



Student Open Circles

Perspectives Newsletter – December 2018

Waking Up through Action and Reflection

Students tell us that reflection changes them. We hear this over and over. Whether it's weekly volunteering, taking one of our extra-curricular courses, or in our small groups, Student Open Circles teaches students to pause and notice. This is radical – in our society it's not the norm to take time out from "productive" or consumer activities. As a result, many live in a trance-like state, feeling disconnected from what is happening around and within. Like Amanda, some of our student volunteers wonder why they need to stay to reflect after every shift. And then, they find that in the combination of action and reflection, they "wake up." They wake up to meaningful connections with their peers and with the people we are serving. They become attentive to their own lives and growth. They grow into people who are "willing to learn, care, and give." For Allyson, as a PhD student and Teaching Assistant, being surrounded by such engaged, awake, and empathetic undergraduates awakened her compassion for and sensitivity to the struggles of the students that she evaluates, even the ones who are anxious, demanding, and angry! Thank you for supporting Student Open Circles to help young people become more awake and alive!!

Marybeth & Jeff

Undergrads Teach this PhD Candidate

by Allyson Oliphant, Volunteer Group Facilitator

I have been a University student for a very long time... 8 years at this point, as I start my PhD. I volunteered every year of my undergraduate, loving every minute of it as I met some of my best friends, and every volunteer shift was a new learning opportunity.

As I went along in my academic career, I began working as a teaching assistant, marking papers, creating online tests, assisting in lectures, sometimes even lecturing to classes as large as 150 students. I felt a growing distance between myself and the students I was marking and evaluating. The constant barrage of emails flooding my inbox daily had begun to affect my perception of this next generation of undergraduates, as many were tinted with anger and frustration. I did what I could to ensure that I was fair, professional and forthcoming but, as the saying goes, "you can't make everyone happy." I was beginning to be affected by this inability to keep everyone happy.

I started with Student Open Circles in 2017, not as a facilitator or a volunteer, but as a paid intern. It was a learning curve! I was thrust back in to a world of undergraduates. Little did I know, this was exactly what I needed. In Student Open Circles, I was immersed in a community of the most compassionate, kind, and caring students I had ever met. They put themselves second, forgoing sleeping in or going out on their Fridays, to be a part of a community; a collective. It was eye opening, and oh so refreshing.

I decided, after my tenure as the intern ended and my PhD began, to return as a volunteer group facilitator myself. I missed the students! And I am so glad that I did. Once again, I am gifted time with these wonderful people from such diverse backgrounds, who want to be a part of something more and give back to a community they are growing to love.

Their empathy, engagement and desire to help reminds me that there is always kindness to be found. They teach me something new every time we meet, and it has resonated throughout my academic work. I am so mindful now of the experiences of the students I mark and evaluate. They too, are faced with challenges and stresses and pressure and by far, most are kind and looking for reassurance. I feel I am able to offer more to them now than before thanks to Student Open Circles and their exceptional team of volunteers and facilitators.



Allyson (above right) facilitates one of our weekly groups at the Eva Rothwell Centre's afterschool program. We have been supporting this centre with our volunteers since they opened in 2006: when a school closed, concerned citizens rallied to reopen the building and provide a much-needed community centre for a neighbourhood with few resources



Celebrate Gratitude with Us

We invite you to join our **“Celebrating Gratitude” crowdfunding campaign**, partnering with us to mentor and empower students from diverse backgrounds in personal and spiritual reflection, community service, and leadership development. A generous donor will match the first \$1500 in contributions, doubling your impact!

We are grateful for the many supporters of Student Open Circles who make this work possible!

www.canadahelps.org/en/charities/student-open-circles/p2p/crowdfunding2018

Reflecting Woke Me Up

by Amanda Zhou, Volunteer Group Facilitator



I first joined Student Open Circles as a weekly volunteer for the breakfast program at Dr. Davey School in downtown Hamilton. I was in my first year, eager to seize any opportunity that would allow me to be involved in the McMaster and Hamilton community. I applied for the volunteering position because I enjoyed working with children and it fit my schedule.

At first, I didn't really understand the significance of reflecting after volunteering each week: so we met for 15 minutes to do activities, debrief, and talk, and that was supposed to make me a better volunteer/person? How-

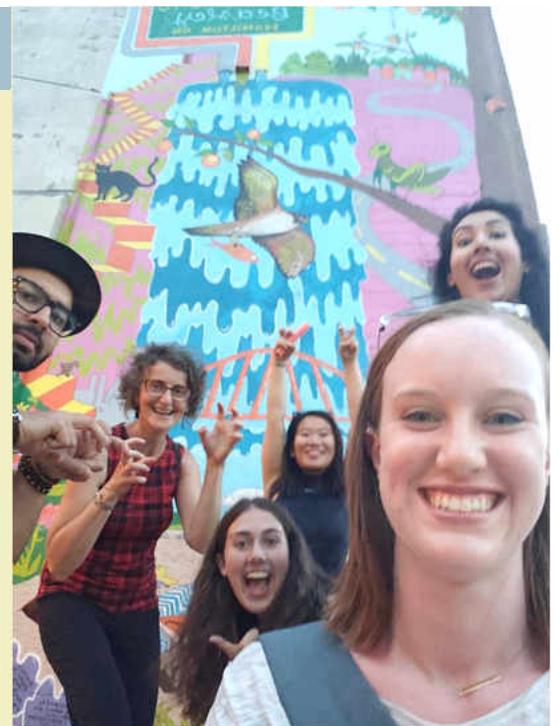
ever, the more sessions I attended, the more I appreciated these 15 minutes. Through these reflections, I built strong bonds with people who volunteered with me, which made the weekly task fun and enjoyable. Through these reflections, I learned what our work at the school meant to the children and their families, which made me a more committed volunteer. Through these reflections, I discussed social problems with others, which made me more aware of what was happening around me.

I valued these reflections so much that I decided to become a facilitator for the weekly group that volunteers at Conway Opportunity Homes for adults who live with disability. Being a facilitator has allowed me to learn more about Student Open Circles. In addition to holding reflection activities for my fellow volunteers, I get to participate in biweekly leadership training meetings and other reflection circle activities. These programs allow me to take some time to just focus on my values, to breathe despite the chaos of university life. They also allow me to pay attention to existing social problems and reflect on how to resolve these issues. Before, I wouldn't even bother going on news websites and reading about what's happening around me. Student Open Circles has transformed me into a person who is more willing to learn, care, and give. It gave me the will and courage to make changes.

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Mentoring Student Leaders

Student Open Circles provides regular leadership training sessions and individual coaching for more than 45 students, teaching them how to facilitate reflection and build community with their peers. Here are some of the students who help to plan events on campus.



How to Donate

Canadian Charitable Registration 891444309 RR0001

- For online donations, visit our website
- Cheques payable to Student Open Circles
- Mail to: TSH B110, McMaster University
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