



# Student Open Circles

Perspectives Newsletter – March 2016

## What Moves Us to Compassionate Action?

Here are two stories that speak to this question. Jordan finds inspiration through mentoring children in struggling inner-city neighbourhoods with his Student Open Circles' volunteer group. Douglas was welcomed into a warm and caring community with us when he was a student, and ten years later he continues to give back.

Thank you for your support as we support young adults in widening their circles of compassion!

Marybeth & Jeff

## Awakening from Cynicism by Jordan Da Silva, Student Volunteer Facilitator



This is my story, not the story of someone particularly well-travelled or exceptionally wise or well-read but one you may find interesting none the less. This is the story of someone who at the ripe old age of 22 can only be certain of a few things, and one of those things is that we as individuals all have an innate drive to serve others. I know this because I found it within myself, after joining Student Open Circles, an organization that allows individuals to transcend the University bubble and engage the city of Hamilton in all its beauty. The Hamilton who's beauty is most clearly seen in the eyes of its residents.

My story goes like this; I awoke one day with the sudden realization that I was tired of being cynical about society and the community I lived in. I immediately knew that I had to start to apply my newly forming paradigm to my surroundings and that the only way for me to change my views would be through making a change in myself and my actions.

*(continued on page 2)*

## A Surprise Reunion by Jeff Druery, Student Open Circles Program Staff

"Hello Jeff, How are you? It's been a really long time. I'm wondering if you have time to meet." When I received this e-mail, I hadn't seen Douglas in 10 years. He had moved home to China immediately after graduating and now he was returning for the first time.

Over coffee, Douglas updated Marybeth and me on his life, explaining that he's been teaching English since graduating. He described how he has been volunteering his own time to run a group for conversation practice outside of class time, where he makes an effort to entice his students to discuss meaningful topics. "They want to talk about shopping, which I think is very boring," he said. "I ask them the kinds of questions we discussed in Open Circle, like challenging the assumptions of consumerism, or how to have healthy relationships."

When we were saying our goodbyes, he told us how grateful he is for the feeling of community he experienced in Open Circle and that he is still applying these lessons with his students, trying to give them a similar experience of belonging. He repeated it a few times, wanting to impress on us that he would not be doing these things for others if he hadn't received so much when he was a student.

In Student Open Circles we make a special effort to be hospitable to everyone. Including international students doesn't happen by accident. Dealing with language barriers requires intentional effort and patience. Douglas' English was not nearly as fluent then as it is now; I was surprised and delighted to find out how much those long-ago discussions have influenced his values. It's inspiring to sense his obvious care for his students. It affirms for me how powerful it is when someone is welcomed into a caring, open, and supportive community. Whether it's including a wide diversity of students in our reflection circles, or welcoming a newly arrived refugee family in one of our volunteer groups, the acceptance that is woven throughout Student Open Circles changes people; it has ongoing reverberations as they find their place and then give back to others.



As a student, Douglas (2<sup>nd</sup> from left) was a regular part of a Reflection Circle that Jeff facilitated, as well as many potluck meals (where he would introduce us to Chinese cuisine).

## Awakening from Cynicism *(continued)*

I vividly remember my first days at Bennetto Elementary School. The realities of this community were at first a stark contrast to my upbringing and a challenge to my understanding. Some students would show up to school without having eaten breakfast and a large portion of students were reading well below their grade level. I saw that the teachers and staff were stretched to the limit of their time and resources and were doing their best to have a positive life-changing impact on these students. It was clear however that despite the heroic staff effort, resources were exhausted. This was evident in learning about the relatively low rate of children from this neighbourhood that would ultimately end up going on to a post-secondary education.



Students in a weekly volunteer group who serve as mentors for at-risk children, joining our 300+ student volunteers who help children and youth, adults living with disabilities, recent immigrants and refugees, and at homeless shelters.

The need was clear, but how could myself as a McMaster student make any difference? Would reading just once a week with these students who were behind their grade level equivalents, in sessions largely spent sounding out words and counting syllables, really make any difference?

I can recall one day specifically, when all my uncertainties about the impact on this community and on myself was made clear to me. On this particular day I was very tired and stressed from school. I felt like I had a million other things on my mind, an experience I am sure you can relate to. I am not proud to admit this, but I considered calling in sick that day. As I battled my own weakness I even questioned what value my presence held with the school and that it might be best to worry about my more personal concerns. Thankfully, I made the decision to keep my commitment that day. Because as soon as I walked through the doors of Ms. Green's grade 2 class I knew instantly I had made the right decision. There were these excited kids who all had their books in hand and were energetically anticipating my arrival. It dawned on me in that moment that it was not so much the difference I had made in their reading that counted but the hope, excitement and positivity that I brought with me every week that was being transferred to them and positively impacting their lives.

Student Open Circles gave me the opportunity to have this and many other amazing experiences. I know that I wouldn't otherwise have had a chance to positively impact the Hamilton community and make great strides in my personal growth. Because ultimately, it is not so much the steps we take in life but the direction in which we choose to step that matters, and stepping with Student Open Circles made all the difference for me.

## Explore Your Community

*An Online Auction fundraiser  
in support of Student Open Circles*

**March 8 – 22**, opens and closes @ 3pm

Bid online for restaurant gift certificates, planetarium show, art, live theatre, services, and more!



## Student Open Circles

Canadian Charitable Registration 891444309 RR0001

### 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 and greeting cards are available on our website, with all proceeds supporting Student Open Circles.

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