appreciation and respect for our shared humanity and committed to creating a world with more depth, purpose, compassion, and reverence for all other beings.



Hamilton Citizen of the Year finalists with Mayor Fred Eisenberger, honouring the work of Student Open Circles

Student Open Circles

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How to Donate

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