

# Perspectives... on the Journey

Student Open Circles at M<sup>c</sup>Master University

*The Open Circle community is enriched by students who come from a wide diversity of faith and non-religious backgrounds. Engaging in discussion with this diversity and serving together provides significant opportunities for growth. Those who bring a faith perspective to these experiences find that their faith is deepened and enriched. In this newsletter, you'll hear from Sharon about how her involvement as a volunteer, and more recently as our CVA Intern, has given her new insight into what it means for her to live her faith. You'll also hear from Nazia about how learning at our CVA facilitator training meetings about how to be present to the moment has transformed her personal life and her volunteer work. Gladys, coordinator at the LAF afterschool program where five CVA groups volunteer each week, shares about the positive impact in the Hamilton community as students act with compassion. Thank you for being present to the needs of students and the community, making all of this possible through your support and encouragement!*

— Marybeth and Jeff



*Community Volunteer Action group that Jeff facilitates (above) at the YMCA Newcomer Youth Centre where we tutor recent immigrant high school students at the Homework Help Club (below) and interact with them in the Drop In Youth Centre (bottom).*

## Learning to Be Present

by Nazia Hossain

*CVA student facilitator at YMCA Newcomer Youth Centre & Homework Help Club*



As our society gets busier and the pressure to be more efficient with our time increases, the days seem to blur into one another and when we finally get a chance to stop and take a breath, we're left with a feeling of astonishment at exactly how much time has flown by without us even noticing. This sense of "losing time" may partly be a consequence of our constant concern for the future. I know that I personally spend a lot of my days preoccupied with crossing items off of a mental to-do list, always trying to stay one step ahead of my schedule. With this mindset, it's easy to take the present for granted.

At our Open Circle student leader training meetings this year, we explored practices to help us become more aware of our present experiences and surroundings. I've since noticed that by taking just a few moments every day to stop and fully appreciate where I am, what I'm doing, and who I'm with, I now place more value on my present and am less stressed about my future and my past. Being more mindful has also helped me become a better volunteer and facilitator for my group at YMCA's Homework Help Club. I now make more of an effort to be fully present for the youth at the agency by giving them my full attention while interacting with them, rather than concerning myself with what the other volunteers are doing or keeping my eye on the clock to make sure that we start reflection on time. I've found that the youth can sense when volunteers are truly providing their undivided attention and they respond positively to this simple change in attitude.

Being mindful has also helped me get more value out of our weekly reflection periods after every volunteer session. Instead of making sure we wrap up on time so that we can catch the right bus back to campus, I find myself paying more attention to the experiences and emotions that the other volunteers are sharing. As a result, I can respond better to the thoughts and concerns they are voicing, which I hope has helped them feel more appreciated for the time and effort they are putting in every week. By learning to both plan for the future and appreciate the present, I think that we can become more effective in all aspects of our lives while regaining a sense of control over our precious time.

*Michael, pictured below tutoring Rahwa, spoke about his volunteer experiences at our "How Can I Make a Difference?" panel event recently. Another of the panelists was a student who now attends McMaster but came to Canada a few years ago from a Burmese refugee camp. He talked about how the tutoring and mentoring we gave him at the Homework Help Club helped him to overcome the challenges he faced. It was rewarding to hear of how our simple acts of service made a difference in his life.*



## Agencies Speak

by Gladys Flores, Coordinator of the LAF

*(Learning And Fun) afterschool program at the Welcome Inn Community Centre*

Colin, a CVA student facilitator, has worked alongside a very special little boy in grade 3. "Kevin" struggles with both learning and behavioural disabilities but since starting at LAF last fall has found a true rapport with his mentor Colin. Colin is always patient, kind, and compassionate when working with Kevin, and Kevin is blossoming under his care and attention. I remember one day very well! Kevin was frustrated and near an emotional meltdown. With Colin's support and guidance he was able to calm himself, (a huge personal victory for him) and feel empowered to make a change for the positive on his next day at LAF.

Stories like this would not be possible without the commitment of CVA volunteers. Their commitment to the children and the program has been crucial to the program's success. Being able to provide one-on-one or small group tutoring with the CVA volunteers is an invaluable tool in mentoring the children who are a part of the LAF Program. This factor is what sets LAF apart from other after school programs but more importantly the relationships and rapport that have developed between the children and the CVA mentors have been the greatest success. Thank you for making such a wonderful impact in our community!

## Living My Faith through Service by Sharon Mathew

*It's been a delight to work with Sharon as our intern this year! We are grateful for all she has contributed. When Marybeth met with her at the end of her time as a student to discuss what she's taking with her from her involvement in CVA, Sharon reflected on how it has deepened her Christian faith. Here she shares her story with you.*



This past year interning with Community Volunteer Action (CVA) has been a wonderful experience that allowed me to develop practical work experience, gain a perspective outside student life, and grow in both maturity and responsibility. I was blessed to have Marybeth and Jeff as my supervisors and I am very grateful for the wealth of guidance they've offered me and, more than anything, for their patience and kindness despite my many "starting troubles." I never imagined my journey with CVA would be so multi-faceted when I signed up at ClubsFest on a rainy September day in my third year of university. Little did I know, my ensuing involvements as a weekly volunteer and later as a group facilitator at various agencies like Pathways to Education, Welcome Inn's Senior's Program, and Reading Buddies Literacy Program would leave a lasting impression on my life and genuinely enhance the quality of my time as a student. In my journey from volunteer to facilitator to now intern, I've noticed that the two overarching themes of love and service have helped me integrate meaning into my time here with CVA.

Admittedly, my generation is the "selfie" generation, and that's in more ways than one. While images of people turning the camera on themselves can be amusing, it often alludes to the self-driven ideals of our society. We are almost always looking to see how things and people can work to our benefit or highlight our achievements or make us look good and, as a result, being a "servant" becomes a foreign and, dare I say, undesirable concept. Being a volunteer allowed me to start investing my time and energies in another person and work towards their success.

Volunteering with CVA has opened my eyes to the reality that the most effective way to live my faith in action is to humble myself to the role of service. As a student there were difficult weeks where worries about school or the future seemed like the "worst things ever!" and overshadowed my ability to see the needs of others. However the sacrifice of 3 or so hours of volunteering would be quickly rewarded with the smiles of newfound confidence on the faces of the kids I tutored or helped with reading and my perspective would be reestablished.

1 Corinthians 13 says that "if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing," and goes on to highlight how love is gentle and unassuming, always seeking the good of others even at the cost of personal comfort. Volunteering with CVA has really helped me understand the essence of this passage. Many of the little kids I worked with at Reading Buddies came from troubled homes and as a result had numerous behavioural issues and no one to pay attention to their literacy skills. On especially boisterous or stressful days, all it took was a quick word of encouragement or a bit more extra attention to calm them down. Ultimately these kids craved our attention and loved that we were singling them out just to read to them or play games with them. Over the course of the term, I witnessed how the consistent presence of the volunteers and our simple gestures of kindness helped reinforce a sense of self-worth in the kids.

Cultivating our hearts for service often comes with some sort of sacrifice, and being at CVA really helped me act out this attitude and aspire to be more like Jesus. My experience is that stagnant faith never has a chance to spread or reach out, but faith that is inspired by a desire to serve can change lives.

## Student Open Circles

### How to Donate:

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*Our "Discover Downtown Hamilton" tour celebrated the end of term together before exams. This pilgrimage of sorts took us through back alleys (above), exploring creative expression in unlikely places (below).*



*On our walk, we heard from an art gallery owner who shared how his art is inspired by mystics and saints as well as his pilgrimage on the El Camino.*



*A few days later, Elise, Maddie and Amanda (above, left to right) met with Marybeth to plan a retreat. Our conversation turned to what the gallery owner said about how his pilgrimage put him in touch with what is essential in life as he realized he had everything he needed in his backpack. This shaped our retreat theme, with activities to explore the pilgrimage of our daily lives. Our retreat invited students to reflect on their growth over the past school year, consider how far they have already traveled, and set intentions for the next leg in their journey.*

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