

Perspectives... on the Journey

Student Open Circles at McMaster University

Voices from the Community...

What Difference is Student Open Circles making?



“A 7 year old girl approached me and said the following about a CVA volunteer in the Monday afterschool group. ‘He reads with me for like an hour! No one ever reads with me that long! I’m getting way better.’”

– Michelle Spellic,
Afterschool Program Supervisor,
Eva Rothwell Resource Centre

“The mentors are my best friends. I love doing art with them!”

– child, age 8, LAF (Learning And Fun) afterschool program at Welcome Inn Community Centre

“The CVA volunteers are eager and willing to engage with the youth. One of the youth in the program came in on Monday looking upset, and I took a moment to ask him what was going on. He told me he had had a bad weekend and didn’t want to talk about it. This boy has trouble associating with the other youth even when he’s in a good mood, and is often shunned by them. I was busy with other youth and couldn’t give the boy any more of my attention for a while. He asked me to play a game of chess with him, but there was too much going on at the time for me to do so, so I had to decline. One of the volunteers went and played chess with him. A few minutes later, the boy seemed to be in a much better mood - which lasted for the rest of the program.”

– Spencer Marshall,
former CVA volunteer,
YOUth Create youth worker, HARRRP

There are things we do or don’t do based on the story of ourselves we operate from. Yet there are untold other possible stories we might choose from.

— Pat B. Allen

Young adults we work with are examining the story they live from, often for the first time. And discovering that, both individually and as a society, we can find another story when the one that directs our daily choices is less than life-giving. We have the potential to change. And not only that, as Simran realized through her CVA experiences, “I could also become a medium to affect change.”

How does this change happen? How do we discover new stories to live by? In Student Open Circles, we see students discovering more life-giving stories in many ways. Through their volunteer experiences they are opening up new questions and encountering the stories of others. And we see students being transformed through being listened to, having someone notice with them the story they are living by and whether it’s what they choose. As one alumni reflected: “I really do appreciate all those times that you listened to me, and I think those personal reflections that you have with students allow people to flesh out their inner conflicts; you kind of give a voice to our natural intuitive feelings that faintly whisper something’s not right, so thanks.”

Listen in with us through this collection of stories, as Mengyuan tells how her path took a sharp turn after volunteering at the Breakfast program. Hear Simran articulate how her personal biases and stories of society were shaken up, and how Laura grew from a shy first year to an empowered fourth year student. Listen to those in the broader community whose lives are touched by this service. Thank you for supporting these transformations, both in the lives of young adults and people throughout the Hamilton community!

— Marybeth and Jeff

Volunteering Changed My Path

by Mengyuan Zhou

Mengyuan is an international student from China who volunteered weekly with Community Volunteer Action (CVA) at the Dr. Davey Breakfast program in inner city Hamilton. Here she reflects on how it opened her eyes.



When I joined the Breakfast Program volunteer group I had the intention of doing something special and meaningful during my last undergraduate semester. As time passed, however, I grew in ways I hadn’t imagined. As a foreigner holding a different cultural belief, I seized any opportunity to learn from the diverse cultures and countries represented by the volunteers in our group including Canadian, Vietnamese, and Lebanese.

As I got to know the Hamilton neighbourhood in-depth, I found that poverty, low literacy and education levels, and poor infrastructure are linked to each other and especially affected by the government policy. Those children I am helping out are not the only kids—they represent a larger group of people who need more care and public concern from society. As a business student, I intended to work for a private company or bank to generate profit for the private sector after I graduate. But while volunteering in the Breakfast Program I heard neighbourhood stories that showed this is a less developed area in such a developed country! And this made me wonder: How about China, a developing country?! How might these needs exist in my home country?

One week when we couldn’t volunteer because the Breakfast Program had a holiday, our group of volunteers went on an excursion to the downtown farmer’s market instead. Through this I learned some government policies on the agricultural sector and how it affects the farmers, people we still need to care about. It made me think about how, since importing goods is much cheaper, people tend to buy foreign products. What can we do to support local farmers?

From these experiences, I now plan to use my business background and explore further study in social work, relating it to these issues I have learned about through volunteering.

Change is Possible by Simran Sandhu

CVA Student Facilitator at Bennetto Classroom Support, Conway Opportunity Homes, and Eva Rothwell Family Night

I think that people take society for granted. I think we assume that things work a certain way and when they don't we change them or jumble them around so that they do. People are in a rut. At least, I think they are. Most of the time. But volunteering taught me that society is not that mechanical or fixed. It's always changing and evolving, something that I'd forgotten in the day-to-day toil.

Community Volunteer Action (CVA) pulled me into this absolutely fascinating underbelly of society, where I saw all the angles, the little things that don't seem to fit and that most people can ignore during their daily grind, but something that, as a volunteer, I was forced to notice. I volunteered among children and adults with disabilities. I read stories and helped with developing literacy, which is surprisingly lacking in so many neighbourhoods in Hamilton, even more surprising for a country like Canada. I walked by worn-out buildings and travelled in musty city transit busses. It wasn't a glamorous experience, but it was a necessary one.

In working with adults, I learned about the difficulties of living with disabilities and on government welfare. I came into the experience with my own illusions. I could deny that they existed or argue that I came in with an open mind, but open-mindedness alone does not quash personal biases. Student Open Circles led me on a path that, almost accidentally, made me fall in love with Hamilton and question the foundation of biases I held. I was challenged by questions of difference. Am I different from the people I was helping? Or am I the same, only dressed up a different way? I questioned myself on what my place was within this society that is so layered and convoluted. Some of these questions came from me, but many were presented to me by my group facilitators, which I would later ask my own group of volunteers.

Student Open Circles placed before me questions upon questions, but they also introduced me to some amazing groups of people. I was able to put my degree and my life goals in perspective. Many of us are incredibly privileged, but few of us are willing to admit it. Circumstances, life's lottery, so to speak, also play a role. However, alongside raising awareness of important societal issues, Student Open Circles also gives its members a medium through which they can affect change. I think that was the most valuable insight I took from my volunteering experience. That using my resources and my skills, and in developing even more of them, I could also become a medium to affect change and that's a fairly powerful idea, is it not?

Growing into Leadership by Laura Crump

CVA Student Facilitator at Learning And Fun & Eva Rothwell Afterschool programs



Over the course of my undergraduate career, I have seen myself grow from a shy first year, to a confident fourth year with bright plans for the future, and I believe this change is partially due to my time volunteering with CVA. Unlike other groups, CVA allows you to grow into a role while still feeling like you're making an impact in every task you undertake along the way, and I believe it is this that makes it such a successful organization. I started my journey as a volunteer at the Eva Rothwell program. Even though I only went once a week and only got to know a few kids well, I always felt like I was making a difference, in part because I knew, as a collective, CVA volunteers put in thousands of hours and help hundreds of kids. Later, as a facilitator, I was able to adopt a leadership role and, with support from Student Open Circles staff, I gained confidence in my ability to fulfill this role. CVA highlighted for me many of the issues but also allowed me to feel empowered and feel that I could make a difference in the lives of people affected.

It's hard to believe how fast these four years went and even stranger to look back and see how much I've changed. CVA has taught me so much about service, reflection, making connections and social issues and I'm so sad to be leaving this community. However, in whatever I pursue in the future I hope that I can take these lessons with me and continue to grow as an individual and make a difference in the lives of those around me.

Student Open Circles

How to Donate:

Student Open Circles relies on the generosity of many individuals and groups. If you would like to make a tax-receiptable donation, please make cheques payable to Student Open Circles. For monthly or other periodic support, you may choose to send a group of post-dated cheques. Online donations, automatic monthly support, and donations of stocks and mutual funds are available at our website or through CanadaHelps.org. Jeff's CD's and Marybeth's art, prints, and greeting cards are available on our website, with all proceeds supporting Student Open Circles.



(above) A silent hike at our retreat to transition from winter to summer term. Students reflected on the journey through the past school year, the present, and what intention to set for the next term. (below) Keerthana and Amanda share a laugh over lunch (clearly, you had to be there!)



Shahan, Maddie, and Amanda (left to right) with Marybeth, Madeleine, and Elise at a planning meeting for the upcoming term.

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