



Student Open Circles

Perspectives Newsletter – May 2016

Helping Students towards Wellness and Spiritual Growth

Pursuing meaning and purpose is common during the young adult stage in life. The questions that Mohamed and Stevie are wrestling with are catalysts for growth. By providing guidance and the support of a community, Student Open Circles is helping young people to discover their inner value and worth as well as the contribution they want to make with their lives. Thank you for your support as we walk with students during this tumultuous and fertile stage in life.

Marybeth & Jeff

What on Earth am I doing here? by Mohamed Sarraj, Open Circle student



University is a transitional period for many. We are exiting the comforts of structured book learning and asked to define a purpose and direction for our lives beyond. This is no easy task, and the academic institution is ill-equipped in helping students find this meaning. Here, Open Circle fills a deep and critical void.

I have found generosity, compassion, and wisdom in Jeff, Marybeth, and their events and circles. I have been part of the Meditation Circle with Jeff since September and what I've experienced has since been an indispensable part of my life. Jeff always leads us in interesting and engaging spiritual practices. It was in this circle that I learned to begin to let go of worries, fears, and anxieties. To pay attention to the present and find peace and wellness in the face of life's uncertainties. Those uncertainties have taken the form of career indecision, doubts about whether I was being true to myself, and questions like "what on earth am I doing in this place?"

It was at the height of this antsiness about monumental questions that I approached Marybeth for a Spiritual Companionship session. I wasn't sure what to expect, and I was a bit apprehensive about the 'spiritual' part. Would there be a voodoo doll? Ritual sacrifice? Perhaps I'd leave unscathed, with just some prayer. In fact, Marybeth said nearly nothing. With some expertly crafted guiding questions, she helped me explore what I was nervous about and what I truly valued. I already had the answers to those colossal questions I was asking. They were buried under disparate thoughts; my midterm the next day, my faltering progress on my thesis, or what I was going to have for dinner. I just needed the time and the professional guidance, which in conjunction with Open Circle's Personal Discovery Course, I was able to access.

Identifying my underlying fears was so valuable, and Open Circle provided critical tools to help me accept them and move forward in a meaningful, purposeful way. Open Circle has helped me live in the present and make peace with the future. It has bred in me a love of self-reflection and spiritual growth, and for that I am ever grateful.

Changing Lives: Student Open Circles Volunteers in the Community

From our weekly Volunteer Group at YOUth Create

One girl in the program who is a higher needs student said, "I love when the volunteers come because they're fun and listen to me. I feel bad for other kids when they can't make it on Thursdays because they're awesome." This is a girl who really thrives with the one-on-one attention that she is able to get on Thursdays, and her social skills have really developed since being able to get that attention. Since starting their time volunteering, I have seen the volunteers come out of their shells and really become comfortable in this environment. They are fantastic with the kids and so appreciated by all the staff!

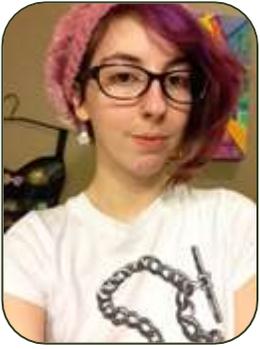
— Rebekah Clause, staff at YOUth Create, HARRRP



Weekly volunteers at Wesley Centre Soup Kitchen
Left to right: Kimberley, Tasha, Rachel, Jaya, Maria

Open Circle got me out of bed

by Stevie Garnett, *Open Circle student*



First term of university was a really challenging time for me. New classes with heavy workloads and high expectations, navigating an unfamiliar campus, dealing with feelings of isolation due to a lack of friends, and a variety of personal crises and trials on top of all of that and it's enough to make you want to give up. Open Circle has been a life saver for me. I had gone to a few Circles throughout the term, and found them a welcome break from my constant anxiety and overthinking. Then I had a really bad week. Couldn't go to class, didn't want to leave my bed sort of bad. But I remembered Open Circle and the positivity I felt while I had been there before. So I decided to go to all of the Circles that week, as an act of self-care and preservation. This fall I made the decision to overcome my mental illnesses, and start taking steps to living the life that I want to live. Open Circle has been crucial to my success with that. Even in the depths of my personal despair, these circles were moments of peace and light for me. Going to reflection circles helped me to integrate meditation into my regular life, as well as taught me what mindfulness is, and how to practice it in my day to day life. For that, I am forever grateful.

When I heard about the retreat, I decided to attend, despite my anxieties about being around so many unknown people for so long. I still was having no luck making friends at McMaster, and had a brewing identity crisis going on, so I hoped that the retreat would be helpful for both of these issues.

From the moment we arrived at the retreat, I had good feelings about it. A beautiful little house in the woods where we would all try to learn more about ourselves and one another. I was amazed by how quickly it felt like a home away from home. Despite the fact that I am a very introverted individual, I soon found myself relaxing and socializing alongside everyone else. Despite not knowing most of the people there, I felt welcomed and accepted from the moment I walked in the door. I found myself opening up to people at the retreat much quicker and easier than I would ever have expected. It was a very interesting experience, for I had never spoken to anyone there about musical tastes, hobbies, etc. like one usually does upon meeting someone new, yet I was able to speak about some of the deepest parts of myself with ease. We were all on the retreat, living in a small house for the weekend, with the common goal of getting to know ourselves better, as well as helping others recognize their place in their own respective journeys. While many groups try to be a "safe space" and accepting of everyone, I often do not feel truly safe and accepted. The retreat and reflection circles are some of the few environments where I have genuinely felt entirely safe to be my true self. This atmosphere allowed for conversations about our deepest desires, fears, and identities to develop and flourish. This retreat offered an opportunity for me to drop my inner shields and bare my soul amongst strangers who did the same, in a place where I felt safe, respected, even appreciated. While on the retreat, and at all Open Circle events, I never feel an obligation to fill the silence; it fills itself naturally as those involved feel the desire to open up and share parts of themselves. It is a completely unique experience to learn and grow spiritually with people you might not otherwise get the opportunity to know, and I am so grateful to Open Circle for offering me this opportunity.



"I felt welcomed and accepted from the moment I walked in the door..." Open Circle is truly a safe space for students from all backgrounds. Below: writing "warm fuzzies" (notes of affirmation and appreciation) at our Winter Retreat.



Student Open Circles

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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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