

Building Bridges with Student Open Circles

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Ask congregation –

How many of you have been to Copps coliseum?

If you took all the people living in poverty in Hamilton, how full would Copps be?
5 times

What does this mean? The Spectator recently reported that one in 10 parents in Hamilton report that their children go hungry at least two days per week. Over 5,000 local parents regularly sacrifice their own food so their children can eat. (Dec 2009 Spectator)

Does anyone know what the difference is in life expectancy between the most and least affluent neighbourhoods? (in the Spectator this past week)
21 years

And the disparity continues to grow...

This side of Hamilton is something that students at Mac aren't naturally exposed to.

In the Community Volunteer Action program of Student Open Circles, we are helping to bridge this divide in our city by getting students involved in service.

Slide #2 - stats

This year we have 29 groups of McMaster students who are volunteering weekly throughout Hamilton. –

with over 300 students weekly, rippling out through out the city

- Getting involved in a great diversity of service projects – from afterschool programs to soup kitchens
- Each group is facilitated by a student leader who meets the group of students at Mac, going with them to their volunteer placement, and leads the group in reflecting on their service, how it relates to their own lives and broader societal issues.

Slide #3 – Student Open Circles vision

In addition to the Community Volunteer Action program,

- Student Open Circles also has another branch called Open Circle where students explore deeper meaning in life and social justice issues
- through weekly discussion groups and events that are
- focused on learning from each other in a respectful diverse atmosphere
- that builds bridges across all backgrounds and experiences.

I'd like to invite you along on an imaginative journey with Student Open Circles

- At pretty much any time during the week, from morning to night, you can find Mac students involved in our programs

On this imaginative journey you'll get a glimpse into the impact that building these bridges is having on these students as well as many in our community.

- So put your imagination caps on and get ready for the ride through a “day in the life of Student Open Circles!”

SLIDE #4 – BREAKFAST PROGRAM

First off, we're up way before dawn to meet at the bus stop on campus at 7:00am and tag along into the downtown with the Beasley Breakfast program volunteer group

- Now getting up and ready at that time may not be such a stretch for you, but keep in mind that these students were likely up until 2am finishing the assignment that is due today.
- They're commitment is outstanding...

While we serve breakfast you notice how delighted the children and volunteers are to see each other

- and how easily the children open up to these university students, sharing about their struggles at home or in school. You hear stories of growing up in refugee camps or of living without parents who are in jail. Or you hear volunteers helping children know how to deal with bullying.

After the children are off to school, the volunteers sit in a circle to reflect on our experiences this morning

- The student facilitator asks questions to get the group thinking about what they have learned from their experience. Several volunteers share about how they have changed their viewpoints on poverty and Hamilton.

SLIDE #5 – BREAKFAST PROGRAM QUOTES

- One volunteer shares about how the experience of getting to know people in the downtown has changed them when they say that through this experience:
 - *"I've learned that downtown Hamilton is a poverty-stricken area and many people have a negative association with it. I've learned that you shouldn't have such prejudice without experiencing it first. I've met very nice people in downtown Hamilton and enjoyed volunteering in the area"-Kimi*
 - Another joins in the conversation by saying: *"Getting to personally know individuals from the area helps to disprove many of the social stereotypes. The stigmas associated with certain areas lead to a cycle of substandard living conditions, since people outside or even within the community aren't willing to get involved"-Sheena*
- One volunteer in particular stands out, the one who openly shares the impact this experience has on them - *"Volunteering here has taught me to be less selfish. I began volunteering so I could use it on my resume for teacher's college. Now that I've been doing it for a year and a half, I realize what a difference I can make. I still hope to teach but I understand more concretely the importance of helping children and I want to teach in an inner city school."*
 - As we take the bus back to Mac together, the volunteers continue discussing how to better meet the needs of these children.

JEFF

SLIDE #6 – MEDITATION CIRCLE

- Now if you are feeling a little tired and need to recharge when we get back to Mac, it just so happens that Open Circle's weekly Meditation group is meeting at 12:30
- Here we find students from diverse backgrounds, both religious and non-religious, experiencing reflective practices from a variety of traditions and discussing these together
- One student in the group, James, shares with you that:
"...Open Circle has helped me to become more tolerant toward other aspects of the spiritual path. Being in Open Circle has opened my eyes to see the diversity of beliefs and practices that help connect us with the divine."

SLIDE #7 – Creativity Circle

- When the meditation circle ends, we have the chance to join in with the Creativity Circle, which is the weekly Open Circle group that
 - created the art show currently on display here in the entrance.
- Here you find students experiencing creativity as a bridge
 - to their deepest self, to others, and to the divine--
 - reflecting through various creative media such as visual art or drawing
- as they try to figure out who they are and live out their own values rather than simply following what others are telling them about how to live
- You listen as one student shares that after their first time at Creativity Circle, they realized: *"I have neglected things that I cared most about, but now it's time for myself to remember what's most important. Set my priorities straight. I feel myself growing. I know I imagined more for myself, of myself. I lost my path for awhile, but I think it's time to get back on track. To be who I want to be. To be who I am."*

SLIDE #8 – Discussion Groups

- We offer 4 regular discussion groups, along with other events and individual spiritual companioning,
- where students discuss important life issues that they may not otherwise have a safe and respectful place to explore.

As one of our student leaders, Assya, says:

- *"What Open Circle means to me is creating an inclusive community despite any differences of opinion or beliefs. I feel that this is something that is extremely important given the diversity of Canada and the need for all of us to work together towards a common goal."*
- The diversity among the students in the group is striking. Open Circle is a place where you see students dialoguing/building bridges across the lines that so often divide us about very deep and personal issues
- this why we spend a lot of time training student leaders about diversity, discussion facilitating, and listening skills...

MARYBETH

SLIDE #9 – LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

When this Creativity Circle ends, we're just in time to catch a regular leadership training meeting for Volunteer Group Facilitators.

- This is a chance for the student leaders to reflect together on the volunteer groups they are facilitating and receive training in skills for their role.
- Today, you listen as they go around and each share stories of what they are learning from their leadership role.

SLIDE #10 – FACILITATOR QUOTES

- You hear one facilitator tell how: I've grown a lot this year as a leader; now instead of waiting for things to change and improve, I make more of an effort to help out myself.“
- Another, Wendy, who facilitates a group with at risk children shares that:
“Volunteering has inspired me to make a lifetime commitment to improving my local and potentially international community”
 - As the go-around continues, you are touched by the deep insight these young people are gaining from their leadership experiences.

SLIDE #11 – ON MARCH OF DIMES

Now while all this was going on, we could have also tagged along with several other volunteering groups – going at 1pm or with another group at 3pm to cook alongside adults living with disabilities at ON March of Dimes community kitchen.... ..

SLIDE #12 – HOMEWORK HELP

Or we could have joined 2 different afterschool program groups – 1 at a Homework club with mostly recent immigrant youth at SISO's downtown youth center called The Globe

SLIDE #13 - LAF

Or another with a group of 15-20 volunteers helping out at the Welcome Inn, mentoring and tutoring at risk children.

SLIDE #14 – EVA ROTHWELL

And before you have time to catch your breath, we're off with another volunteer group in the evening to run children's programs for children who are living with their mom's at Inasmuch shelter, having just left abusive home situations.

Or if you prefer, at the same time you could join in with a volunteer group that has created and implemented a Family Night at the Eva Rothwell center in the Keith neighbourhood where there is a 50% highschool drop-out rate and very few social services. We have groups there several days a week not only volunteering but they have created and implemented these programs.

Here you listen in as the volunteers debrief together and discuss plans for the next week. They tell you that this year, when they saw the empty shelves in the food bank and learned that the centre's electronic equipment had just been stolen, they decided to see what they could do above and beyond their weekly volunteer group and are planned a series of fundraisers for Eva Rothwell Centre which were very successful (you might have read about it in the Spectator)

JEFF

SLIDE #15 – MARTIN’S QUOTE

As you arrive back at Mac around 10pm and this day draws to a close, you are struck by the many insights you heard these students articulating in the discussions

- Some talked about how volunteering has opened their eyes to a lot of issues that occur very close to them that they weren’t aware of before
- Others expressed how the discussion groups sustain them and prompt their growth as a whole person in the midst of the demands of their studies
- And you are left with the sense that these experiences of building bridges across many lines are an essential
 - to preparing them to create a more tolerant and compassionate campus and society
- So as you can see we really don’t have time for our imaginative tour to continue any further through the week...with each day as full as the next...
- Thank you for going on this tour with us

We appreciate the support of First Unitarian and would like to share a note from Martin Dooley who is on the Board of Directors of Student Open Circles and a member of this congregation.

- Since he is on the walk-a-thon this morning, he offered a few words on why he supports SOC.

In volunteer service with less advantaged fellow citizens, Student Open Circles affirms the Unitarian principle of “Justice, equity and compassion in human relations”. In welcoming students of all faiths and of no faith to its discussion groups, Student Open Circles affirms the Unitarian principle of “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning”. In seeking to build bridges of understanding between academe and the broader community, Student Open Circles promotes the Unitarian goal of “world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all”. - Martin Dooley

- We invite you this morning to pause and notice – what bridges you are being called to build in your own sphere of influence? How do these principles flow into your daily action?

Slide #16: Student Open Circles

Thank you for your interest in what Student Open Circles is doing throughout Hamilton.

- There are many opportunities for involvement – please talk to us if interested in knowing more (www.StudentOpenCircles.com)
- Opportunity to sign up for quarterly newsletter.
- Art for sale in support of Student Open Circles (www.ContemplativeArt.co.nr)