



Student Open Circles

Perspectives Newsletter – August 2019

First-year students are moving in! And within hours and days, they will be adjusting to this new environment, dealing with the loneliness of being far from home, and searching for connection in their lives as students. In this letter, hear Clare, Hardil, Elise, Holly, and Kristy share how Student Open Circles eased their transition and helped them to find meaning and service in their new life at McMaster. Thank you for supporting us into this new school year as we help first year students through the many challenges they face, and provide guidance for years to come.

Manlybeth & Jeff

How I started volunteering and what has kept me going

by Hardil Bhatt, Volunteer Group Facilitator



As a freshman at McMaster University, I was nervous and excited to embark on my undergraduate journey, just like every other student entering the class of 2021. My first day of university was literally the first day I had ever stepped into Hamilton; the city was unknown to me and I was a stranger to the city. As days passed by, I really started to enjoy university life. However, the most eye-opening thing happened when I was introduced to a study called Code Red in one of my courses, which exposed me to shocking details of how socioeconomic factors such as educa-

tion and family income are correlated to cancer rates in different neighbourhoods in Hamilton. It represented the disparity that exists in this community, where some neighbourhoods such as the inner-city have the lowest education rates and highest cancer rates.

What I learned from that course greatly inspired me to go out there and make a difference. I was desperately looking for a way to get started, and to turn my noble intentions into reality. At the beginning of my second semester, I was introduced to Student Open Circles and I knew from that very moment, that I had found the opportunity I was looking for to make some actual difference in the Hamilton community. Low education rates and high dropout rates in some neighbourhoods is the root cause of the disparity. Therefore, I started out as a volunteer at the Dr. Davey breakfast program, where I helped prepare and serve breakfast to children right before they began their day at school. I was well aware that the service I was providing was not limited to feeding the children at school but rather had a bigger picture attached to it. Fostering a welcoming environment at school by providing breakfast in the morning is essential for helping children stay engaged at school during the day. In the long run, it can decrease the school dropout rates and increase education rates, allowing these neighbourhoods to uplift from poverty.

This past year I got the opportunity to serve as a facilitator for the Pathways to Education group, where we get to tutor high school students and provide mentorship for achieving whatever goals that they may have set for themselves. My experiences with Student Open Circles have allowed me to discover Hamilton and make it my own. I am not a stranger to the city anymore. It has also helped me and many other students realize our true potential for changing the lives of others.

Student Open Circles had the biggest influence on me in my first year at McMaster. During a time of change and adjustment, Open Circle helped me find my center and discover what was important to me when surrounded by many different forces that left me feeling overwhelmed. It gave me the opportunity to take a break during my busy schedule and check in with feelings that may have gone unnoticed all day, which I explored during Meditation and Creativity Circles. I'm glad I discovered Open Circle!

– Clare de Souza

Here's a painting that Clare created during our weekly Creativity Circle, which she entitled "Roots of Love and Strength"



Away from home and uncertain of who I am by Elise Durie, student



My involvement with Student Open Circles began during my first semester as an undergraduate student. The stress and disorientation that came with moving away from home and immersing myself in a new environment only heightened the growing uncertainties of who I was and what I wanted to do with my life. With this growing anxiety, I signed up for Open Circle's 'Becoming Yourself Series', a five-week course that set time aside for me to explore what I truly value at my core, and how I could integrate these ideas into my everyday life through practicing presence and awareness. Not only did these sessions allow me to set time aside for myself and build a journey of personal discovery, but they encouraged me to build daily habits and listen for my deeper longings. Open Circle has provided a safe, accepting environment for me to explore these meaningful life questions.

My first 'Becoming Yourself Series' was so effective and enjoyable that I ended up continuing with three more series, and eventually signed up to be a part of the Open Circle student leader team. On this team, I am able to help organize and plan events that help other students begin or strengthen their own path to self-discovery – one that has no final destination but is consistently shifting and changing. Open Circle allows me to continuously nurture my own growth through my participation in the Becoming Yourself Series and the student leader team, and I am so thankful for the community and support it provides to myself and others in the McMaster community.

From confusion to connection

by Holly Corbett, student



I got involved in Open Circle because of their "Astronomical Reflections" planetarium show. I came for the astronomy, but the "reflections" part was compelling enough that I put my name on the Open Circle mailing list. Next, I tried one of the drop-in reflection circles: Creativity Circle, because I was seeking ways to practice creativity despite academic busyness and lack of space in my little apartment. I valued what I experienced in Creativity Circle, and my involvement expanded to other reflection circles, the Personal Discovery Course for graduate students, and various Open Circle events. As a new PhD student in a new country, newly out to myself as bisexual, I was feeling confused and overwhelmed on a regular basis. Open Circle offered a constellation of wellness habits, mindful introspection, community, and opportunities for spiritual growth that helped me stay grounded and think critically (but not judgmentally!) about who I am and how I want to create my future. I'm still confused and overwhelmed at times, of course, but that's okay. These days, I feel more connected to myself and others. When grad school feels especially challenging or lonely, I have ways to cope. I'm hopeful that I'm developing healthy practices I can sustain beyond my time at McMaster. I recently started volunteering on the student team that helps to plan Open Circle events, because I want to give back to the organization that's meant so much to me as I've gone from new PhD student to dissertation-writing, hoping-to-graduate-eventually PhD candidate. Moreover, the mental and emotional strength I've found through Open Circle has encouraged me to seek further opportunities to nurture my relationships with others and do good in my community. I'm a work in progress, but with the help of what I've learned and continue to learn through Open Circle, I feel like I'm moving in a meaningful direction.

Why I give back

by Kristy Yiu, Student Open Circles Board Member



I joined a Student Open Circles weekly volunteer group during my first year at McMaster because I wanted to connect more with the student community as well as the local Hamilton community. To be honest, I was also feeling homesick and volunteering was one of the ways that I used to ease myself into this university transition as it was something that I did throughout high school. I enjoyed my time with Student Open Circles so much so that I continued getting more and more involved with the organization throughout my undergraduate and graduate careers at McMaster. Beyond finding the sense of comfort and community that I initially sought, Student Open Circles also played a major role in my personal growth and development. Which is why even now as an alumna, I continue to look for ways to get involved and I am grateful to be given the opportunity to serve as a

board member. This experience with Student Open Circles played such a huge role during my formative years in university and I am excited to be able to give other McMaster students the opportunity to experience what I did as well.

How to Donate

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- For online donations, visit our website
- Cheques payable to Student Open Circles
- Mail to: TSH B110, McMaster University
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