

Perspectives... *on the Journey*

Student Open Circles at M^cMaster University

Fast Facts:

- 20–25 teams volunteering each week
- Over 300 students giving 10,000 hours each year (this translates to at least \$110,000 of benefit to the Hamilton community)
- Hundreds of students involved in Weekly Reflection Groups, Events, Personal Discovery Course, and Retreats

Children Speak...

“I come here and I always get help from my mentors. They give me good advice and suggestions especially when it comes to staying out of trouble from gangs or bullying.”

– David M., Grade 8

Learning And Fun afterschool program at Welcome Inn Community Centre

Student Volunteers Speak...



“I’ve learned that I have the potential to make a difference in other people’s lives, even if it seems small.”

“I always knew that poverty and social issues in Hamilton were serious, but not to this extent. Only after this volunteer opportunity, I got to notice some of the problems that even children undergo. I’ve learned the importance of voicing out my concerns about poverty to a greater audience, so more people can take action. In the future, I can picture myself continuing to support and assist more individuals that face social issues.”

Which of the following were heard from students in Open Circle recently?

- (a) Usually I feel like adults think I’m a nuisance...because I’m “**just a teenager**,” which to them means I’m annoying, in the way, without a valid opinion, idealistic.
- (b) Thank you for seeing me as a valid soul and respecting me **despite my age**.
- (c) I’ve never had space like this where I can share about who I am without having to explain, where there’s **no pressure to fit in** with something. I can discover who I am so much more freely here where there aren’t restrictions on what is shared.
- (d) Being here, being guided and supported by you, shows me what it’s like to be loved.
- (e) It’s **not ok just to do well**. You have to be better than everyone else. So for you to do well, everyone else needs to fail.

And the answer is... all of the above except (e), which was a conversation between students I overheard on the city bus.

Two things stand out to me here. One is that young people are craving relationships with role models who can hold space open for them to explore their own path. The second is that young people often feel discounted and of little value in our productivity-oriented society. To feel valued, they feel they need to fulfill a checklist of having a career that makes a lot of money, buying a house, getting married, and so on. This is in contrast with my own faith perspective in which every person has immense value, just as they are. Mary Hynes on CBC’s Tapestry asks: “How would you measure your worth as a human being? Does it hinge on your job title, your usefulness in the world, your bank balance? The spiritual [perspective] is that your worth is built in. Everybody’s life has value.” As a young adult, my resilience was encouraged by the example of Jesus, who welcomed young people when others discounted them, spoke of the least being the greatest, and taught about the need to become like a child in order to understand what it’s all about.

In Student Open Circles, our daily practice is to invite young people, from all or no faith background, to understand their worth and grow into who they truly are. You can see in Shahan’s story, how experiencing this space of respect and deep listening is a life-changing relief. Thank you for your support in creating these opportunities for transformation!

— Marybeth Leis Druery

Mentors Making a Difference

Six of our weekly volunteer groups serve at the Welcome Inn Community Centre. Volunteers are paired as mentors with children in need of extra social and academic support (below and left).



A Place to Discover & Connect

by Shahan Tariq, Open Circle student participant

Open Circle gives me a place where I am able to meaningfully reflect and even discover who I am and how important community is to me. It's funny — I'm now in my last year, about to graduate, and it doesn't feel like it's been 2 years since I joined Open Circle.

I still remember the first time I showed up to one of the potluck introductory dinners, way back when. I was a bit more of a wallflower then and I can remember that moment when I thought this was something I wanted to get involved with. With food in our hands, we had split up for a small group discussion and I was with a group of strangers in a room not knowing what to expect. I forget most of the specifics but somehow the conversation turned to bullying and it jumped from there to more generally about what it feels like to be isolated and on the edge looking in, or to use a more cliché phrase, feeling like you don't belong anywhere. The emotional charge in the room was palpable and there were a few tears shed. Now that was something that just hadn't happened to me before. I mean you share things that have meaning and that are important with people that are closer to you, but this was a room of people who for the most part were just meeting for the first time. By society's rules we're supposed to talk about the weather and movies and our days, not bare our vulnerability and soul for everyone to see. It was almost magical and since then I've realized it wasn't a one-off thing.

The key is in the spaces Open Circle creates, and it doesn't matter whether we're volunteering out in the world or playing board games, or discussing our life's journey. Wherever the circle forms, it's like something happens. All of a sudden, this room with people, amazing glorious human beings, becomes this inclusive, welcoming, non-judgmental space, where for an hour, just a few drops of time in the big bustle, you're connected to each other, and you learn and you grow, and just become better through that connection. And in this space, it's okay to just be you. No more, no less, with all the myriad of things about yourself you deem flaws, and simply the act of being in this space is enough of a contribution. You can talk as much as you want, or stay silent, or dance, or rant, or pass, and your presence itself is received as a gift. And that feeling, the feeling of being enough — and this might sound a bit paradoxical — it's a powerful thing, powerful enough to change things inside and outside. And in my experience, that is how you begin to discover and explore and reflect on all the things that make you up, how you find your place in a society that constantly berates you for not being 'something' enough, and how you learn to walk a path that is true to who you are, learning and growing and definitely stumbling.

In Open Circle this journey, and these spaces, are shared with others, and that's how a community is formed.

Following a Path with Heart

Highlights from our Open Circle Winter Retreat



Shahan (front left) and the rest of us...



Silent hike... spontaneous midnight walk...



Cooking and eating together...



Putting away screens and connecting with those in front of us... Deepening spiritual awareness through journey sharing circles.

Student Open Circles

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, and donations of stocks and mutual funds are available at our website. Jeff's CD's and Marybeth's art, prints, and greeting cards are available on our website, with all proceeds supporting Student Open Circles.

Canadian Charitable Registration 891444309 RR001

P.O. Box 57292, 2 King St. W.
Hamilton, ON L8P 4X1

289-426-5704

Marybeth Leis Druery: leismb@mcmaster.ca
Jeff Druery: jdruery@mcmaster.ca

StudentOpenCircles.com