



OPEN CONNECTIONS™

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2022-2023

Cover: Maggie, Gwen, Annabelle and Emmy all came to Group II in overalls one day (unplanned!). Do you think it's because the group loves playing the game, Stealthy Overalls?

Right: Jack, just hanging out in the Open Program!

## Open Connections Magazine

Issue 82 | Winter 2022-2023

### Mission

The goal of this *Open Connections Magazine* is to inspire and connect, both with the Open Connections community and beyond. We hope to entice a wider community to get engaged with Open Connections by telling the stories of our community in these pages. As a small and established nonprofit, located just outside of Philadelphia, PA and centered on the mission of empowering people to live their lives full of purpose and fulfillment, we firmly believe that we can have an impact beyond our physical campus. Our hope is that the stories depicted in this magazine will inspire a connection of some sort. Maybe you'll feel connected to your own purpose. Maybe you'll find a connection that resonates with your values. Maybe you will spark a connection with a friend or family member as you have a meaningful conversation about what you've seen printed here. Maybe you'll connect with a story that brings to mind a meaningful memory of growth during your own youth.

At Open Connections, we focus on process over product, and put the learner at the heart of the experience. We value respect, freedom, and responsibility. With the strong belief that people are natural learners, we provide an environment and community that allows for individuals to learn in a way that works best for them, at a pace that is comfortable for the learner. With this magazine, we want to be able to share some of the enchantment that occurs on campus. In these pages, look at how happy, how focused, and how intentional people of all ages are. Open Connections has been and will continue to be a place of great growth and exceptional warmth.

Through this magazine we invite you to connect with us, and explore what a life full of purpose and fulfillment can look like.

Additionally we welcome artwork by adults and youth who are striving to find a voice in photography (or in other forms of artwork that can be photographed clearly for publication).

### Staff

CO-EDITORS: Margaret Welsh and Sarah Becker

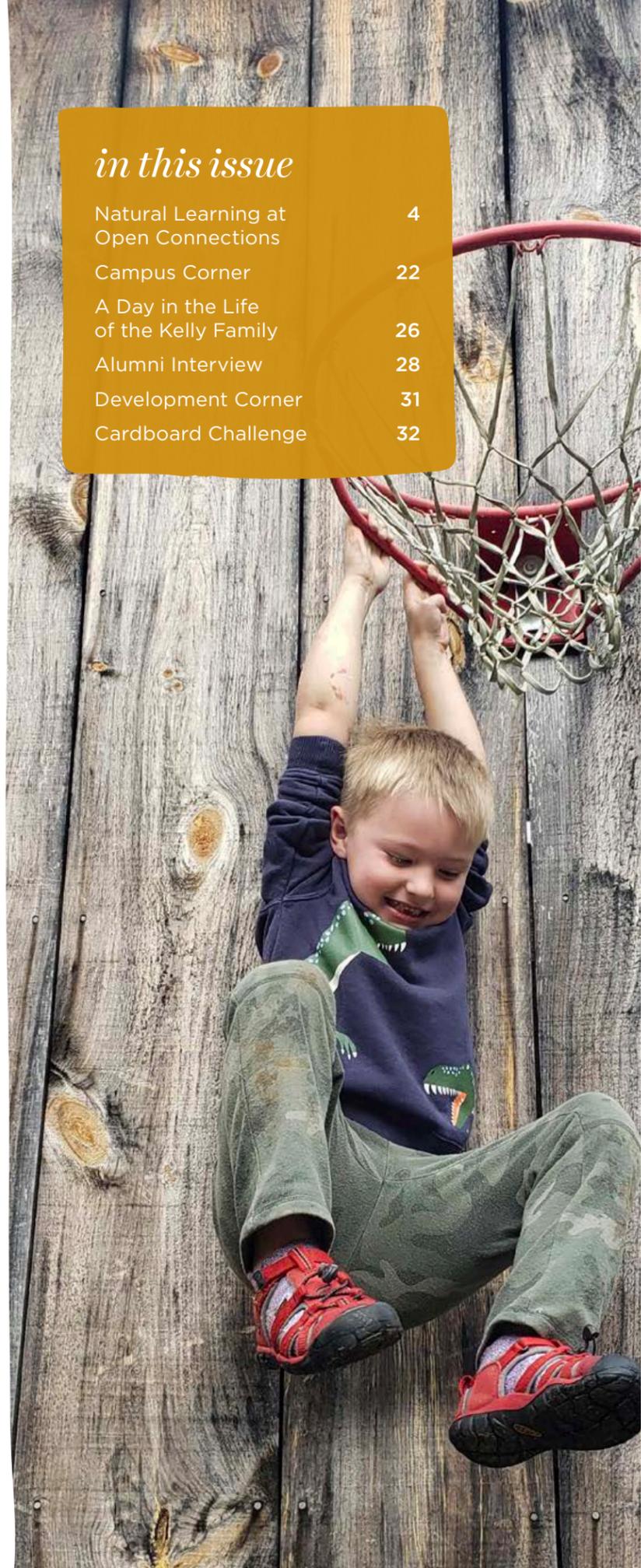
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## FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR

Margaret Welsh



Dear Friends,

As I write this morning, the sun is warming the campus and the youth are enjoying exploring outside, as well as in, despite the chilly air. In a couple of weeks the annual Community Winter Marketplace will happen, organized by Group IV youth this year.

The Marketplace is an opportunity for community members to shop for the holidays from local artists, including a number of OC youth. A portion of all the proceeds will be donated to the OC Sustainability Fund. This event showcases what it means to be part of the OC community: supporting each other and the organization.

This issue of the Open Connections Magazine is devoted to Natural Learning as it happens in our programs.

Take a journey with us and read vignettes from each program. Natural Learning supports the life skills areas that we focus on here at OC: Interpersonal, Intrapersonal and Impersonal skills, which are vital to our daily lives, and for all ages.

Continue on the journey with our regular columns and interviews, which help us connect and get to know each other and our campus better. Our Annual Giving drive this year is centered around a theme to encourage our community (and beyond) to Keep Exploring. We would love to hear from you—how are you connected with Open Connections? How has Open Connections influenced you?

I hope you find inspiration in these pages.

Gratefully, *Margaret*



The Shaping Your Life, Group IV, and Group III programs combine to play some after lunch games. Here they are playing "Giants, Wizards, and Elves," which is a rock paper scissors meets tag type of game.



Kaiyah and her team work through several iterations of a da Vinci bridge model during Group III, determined to succeed using drinking straws as a building material, relying on bend and shear forces to hold it together.



Today's foray into Choice B: Fancy Food was French Hot Chocolate. Here, Benji (center) checks out Shep and Silas's efforts at shredding and chopping large quantities of chocolate, as they each figure out which method worked best for them.



Open Program youth enjoying each other and celebrating a friend's birthday.



Ella researches parodies of the painting American Gothic for Shaping Your Life's Adaptation Project, a mini research and presentation opportunity inspired by the phenomenon of adaptation. While starting with a common theme and format, each youth was encouraged to follow their natural curiosity and chose a specific topic that they were personally interested in pursuing. Research on their subjects, ranging from fine art to folklore to neuroplasticity, will be presented to peers.



Evie and Locke work together to produce and collect O2 gas from a mixture of hydrogen peroxide & yeast during a Group IV lab on Production & Testing of Gases.



Ollie measures one of the boards that Group I will use to fix the fence.

## Real Work in Group I

Group I youth had the opportunity to do Real Work outside on campus. Atlas, Pip, and Nim, the goats, have been escaping from their fenced in area around the pond. The young people were tasked with trying to figure out from where the goats could be escaping, and how we could reinforce the gate/fence to keep them from getting out.



Josh fastens a new board to the pond fence.



Nim pokes her head through the fence to check on the fence repairs.



Jett, Josh, Wally, and Ollie are pleased with the fence repairs that Group I made so that the goats won't sneak through the fence.

The term Natural Learning has widespread use throughout education literature, mostly without any specific, let alone scientific, definition. At Open Connections, the term Natural Learning reminds us that learning is a natural process—it is in our nature, in the hard-wiring of our brains. Put another way, John Holt<sup>1</sup> states:

*Birds fly, fish swim, people learn.*

# Natural Learning

From the OC Glossary of Terms\*



Eli and Marlon work on their bridge constructed out of straws and tape only during Choice A: Construction Challenges. Here, they have assembled and stabilized supports on each side of the chasm between two tables, and are working on a structure to bridge that gap.

Lyla, Uma, Kaiyah and Everleigh connect with each other on the sidelines during a midday Group III game of Greek dodgeball.



At Open Connections we do not have a pre-set curriculum, nor do we have specific expectations that all young people will hit the same academic milestones at the same age. Rather, we believe that through living life, young people will learn what is important at their own pace.

The term is also used to distinguish it from learning that has been artificially induced—by someone other than the learner. Holt spoke to this as well when he said, “Learning is not the product of teaching. Learning is the product of the activity of the learner.” Natural Learning occurs in the context of real life, purposeful activity that is being done for its own sake rather than for the inherent learning. Hence, a toddler learns her native language in order to communicate, not to satisfy some language requirement. A young person learns to climb trees in order to, well, climb trees—to see what it’s like up there, to scout out a location for a tree fort, to check out a bird’s nest—not to fulfill a physical education requirement. And a person of any age learns to cook in order to enjoy the fruits of such “labor”, not to get an A in Home Economics. Natural learning follows the path of the learner rather than an external source. It is most likely random in both action and time.

Think of learning to read, for example. To do so naturally involves moving through several stages in a stop-and-start, bits-and-pieces, on-again-off-again process. This includes seeing letters long before one knows what they stand for, or even understanding that they stand for anything; beginning to recognize patterns in the order in which they occur; seeing repetitions in differing circumstances, such as the STOP of a road sign and on

a button on the front of a microwave oven; memorizing a favorite story and then seeing the words on the printed pages of a book, matching them between ears and eyes; and so on and so forth. Such experiences don’t happen all at once, category by category. And they certainly don’t occur in the same way for any two people, let alone everyone who learns to read. Each individual mind puts the various components together in his own way, in his own time. It’s only natural.

This is why at Open Connections we do not have a pre-set curriculum, nor do we have specific expectations that all young people will hit the same academic milestones at the same age. Rather, we believe that through living life, young people will learn what is important naturally and at their own pace. While this in no way excludes adults from making offers and introductions of materials and content which they think will be of interest, it does mean that they are not imposed on the youth. Such coercion is the antipathy of Natural Learning.

*Of note: Youth who choose to enroll in Group and/or Choice Programs are implying their desire to share ownership of the program and come with an expectation of facilitator and youth-initiated activities.*

<sup>1</sup>John Holt was a pioneer author and activist in advocating homeschooling/unschooling.

\*The OC Glossary of Terms can be found in the OC Parent Resource Library at Open Connections.



# A-ha Moments

By Megan Marran, Facilitator

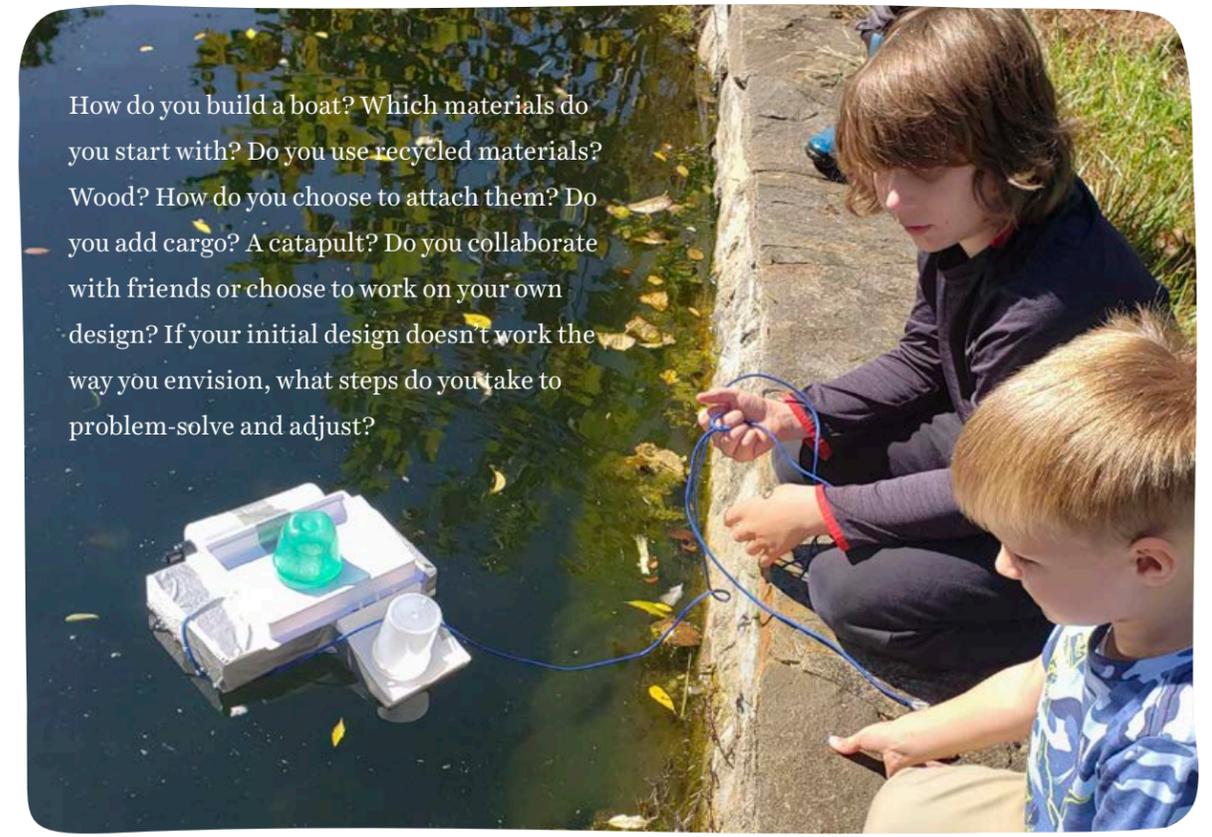
The Sand Pit and Environment area offers youth many opportunities for growth in areas such as communication, problem solving, gross motor skills, sharing, and leadership. How do you get water from a 50-gallon barrel in the ground, up through a pump, through a series of pvc pipes and into a reservoir that you have carefully and collaboratively dug out and sculpted with four (or more) of your friends? How does the work get distributed? Does everyone dig at the same time? Who pumps? Who patches holes that develop in your carefully constructed dam? What is your process for laying out the series of pipes and how do you communicate all of this with the people you are working with in a respectful manner? How do you communicate with others the parts of the project that you really wish to be a part of?

Natural Learning in the Open Program (OP) takes many forms and looks different based on the interests of each youth. If you had the power of invisibility and could move around the Open Program without disturbing the flow of the space or the concentration of the youth, you might see that “a-ha” moment sparking in various places. You might see it during a game of chess, Uno, Snail’s Pace Race or other games happening between youth, or, from a youth engaging in a Conceptual Development<sup>1</sup> (CD) activity with a facilitator. The woodshop provides a-ha moments for youth experimenting with their sawing, hammering, drilling techniques, as well as for youth who have mastered the beginning skills and are creating

projects. A-ha moments might be seen when youth are tinkering with a take-apart; during a fantasy game of restaurant, school, or office taking place in the Environments<sup>2</sup>; while a youth who is developed in reading, reads to those who haven’t developed that skill yet; or, while someone is sewing bean bags or a stuffy. Building materials that might include giant tinker toys, Zoobs, car tracks with matchbox cars or train sets are also ripe for these magical moments. That “a-ha” moment is the process of Natural Learning in action. It is when a youth puts together a concept in their mind and can now build off of that new knowledge until the next “a-ha” moment. ©

<sup>1</sup>Conceptual Development (CD) by definition cannot be taught, only facilitated. We can set up the conditions whereby a person can, when ready, create his/her understanding of various concepts. CD activities are offered in the Open Program to regularly engage youth in exploring various concepts that are important building blocks to future understanding.

<sup>2</sup>An Environment in this context is a multi-level structure where youth can explore in multiple ways including imaginary play, collaborative interactions, focused building time, and quiet story time.



How do you build a boat? Which materials do you start with? Do you use recycled materials? Wood? How do you choose to attach them? Do you add cargo? A catapult? Do you collaborate with friends or choose to work on your own design? If your initial design doesn’t work the way you envision, what steps do you take to problem-solve and adjust?

Lincoln and Jack try floating a boat they created with recycled materials in the Open Program.



Leo checks to see if his boat made from recycled materials in the Open Program will float or sink. After youth refined their designs, they took their boats to the pond for another test.



Delilah works at the Conceptual Development table in the Open Program. She thinks about the attribute blocks and figures out what the rule is for which ones are outside the circle and which ones are inside. Can you tell?



# Natural Learning through Purposeful Projects

By Jane Sleutaris, Facilitator

the value of making prototypes to provide clarity about how something might look or work, and everyone agreed to make one. We gathered up cardboard, cardboard cutters, paper, pencils, and t-squares, and the youth went to work. The following week, we were ready to begin working in the Woodshop. After getting a tour of the Woodshop and reviewing basic safety, the youth searched the wood storage areas for the pieces they would use for their projects. This, in and of itself, is a time consuming process as the Woodshop and shed are filled with many pieces of various shapes and sizes. Finding and selecting the right pieces for a project can be a challenge. Sometimes youth struggle to find exactly what they are looking for and need to think flexibly about how they can use what is available. As a facilitator, it can be tempting to give advice or to subtly direct a young person's experience rather than let them make mistakes and figure things out "the hard way." By influencing their wood selection, encouraging measuring, or making suggestions, we might deprive these youth of valuable learning opportunities. Through their own experimentation, they are able to discover, naturally, why a particular wood choice was, or was not, adequate, or learn the value of measuring before sawing. Through trial and error, the young people discover what works and what does not. Natural learning is occurring through purposeful activity that is happening for its own sake rather than for inherent learning. The youth are not building things for their stuffed animals in order to learn measuring skills or how to saw or drill, but rather to realize an idea and to create something that has meaning and significance to them. ©

Group I youth were invited to bring a stuffed animal to program and were then challenged to create a chair to support the weight of their stuffed animal using only paper and tape. Though this was a facilitator initiated activity, what transpired after the youth completed the challenge beautifully illustrates the essence of natural learning. After constructing the paper chairs for their stuffed animals, the youth excitedly proposed the idea of bringing them back to OC in subsequent weeks to make/build more things for them. As facilitators, we were eager to hear the young people's ideas and asked them to tell us more about what they were envisioning. Earlier in the fall, youth had expressed a wish to spend time in the Woodshop, and they now had the idea to build things for their stuffed animals in the Woodshop. We all felt great enthusiasm for this suggestion and agreed to move forward with this plan.

The next week, we invited the youth to draw sketches of what they were wishing to build for their stuffed animals. Their wishes included building a house, roller coaster, and a car. We discussed



Wally works on creating a chair that can support the weight of his stufie using only scrap paper and tape.



Josh uses cardboard to create a prototype for his project before heading to the Woodshop.

Sometimes youth struggle to find exactly what they are looking for and need to think flexibly about how they can use what is available. As a facilitator, it can be tempting to give advice or to subtly direct a young person's experience rather than let them make mistakes and figure things out "the hard way."



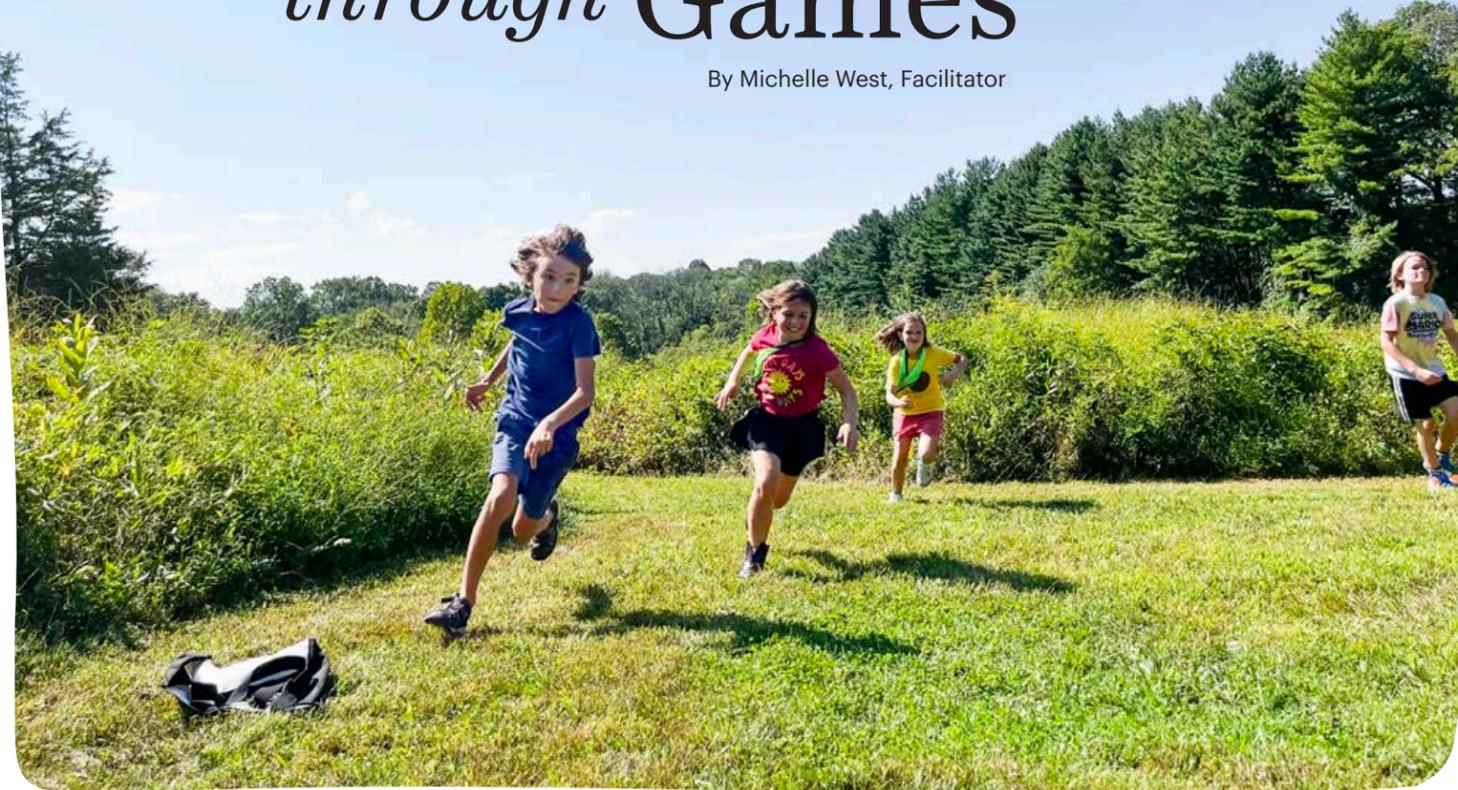
After several unsuccessful attempts to build a chair that could support the weight of "Doggy Love," Jett decided to draw some different design options for his chair. He chose to go with his idea for making a hanging hammock chair. Though the challenge was to use only paper and tape, we all agreed that an exception should be made to allow Jett to also use string.



# Natural Learning through Games

By Michelle West, Facilitator

Marlon attempts to evade Emmy and Maggie during a rousing game of Stealthy Overalls in the Meadow.



Group II youth mime a reason for tardiness to Annabelle (right) while playing "Why are you late?"



Group II youth, (Marlon), Lee, Trey, and Cassidy seek balance as they attempt to Suspend the metal rods in precarious arrangements.

The innate human desire to learn is never more in evidence than when observing young people at play at OC. Untethered to any state standards, they gain competencies and stretch themselves while engaged in what can only be described as...fun. When young people arrive at OC, it is always a safe assumption that they will be playing. Games make up a vital part of each program day in Group II, and provide endless opportunities for meeting the needs of the youth to communicate and create.

Many days in Group II begin with games set up throughout our homebase in the Slate Room. As young people trickle in, they join friends at tables and get down to the serious business of learning, naturally. Some days logic puzzles are in order, providing the opportunity to use impersonal skills like strategic thinking and spatial reasoning. Other days the name of the game is Boggle and the goal is to find as many words as possible hiding in plain sight. Whatever the table game of the day is, natural learning abounds. Youth work through disagreements about rules and establish guidelines for fair play; they cooperate with partners for a common goal and communicate about strategies. While youth

play, they develop their interpersonal skills. They don't need an artificial role-play situation to do this; they are natural learners.

Other hot spots for play and natural learning are outside in the Gravel Yard and in the meadow maze. Stealthy Overalls, Blob Tag, and Robin Ball, are fast and physical. These low-stakes, high-fun sporty kinds of games offer different learning for each individual. Some youth are working on developing the skills of balance and coordination, while youth who are experiencing negative self-talk or lack of confidence can take away intrapersonal development from these games. All Group II youth benefit from repeated chances to practice how to respectfully protest when something in the game play feels unjust. The communication is meaningful and real, and so is the learning that proceeds from it.

It truly all starts with the belief that learning is natural. When that belief is at the heart of all that takes place, it is easy to see the potential of play. Games spark wonder and curiosity; they encourage young people to move in closer, pick up pieces they've never held, re-read instructions, ask questions, and step out a little further on a limb. Young people are inclined toward games, just as they long to learn. It is entirely natural. ©

Group III gathers for a victory photo after the grueling process of crossing hot lava! Using fewer boards than people, this team-building experience challenged the group to get everyone safely across the Gravel Yard (the lava), using care to keep as many boards as possible in play by maintaining contact with the boards at all times.



# What Does *Natural Learning* Mean to Different People?

By Kelly Dillon, Facilitator

There are several ways to define Natural Learning. Natural Learning could refer to learning from the natural world, perhaps recognizing patterns or connections to other content areas, or exploring nature-inspired innovations to solve other real-world challenges. Natural Learning could also define growth and development through experience, as a consequence of investigating wonder. Curious about what might come to mind for the youth in Group III, I asked them to share their thoughts about what Natural Learning means to them. Here are some of the ideas we captured:

- "Learning through experience."
- "Learning at your own pace. Working at your own unique level of comfort. Investigating what you want to know more about."
- "Learning without thinking you are going to learn something."
- "Learning through doing - without a curriculum (or with a curriculum)... even math can happen naturally."
- "Figuring things out on my own. Don't like having things handed to me—that's boring."
- "Learning how you want to—by doing, hearing, seeing etc."
- "Figuring out how I want to learn—hands on, observing."
- "Learning from mistakes."
- "Learning when you don't think you are learning...experiencing it, rather than reading about it, passively sitting. Doing it."
- "It's different for everybody."
- "Making it your own."

There was no need for prompting or gentle nudging; their responses appeared to come with ease—naturally. Excited by the engagement in the discussion and inspired to hear more, we continued the conversation later that week, asking for any examples and insight into which Group III experiences or activities, over the last several weeks, invited Natural Learning:

### *Chicken Baseball*

(a zany, high-energy, non-traditional variation on a bat and ball game) "No one really got it until we played it. Learning by doing. Learning from experience."

### *Basketball*

"I wasted  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the basketball game not passing. Passing in the last  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the game, made the game much better. I don't have to do it alone. Teamwork. It's a team sport."

### *Disruptus*

(a game of creative and innovative thinking, revolving around creating, transforming and improving objects).  
"Opportunity for individual creativity to analyze objects and figure out [possible solutions]."

### *Paper tower*

"Paper [was the only material]. We had to just build...."  
"Each person has their own technique and we learned techniques from each other to create unique tower designs. Do we combine ideas? Use one? Collaborate?"

Several people reflected on a team building experience called Hot Lava (which challenges the group to get all team members across an area, using fewer boards than team members as safe stepping stones. Team members need to maintain contact with the boards, or they are removed from play, leaving even fewer stepping stones to get everyone across):

- "Group activity." "Figuring things out as a team." "sharing, hearing individual ideas."
- "Discovering what worked and didn't work."
- "It took a long time the first time - revisiting it was much shorter."
- "Using what worked in the next try."
- "Learning to be more open in Hot Lava; letting it happen rather than forcing."
- "Greater success when we bridged across."
- "Navigating and negotiating through challenges."

There were no blueprints detailing any expected outcomes for any of the experiences referenced above. Each person was free to happen upon their own take-away, naturally allowing for growth opportunities in intrapersonal, interpersonal and impersonal skills within the same shared experience. ©



After testing multiple building strategies, Jude, Everleigh, and Shep land on a collaborative approach that allows them to achieve some height in a Group III Paper Tower challenge using only paper.

Group IV members Indiana, Jack, Locke, and Jamie experiment with leaves, hand cut stencils and upholstery spray paint to create botanical prints, drawing the curiosity of Chris (Group II Facilitator). This activity was a practice session for the couch makeovers that Group IV will tackle in the spring.



**Left:** Evie and Indi face off against Elliot & Søren in a Group IV game of Ice-Breakers. Each pair needs to solve the problem of suspending a block-bridge between their index fingers while simultaneously attempting to use their free hand to break the block-bridges of another pair. Team challenges like these take advantage of the teens' natural affinity for playful competition to develop both self and social awareness, along with self management and relationship skills.

**Below:** A Group IV walk in the woods unfolds into a joyful kinesthetic moment, as Jamie, Locke, and Jack engage in the whole-body enjoyment of the tire swings! Making room for spontaneous play and unstructured time in nature is one way that the Group IV program leverages natural learning opportunities to further both individual and social development.



When GIV began their exploration of Shakespeare they confessed to feeling a little unsure of how they would like it. Soon after, they were huddled together composing a sonnet and verifying rhyme, syllable counts and iambic pentameter. Exposures like these provide the opportunity for natural curiosity to overcome preconceived ideas about what is enjoyable to learn.

# Natural Learning in Group IV

By Linda Soffer, Heather Gosse, and Michelle West, Facilitators

When youth reach the teen years, expectations around learning can shift towards a greater emphasis on quantified knowledge and product, with natural learning taking a back seat to more formal approaches. Our Group IV program aims to meet the intellectual, physical, and emotional needs of our members through a selection of activities and projects, designed in conjunction with the youth, that balances our acknowledgment of the increased desire for competencies in teenage youth with the strong influence of their personal motivations and interests, and the transformative power of group experience. In this context, we continue to celebrate each teen as a unique, natural learner, seeking to meet individual youth “where they are” and incorporating occasions for them to make personal choices and experiment with materials and ideas in their own way, while also making room for the opportunities that arise from our endeavors to learn about ourselves and each other.

The Group IV Comprehensive Project is one example of this approach, combining the more structured, traditional pursuits of researching, essay writing, and presenting/facilitating within a project of the youth’s concept, design and execution. Facilitators serve as “point people” working one-on-one to help youth stay on track, recognizing that each will follow an individual rhythm as they navigate the trajectory of their particular project. Within this format, the project itself serves as the meaningful context for the other elements. While we expect “work” to be done, it is up to each youth to define exactly what the parameters of the “job” will be for them.

Another way that Group IV incorporates natural learning is through our mindful integration of freedom and play into practical activities. While some direct instruction has its place, such as how to use the GlowForge safely or best practices for lab work, we purposefully offer other programming where youth have the

chance to explore materials or ideas in a more open, experimental fashion. One such opportunity is the Couch Makeover Project that we formulated this fall in an effort to brighten our program space and breathe new life into a pair of well-used sofas. After deciding on upholstery spray paint as the desired art media and leaves from trees on OC’s campus as the motif, youth were given an entire work session to create a “practice” piece on a portion of fabric, experimenting with spray paint and leaves-as-stencils, playing with positive and negative space and other design principles, discovering their own techniques and effects much to their delight! When it was first introduced, group members were highly skeptical of their abilities to tackle such a “serious” task. However, with this innovative session under their belts, group members eagerly await the opportunity to transform the furniture and literally leave their marks on the program space.

A third way in which natural learning is embraced in Group IV

is through our awareness of group process and development, and our ability to make room for the opportunities for learning that spontaneously arise through group work, rather than cutting off those moments to pursue a predetermined outcome. For example, during a period of research work, tensions arose within the group based on differing preferences for work environments. The group paused independent work and dedicated time to explore individual needs as a group, brainstorming ways to address the tension. While we were left with less time in the work session, this divergence resulted in a more productive work environment for everyone during future work periods, as well as increased group cohesion. None of us set out at the inception of the project to work specifically on that issue; rather, we took advantage of it when it arose naturally in the course of a program day. ©

# SYL Youth Describe a Piece of their *Natural Learning Journey*

By the Shaping Your Life Teens

The Shaping Your Life group sits down with their microwave popcorn ready to enjoy the film *Twelve Angry Men* as part of their study on the Law in preparation for the Teen Symposium which will be held in March. L-R: Eliza, Aminah, Ruby, Ella, Norah, and Diane (Visiting Artist).



I always had an interest in creative writing and storytelling, but it was only briefly covered in my writing education, which was focused on academic writing such as essays and research papers. When I was eleven, I decided to take things into my own hands. I started off by writing twelve page stories about mermaids, and that unlocked a whole new world for me! With lots of practice, trying new things, and finding my own resources, I discovered a love of writing poetry and fantasy novels! - *Eliza*

Being able to type fluidly on a keyboard is practically essential for using computers. I don't mean texting; I mean actually typing. When I was younger, my mom found an online game that was designed to teach homeschoolers how to type. This game frustrated me, and I hated the graphics. Eventually we gave up on the game. As I used computers more, doing things like Google searching, essay writing, and playing Minecraft, I naturally developed a way to type that works for me. Now, I can focus on the message of what I'm typing and not be distracted by searching for letters on a keyboard. - *Ella*

I have been around horses for most of my life and really connected with the idea of training when I learned about different training methods and how much they can vary. I had been intrigued by animal psychology and behavior for years, so when I wanted to learn more about horse training, I did. I took online courses, read books, watched videos, connected with trainers, and practiced on my horses. This is a passion that I continue to develop and has brought a great amount of fulfillment to my life. - *Hannah*

When I was around twelve, I noticed some of my friends got into drawing, and I started to take an interest in it. It was difficult at first, but still I loved doing it and once I started, I couldn't stop. I spent hours practicing drawing by trying to replicate other people's artworks to get a sense of proportions. Drawing is still one of my favorite things to do after four years of experience and practicing! From teaching myself and allowing my skills to develop at my own pace and in my own way, I've learned the value of pushing myself to learn new things even when it seems difficult. - *Aminah*

When I was younger, I hated reading... hated it. My parents always encouraged me to read, and I never did it. I pretended to read by just staring at the pages, but I never understood what was happening. All I was thinking about was how much I did not want to read and how much I hated being told what to do. As I got older, my parents let me make my own learning choices. I found myself picking up books that interested me and discovered the magic of stories, falling in love with characters over and over again. This was a completely new and foreign experience compared to my previous encounters with reading. Now I love indulging in a good book! - *Norah*

When I was around twelve, I started thinking about movies in a way I never had before - as something more than just entertainment, as an art form. I no longer wanted to just watch films and enjoy or dislike them, I wanted to really understand my response and be able to articulate this judgment from an informed position. I studied films, read film criticism, and tried my hand at writing my own reviews. I developed many skills, including critical thinking. From selecting resources for an academic research project to designing a mural for my closet doors, my ability to formulate a judgment based on analysis and evaluation has increased my confidence in my choices in all aspects of my life. - *Ruby* ©

Norah and Ruby pose for a picture on Shaping Your Life's morning walk through Ridley Creek State Park.



Hannah creates a cardboard version her one-wheel as part of the cardboard challenge. She uses the one-wheel to measure the pieces so she can make an exact replica!



Emmy, Gwen, Holly and Lincoln proudly pose in their finished screen printed t shirts, created in Choice A: Printmaking.



Lincoln, Josh, and Holly all collaborate to work out the details of a scene during Choice A: Filmmaking.



When young people come up with their own solutions in Choice A: Construction Challenges, it's fun to see the wide variety of forms those solutions take. During a challenge to construct a bridge made of straws and tape, Josh works on his freestanding, cantilever-style bridge over a paper river, and in the background you can see Cassidy's very different approach, which bridges the gap between two boxes with a bridge design based on the triangle.



One day in Choice A: Nature Explorations, we went exploring in the White Pines. The most exciting thing we found was a bunch of deer bones! This led to digging out the deer skeleton that lives in the basement and trying to get a better understanding of how the different bones fit into the whole deer skeleton. Here, Cataleia sorts and categorizes the bones.



*Choice A:*  
**PRINTMAKING** By Kelly Dillon, Facilitator

Afternoons in Choice A: Printmaking generally begin with a demonstration of a new printmaking technique. The aim is to provide enough information to get started, yet allow ample room for inquiry based investigation and tinkering through creating and adjusting. There is natural learning in the iterative process inherent in printmaking, testing cause and effect, and making changes as the designs evolve. Does the image printed from the matrix or substrate look the same or different than expected?



Lincoln uses a light box to create a design to use for a screen print in Choice A: Printmaking, puzzling through positive and negative space.

*Choice A:*  
**FILM** By Sarah Becker, Facilitator

In Choice A: Film, youth are provided with some initial guidelines, tips and tricks when it comes to putting together a film. From there, creativity takes over. In this session, youth have been working independently, in pairs, and as groups to produce various film pieces. In the filming process for one particular group endeavor, a lot of Natural Learning has been happening. In order to get a spooky effect, often dark settings (like an attic) are enticing. What happens when your footage is all black? Youth experienced the natural consequences of a poorly lit scene, and will go forth in their filming careers with better knowledge around effective lighting! (Stay tuned for some masterpieces at the upcoming Story Fest in February 2023!)

*Choice A:*  
**CONSTRUCTION CHALLENGES** By Heather Gosse, Facilitator

In Choice A: Construction Challenges, the challenge gives the participants a goal, with all sorts of learning happening along the way. The day we made parachutes to slow the fall of our plastic frogs, the young people also practiced using stopwatches, worked with a variety of materials, used a slow-motion video to observe how their parachutes behaved during the fall, and realized that they needed to clearly communicate with their videographer to make sure their drop got recorded!



Choice A: Construction Challenges group took advantage of the beautiful day to go down to the creek to construct using natural materials. Here, Cataleia, Marlon, Eli, and Josh work on shoring up a dam. They discussed and tested a variety of methods to plug up leaks. The group also started construction on a creepy fairy hotel, caught a frog, caught a crayfish, and enjoyed the creek in general.

*Choice A:*  
**NATURE EXPLORATION**

By Heather Gosse, Facilitator

You never know where your curiosity will take you! One day during Choice A: Nature Exploration, we walked up the creek from the lower bridge to the gate by the upper pond. Along our way, we found a dead frog and decided to take it back to the lab for dissection and for viewing under the microscope. Among other things, we looked at bones, organs, webbed feet, and what we're pretty sure was the lens from the frog's eye!

**“You never know where your curiosity might take you!”**

Shep's first project was to create a miniature acrylic shelf for his bedroom. Since a sheet of blue acrylic is expensive relative to other materials, he first cut a prototype out of cardboard. Once satisfied with the design, he cut the shelf out of the acrylic and assembled it using super glue. He noticed that super gluing acrylic together was a lot more challenging than cardboard so then had to work on solutions to this challenge that cropped up.



As Silas was building his katana sword he had strong feelings that the handle be larger than the blade. He went through a couple of iterations before settling on cutting and stacking oak discs then sanding them down to his liking.



### Choice B: WOODSHOP

By Chris McNichol, Facilitator

Wood is a natural product with many different characteristics. Working with wood can be very unpredictable, but that is what makes it exciting. Projects in the woodshop often go smoothly but sometimes it is like a game of whack-a-mole. Once you get an issue sorted another issue pops up. When this happens, young people need to adjust to get the outcome they are wishing for. This might be just a minor adjustment or it might result in the youth scrapping the project and starting over. You never know until it happens!

“This is real, purposeful work, and usually leads to a high level of ownership that can propel them to push through challenges and find creative solutions to the inevitable setbacks.”

### Choice B: USING ADOBE ILLUSTRATOR IN THE MAKERSPACE

By Rick Sleutaris, Facilitator

Youth have a tremendous amount of freedom to create in this Choice Program. Their projects are varied and robust including a custom printed t-shirt, a 3D bowl made from wooden cross sections, a poseable wooden figure using wire to create joints, a marble run, an acrylic miniature shelf, a mask, and more. Each youth is engaging with Adobe Illustrator, the Roland printer, and the Glowforge cutter/etcher in ways that are meaningful to them. This is real, purposeful work, and usually leads to a high level of ownership that can propel them to push through challenges and find creative solutions to the inevitable setbacks—Natural Learning in full display!

Benji uses clothespins as a third hand to hold the spokes of his willow basket while he works in the “weavers” during Choice B: Foraging and Wildcrafting.



### Choice B: FORAGING AND WILDCRAFT

By Kelly Dillon, Facilitator

Foraging and Wildcrafting are ancient pastimes and practices. There is at once, an appreciation for the concoctions and discoveries of those who have gone before us, and a compelling curiosity to try stuff and see what happens. Sure, we could read about ratios of plant matter to weight of fabric while gathering and preparing a dye bath in Choice B: Foraging and Wildcrafting, but how would that compare to the richness in the natural learning in investigating, seeing what happens and making connections?

Renewable Energies youth pose with their solar powered vehicles. Youth shared different design techniques as they experimented with pulleys, gears, axles, wheels, chassis, and solar panels. There were ample opportunities to hone their problem solving and flexible thinking skills as each vehicle design required multiple iterations before it could successfully move using only sunlight. L-R: Jay, Danny, Locke, Eli, Shep, Logan, Evie.



### Choice B: EXPLORING RENEWABLE ENERGIES

By Rick Sleutaris, Facilitator

Sometimes facilitator-initiated activities transform into an example of Natural Learning. In Choice B: Renewable Energies, we spent the first few weeks building up basic knowledge about energy—exploring the terms voltage, current, resistance, and power; building circuits; creating batteries; etc.—before diving into the world of renewable energies. Our most recent project was to build a solar powered vehicle. Even with a concrete outcome, youth had total freedom in how they would meet this challenge. They were all very interested and each took the project in a slightly different direction—learning from each other, using materials that were not initially offered, pushing the limits of the solar cells, and more. These hybrid experiences that are facilitator initiated but youth driven speak to the merging of exposure and natural learning.©



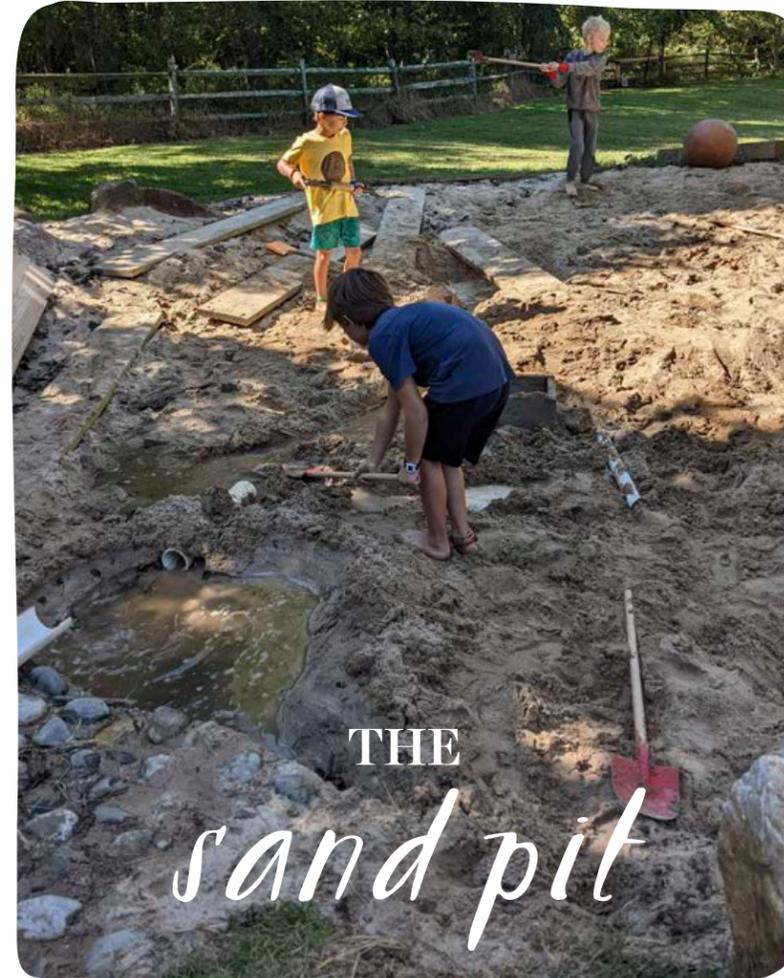
The Choice B: Renewable Energies group inflated a thermal balloon and then waited for the sun's energy to heat it up. As the air inside warmed, the balloon began to rise. Using a kite string, the balloon went as high at the top of the 3 story barn!



Peter (facilitator) and Ari collaborate on creating a water pathway that will reach the sand pit. Peter takes a turn pumping while Ari works to line the pipes up just right so the water will travel all the way down to a pre-dug canal. You will often find the Open Program youth working together to create a city of water passages in the sand pit.

# Campus Corner

by Peter Huis, *Facilitator*



## THE sand pit

Open Program youth collaborate to get water to run through ditches and pipes from the pump to a "pond" at the far side of the Sand Pit.



Jack and Kai work together to move a very full wheelbarrow of water from the pump to the sand pit during the construction of a dam.



Luna enjoys exploring the patterns in the sand as she moves it around.

The Open Connections Sandpit is a hub for outdoor activities, and has become so many different things to many program groups, it is hard to list them all. While many spaces on campus have specific or specialized uses (woodshop, makerspace, etc), the Sandpit has no such direct purpose. So what exactly can be done with a large amount of sand in a hole? Quite a lot as it turns out. One of the first things I noticed were the industrious projects that are always cropping up. These projects usually start out small; a hole, a trench, or a large pile. From there, organically, small beginnings turn into pit-wide collaborative efforts. In the nearby shed, there are plenty of shovels, rakes, buckets, and other tools to support large scale building. While the specific aim of a given project is not always sharply defined, anyone can move sand in the right direction. In the warmer months, much of the building involves the corralling of water into a network of

streams and ponds. Water is a true team effort. Lots of communication is needed to cover all the various jobs involved.

Of course, not everything that happens in or around the Sandpit is about industry and aqueducts. Much of our time there is spent simply playing around in the sand. Because of the Sandpit's close proximity to the Outdoor Environment<sup>1</sup>, games that involve one space usually involve both. Cooking utensils, pots and pans make their way up and down between the Sandpit and the Environment play space (the activity is usually some mixture of restaurant, home, and workshop). Also, the Sandpit's central location means that more than one group can join in the fun. It is a great spot to meet people from other parts of the campus who you might not usually cross paths with! ©

<sup>1</sup>This Outdoor Environment is a multi-level structure where youth can explore in multiple ways including imaginary play, collaborative interactions and practicing climbing skills on the rockwall. This particular Environment was dreamed of and designed by a group of youth in the Choice Program in 2014.

# Community Days by Parent Connections



# A DAY IN THE LIFE OF *The Kelly Family*



## Please describe your family constellation:

Dennis, Becky, Kenny (21), Lee (10), and Jett (7). Lee attends Group II on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and Jett attends Group I on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

## How do your young people spend their time when they're not at Open Connections?

They usually sleep in! We often cook breakfast together and do some reading in the morning followed by some one-on-one math while the other youth plays with legos, draws, plays outside, or reads independently. Dad comes home for lunch which is often followed by snuggle time on the couch before he goes back to work. In the afternoons there is typically some kind of creative activity going on. Jett loves to draw, paint, and create games for our family to play later. Lee likes to rest in the afternoon and play video games like Minecraft, build with Legos, play piano, or watch true crime and paranormal shows on TV. I do a lot of baking leading up to

cooking dinner and I usually have at least one helper in the kitchen. On the weekends and some weeknights Lee and Jett both play basketball in the winter, baseball in the spring, and soccer in the fall.

## What is your family's approach to learning? Real Work? Play? Self-direction/self-motivation?

We strive for self-direction in our day-to-day lives, but honestly, it can be very difficult sometimes. As much as we, as parents, want to wait for our youth to invite learning experiences, sometimes it feels like we could be waiting forever. In those times we lean more on a structured curriculum to check off some of the math and language arts boxes until something sparks a curiosity and we can move more toward that topic. We value work and play as a part of our regular rhythm. Perhaps most important is the desire that our young people be rooted in their connection to family and home. When we are connected, our minds and hearts are more open to new experiences and to one another's current interests. In the best of times, our home and family life works in harmony with our learning.

## What are some of the key benefits to this educational approach for your family?

It is truly such a tremendous privilege to be able to spend so much time together as a family. Homeschooling gives us the freedom to learn what we wish, when we wish, and to find learning opportunities in so many ordinary moments. It also allows us the freedom for those extraordinary experiences, like our month-long cross-country RV trip, that wouldn't have been possible within the constraints of traditional school. Having the support and community of OC allows us to enjoy that freedom, with the support of an entire community of like-minded people. It allows

We all know that homeschooling looks different for each family. Here is a glimpse into how one OC family handles their days.

our young people to have experiences that we alone could not offer them. They have dear friends at OC and this community means so much to them.

## What resources—people, books, curricula, places or organizations (museums, art centers, scouting, 4-H, businesses, etc.)—have you found helpful? How have they contributed to your youth's development?

Our family has made some positive connections in our local community through organized sports. Lee and Jett are both interested in music. Lee takes weekly piano lessons and performs in recitals twice a year. We frequently visit our local library, and Lee and Jett both have book subscription boxes that they look forward to each month. We've explored a few full curricula, and some that are subject specific. For now we're using Math-U-See for both Lee and Jett, and The Happy Cheetah Reading Program for Jett. ©



Søren and Elliot discuss the personal coaching strategies they have formulated to challenge their Inner Critics. Group IV and Shaping Your Life joined together for a 3 session program that explored the qualities of the "beginners mind" and the dynamic role of self-compassion on the adolescent journey to young adulthood.



Weston works on a Group I building challenge: Using materials of your choice, build a boat that can float in the creek.



Cealy, Kellan, Mara, and Lila enjoy a pumpkin decorating activity in the Open Program on a warm fall day.



Violet has found the stock of recycling art materials in the Open Program. She carefully paints each section of an egg carton a different color.



Leo reads a book to his fellow Open Program youth, Nico.

## ALUMNI INTERVIEW

# Madeleine Kunda



### What led you/your family to OC?

My parents have always been alternative thinkers. When my sister and I were kids, we all craved a lifestyle built on freedom and desired greater adaptability and fulfillment in our education. We were raised to understand learning as more of an immersive experience than what was traditionally provided inside most classrooms. I was also heavily bored in school and always thirsted for deeper engagement and autonomy in my studies. The public school system of sit, listen, memorize, repeat seemed awfully hollow to us. We felt there had to be more to learning than what society offered at first glance. All of this was a mere dream, however, until we found OC. We'd explored the idea of homeschooling before, but my mom worried about some of the things I think many who begin the journey do. She wasn't a teacher by training and didn't feel qualified to take our education on alone, with nothing but books and the kitchen table to build upon. She also wanted us to have a community with whom to explore, socialize and learn. My dad was the visionary, and while he was always very involved in our education, he also worked full time and couldn't be around to provide guidance on a daily basis. All this goes to say that the minute we walked onto OC's campus we felt we'd found home. I think this is an experience

shared by many OC families. It felt as though we'd found our place and our people: a network of dedicated lifelong learners united in their quest for growth. Our parents pulled us out of school that month and we started at OC right after. At the time I was in 5th grade and my sister in 3rd. I am so grateful my parents were willing to explore alternatives and take the leap with us. You can't ever get your childhood back; you only have one shot to make it memorable, educational and truly stimulating. So that's what we tried to do and I've never once regretted it.

### At what age did you start at OC? What programs were you involved in?

We discovered OC when I was 11, and I started programming at age 12. I continued from then all the way up through my teens, supplementing classes at OC with college courses nearby until I graduated "high school" and left for university and life abroad.

I took so many programs at the time but some highlights include: Tuesday Tutorial, Teen Choice, Shaping Your Life, Model UN, Circuits, Writing, Afternoon on the Farm, Theater, Swing Dancing and Sports.

### What have you been up to since leaving/graduating from OC?

Immediately after graduating from OC I spent a year abroad attending university in a handful of places including Sevilla, Spain, Paris, France and Carmarthen, Wales. A few years later I graduated from university in BC, Canada with a degree in Linguistics and Education.

Upon my graduation I moved to Utila, Honduras to complete my PADI training and work as a Master Scuba Diver Trainer. I continued down the outdoors route for another year becoming an EMT and professional Ski Patroller in Colorado. After dabbling in publishing and illustrating a few children's books, one of which was with best friend and old OCer Liam Snead (called *The Wish of Wishes*), I now have my own marketing and tech business based out of Telluride, Colorado. One of my apps, an advanced ski resort 3D mapping tool, business directory and trip-planning solution developed for the Town of Mountain Village will launch later this year! I primarily

work remotely and live with my sister, Olivia, in our condo at 9,500 ft. near the base of the ski resort.

### How did OC impact you?

Instead of claiming OC molded me into who I am today, I'd say that OC provided me with the space, resources, and leadership to become who I always wanted to be. That is quite a powerful thing one doesn't easily forget, no matter how much time passes. I think a lot of people are grateful to be done high school and quick to forget much of what they learned. I can still remember many of the facilitations I gave, the interactive projects I created, the fascinating topics I researched, the articles I wrote and the life-changing experiences I had. How many people can say that about their childhood education, I wonder?

Just as important, I believe that nothing could have set me up better for the life I lead today. I am a more proactive learner, a more resourceful professional and a more engaged citizen as a result of my OC education.



### What did you find useful about your time at OC?

OC teaches you how to think, more than what to think. Thoughtful challenges and unique opinions were always encouraged. I also found OC to be more reflective of real life than most of today's traditional classrooms. Rather than isolating students inside an over-pressurized system, OC was a place designed to foster learning through interaction with the outside world. Whether we took trips across the state or across the tutorial room, OC was a place that combined disciplines in a practical way to better embody real life. We might be discussing management of personal finances or building a rocket ship; either way, our studies were multidisciplinary in nature. I find that life beyond school rarely divides itself into disconnected disciplines, divorced and disembodied from real world interaction. More often than not you might use historical analysis to create pioneering mathematics, or employ writing and design to build new technology. OC integrated this kind of multifaceted education into our programming, and without a doubt I am so much better off for it.

### How did OC hone your Self-Understanding, your Intrapersonal Skills?

I have become much more self-assured and self-reliant thanks to OC helping empower me to take responsibility for my own education. If you're going to take on a leadership role in your own learning, you need to first address some fundamental questions about who you are and what matters most to you. It's not an on-and-off switch, and there's no question it's a journey, but OC certainly helped create the conditions in which I could strive to get to know myself better and investigate my goals. It takes courage to look inward, and OC helped me find the strength within myself to do just that.

### How did OC help you grow your Interpersonal Skills?

OC was always a place where all ages came together to inspire each other to tackle challenges head-on and embrace the evolution of learning. I loved the fact that facilitators and young people across the spectrum could connect over different projects and activities on campus. We were able to learn from those who'd been there, apply existing

knowledge to help guide younger generations, and venture into new arenas of thought as a community. I remember that I was also quite comfortable with public speaking at a young age, a skill I use on a daily basis in my job now. I attribute this confidence in large part to the exposure I had to people of diverse ages and backgrounds at OC. OC built a community that went beyond the classroom and encouraged us to work together to reach for the stars.

### How did OC help you develop your Creative/ Implementation Skills, your Impersonal Skills?

OC was always action-oriented. I thrived by engaging with material through the kind of immersive and experiential learning to which we were exposed on campus. The ability to approach problems from unique perspectives is essential to creativity, and OC was always devoted to encouraging us to debate and come to our own conclusions. Learning, in my view, can not really be detached from creativity—they are one and the same. If you are not using your creative capacity to address problems, then you are more likely memorizing and regurgitating material. There is a time and a place to cram for studies, but pretty much anyone can do that, and it has little value for the kind of personal growth that leads to meaningful professional accomplishments. True learning requires investigative and inventive thinking. I am so grateful that OC fostered an environment of such proportions.

### If you had not gone to OC, imagine how you might be different.

It's difficult to imagine. Once I started unschooling through OC, I never looked back. I can only imagine I'd have less self-knowledge and less courage to pursue what I really wanted. Unthinkable to me today.

### What advice would you give to youth just starting out on their OC journey?

Unschooling happens in so many different ways. It is not a one-size-fits-all kind of experience. OC advocates for you to be an independent learner and creative thinker, but that doesn't mean you have to do it all alone. Take advantage of the amazing facilitators and resources around you to help you find the way that YOU learn the best. That is what OC is all about: helping you to customize your education so you can discover who you are and what you want to be. Don't forget to live and love these great days, you will look back on them forever.

### What wisdom could you offer to parents of new OC youth?

I certainly can't claim to be capable of providing earth-shattering wisdom, but here is a thought for you to take or leave. Jumping into unschooling is a leap. It does take some commitment from the part of the parents, but there are so many different ways to manage this kind of lifestyle and I cannot imagine anything more worthy. It's natural to worry about your kids' futures, but if they are exposed to a community that is built around facilitating true learning, you know you are on the right path. My life would not be the same without OC. I shudder to think where I'd have been if I didn't have parents that believed in my journey and helped to guide me along the way.

### What favorite memory of OC would you like to share?

One day back in Tuesday Tutorial, we spent an afternoon attempting to build a raft. We were given the entire campus to explore to find the kinds of supplies that would get us off the ground and into the water. Our instructions were simple: the whole team had to be able to fit on the raft and make it across the pond. I will fully disclose that the process was not a clean one! To measure, weigh and test our contraptions we had to get our hands dirty and our feet wet—but that, of course, was one of my favorite parts. Our float was not perfect, and we ended up with some oddly lopsided paddling, but that was all part of the learning. Lots of laughs and challenges later, we had a triumphant sense of accomplishment that went well beyond the beauty of the product (thankfully!)—but we did it! ☺

## ALUMNI

We're very excited about continuing to welcome the Open Connections Alumni back to campus! We're getting ready for our Second Annual OC Alumni Connections Winter Event! —check your inbox for an invite! We look forward to connecting over some food and a fire. If you are farther away, please feel free to connect with us on social media, including the OC Alumni Connections page (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/ocalumniconnections>). Drop us a line and let us know what you're up to; it's always good to hear from alum out in the wider world. If you ever need anything, or are interested in getting involved on campus, drop us a line: [alumni@openconnections.org](mailto:alumni@openconnections.org) and feel free to let us know what types of events or services you'd like to see from OC in the future!

# Development Corner

To the wonderful Open Connections Community and Supporters—

As we get ready to enter the holiday season, I am reminded of all of the things that excite me: family, friends, togetherness, the excitement of an opportunity to slow down and really get curious about things, and time to explore.

The mission of Open Connections is to empower people to create the life that they want, full of purpose and fulfillment. At the heart of this philosophy is the sentiment that learning, growth, and exploration never stop, even when we leave the OC Campus. This holiday season, we all hope that you are able to take time to #KeepExploring. In that time, Open Connections will keep growing, keep providing opportunities for as many families as possible to come to this magical place, and we will keep exploring how best to serve this community as we all continue to learn and thrive, together.

As you can see in the pages of this magazine, our community is flourishing in this environment that cultivates curiosity, compassion, and community. Thank you for your part in this community and your support, whether it's a donation, engaging with our youth or alumni, spreading the word about Open Connections, or just learning something new about yourself! Here are some ways to make a gift in support of Open Connections:

#### Donate online:

<https://www.openconnections.org/support-oc/make-an-online-donation>

**Text:** KeepExploring to 610-827-5755

#### Or mail a check to:

Open Connections  
1616 Delchester Road  
Newtown Square, PA 19073

#### Additionally, here are some ways for you to keep exploring Open Connections:

##### Virtually:

Social Media, including OC Alumni Connections Facebook group

**Website:** [openconnections.org](http://openconnections.org)

**In-Person:** call or email me to set up a time to come visit campus!

Have a wonderful and warm break, and we look forward to connecting in 2023!

With warmth and gratitude,

Sarah Becker





THE 2ND ANNUAL

# CARDBOARD CHALLENGE!

We had so much fun playing with cardboard last year, we just couldn't help ourselves: we've started a tradition! For the second year in a row, the entire community came together to imagine, play, create, and construct a myriad of items out of cardboard! From a Samurai yoroi to scale miniatures, a wishing machine, arcade games, and beyond, imagination reigned supreme on this day, for ALL ages!





FREEDOM *to*  
LEARN *and*  
CREATE

