



Student Open Circles

Perspectives Newsletter – March 2018

Community that Changes Lives

When students experience real community it is life-changing. Yi and Martin describe the difference it makes to be part of an inclusive and safe group, where they feel held and supported by others who know and care about them. This even influenced Yi’s decision about which school to attend for her graduate studies. Our work has expanded over the past few years to include graduate students and we’ve added programs specifically for them. Graduate students often feel a sense of isolation and, as Martin shares, creating community where they can connect with their peers in meaningful ways is transformative. Thank you for your support as we create community that changes lives!

Marybeth & Jeff



Showing me what “Community” is

by Yi Wang

Volunteer group facilitator and graduate student



Yi (bottom center) and several of our volunteer group facilitators during a leadership training session

When I first arrived in Hamilton in my first year as a froshie, I was unaware of my innocent ignorance. I found myself living in a foreign city independently for the first time, overwhelmed by the new public transit system, not daring to venture further than the safety of McMaster for several months. When I finally stepped onto a city bus, I was shocked by how downtown Hamilton’s Jackson Square could be called a mall; it wasn’t similar to any other mall I knew. About halfway through my undergraduate career, I was accidentally brought to the Student Open Circles’ Volunteer Fair by my housemates. I remember dreading the cold back then, but I’m so glad that I left the house and trekked through the snow that night.

It was Student Open Circles that showed me what “community” can mean: offering support, raising awareness, building friendships, and so much more than I can put into words. During busy times, my weekly opportunities to laugh with children at the Welcome Inn Community Centre and at the Inasmuch Women’s Shelter were a getaway from overstressed peers and thoughts of studying. I felt fortunate to have open-minded facilitators to reflect with in a safe and compassionate space.

When graduation was near and it was time to choose the next chapter, I was not only choosing a Graduate program, but I was also choosing a community to be a member of. I realized how important the role is that Student Open Circles plays in my life, and how it was not yet time to say goodbye. It has shown me and many others how to create a safe space and be truly inclusive, how to challenge ourselves to be vulnerable and grow, and how to humbly be a part of the wonderful Hamilton community. For me, one of the greatest things I have come to appreciate is Jackson Square, how it offers everyone a space with free air conditioning in the summer, free heating in the winter, how it creates an inclusive space for everyone in downtown Hamilton, including people who have nowhere else to go. The change in my perception of Jackson Square* from my first year in Hamilton to now is one thing I reflect on often to measure my growth. I’m beyond grateful for the people I’ve met and the support I’ve received through Student Open Circles, for the opportunities to give back to this wonderful city, and for how they have helped me grow to be more sensitive, inclusive, and a more wholesome individual.

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**Note from Jeff and Marybeth: If you aren’t familiar with Hamilton, you might miss the magnitude of the attitude shift Yi is describing. The Jackson square area, where we live, is often spoken of with disdain and fear by other students and “better-off” locals*

Explore Your Community

An Online Auction in support of Student Open Circles

AUCTION

March 6 – 20

opens and closes @ 3pm

Bid online for concerts, restaurant gift certificates, live theatre, wellness services and more!

StudentOpenCircles.com/auction

Moving from Montreal to Hamilton for my Master's degree was quite a challenge and outside my comfort zone. I didn't know anyone and I only knew a few basic directions to get around the city. In the midst of this complete change, I received an email about a Personal Discovery Course for Graduate students that Marybeth and Jeff facilitate.

Joining the group was quite unorthodox for me. In the past, I went to one-on-one counselling, but joining a group where I would open up to people without the professional barrier between client and counsellor made me feel uncomfortable. Questions such as: "What are the other participants going to think of me?", "Will there be people who are smarter than me?", or "Will I look stupid?" raced through my mind. But for some reason I kept feeling a push to participate. Eventually, I talked myself into going to the first meeting and I said: "If I don't like it, there is nothing stopping me from leaving!"

I remember how nervous I felt when I arrived. My heart raced as I turned the doorknob, opened the door, and entered the room. Jeff and Marybeth greeted me with a friendly "hello" and invited me to help myself to some snacks and to have a seat in the circle. The other students were very quiet. I simply stayed silent and ate a few cookies. What astonished me was that some of the other students were also nervous. I noticed how they, like me, avoided eye contact and distracted themselves with their cellphones until the meeting started.

Marybeth and Jeff opened by introducing themselves and explaining the aims of the group and the guidelines that everyone needed to respect. Then, it was our turn to introduce ourselves with our name and something that we like doing. What I really appreciate about their approach is that they allowed us to skip if we didn't wish to speak, and we had the choice to express our ideas either vocally or through drawing. This was the first time I experienced a group that encouraged different avenues for communicating our thoughts. I also really liked that we were divided into smaller groups, giving us the chance to know each other more profoundly. By talking in these groups it became clear to me that I wasn't the only one who was nervous about what others would think of them. This gave me a sense of relief and I quickly became more comfortable with sharing my thoughts and feelings.

In this moment, I realized how much I have in common with others. Even though we all come from different personal backgrounds, we all have similar fears, hopes, and dreams in the end. For me, it was the first time I opened up to strangers and it felt great. I also didn't feel anxious about having the right answers to the questions that were posed. I was even quite alright with not knowing. I realized that what was important in these sessions wasn't so much the answers that we produced. It was the journey that we were all beginning to take to get to know and listen to ourselves.

Now, saying that "process matters over results" is a motto that we see in all sorts of ads and healthy cereal boxes. Frankly, it's a motto that has cheapened the complex nature of such a truth. In my case, it's one year after having attended the group that I am truly beginning to experience and recognize how I have grown through this process. It's only today where I am back in my hometown that the process of challenging who I am is truly put to the test. I reflect about the exercises we did and it helps me to trust and feel comfortable with the idea that not knowing exactly where my journey will lead is ALRIGHT!

One exercise we did was to draft our personal life mission statement. We were encouraged to think about questions such as: "What type of person do you want to become?" and "What personal values do you want to uphold?" Each week, we were given reflective exercises to help us look at various aspects of our lives and examine our personal conduct.

If you would ask me what I got out of the group that mattered the most, I would provide a visual image of an exercise we did in the last meeting that marked me. Jeff asked us to stand in a circle and he gave one of the members a ball of yarn. Jeff asked her to say how these meetings will affect her life going forward and then, while holding on to the



string, toss the knitting ball to another member to continue. We ended up creating a large web which showed me how we are all interconnected even though we may feel completely separated from others. Before I came to the group, I saw myself as a separate person and I easily passed judgement on others without a second thought. This web showed me how interconnected our lives can be, and I became more sympathetic as a result. I have become more kind. By being less harsh with myself, I have also become more understanding towards others. That is what mattered to me the most.

I thank Student Open Circles with my heartfelt gratitude for facilitating the Personal Discovery Course. It truly made a valuable difference for me.

Before I came to the group, I saw myself as a separate person and I easily passed judgement on others without a second thought. ... I have become more kind in my interactions with others and with myself

How to Donate

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