

# Perspectives... on the Journey

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

"When is the last time that you had a great conversation?" asks John O'Donohue. "A conversation which wasn't just two intersecting monologues, which is what passes for conversation a lot in this culture. But when had you last a great conversation in which you overheard yourself saying things that you never knew you knew, that you heard yourself receiving from somebody words that absolutely found places within you that you thought you had lost." With this quote, we began our first student leader meeting of the year, asking students to pause for a minute of silence to reflect on the question it poses. It is these kinds of conversations that we are modelling and training students for, whether they are facilitating volunteer groups or discussions on campus.

In this letter, several of our student leaders reflect on how they are growing personally through their role and how they are being influenced through our regular Facilitator Training meetings and individual mentoring. The themes of trust, service, listening, and compassion that you hear in the students' stories are topics we've explored in depth this fall. Often the students who facilitate our Community Volunteer Action (CVA) weekly volunteer groups are pretty new to reflecting on these themes. Each year Open Circle and CVA's 50 student leaders agree to attend our ongoing Facilitator Training meetings and mentoring sessions when they sign up for their facilitator role. Initially, some students are uncertain about whether these regular meetings are really all that necessary. Some are more prone to action than contemplation. But as this student discovered, their perspective soon changes: "I started the year skeptical of how useful the regular Facilitator Training sessions would be in developing my skills as a facilitator and leader, but having done a year of it, I realize that they have been a great space for me to grow as a whole person."

Thank you for your support and encouragement as we journey with students who are growing into leaders. Many tell us of how they are carrying this depth of development with them into other settings and into life beyond university, where they continue to initiate "great conversations" in a society that often settles for "intersecting monologues."

— Marybeth and Jeff

## Supporting Students as they Grow into Leaders

By Heather O'Halloran, student facilitator of CVA weekly groups at Eva Rothwell Resource Center afterschool program and Dr. Davey Breakfast program

Student Open Circles has a very special approach to leadership. While other organizations appoint leaders who are already expected to know how to lead, they select students with the capacity for leadership and then come alongside them, supporting them as they grow into their role. As someone who had never been comfortable leading, I appreciated this opportunity to develop into a leader. Through the patient and reflective culture of Student Open Circles, I was able to come to a better understanding of what leadership means. I came to realize that there are many different ways to lead and I was able to identify a method that worked best with my own personality. This is an important skill to have gained; I have already been able to apply this knowledge to facilitate group interactions in other settings.

## Listening is a Conscious Act of Service

By Shannon Kainula, student facilitator, CVA group at Eva Rothwell afterschool program



Student Open Circles' Facilitator Training meetings offer me a time where my only imperatives are learning to understand myself and others, and how to expand certain skills, such as meaningful conversation. I find the former particularly important, given that so much of my focus is given to accomplishing goals, without always thinking about why those goals are important. With all my worry about school and aspects of my personal life, it's easy to push time for self-reflection to the wayside. In this respect, I value our regular leadership training meetings for carving out slices of time for personal growth, both of myself and of others in the group.

Being in a group is helpful, as others' experiences and perspectives are vital contributions to my own learning process.

The Facilitator Training meeting that had the greatest impact for me was centered on what it means to listen. We discussed how listening is a conscious act, not a passive one, and that the mind must be clear to allow someone else's words room. With CVA, I volunteer weekly at a community centre with young children. Following the Facilitator Training session on listening, I realized that the times the children seem most happy are when all I do is give them my full attention, so that they can talk to me about whatever they want and know that somebody cares about what they have to say. It hadn't truly occurred to me before that the act of listening could be more valued than the words given back, or that those words aren't necessary to show that I am listening. Understanding this makes me less quick to provide feedback as a defense mechanism when I feel uncomfortable with my silence, which I now find particularly important in those first few conversations when getting to know someone. Sometimes, all we can do for another person is listen, and I'm increasingly finding that this is more than simply okay. I consider this just one of the impressions Student Open Circles' leadership training has made, and one that has made me a better facilitator, friend, and community member.

Open Circle student leaders planned our December event to reflect on the past term. It's inspiring to see what they create and how they are influenced by their experiences in Open Circle, blossoming into people who invite their peers into meaningful conversations.



(Above) Gathering begins at a downtown restaurant. (below) Continues with a homemade gift exchange game in Jeff and Marybeth's home, along with an intense hour+ of reflection on quotes and questions that the student planners posed:

"Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments and life itself is grace." (Frederick Buechner)

- How has this past term contributed to your journey?
- What is one thing you would like to continue?
- What intangible gifts have you received? How do you express gratitude for these gifts?



## Learning to be a Leader in Life and Service with CVA

By Wasim Syed, student facilitator for CVA groups at Eva Rothwell Afterschool program and Welcome Inn's LAF Afterschool Club

I could not have imagined I would grow to such an extent as a person when I began this journey of mine with CVA over a year ago. I've not only become a leader, but am able to influence and inspire others. I've enhanced my interpersonal skills, increased my network, and identified ways to attain more fulfillment in life. I have grown with CVA through two ways: through reflections at our Facilitator Training meetings, and through service at Eva Rothwell Community Centre. Facilitator Training meetings are an avenue through which CVA facilitators like myself can grow holistically, with the opportunity to share ideas and experiences to become a better leader. I participate in insightful and in-depth conversations about life, compassion, egoism, mindful attitudes, active listening, consensus, conflict resolution, helping vs. service, being authentic, etc. Through all these reflection activities, I am gaining a deeper understanding of myself and have started living more authentically, being true to myself. I am experiencing the importance of reflecting on my whole life, what I am doing in life and why I am doing it. As such, I was able to confirm and reinforce the career path I have chosen for myself: medicine. I've learned to live in the present moment and to give my full attention to whatever is in front of me. I am learning to always be humble, to have high self-esteem with a humble eagerness to learn something from everybody and anybody. I've started living for others, and go to sleep feeling more satisfied with the use of my leisure time.

Every individual has an innate quality of being a leader. Leaders have the ability to influence and empower others. Leaders work by not only knowing and showing the right way, but by taking the first steps towards what is right. However, we cannot guide someone beyond a point at which we have not reached ourselves. Qualities and skills have to be fine-tuned, and perspectives need to be gained. Seeking the leader within you becomes an act of seeking your inner true self, your inner strengths, and living that out.

Applying the same principals to service helps me understand my volunteering experience with the Community Centre and its relation to the Hamilton community. I've begun to understand that I am not just a leader to myself and to my volunteer group, but also to the children I serve. By being a positive role model, by providing support, by helping the young make the right choices, and by helping them overcome obstacles in school, we can empower them in a positive life direction. Consequently, the Hamilton community as a whole will be strengthened. Problems can only be fixed once you address the root of the problem. I believe that by helping those young children, who are the future of Hamilton, we can and are essentially making a difference for the whole Hamilton community.

After more than a year as a CVA volunteer and leader, I thought I may have reached the peak of my potential, only to find out that my potential has grown even more. Simply put: I am a growing leader. I am a CVA leader.



*Wasim (left) with students volunteering every Friday, building relationships with children at Eva Rothwell Afterschool program*



*Our volunteer groups serve breakfast and connect with children four days a week at the Breakfast program in Beasley neighbourhood. (above) Monday's group (below) Marybeth facilitates discussion with Friday's group on how to serve better and what we are learning about ourselves. CVA groups reflect together after each volunteer session.*



## Blurring the Lines between Service and Life

By Kristy Yiu, student facilitator for CVA groups at Dr. Davey Breakfast Club and Newcomer Youth Centre (YMCA)

My journey from a new to full-fledged facilitator with Community Volunteer Action (CVA) has been eye-opening in so many ways. Despite being a volunteer for two years before becoming a facilitator, the transition was still overwhelming. Thanks to the various supports that Student Open Circles provided, it has been more manageable than I had imagined. The bi-weekly Facilitator Training meetings are indispensable to any facilitator's service with CVA, whether you're just starting out in the role or a well-versed and seasoned pro. Not only does the wide spectrum of themes provide me with a variety of reflection ideas for my weekly volunteer group I lead at the Breakfast program, it also draws out different opportunities for me to reflect upon my life.

We are not limited to discussing our difficulties or the rewards that we gain from volunteering, but are encouraged to bring in experiences from different aspects of our lives. This welcoming inclusion soon blurred the lines of distinction between volunteering and the other parts of my life. I have come to realize that volunteering IS a part of my life; it is not something brushed to the side in isolation, but instead seamlessly integrated into my weekly routine. This bridge built by our Facilitator Training meetings allows me to bring in my own life experiences when discussing certain themes during the reflections I facilitate with my volunteer group, and I've noticed that this invites other volunteers to do the same. It is amazing how this little change breaks the intimidating barrier that reflections may impose on some people. Our Facilitator Training meetings have shaped me into seeing that reflection is not only a mandatory activity to be checked off a list of tasks at the end of a volunteering session, it is a chance for volunteers to have a meaningful conversation together.

## Student Open Circles

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