



# Student Open Circles

Perspectives Newsletter – September 2018

## Supporting Students to Make a Difference

Student Open Circles gives students the support they need to be present to their daily lives, their relationships with others, and the difference that they can make. For Chari, this support helped him to find a sense of purpose and to respond thoughtfully instead of reacting to whatever life throws at him. For Chari and Betty, they discovered themselves as leaders inspiring change in the lives of children and youth. Thank you for supporting Student Open Circles as we support young adults in their personal, spiritual, and leadership development!

Marybeth & Jeff

### Leaders Inspiring Change

by Betty Zhang, Volunteer group facilitator



Betty (2<sup>nd</sup> from left) with her weekly volunteer group at the Pathways to Education Program

At an early age, I noticed that our society sees “youth” as deviants causing disruption rather than leaders inspiring change. Beginning in high school, I tried to challenge this notion by starting a youth volunteer group to tend the community garden, which provides fresh produce to impoverished families in our city.

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Upon coming to University, I began volunteering with Student Open Circles as a tutor for new youth immigrants and was exposed to the vulnerability of young refugees. I was deeply moved as I got to know a young girl who had spent over seven years at a refugee camp in Lebanon with limited access to education and role models. Now, in the Canadian school system, she not only struggled with English Literacy, but also with believing in her ability to achieve her ambitions. I realized that even more than textbooks, she needed a mentor to help her believe in herself. Although I had limited resources, I tried to connect her to social services to support her education and career goals. I saw her smile when she achieved 80% on her math test after working through a hundred algebra problems together the week before. I lifted her spirits with a simple smile when she faced small obstacles in reaching her goals. I had the privilege of watching her grow every week while volunteering.

“I am proud to serve as Chair of the Board of Student Open Circles, an organization that does an amazing job at connecting students with volunteer opportunities in the community, as well as providing a safe space for students to explore their values and directions in life. A great initiative for positive mental health!”

– Dr. Karen Trollope-Kumar  
Student Open Circles Board Member

I would not have been equipped with the skills to be a positive and motivating mentor without the mentorship I received from my Student Open Circles facilitators. My facilitators led reflections with our group each week, which helped me contextualize the impact of our work in the community and inspired my continuing commitment. Through their guidance, I realized that by helping students improve their literacy skills, we are empowering youth with new opportunities and tools to protect their health and wellbeing. The supportive environment of my volunteer group helped me discover my passion for youth mentorship. My facilitators challenged and inspired me to start an ongoing collaboration between the Hamilton Police and Sir John A Macdonald High School in Hamilton’s inner city to host a basketball tournament that would allow youths to personally meet the police officers who protect our community. The game provided a setting and opportunity for officers to model peaceful and respectful behaviour for youths.

In my third year of volunteering with Student Open Circles, I had the opportunity to facilitate an extremely engaged, nurturing, and diverse weekly volunteer group to support the Pathways to Education Program at the North Hamilton Community Center. The Pathways program provides academic, financial, and one-on-one support to help at-risk youth graduate from high school and pursue postsecondary opportunities.

I am humbled by the opportunity to empower youths through education and mentorship under the guidance and support of Student Open Circles. I am grateful for the generous support of our community and the exceptional leadership of Jeff, Marybeth, and our intern to make these wonderful opportunities available for McMaster students.



A glimpse of one of our Volunteer Fairs, signing up 300 students to volunteer with our weekly groups.

# From “Headless Chicken” to a Sense of Direction

by Srimann Chari, *Open Circle student*

I have tried to think back to my state of mind before I joined Open Circle, but it is perhaps beyond what I can describe. It brings to mind the image of a headless chicken running around with no sense of direction or purpose. This is, unfortunately, the state of most students (and I think most people), where focus is shifted from one assignment to the next. The most valuable gift Student Open Circles has given me is the ability to reflect. Introspection does not come naturally to me, but Open Circle finds a way to effortlessly seam it together with student life. It has granted me a sense of purpose, and I am no longer doing things simply because a deadline is approaching. I have been granted a new sense of calm, and the ability to control my reactions to the challenges the world has to offer. The plethora of events that Open Circle offers caters to a vast majority of students and helps us in a myriad number of ways. Personally, the weekly reflection circles provide me with a sanctuary to pause, sit back and reflect on what it is that I do every day. I reflect on experiences that shaped who I am, and develop ways to improve my daily interactions with the people around me. The circle allows an open space to express feelings without inhibition and to discover our true selves.

Open Circle also provides a medium of expression for the sense of peace it instills through its volunteer circles. The principle difference between these volunteer circles and other volunteer programs is the mandatory reflection at the end of each session. During a busy school term, volunteering can quickly become another weekly chore, like a 3-hour lecture that you don't really want to attend. Reflection helps ground you to what you are doing and why you are doing it. The emphasis is placed not only on the children's development, but also on the volunteer's growth. It allows volunteers to have a rewarding and challenging experience while pursuing something that makes a visible difference.

Student Open Circles has been integral to my development as a student and as a person. It has given me a reason to continue working to the best of my ability without losing sight of why — to make a positive difference, no matter how small, in my life and the lives of everybody else.



*Chari (on floor beside fireplace), at an Open Circle retreat. Pictured here: students engage in a silent group reflection, creating with clay in response to a question*

## Breakfast Program Volunteers

This experience made me feel more like a part of the Hamilton community beyond McMaster. I think that, for a student, having a place to go each morning helps make the rest of the day go smoothly and has a long-term positive impact on the children's overall well-being and academics as well. *(student volunteer)*



I realized my contributions are important and that they make a difference to at-risk youths. Poverty has many effects, not just malnutrition, but also education and health care. I hope I have left a positive impact on the kids, either through providing a nutritious breakfast or giving them advice on various aspects of their lives. Through the influence of my service, they may decide to help others or see the importance of education or work hard to improve their lives in the future. *(student volunteer)*

## How to Donate

Canadian Charitable Registration 891444309 RR0001

- Please make cheques payable to Student Open Circles
- Mail to: TSH B110, McMaster University  
1280 Main Street West, Hamilton, ON L8S 4M2
- For online donations, visit our website

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