



Student Open Circles

Perspectives Newsletter – October 2020

"It's amazing and strange how much I've come to know Open Circle members and how I've spent quality time with them, despite never meeting many of them in-person due to COVID-19." (Student Participant)

Now that all classes are online and extracurricular options are few, many students are looking to Open Circle for community, to find meaning, and to help out in the midst of our current crisis. Our reflection circles, volunteer groups, and courses have been packed full all summer and into the fall. Students are serving those in need through our 28 weekly online volunteer groups, building friendships with adults with disabilities, mentoring and tutoring at-risk children and youth, and relating with thousands of isolated seniors. As we journey with students every day, we often forget that we're not seeing them in person, because the quality of connection runs so deep. In these stories, you will hear how Eddie, Olivia, and Isabel experienced support, transformation, and meaningful service when the changes from the pandemic made them feel like their worlds came crashing down. Thank you for your support during these challenging times!

Marybeth & Jeff

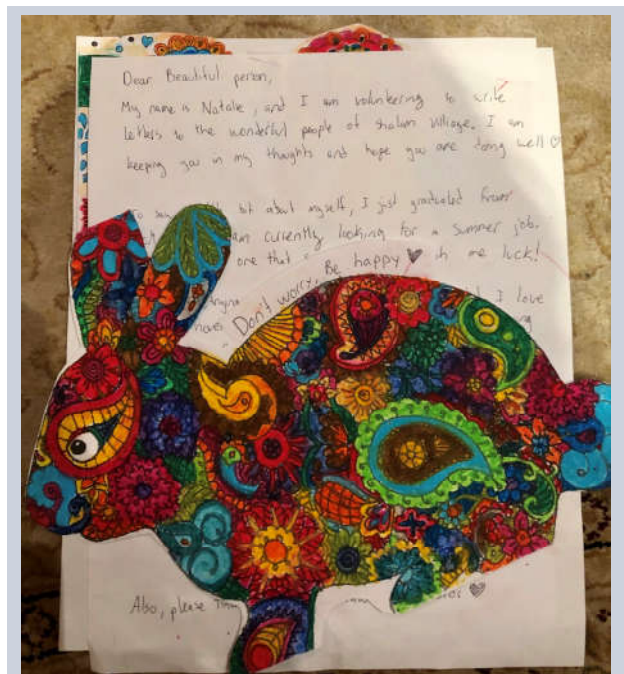
A Crashing Halt to my Plans

by Olivia Symons, student

My experience with Open Circle began one year ago when I started volunteering in a weekly group at a Reading Buddies and Nutrition program at an inner-city school. This was where I was first introduced to reflection circles. This was something entirely new to me in a volunteer position, and I enjoyed reflecting on our volunteer work and its significance to ourselves and the community. Doing this every week solidified how important engaging with the community was to me. However, I was hesitant to take part in the circles offered to students outside of volunteering, nervous of what they would entail. Spurred into action when the COVID-19 pandemic took over, I decided to step outside my comfort zone and join the Becoming Yourself Series. The pandemic and subsequent isolation forced me to confront truths in myself that I had been ignoring or simply hadn't noticed. The fact that the future cannot be controlled, regardless of all the plans I had made, was one of said truths. All my summer plans had come to a crashing halt and I sat back with nothing else to do (quite literally) but watch them go up in flames. My summer trip, cancelled. The summer job I had acquired, no longer existed. And my breaking point came when I started talking to my friends who had all signed up for summer school courses and it was too late to sign up myself. The culmination of change after change to my perfected plans led me to the first panic attack of my life. So, following the hour spent crying in my room questioning life, my purpose, and the future, I signed up for the Becoming Yourself Series.

The Becoming Yourself Series has been a bright light during the difficulty of COVID-19. Through the weekly practices, including meditation and journaling, I have discovered strategies that work for me to bring more awareness into my life. Before Becoming Yourself, I had the mindset that negative self-talk was the motivating force driving my productivity, but I learned a surprising truth. Negative self-talk was actually demoralizing and by practicing self-compassion instead of tearing myself down in moments of pain or struggle, I was able to better process my emotions, and increase my productivity and happiness. One example of how practicing self-compassion has helped me was through accepting my anxiety about my third year of university. I was finally able to face my anxiety, naming what I was feeling without judgement, acknowledging that I was not alone in my difficulty and expressing compassion toward something that I was struggling with. I was finally able to feel some excitement beyond the anxiety and, for the first time after weeks of procrastinating, plan out my courses.

Through Open Circle and the Becoming Yourself Series I have found a group of supportive people that made it easy for me to participate and learn about emotional self-care. Over the past 15+ weeks I have let go of judgement and started to listen to my inner voice that had gone quiet from years of doing what I thought I was supposed to instead of what I truly wanted. Though I have only known Marybeth for the weeks we have been participating in the Series, she has become a role model and mentor to me. She has helped me much more than I can express along the way by encouraging me to follow my curiosity, to trust, to be okay with things that cannot be controlled. I know more about myself now than I ever could have learned on my own, and what I have learned will shape my future in ways I cannot begin to imagine, and for that I am immensely grateful.



A letter and original drawing from Natalie, one of our volunteer group facilitators. Starting in summer, we began 9 new weekly groups to phone, write letters, and to create art and CCTV content for seniors who are isolated.

Acceptance Opens my Heart

by Isabel Khudr, student



I cannot think of a better time to have immersed myself into Open Circles community. During the school year I had limited myself from attending Open Circle events because I knew that I would be shedding light onto parts of myself that I was not ready to deal with. Open Circle was the first place I turned when my life came crashing down (dramatically enough, I thought I lost everything that was important to me). I realized how little I paid attention to what my inner voice was telling me and how much attention I put into materialistic things.

I joined the Becoming Yourself Series this spring, in hopes to learn how to connect with my inner self and with others who were wishing the same. Honestly, I was not expecting how much of myself would be uncovered. I had never looked at myself as someone who is self-critical at ALL, I thought the amount of care I gave myself was enough. As Marybeth exposed us to self-compassion meditations and exercises, I was shocked to learn I had barely been self-compassionate! This was the biggest learning lesson for me during the past four months of BYS, and since being awakened to this I have recognized patterns of behaviors that are a result of not giving myself enough love.

Another incredible thing that has come out of being part of the community is the lovely people I have met along the way. Before Open Circle, I would find myself stuck in shallow conversations that brought me nothing but dreaming I was somewhere else. I could not find people I could converse with on topics that were helpful in awakening my inner self. I can truthfully say the joy I have when I login to an Open Circle event is one that I rarely experienced before. Having a space where one is heard and accepted has allowed me to open up my heart and see others experiencing the same thing.

I am grateful to be involved in Open Circle, I tell all my friends and family how being part of the community has created a new chapter in my life. I feel much more confident in who I am as well as feeling as though I have found a community that has and will ultimately be one that has had the most life changing impact.

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How to have a Great Summer amid a Global Pandemic

by Eddie Chow, student



When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, my summer plans fell through. My in-person classes were cancelled for the unforeseen future and I was sequestered at home with the rest of my family for the remainder of second semester. Although it was nice to see my family again, being quarantined with them for an indefinitely long time was somewhat suffocating. Also, every store and restaurant was closed, so the prospect of going out or even finding a job was eliminated. I was bound to stay home, doomed to eternal boredom. However, the shining light in that fog was the volunteering I did with my Student Open Circles volunteer group.

This summer was also my first time facilitating a volunteer group. The online aspect of the experience only added to how daunting it was. However, my co-facilitator was very supportive and the mere presence of all the volunteers I worked with motivated me to do a good job. I knew I had to be a good example for those who looked up to me as their leader. Perhaps it was everyone's approachable demeanours, but I cherished the intimate discussions during our reflection sessions regarding our volunteer work and our personal lives. Not only was it a valuable opportunity to exercise my leadership skills, but in those moments of vulnerability, I recognized I was helping to forge deep connections and empathy between us volunteers.

Furthermore, the actual volunteer work itself was something I found personally transformative. In the first half of the summer, my volunteer group helped immigrant youth with their homework. When high school ended, we moved on to a summer camp where we assisted with activities for children. The challenge of volunteering virtually was a chance to be creative in the way we assist people. I managed to make some positive change in their life, even if it was something trivial like answering a homework question or dancing to a song. Even though I couldn't adhere to my original summer plans, facilitating a volunteer group provided me with gratifying work, relationship building, and interpersonal skill development. At the end of the day, I'd say that I had a great summer, even amid a global pandemic!

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