

OPEN CONNECTIONS™

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Open Connections Magazine

Issue 80 | Spring 2022

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).

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Cover: Group II created reindeer from branches found around the OC property. Here, Silas puts his muscles to the test as he uses the hand drill to create holes for his reindeer's legs.

Left: Group II started this fire to cook lunch and roast marshmallows but had to move away from it for All Campus Capture the Flag. When we returned, Everleigh persisted and was able to get the fire going again by adding small amounts of tinder and twigs.

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FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR

Margaret Welsh



Dear Friends,

We have had many chilly days this winter in southeastern PA and had some fabulous sledding snow too.

As I write, the sun is sparkling on a frosty February morning and youth are bustling around full of anticipation for another busy day on campus.

Our community is engaged with a variety of activities outside of program time, creating strong connections. We have also been welcoming new families to campus, sharing with them what the Open Connections community and programs can offer their families.

This year, each issue of the Open Connections Magazine is devoted to one of the three broad life skills areas that

we focus on nurturing at OC—Interpersonal, Intrapersonal, and Impersonal. This issue is devoted to the ways in which intrapersonal skills are nurtured in the various programs at OC. Take a journey with us and read vignettes from each program. Intrapersonal skills are vital to our daily lives, and for all ages.

Continue on the journey with our regular columns and interviews, helping us connect and get to know each other and our campus better. Our Annual Giving drive this year is centered around Creating Connections. 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.

Margaret



Group IV members Evie, Hannah, Lily and Aria react to the playback of the scene they just filmed for the OC Film Fest. While film making is a complex collaboration, each individual is encouraged to choose the role that holds the most interest and new learning for them, be it in front of or behind the camera.

Intrapersonal Skills *at Open Connections*



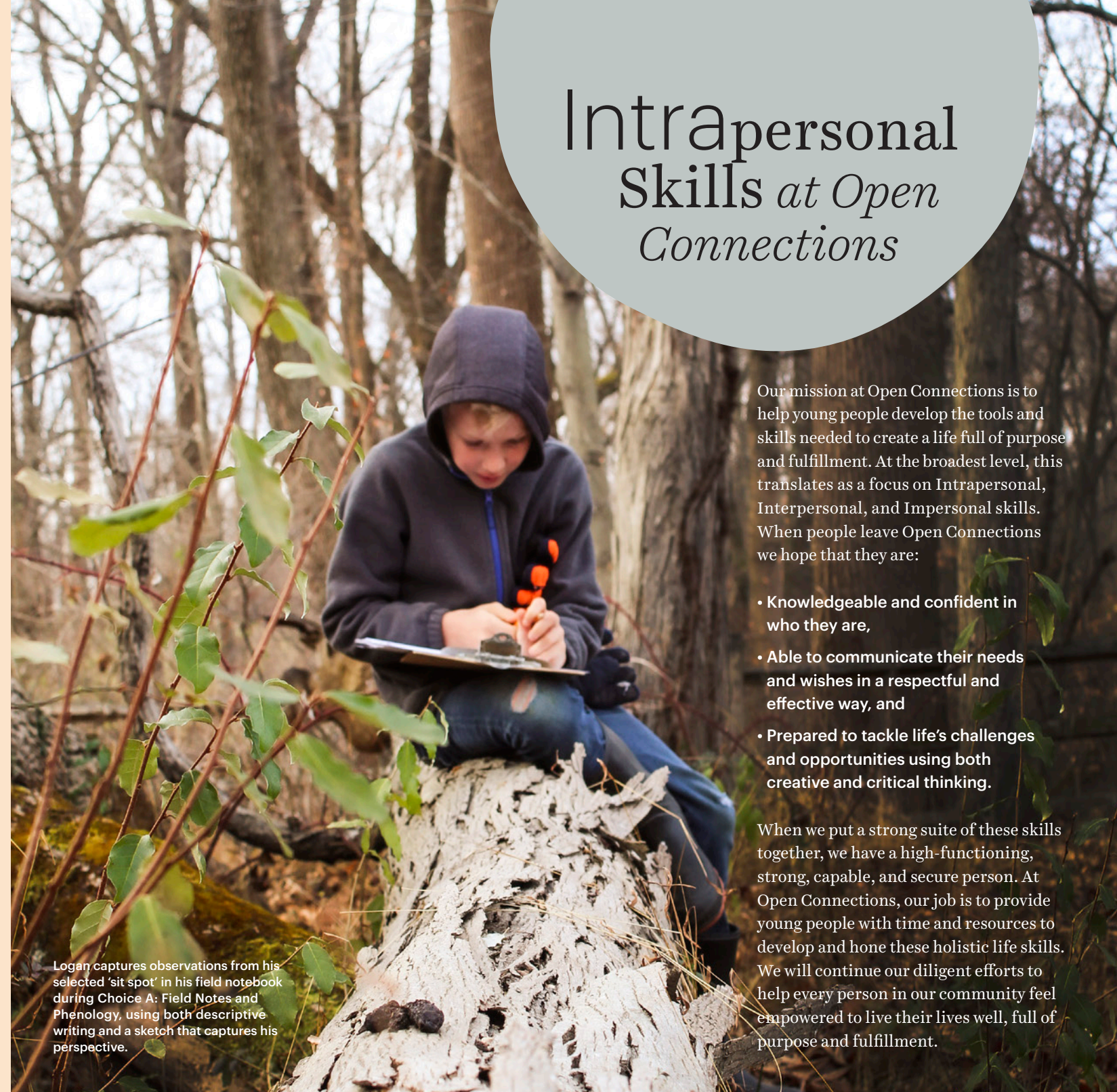
The puppet theater has been a source of much creativity and entertainment in the Open Program this winter. Here, Wally and Theo enjoy a show by Charlie.



Lyla carefully adds bits of color to her watercolor painting during a morning watercolor challenge in Group II. These morning challenges encourage youth to practice slowing down and observing their surroundings.



Shep and Ollie work on a Lego Mindstorms conveyor belt delivery system that will be part of the P, B, & J Rube Goldberg machine in Choice B: Rube Goldberg.



Logan captures observations from his selected 'sit spot' in his field notebook during Choice A: Field Notes and Phenology, using both descriptive writing and a sketch that captures his perspective.

Our mission at Open Connections is to help young people develop the tools and skills needed to create a life full of purpose and fulfillment. At the broadest level, this translates as a focus on Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, and Impersonal skills. When people leave Open Connections we hope that they are:

- Knowledgeable and confident in who they are,
- Able to communicate their needs and wishes in a respectful and effective way, and
- Prepared to tackle life's challenges and opportunities using both creative and critical thinking.

When we put a strong suite of these skills together, we have a high-functioning, strong, capable, and secure person. At Open Connections, our job is to provide young people with time and resources to develop and hone these holistic life skills. We will continue our diligent efforts to help every person in our community feel empowered to live their lives well, full of purpose and fulfillment.

This is the second in a series of three Open Connections Magazines sharing with you a window into how broad life skills are nurtured in the programs at OC. The following pages give you a glimpse of intrapersonal skill development. This category could be defined as the "I" realm of life skills. Some time ago, Socrates philosophized, "Know thyself," which is a sentiment that is relevant today. Some abilities that are

mentioned in regard to this realm are: recognizing and developing your own interests, establishing a healthy emotional and physical lifestyle, having an abundance mentality, developing good organizational skills, cultivating mindfulness, being committed to lifelong learning, and so on. This set of skills really helps individuals uncover and solidify their own voices, wants, and needs.



Intrapersonal Skills in the
Open Program
 By Michelle Brockway, Facilitator

Gracie finds a way to reach a high tree branch on her own by stacking wooden boxes to create a staircase. These hand crafted wooden boxes support imagination and Flexible Thinking in the Open Program, serving as tables, shelving, climbing structures and even fort walls.

During an outdoor game in the Open Program, Maks, Serafina, Delilah, and Bronwyn raise their hands up to show they are happy to be at Open Connections.



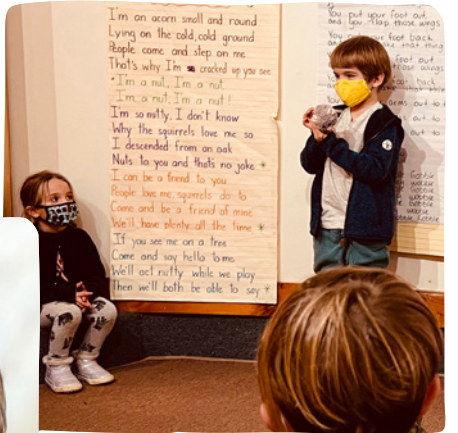
(Left): Jett uses arm strength and body awareness to pull himself up the climbing ropes during a day in the Open Program. Youth have an abundance of opportunities to develop confidence in their abilities when playing around on the OC campus.



Youth in the Open Program have a plethora of opportunities to develop intrapersonal skills. Pictured here, Peter (facilitator and OC Alum) facilitates Miles in a game of Attribute Blocks. Miles has the opportunity to challenge himself and find his own "sweet spot."



During some outdoor fun in the Open Program, Nico works to climb up the rock wall. Here Nico ponders his next step before reaching the top floor of the Environment.



(Above): In the Thursday Open Program Maks shares a special handmade stuffie with the group. It is opportunities like these that give our youth a safe place to develop public speaking skills.

I like to think that the Open Program (OP) is the "HEART" of Open Connections (OC). This is where it all started all of those years ago. The OP is a creative space which allows youth to choose how they spend their day. It is a space where facilitators support youth in developing life skills through work, connection, communication, interactions, and play. In this issue of the OC magazine we will focus on ways we support development of intrapersonal skills in the Open Program.

The OP offers a plethora of opportunities to develop intrapersonal skills starting when you enter the OP space. Just the freedom to choose how you spend your time can support development. For example, one youth entered on his first day, quiet, watching, and taking it all in. I could see him sitting up in the Environment* peeking out. He watched as others joined in activities. He watched as others collaborated and shared in conversation. When I looked up, I could see a smile on his face, his head moving around in the Environment window. Facilitators invited him to join in. With each invite he declined the offer and continued to watch. For several weeks he entered the OP in the same way, sitting back, watching and listening to others, and declining invites to join in. Once in a while he would sit close and listen to a story, play a board game one-on-one, join a large group game of parachute, or sing along at Group Time. With each passing week he would join in a little more and try a little something new. Each week he would join in with a new group of young people. He started to accept offers to join in

when he was ready. This youth was given the space to develop at his own pace. In December, I watched as this youth requested to share a special something with the entire group. He spoke in front of us all as if he had always done so. I could see that this young person knew himself well. He built up confidence and waited until he felt ready, unpressured, to step out into the program.

Another way we support the OP youth in developing their intrapersonal skills is through self help. You might hear us say "when your body is ready, you will be able to do it". Allowing for young people to climb up ladders on their own and pull themselves up onto swings can seem unusual to some. It is our goal to not rob our youth of the opportunities to develop these skills on their own. There was a young person wishing to be lifted up the rock climbing wall to spend time in the upper level of the outdoor Environment. The facilitators helped her understand that when her body was ready, she would be able to get herself up, and therefore she would be able to get herself down. This youth worked week after week to make it up that wall. With each week she got a little closer, building confidence and strength. By week eight she was successful! She was overjoyed with excitement to finally be able to spend time in the space that she had worked so hard to reach. Her sense of accomplishment was oozing out, because she did it all on her own.

It is opportunities like these that support our youth in developing their intrapersonal skills. Our days in the Open Program are full of these moments, giving space and time for growth. ©

*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.



Intrapersonal Skills in
Group I By Jane Sleutaris,
 Facilitator

Group I youth talked about ways we can have a positive impact on others and the world around us. One idea that was enthusiastically embraced was to do a food drive for the Chester County Food Bank. Each of four weeks, Group I youth took time to sort and stack items donated by the OC Community. On the final day of the collection, they were excited to discover that they had enough cereal donations to build a tower that reached the ceiling! L-R: Josh, Lincoln, Luke, Jack, Miles and Annabelle.

Group I supports development of intrapersonal skills in young people through a variety of activities. Here are a few examples:

Me Mobiles

Self-reflection is an important intrapersonal skill that involves contemplating one's actions, choices, and the things that are important in one's life, including personal values and loved ones. It can reinforce a person's understanding of the people and things that matter most to them. The youth in Group I created physical representations of what is important to them by using different trinkets, objects, keepsakes, photos, and drawings to create Me Mobiles. Each young person presented his/her Me Mobile to the group and described each object and why they chose to include it on their mobile. The colorful "Me Mobiles" hang cheerfully from the ceiling in the Group I program space and convey a personal story of each youth and what is important to them.



Jack presents his Me Mobile to the group.

Gratitude Quilt

In addition to making Me Mobiles as a way to promote self-reflection, youth also spent time contemplating what they are grateful for. Each youth then created a quilt square to reflect this including choosing a border fabric. Our finished Group I Gratitude Quilt is a beautiful, concrete representation of the things the Group I youth are grateful for and is displayed in the Farmhouse Foyer just outside the Group I program room. We hope others will see it and be inspired to pause a moment and feel gratitude for something personally meaningful to them. Creating a Gratitude Quilt was a project inspired by our ongoing Thursday program focus on gratitude and an awareness of others in need.



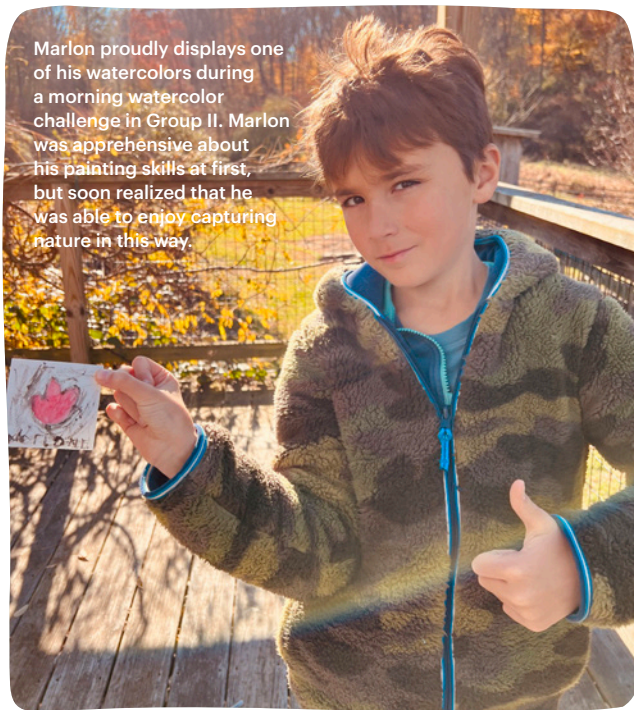
Group I youth pose with their finished Gratitude Quilt which captures their gratitude for family, friends, the world, pets, OC, and favorite activities such as baseball. After creating their individual squares, youth chose pieces of colorful patterned fabric on which to mount them. The finished Gratitude Quilt is displayed by the Group I program space. L-R: Henry, Josh, Levi, Lincoln, Miles, Brendan, Annabelle and Luke.

Providing Food For Those In Need

Another important intrapersonal skill is the awareness of how we affect the world around us. Marshall Rosenthal, father of Nonviolent Communication (NVC), identifies the need to contribute as a universal human need. Making brownies and homemade casseroles for people experiencing houselessness is something concrete and hands-on that the Group I youth are doing to make a contribution to society. Group I has committed to preparing casseroles and brownies for the folks receiving services at The Life Center of Eastern Delaware County three times this program year. Knowing that people in need will directly benefit from their efforts and receive a hot, healthy meal inside a warm, safe place just 30 minutes from Open Connections provides the young people with a sense of meaning and purpose, and allows them to experience the positive feelings associated with helping others. Collecting food for the Chester County Food Bank is another way that Group I youth had the opportunity to help others. Preparing meals and collecting food meet the universal personal need to contribute. Through these activities youth are practicing compassion for others which can increase awareness of one's own emotional experience and help self-compassion to flourish. And we all know that performing random acts of kindness promotes positive feelings toward others and oneself, and makes the world a happier, better place! ©



While looking at close-up photographs of their faces, youth were encouraged to celebrate their unique features and appreciate that no one else in the world has their same face.



Marlon proudly displays one of his watercolors during a morning watercolor challenge in Group II. Marlon was apprehensive about his painting skills at first, but soon realized that he was able to enjoy capturing nature in this way.



(Left): Carter leads the group in a debrief at the conclusion of his game. Each youth in Group II created an original game (rules, materials and area of play), and then facilitated the playing of that game and the discussion around the experience afterwards. Youth weighed in on pros and cons and gave and received feedback in the form of How-to's* for when the group played again. This has been an incredibly fun experience for Group II this year.

Games have been a running theme this year in Group II. In the beginning of the year we observed that this group of young people really enjoy the time spent playing games together. The favorites all year have been Robin Ball and Dodgeball, but youth were invited to create their own games from scratch. Each youth named their game, wrote the rules, and planned the materials needed and area of game play. One by one, we are playing each of these games. Youth are responsible for introducing their game to the group, passing along rules and expectations, and debriefing with the group at the conclusion of the game. This has been such a valuable experience from the perspective of building intrapersonal skills.

We have seen growth in many areas including openness to new ideas, self-confidence, managing emotions, and weathering challenges. One youth had a lot of resistance to playing a particular game and refused to play. Through much conversation we were able to get to the root of the youth's concerns and let them know that we would never force them to play. However, because of our small group, if one person sits out that can really have an impact on the way this group member's game may run. The hes-

*How-to's are an important Process Conscious tool that we practice at OC. Feedback is offered in a problem-solving mode using the phrase "How to..." This creates a collaborative rather than judgemental attitude to the feedback.

itant youth weighed their options and chose to try the game with the understanding that if they did not like it they would sit out after the first round. Ultimately, the youth loved the game and chose to play multiple rounds.

Another growth opportunity arose when we were playing a competitive game. While it is not often that we play games at OC where one team wins and the other loses, one of the youth-created games had this element. The group played several different rounds of this game and the teams were shuffled before each new round. Despite the shuffling of team members, one youth ended up on the losing end of all three games and experienced a lot of emotion around that. Intrapersonal skills such as resilience, empathy, communication, and conflict resolution all came into play, with the single youth needing to effectively communicate their feelings to the group and the other youth empathizing with them because they have all had the feeling of being on the losing end of a game.

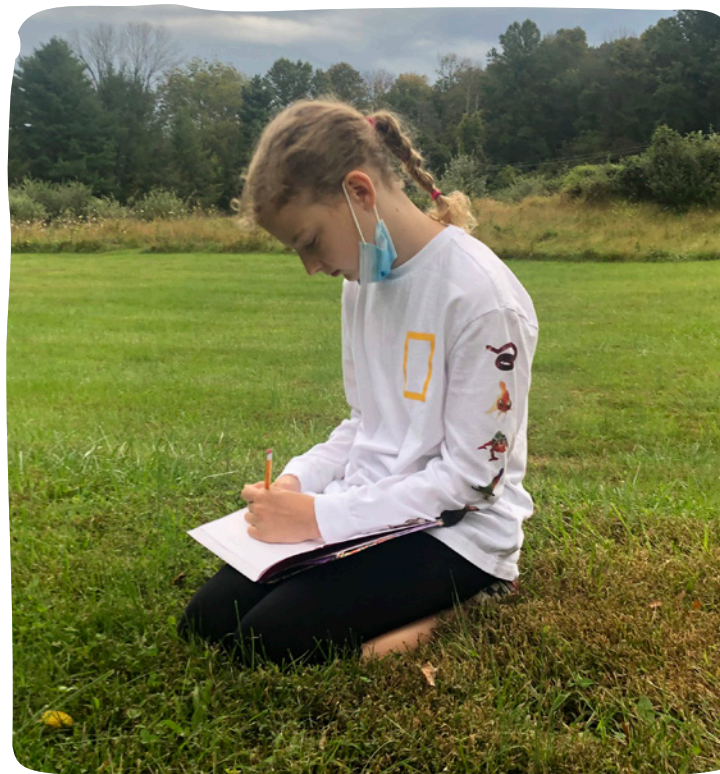
Through these group activities the youth of Group II have been able to hone many intrapersonal skills that will serve them well throughout the rest of their lives. ©



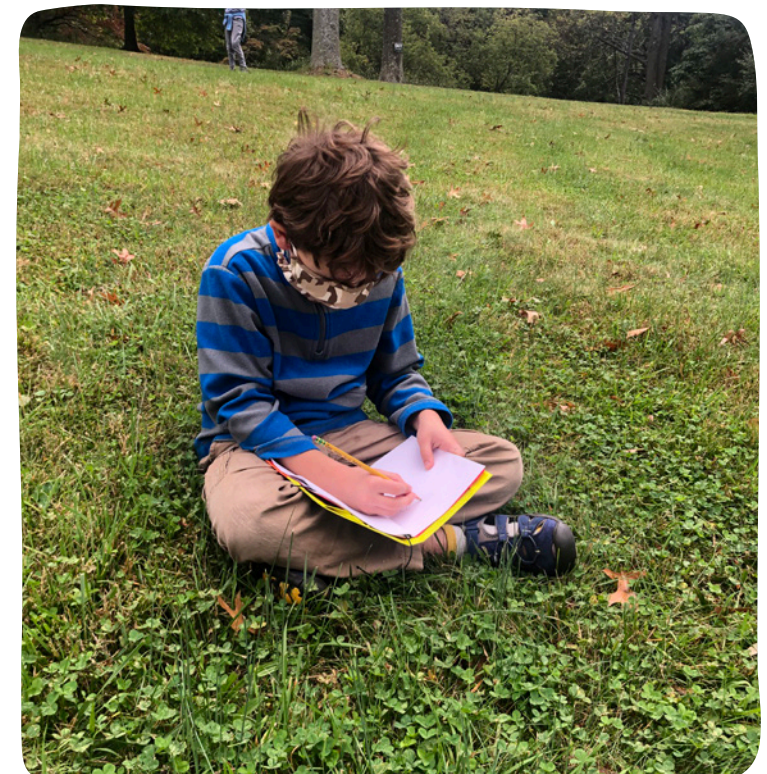
Intrapersonal Skills in Group II

By Megan Marran, Facilitator

Sometimes intrapersonal skills are built during group activities. Before this Group II game of "Among Us" tag, one youth was very resistant to playing. After a lot of discussion around his resistance he decided to give it a try and then sit out if he didn't enjoy himself. He ended up loving it and was surprised and proud that he had pushed himself past his previous comfort zone.



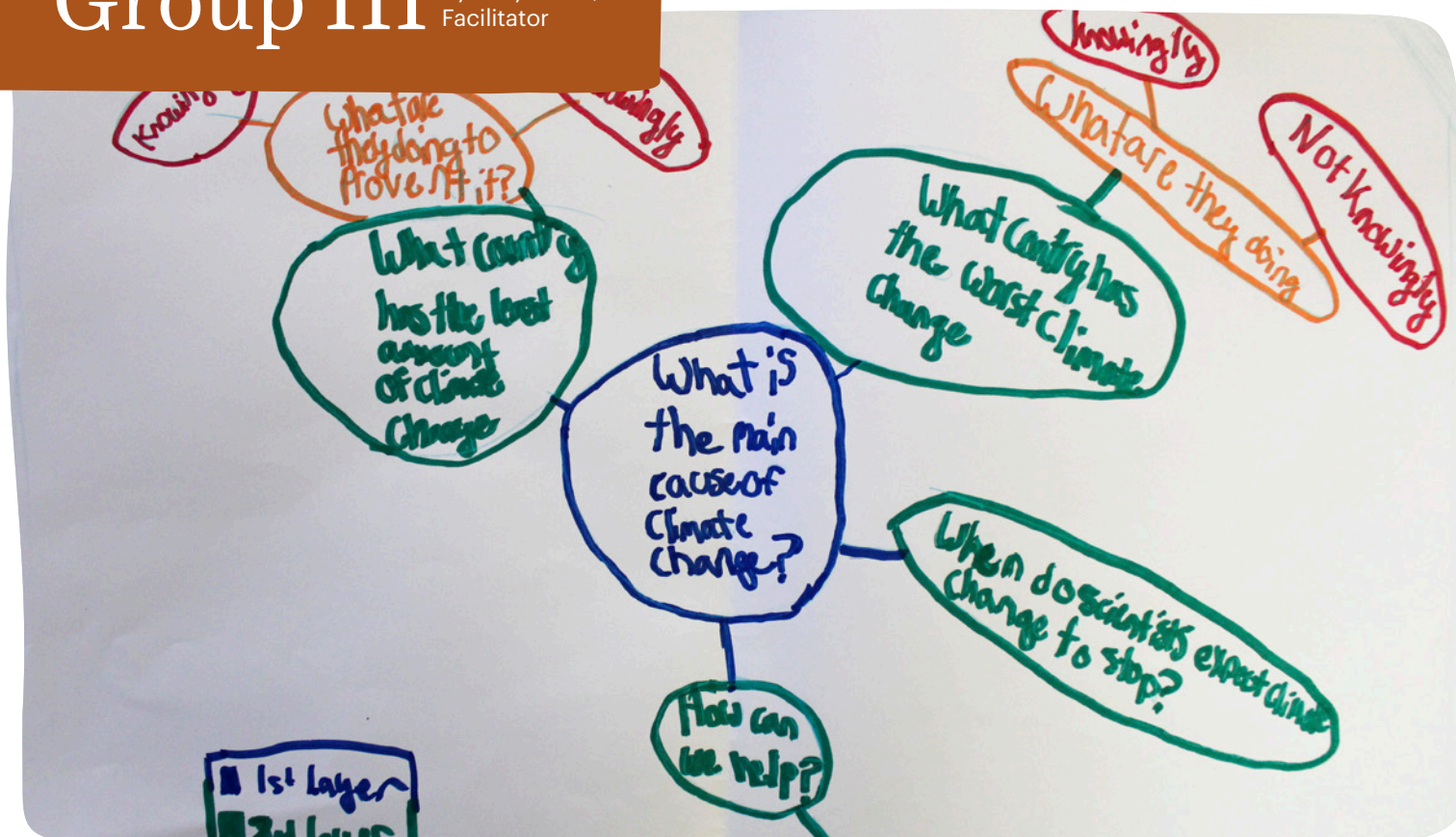
Everleigh and Eli sit in the grass near the archery field during a journaling activity where youth were creating a Sound Map. The intention of this activity is to create a map such as this during each season to see how sounds on campus change throughout the year. Each youth found a spot that resonated with them (marked as an X on the center of their page) and marked sounds around them by drawing or labeling the sound in the general direction it was heard in.





Intrapersonal Skills in Group III

By Kelly Dillon,
Facilitator



Danny creates a mind map with a key to capture and rank his curiosities about climate change, the topic he has chosen for his Group III I-Search project.

(Left): Group III youth explore different strategies to mine sparks of personal interests with the goal of refining them into a suitable topic for an I-Search paper. Elric and Silas independently brainstorm possible ideas, invite feedback in the form of questions from their peers, and, taking inspiration from the feedback, refine the aim of their research.

The ‘group’ in Group III implies togetherness, collaboration, and teamwork, and indeed we do a lot of those things, developing our social and emotional selves as we grow in our understanding of each other, learn how to communicate more effectively, and work well together as a team. This speaks to both our interpersonal and intrapersonal skills and intelligences; there is a lot of overlap as the two are typically intertwined. It has been said that knowledge of others leads to knowledge of self; it has also been said that knowledge of self leads to greater knowledge and understanding of others.

Check-ins, debriefings, appreciations and Balanced Responses are effective, well-used tools for communicating within the programs at Open Connections, each offering opportunities for introspection, reflection, and authentic sharing of our unique perspective and experience. As we identify, consider, and communicate our thoughts and feelings, and listen, free from judgement, as others do the same, we grow our empathy and build connections. Of course, rarely does this occur seamlessly, without incident or misunderstanding—such is life, both inside and outside of Open Connections and Group III. Finding our way through the challenges is a valuable part of all growth.

In addition to the OC Process Conscious tools mentioned above, there is content that explores intrapersonal skills, both organically and intentionally. Opportunities for growing in self-awareness, resilience and grit naturally present themselves in the hours we spend together in Group III. We maintain the flexibility to notice and investigate these moments as they arise, in an environment where we hope it feels safe to do so. We also seek out and/or cultivate exposure through games, experiences and projects. What follows are some examples of how we (sometimes) bravely and (mostly) joyfully engage with our minds and hearts, applying and developing valuable intrapersonal skills like intuition; vision; independent, analytical and strategic thinking; introspection; resilience; resourcefulness; and reflection along the way.

- We all know how easy it is to go along with the majority at times, particularly when we don’t know what we think, feel disconnected from our voice, or can’t seem to find the words or courage to share a different perspective, idea or wish. To encourage and embrace authenticity, acknowledging and celebrating the ways we are similar and unique, we intentionally mix up the way we ask for and share feedback within our group. Sometimes we have a group discussion, sometimes we

have conversations in pairs, and sometimes we ask for independent, possibly anonymous, written responses. Although each approach invites self-awareness, the ease of access to that awareness and how we express ourselves may be different.

- Inspired by activities during late summer staff development, Group III youth learned more about feelings through a spin on the game of charades. Choosing from a deck of cards with words describing feelings, each person in turn used facial expression and body language to convey the selected feeling, while others guessed, referring to an extensive list of feeling words as needed. Through acting and observing we increased our feelings vocabulary, maybe making it easier to identify what we’re feeling. We learned more about how we communicate our own emotions and increased our understanding of the behavior and actions of others, possibly leaving us better informed to respond in a more empathetic way. These are clearly life skills. None of us are ‘experts’, and I’m sure we’ll revisit this game and similar ones again and again.

- Group III’s annual research and writing project has followed the format of an I-Search paper in recent years. Given the youth-directed, process-oriented focus, the I-Search (Macrorie, 1998) is a good fit for an Open Connections project, aligning with youth interest-driven learning. Each youth decides on a topic for their paper which is one of genuine and relevant interest, placing them in the driver’s seat for the journey from curiosity to greater understanding. In choosing a topic, youth have to unearth and refine an interest, which can be easier said than done. We’ve applied different strategies and tools to name ‘sparks’ of interest and coax a suitable, researchable idea into a topic—including prompted free-writing, peer feedback on ideas, and mind-mapping. There is intentionality in the research process, and the paper evolves with narrative, expository and reflective portions within the paper. This style of writing documents the nature and origins of the author’s interest in the subject, the story of the search for information (the challenges and successes), what was discovered, what curiosity remains, and any possible next steps. The hope is to support the curiosity and interest behind research writing, empowering young people with an opportunity to experience the purpose of ‘real-world’ research—finding the answer to an important, personally relevant question. ©

Intrapersonal Writings from Group IV



Indi, Søren, Declan, Jamie, Heather (facilitator), Locke, Evie, Hannah, Kylie, & Lily gather to consider possible topics for a mini field research project. Group IV has performed several different types of experiments this fall, providing multiple opportunities for youth to engage with a variety of science processes and procedures as they prepare to select a topic of personal interest and then design a project for the Science Expo in the spring.

Four Group IV youth decided to hone their hand-building skills by making serving spoons. Time-management, an understanding of woodworking tools, collaboration and a willingness to build new skills were apparent as youth worked diligently to create these serving pieces.



One of the key tasks for youth in early adolescence is the development of a confident and stable sense of self. The Group IV program supports youth in meeting this vital intrapersonal goal through intentional program design that integrates a range of opportunities for making mindful choices, assuming responsibility, working independently, and reflecting on both individual experience and group process.

One morning this year, Group IV youth were invited to share a response to the prompt: What is something you have learned or noticed about yourself *this* program year? In an effort to encourage authenticity and circumvent the self-censorship so common for youth in this age group, submissions were accepted anonymously.

“Reflecting back on past years, I realize how much this year has changed me. In three short months I have gone from someone who used to kind of hide away from an activity or game because I felt I would look weird or mess up somehow, to someone who jumps right into activities, even if I feel self-conscious. I have learned that I lose more value when I sit out or don’t try, instead of just doing it and dealing with the anxiety of messing up. There are times in the science lab or when we are doing math boxes that I feel like “Oh I’m so dumb; I bet everyone else knows how to do this or solve that.” But when I take a step back and think for a minute, I remember that most of us are struggling with the same thoughts or feelings.”

“This year has been so amazing! It feels so good to be here this year I didn’t even want to go on break. The OC environment/community is so inclusive, helpful, friendly, and kind. Group IV is so lovely—the whole group is amazing, inclusive, and kind. I love that we have done things together outside of the program. This is by far the best group I’ve ever had. I really feel like both new youth and longtime OCers are really fitting in and engaging with the group. I feel like we have more freedom than in years past—I love being able to talk and socialize more. It’s also really nice to combine with Shaping Your Life pretty much every day. Overall I think this year feels pretty stress-free and super fun!”



While collaboration is an integral part of all OC programs, in Group IV much time is spent exploring topics of one’s own choosing, specifically for the Comprehensive Project and the Science Expo. Søren gathers sources to support one of these projects.

“It’s been interesting to learn that I like to be a leader. I learned how great it made me feel when we were working on wooden candle holders for the Thankful Lunch. The wood that we used was very hard and you had to drill it very slowly or else it would spin out of control. I was not originally planning on working on them because I was already working on napkins, but the boys in the woodshop didn’t end up having time, so I took over. They were pretty reluctant to let me help, but eventually they let me. Once I had gotten all of the candle holders done, the boys were more trusting to let me lead in other projects. It made me feel appreciated and helped me find my confidence in leading.”

“Making my Vision Board was an activity that really helped me understand and get clear on my values: humor, wildlife, and creating. Three of the things I value most and the three focuses of my Vision Board. Why? Because humor makes the world fun and enjoyable to live in, wildlife makes the world beautiful, and creating makes our everyday lives better.”

“In program I like that there is a relaxed atmosphere while working. I also like that you can do your work at your own pace instead of having time limits and getting a lot of work to keep up with.”

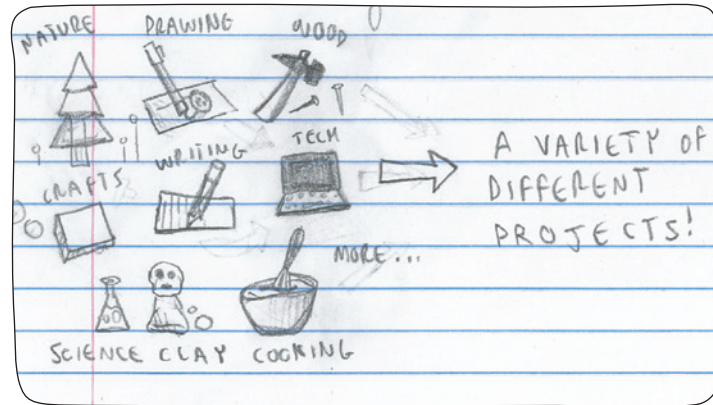
“In preparation for the Thankful Meal I got the opportunity to work in the woodshop. I discovered that I really enjoy making spoons. I enjoyed making the spoons because you can create anything you want and it really gave me a chance to be creative and help me discover something I enjoy.”



Jamie carefully shapes his spoon. New learning comes easily when one is pulled toward a goal, fueled by interest. Group IV took the lead in areas of new learning by identifying spaces on campus where they wanted to spend more time. Having a shared meal as a collaborative end goal certainly helped!



"I find that I really like being able to apply an interest of mine to a variety of different activities. Some examples of this would be being able to use the Makerspace to make name cards for the Thankful Meal, or even being able to draw alongside this writing."



"When we were doing the Thankful Meal I found out that I really like to work in the woodshop. The reason I like it is because it's like drawing in the way that if you mess up it could lead to something better. It showed me that even if you mess up and can't go back, you can just look at the situation in a different way and make something good out of it."

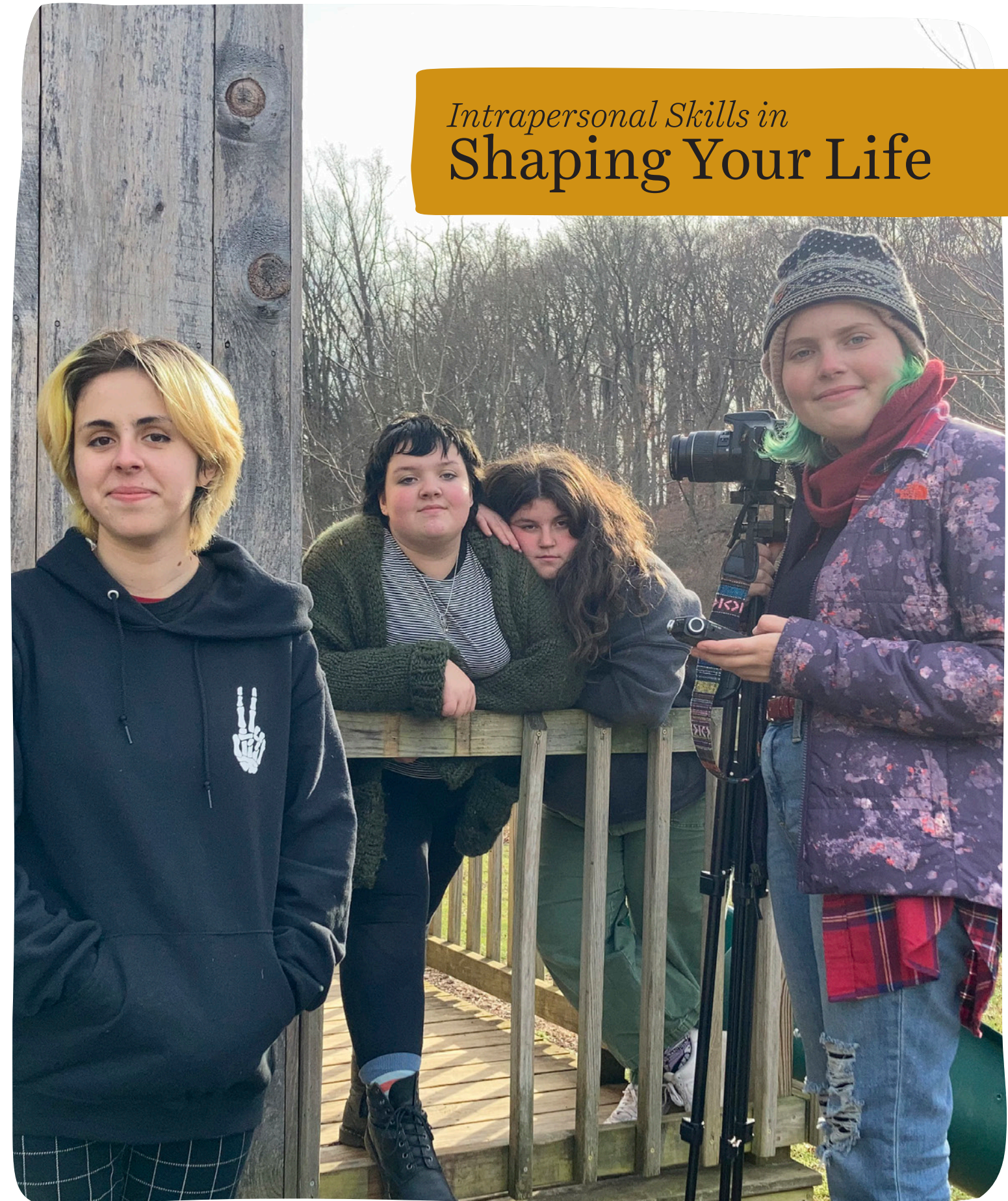
"Something that I've realized about myself during the first few months at Open Connections is my new found likes and dislikes. For example, Capture the Flag - I was very concerned that I would be embarrassed about my strengths for the game. Instead of feeling bad, I felt more supported. (So far, it has been more than easy to make friends, and with everything that I've needed help with, either my peers or the facilitators seem so happy to help.) But about Capture the Flag, instead of feeling bad, I was happy to be playing. I've gotten to be with all of my new friends so much, which is so amazing! Something I've definitely taken away from these few months is that not everyone is judging you, even while you're judging yourself. That "no putting yourself or others down" quote is a great one. Also, I've done so many new-to-me things, including writing this."

"In all my years at OC I have never been happier than in Group IV. Why? Maybe it's because some people have changed or maybe I have changed, but I think it is because everything has been torn down and was built back up bigger and stronger than before, creating a happier and stronger community."



Nature mandalas are one example of an activity that develops intrapersonal skills such as mindfulness, creative expression, and self-regulation. Here Kylie, Group IV youth, begins her design with the thoughtful placement of a strong central element.

Intrapersonal Skills in Shaping Your Life



Shaping Your Life members Ella & Ruby (foreground) work behind the camera as Aminah & Norah (background) act out a scene of the three act film they are creating for the OC Film Fest. When planning a complex collaboration, each group member is encouraged to share her ideas and consider what skills she can offer and/or wishes to develop over the course of the project.

For many youth in the 15 to 18 year age range, the intrapersonal realm has a powerful pull. As they develop and mature in other areas, older teens become naturally curious to learn more about themselves as individuals, and to deepen their understanding of who they are and how they personally engage with others and the world. They are also able to advocate for their freedoms and interests and take on new responsibilities with growing awareness and intention, including decisions around lifestyle choices and self care.

The Shaping Your Life program is structured to allow for the maximum level of freedom, self-direction and ownership chosen by group members, affording each individual a multitude of opportunities for intrapersonal learning and development. From concrete examples such as independent projects (which are chosen, planned and executed by each youth) to the more subtle acts like choosing the group game or composing the daily updates for the website, the teens in Shaping Your Life are in the driver's seat, making the majority of choices around program content and project direction.

This year we have a new Shaping Your Life group, with four youth who are in their first lap of this final segment of the OC journey. They have mapped a course and are moving steadily towards the next checkpoint, sharing both the grind and the joyful anticipation of the ride, along with the supportive guidance of the facilitators. Below, each group member shares a reflection on a way that a Shaping Your Life experience has led them to grow in their knowledge and understanding of themselves this year.

"I've never been very well developed when it comes to time management. I would always procrastinate and then get very stressed doing all of my work at the last minute. This year in Shaping Your Life I have been learning a lot about the importance of time management and how to go about it. For instance, on Tuesday afternoons we go from an organized activity to a work period for independent projects, which as it sounds, is "independent". I create my own "to-dos" and decide when I start my project and how I spend that time. At first it was weird and difficult, but as the year goes on I realize how important this skill is and how it will continue to serve me in future jobs and in my everyday life." ~ Norah

"For most of my life I have been a very picky eater. A vegetarian from a young age, my childhood was spent eating a lot of beige foods. While I have mostly grown out of that diet (though still a vegetarian by choice), I have always been wary when approaching new foods. This year in Shaping Your Life we started a study of cultures through cooking. I've always enjoyed cooking new dishes but was still rather apprehensive about eating them. However, after I got over the initial hump of trying something new, I actually really enjoyed most of the things we made. Not only did this culture study give me the chance to try all these dishes I wouldn't have otherwise, it has also given me the courage to be more open with trying new foods in my everyday life." ~ Ruby



Aminah arranges images on her Vision Board, a collage depicting her idea of "a life of purpose and fulfillment," one of several opportunities for intrapersonal learning that the Shaping Your Life program has explored this year.

"At the start of this program year, Shaping Your Life did a vision board project with Group IV. Everyone made a collage after participating in a guided meditation about a "life of purpose and fulfillment." I started by looking through old magazines at the pictures to find ones that aligned with what I got out of the meditation, and other images that just caught my eye. I found I was drawn to pictures that had different nature elements like tall grass, flowers, water, or animals. I think those pictures relate to what I want in my future as the things I want to surround myself with: I grew up outside, and I feel more connected to myself when I am in nature." ~ Aminah

"For the vast majority of my time at OC (9 years to be exact), I have only experienced its wonderful offerings one day a week through the Open Program and Choice programs. Last year, I finally made my debut in the Group IV program which meets 2 days a week, and this year I'm in Shaping Your Life! It has been an exciting transition for me, and even in 2020 when things were a little bonkers, I felt like my world, inside and out, was expanding tremendously. I've grown to be more confident in myself and my abilities to be pushed outside of my comfort zone, and feel like I know myself better than I might without the supportive and open-minded nature of these programs. Now it's been 11 years since I first walked down the stairs to the Open Program, and I still feel excited to make new discoveries about myself and the world around me." ~Ella. ©

Intrapersonal Skills in the Choice Program

Choice A: Lego Robotics

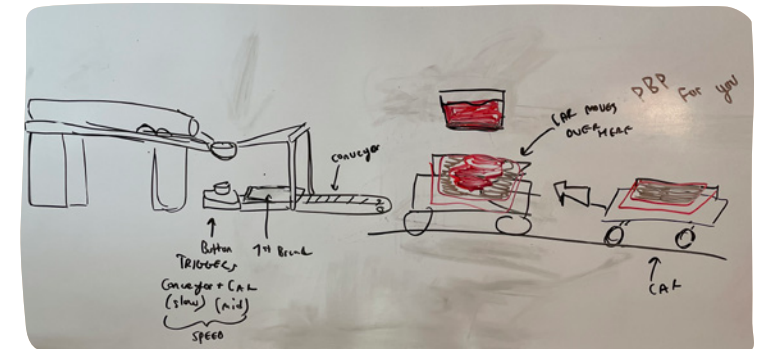
During Choice A: Lego Robotics, participants often worked in groups, in part due to the total number of robot units, but also to reap the benefits of learning and working together. Several of our youth, however, really found their wings when it was their turn to work alone. Rather than having someone else's interests and knowledge to lean on, they had to choose a goal for themselves and do the problem-solving needed to work towards it. For example, one youth was interested in having the ability to have her robot carry out an action called "werewolf", and developed a subroutine by that name. In addition to being able to include her new werewolf subroutine in her own programming, she shared her newfound knowledge about how to create subroutines with other participants.



Annabelle chose to develop her coding skills through a self-guided tutorial on code.org in Choice A: Lego Robotics. She later applied her skills to more open-ended projects with the robots, including programming her werewolf subroutine!

Choice B: Rube Goldberg

Pulling off a functional Rube Goldberg machine takes work and while we may easily see the numerous opportunities to develop and hone interpersonal and impersonal skills, it also presents intrapersonal development opportunities. These opportunities include developing confidence to share your ideas with a group (without fear of judgement), taking ownership of your part (knowing that others are relying on you), and willingness to adjust expectations of yourself and others (as the machine continues to evolve).



Søren spent the early part of week three in Choice B: Rube Goldberg sketching out the entire machine. He used this drawing to guide his end-of-day conversation with the group: seeking feedback, gaining buy-in, and problem-solving around open issues. By taking on this leadership position, Søren demonstrated a sense of ownership over the project and the confidence needed to step into this important role.

Choice A: Sewing

Much of the exploring we do in Sewing/Handwork is extremely intrapersonal. Each participant may ask, "How do I view my mistakes? My successes? Does it feel better to me to take whatever time I need to complete a project, or do I prefer to be "done"? What do I already know how to do and what new skills do I want to develop?" Using both hand and machine sewing techniques, youth in the program have taken on a variety of projects which include: a quilt, a pair of pants, a cape, a stuffed axolotl, a zipper bag, a wedge of cheese (for a toy mouse), and a quilt square with a scene on it.



Who says you have to choose among compelling fabrics when you can use them all? Emmy machine tacks floaty pieces onto a white cape of her own design.

Choice A: Woodshop

Working with wood is oftentimes a very personal journey. The Choice program woodshop offering is quite open-ended, giving space for youth to approach their woodshop time in different ways. Some youth are watchers, they like to sit back and see what other youth are creating, which then sparks creativity for them. Other youth come in with a specific idea in mind - although many times they start off building one thing and end up with something completely different! This happens because wood morphs as you work with it. You see something you did not see before and you like the direction it is going so you abandon the original plan and run with the new one. The creative process in the woodshop can be quite powerful if you are willing to listen and go with the flow.

(Right:) Logan uses a draw knife to shape the stock of an M1 Garand. The draw knife "peels" wood away from the stock. Logan needs to constantly check to see how much material is being removed and adjust the stock or the knife to get the desired outcome. One needs to be patient and work with the wood.



Choice B: Film

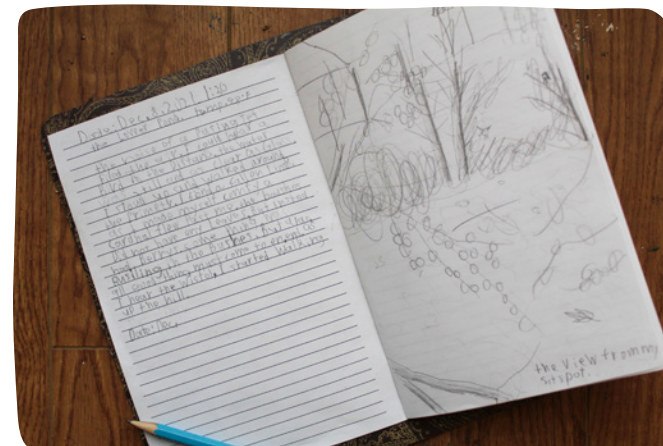
While making films is undoubtedly a large task for just one person to take on, there is a lot of development that happens on an intrapersonal level. A person might be asked to overcome challenges of comfort, like acting in a scene that is a personal stretch. There might be realizations that come to light, such as, "I enjoy editing much more than production work" or "Storyboarding is not my favorite activity". Additionally, the topics and medium that a person gravitates toward helps to identify other preferences, like the preference to work with their hands in a stop-motion production, or the preference to write a comedy scene over a horror flick. At every step in the filmmaking process, there is an opportunity for reflection and self-realizations.



In Choice B: Film, Lily works on editing the selected clips for her documentary about Open Connections Community Values that will be featured at the upcoming OC Film Fest.

Choice A: Field Notes and Phenology

These days one's daily routine can be so packed with activity and full of distractions, it's no wonder it can feel impossible to put it all in perspective. Collecting our thoughts and reflecting upon them can be difficult to do under these conditions; many are not accustomed to this level of concentration. The weekly field note practice in Choice A: Field Notes and Phenology can be a great way to quiet the chaos in our internal and external worlds, and create an inviting space for introspection. Youth are invited to note their observations and thoughts as they connect with the natural world and themselves. ©



Youth in Choice A: Field Notes and Phenology capture observations from their selected 'sit spot' in their field notebooks, using both descriptive writing and a sketch that captures their perspective.



Luna and Nova carefully use hand clippers to cut greens from around the OC property to use in wreath making and winter decorating during Open Program.

Group III spends time in the lab conducting tests for mineral content in rock samples; Thomas makes close observations on the surface details of his rock specimen: color, texture and luster.



Carter is feeling proud of Jabba the Mug that he made during Group II's time in the ceramics studio.



Having the opportunity to speak in front of a group and take on a leadership role develops self confidence and contributes to the development of healthy interpersonal skills. Annabelle requested the opportunity to read the book *The Quilt Maker's Journey* to her Group I peers.



Indiana uses the drill press to cut through a slice of yew branch to create a rustic, wooden napkin holder that will decorate the table for the Group IV Thankful Meal.

*From the OC Glossary of Terms**

Responsibility/ Ownership

At OC we talk about Respect, Freedom, and Responsibility as being the foundations upon which our community is built.

When we speak of *Responsibility*, we speak about responsibility to oneself, each other, and the environment, but what does that mean? In our case, the term Responsibility is used broadly to mean ownership of one's actions. Perhaps it is easiest to understand by reviewing certain examples. In general, you (as an adult in particular) have responsibility for your own body. You are in charge of when and how you move, what and when you eat, what you like and dislike, what you feel, what you think about, etc.

- As a homeowner, you are responsible for your own property (subject to zoning laws, etc., where the responsibility may be shared with the township).

- As a shopper, you are responsible for what you buy. As a shopkeeper, you are responsible for what you are willing to sell an item for.
- As a teenager, you are responsible for what you learn, who you choose as friends, when and how you study, how you dress, what foods you eat, how you spend your money—except, you don't have sole responsibility. The school board decides what you're *supposed* to learn (assuming you're in school), although you yourself do determine what you *actually* learn. (Haim Ginnett, the psychologist who wrote *Between Parent and Child*, tells the story about his rebellious teenage patient who bragged, "My father can take away my allowance, and he can take away the keys to the car, but he can't take away my bad grades!") Your parents may have a say in who your friends are/are not, what your study schedule is like, what clothes you're allowed to buy, what food you are offered at home, and perhaps even where your money comes from and how much you're allowed to have to spend. Much, if not most, of the disagreements between parents and teens (all young people, really) tend to be based on a lack of clarity over responsibility: what is my decision alone, what is yours, and what is shared.

- The facilitator of an OC program is ultimately responsible for a program's activities, though they often seek input from the enrolled youth. For example, in an Open Program, the facilitators are in charge of health and safety. The extent to which the young people are engaged in the setting of the rules—for example: "Are we allowed to climb in the trees or on the rocks?"—is largely determined by the facilitators. Should they decide to share responsibility, then the group can help set the rules and thus become shared owners, each responsible for him/herself.
- Margaret Welsh, our Administrative Guru, is responsible for answering the phones, maintaining family records and program rosters, distributing various communications, making bank deposits and routing the mail, etc. No one has the right to rearrange her filing system, although, if they use it, they may want to ask Margaret to make changes in order to accommodate their needs within her area of responsibility.
- Chris McNichol is responsible for most things property-wise at OC as far as maintenance is concerned. He determines, for example, how he mows the lawns, cleans the gutters, and conducts preventative maintenance on the various building systems.

There are levels of responsibility/ownership, however, that are important as the definers of boundaries. In the example above, for instance, our property manager may be responsible for mowing, and he may be owner over exactly how he mows, and yet he is not generally responsible for *how often* he mows so far as how it affects the general appearance of the property. Should Chris decide, for example, that he prefers a more woodland appearance, and hence decide not to mow the areas where people walk, he would run up against the responsibility of the Director and his responsibility to the Board to keep OC looking neat and cared for. This Responsibility/Ownership supersedes the property manager's as to *whether or not to mow* in general.

Similarly, Open Program facilitators have responsibility over how they conduct parent conferences but not whether or not to hold them at all; they have responsibility for how the Open Program room gets tidied up at the end of the day but not whether or not to leave it ready for the next day's group. The Open Program staff in general may decide which materials to make available to the young people, but they would have to make a good argument for clearing out the room entirely, or for filling it with only a certain type of material at the expense of a variety of materials. There they would invoke the over-arching responsibility of the Director who has ownership over staffing and programs.

The way in which responsibility/ownership becomes relevant is in regard to defining the boundaries of one's areas of decision-making. When one might act unilaterally, and when one must—or should—engage others in the decision-making process, depends largely on matters of responsibility/ownership. In general, the more one considers what other areas of responsibility will be affected by one's decisions, and the more one reasonably engages those others in the decision-making process, the more likely it is that decisions will be met with mutual satisfaction and success.

Of course you can't please all the people all the time, and of course we would get nothing done if all we did was talk, talk, talk in order to be certain that every voice were heard on every detail of every decision. *Still, for the important things, it seems more than worthwhile to be as democratic as possible much of the time.* It is equally helpful for others to understand the challenges of responsibility and thereby support a person's decision wherever reasonable, rather than nit-pick or try to force their thinking into every situation. (Picture a typical homemaker in a grocery store, on a cell phone, calling their spouse for approval before making each and every purchasing decision. What a nightmare!)

Recognizing areas of responsibility/ownership makes it possible to find the working balance between pure democracy and authoritarianism. When engaged with a sense of collaboration, as opposed to normal competition, recognizing responsibility areas gives groups the way to move forward with relative efficiency, initiative, innovation and coordination. They are part of a process for shared working and living that

Recognizing areas of responsibility/ownership makes it possible to find the working balance between pure democracy and authoritarianism. When engaged with a sense of collaboration, as opposed to normal competition, recognizing responsibility areas gives groups the way to move forward with relative efficiency, initiative, innovation and coordination.

can enhance the joy and effectiveness for all.

The power of responsibility/ownership is nowhere stronger than in family life, especially in the development of our young people. Starting with toddlers, who always want to "help", there is much to be said for using our approximate thinking to identify ways to allow them to join in on clearly important activities. As their skills rapidly develop, they can assume increasing amounts of responsibility—such as a one year old putting clothes in a hamper, sorting socks, putting toys away (using a system that is appropriate for *them*), or helping to wash off the baking potatoes or mash the bananas for banana bread.

Much later, as teens, they continue to want to participate in the adult world in a meaningful fashion. Rather than simply being given chores to do, using a process that is exclusively defined by adults, they are happier and more productive when they own the process that they are implementing. For example, the youth who designs the family recycling system, prepares Sunday breakfasts, or selects the Friday night movie or game for the family—that is a teen who feels valued for his or her contributions and abilities. The more room there is for decision making on the part of teens, with feedback coming in the form of a *Balanced Response*** as appropriate, the more likely they will learn to make good decisions in all areas of their life. ©

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

**A Balanced Response is one of the Process Conscious tools that we practice in programs at OC. When offering feedback, a person expresses at least 3 positive attributes (pluses) and then offer possible changes in the form of "How to..."



Big Three Outside of OC (aka A Day in the Life of Declan Dowd)

Many of you know that the Dowds are a longtime OC family. In fact, Declan has been a homeschooler since birth, and has attended OC since before he turned 4! (He is now 14, and is a member of Group IV this year.) Since none of our non-OC days look the same, we will share a peek into this year's "Big 3 Outside of OC" elements in Declan's homeschooling lifestyle. Ready? Here goes!

Academics

Much to our surprise, this year Declan expressed a wish to shift to a more structured and traditional academic format. After some family negotiations, we decided that Kelly (mom and homeschool facilitator) would provide a weekly spreadsheet with all the things that needed to be done, both academically and generally, and Declan would work to hold himself accountable to the schedule with parent support as needed. We are using a variety of agreed-upon curricula and resources to formally learn Algebra, Language Arts, and Chemistry. Generally, Declan works on structured academics 3-4 days each week.

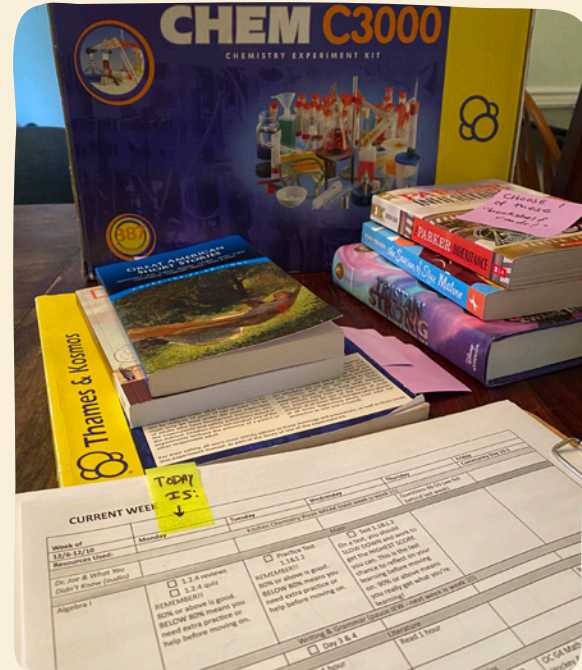
Boat Build Class

The activity that Declan is MOST excited about continues to be the year-long Homeschool Boat Build Class at the Independence Seaport Museum in Philly. Every Wednesday morning, a small group of 8 teens (including three other current or former OC youth) gathers to work on constructing a Bevin skiff to be launched at the seaport in June. They are building the boat entirely from scratch—using blueprints and expert facilitators as guides.

Ice Hockey

We would be remiss if we didn't include ice hockey on our list. Declan has been playing hockey since he was 3 years old. That's a long time, and he still absolutely loves it! He currently plays on 2 teams that run nearly all year—our local Middle School team and a hockey club team. He logs about 12-15 hours a week on the ice, and has plans to start officially refereeing later this year.

We hope you found something of value in reading about our homeschool experience. Feel free to reach out to us if you want to know more about what we do when we aren't at OC. @



Gwen gains confidence in her knife handling skills as she carefully whittles the end of a stick during Group II.



Kai and Owen collaborate in creating parking spaces for their cars using chalk on the parking garage during Open Program.

Aminah and Ruby don their aprons and pose for a team pic during the Shaping Your Life CHOPPED Challenge. This activity really put into action the teens' Flexible Thinking and creative problem-solving skills to create a dish with mystery ingredients in a short amount of time!



Take-aparts are a favorite activity of many youth in the Open Program. Levi and Jett's engagement is evident as they explore the inner workings of this keyboard.

Community Connections is a feature that helps us get to know different members of our community. Let us know if you would like to share: oc.magazine@openconnections.org

Community Connections



Harmony Meussner, OC Parent

I find life so very interesting. Asking questions, being patient, exploring, and coming to answers is what turns life's mundane details into something beautiful and meaningful. I enjoy making connections in a variety of ways. I enjoy taking things apart to see how they work or seeing if I can fix them or make them. I enjoy exploring concepts I don't fully understand. I enjoy exploring what I can do or be. I enjoy exploring how it all fits together.

I am interested in everything internal and external. I was raised in a mystical family and among other things, was taught meditation as a child. I have found that exploring both my inner and outer worlds fit together beautifully in a way that gives me

a more complete story of whatever I am exploring or learning. I started journaling as a young person and found that having time with myself daily to reflect helped me to stay in touch with myself and helped me to figure out who I was and what I was interested in. I went to public school and felt that few of my learning needs were being met there and that I had to take learning into my own hands. We didn't call it self-directed learning, but my mother not only encouraged it, she modeled it, as she has never stopped learning.

I have discovered that in order for me to fully understand something new, I need to gather my information in layers: from reading or listening to interviews or stories, to watching someone do it and then trying it. I find that learning is the most interesting and satisfying when I am able to look at whatever my current interest is from multiple perspectives, even ones I don't fully understand and sometimes from perspectives that I don't fully agree with, so that my perspective actually grows and becomes more inclusive. ©

Campus Corner

by Chris McNichol, *Property Manager, Facilitator*



The Gravel Yard takes center stage for collaborative group games during and after program. Here Group II youth play an OC classic...Rainbow Tag!

The Gravel Yard...just a place to play Rainbow Tag? I think not. The Gravel Yard is located in the courtyard in front of the Farmhouse. It has been many things over the years but it started out as an area for the Hare family to park their cars. Mr Hare had the Gravel Yard built with clay he had imported from Italy. The original driveway came down the hill, around the big Ash tree, and right into the Gravel Yard. When Mr Hare built the garage in the back (behind the Woodshop) and changed the drive's destination, the Gravel Yard became a play area for the Hare children. There are stories of them playing "Baby in the air" in the yard. Today the Gravel Yard continues as one of the most popular play areas on campus. During the program day you may see a group shooting off rockets, testing projects built in the Woodshop, or taking a kinesthetic break from indoor activities. After the program day it has become a gathering place for parents to socialize while watching their youth engage in a game of Rainbow tag, Robin Ball, Blob tag or whatever they invent next! The Gravel Yard is another of the ever-evolving spaces that make our campus special. ©

duPont-Andrew Family Written by Ishnee and Aria



Please describe your family constellation: Parents, names and ages of young people.

Aria (14) is in Group IV & Choice B at OC; Jalen (21) and Trey (21) are both OC Alumni; Parents: Ishnee duPont, Anton Andrew

How did you get involved with Open Connections?

When Jalen and Trey were 5, after attending a local preschool a few days a week, they asked if I'd look into homeschooling as an option. I hadn't considered it before, but did look into it, found OC, met with Peter Bergson (OC Co-founder), and loved the philosophy and the campus. Jalen and Trey started attending two days a week as 5-year-olds. Trey attended straight through to graduation; Jalen chose to do his last year of high school with an online cyber school. Aria has been raised at OC from birth when she'd join in the drop off drive and then have tea with Barb (former Office Guru) before heading home. Aria debuted her singing career at Open Mic Night when she was a fearless two-year-old.

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

It's fluid, mainly young person driven. We did as much travel as I thought possible while everyone was young; now I wish we'd doubled that and done so much more no matter what it took to get there. I loved that OC made taking time off to travel a positive, rather than something to worry about. Once the youth hit age 11 or 12, we started some obligatory math...originally trying a tutor for a year, then settling on Teaching Textbooks through high school. As a parent, I had very little to do with this other than to buy the next level each year; each youth was responsible for working at their own pace and doing as much or as little as they chose. Jalen and Trey both took the SAT's and both took college classes at DCCC once they could drive. Those two things and a personal interview proved the only thing colleges were interested in seeing. Both got into their first choice college with academic scholarships. Trey graduates from Susquehanna University this spring with a degree in environmental science. Jalen is a junior at University of New Hampshire in biology, after taking a

year to travel and work on different farms in Australia as a 19-year-old.

Aria enjoys travel, riding horses, riding her One Wheel, and sewing—including designing her own clothes, mostly high fashion and period pieces. Aria is also passionate about cooking. She is self taught and also spent two years sharing cooking classes with a homeschooled neighbor friend and a chef tutor. She tried out to be on Chopped cooking show and made it to the finals of the tryouts. She catered a friend's wedding this past summer in Sedona, and enjoys teaching herself many new cooking skills through Masterclass and other online sources over the pandemic.

Over the years we've done local gymnastics, trampoline, and various yearly homeschool groups on non-OC days. Hiking and getting outside has always been a big part of non-OC days including animal care as we've had many different animal friends over the years. This past spring we brought our pregnant mare home and got to watch a horse birth one late night.

What led you in this direction?

Jalen and Trey were born in Miami and we moved back to this area to be near family when they were two. Aria was born and raised here. Spending time as a family has always been a priority, so extending that to learning and growing together seemed natural. Traditional school was always an option if anyone wanted it, but as a parent I feel very lucky to have been able to learn alongside them as long as I could, and get to know my kids as well as I have.

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

Time together, freedom to travel, kids who are very self-directed and know how to learn—they know what they are interested in and how to find information. Jalen,

I usually say OC is sort of like the good parts of college, lots of freedom and choice of what you study, different options offered throughout the year, and time to spend with a group of other people also taking a different educational path.

Trey and Aria are strong, kind people who can handle life in positive ways. Another benefit these days is having a personal chef at home!

What concerns or challenges have you experienced along the way? How have you addressed them? Do you have any concerns as you look ahead?

Anton and I got divorced in 2015 which brought with it the normal divorce challenges. As a family we made things work. We live a mile apart and homeschooling has remained a priority. OC as a constant has been a positive. We have continued to travel, occasionally together still, and to be on the same page as far as supporting educational goals.

Looking ahead, only the normal concerns as far as life goes, absolutely none of them are education related, which is a nice thing to be able to say! Aria is currently interested in attending cooking school after OC. She's researched what she needs to do to attend, and has her eye on The Culinary Institute of America. For now, she is enjoying her OC experience this year, especially being in person.

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?

When everyone was younger, we'd spend at least a day a week, often two or three, at local museums, gardens, and other resources. Last year Aria joined a local scout group, one of the first all girl groups in the Boy Scout program (which means they can go all the way to Eagle Scout, which Girl Scouts cannot). She has met a supportive and interesting group of girls this way, survived some arctic and sweltering camping adventures, earned badges, and advanced to a leadership role. She joined during the pandemic when many other options were closed and it's been a very supportive experience.

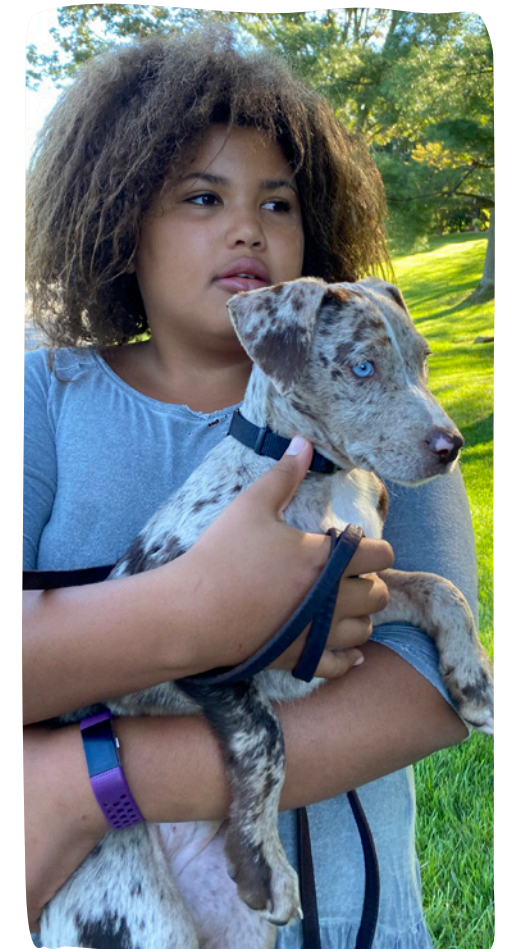
Family, including great grandparents over the years, have been a supportive resource. We've travelled to see them, experienced such things as working on a yak farm in Idaho (Jalen and Trey for my sister one summer), visiting Jamaica (Anton's family) where we got to eat fish eyes and all sorts of different and delicious fruits, visiting San Francisco and experiencing many different foods and helping with natural building techniques including cob houses (another sister/aunt). Art has always been a part of our experience, mainly at home but also at different local art places over the years when classes were offered. Jalen and Trey used different self teaching guides for different subjects that interested them (biology, physics...) Aria uses more online resources at this point. Producing products (handmade

cards, soaps, bath supplies) and selling them at our local farmers market has been a real life experience at different times for all three.

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

Over the pandemic, with everyone home, we did a lot of cooking (and ate really well having our own personal chef in Aria). We play games, are building a huge outdoor bmx bike track through the woods (Trey, and Jalen), walk and train the dog (Aria), foster kittens, and are certified to foster more animals as we go...

These days, Jalen and Trey are mainly at college. Aria spends her days cooking, preserving food, and foraging. We ate — and survived—four types of wild mushrooms this year for the first time, very carefully. Aria has preserved fruit from our trees, seaweed collected from visiting Jalen—including a type that tastes like





From your young people's perspectives, what are the main pluses of this type of education?

ARIA: Freedom to pursue interests.

From your young people's perspective(s): what does a life of purpose and fulfillment look like?

ARIA: I envision a life with something to do with cooking, helping animals, and having the freedom to pursue my passions.

How have the 3 broad life skill realms (interpersonal, intrapersonal, and impersonal) that have been nurtured at OC been reflected in life outside of OC?

ARIA: The skills that I learn at OC are put to use in my broader community where I am part of the Kennett Amateur Theatrical Society and I am a patrol leader in my local scouts BSA troop.

What would you tell other families about how to get the most out of their OC experience?

If you have an interest, speak up, OC has been very willing to help find resources if they are unable to provide them on campus.

How would you describe OC to friends and family?

I struggle with that one! It's not an easy quick answer. If people really want to know about it, whoever is currently attending can share what they are doing at the time; it varies, and it's always interesting.

If forced to describe it, I usually say it's sort of like the good parts of college, lots of freedom and choice of what you study, different options offered throughout the year, and time to spend with a group of other people also taking a different educational path. ©

truffle when dried, and nuts including acorn flour (very time consuming). We adopted a pandemic puppy, Rona, so she's a daily walk and hike companion. Before Rona, it was often daily goat walking with the goats we share with our homeschool neighbors. Before our horse was pregnant, riding was an often daily thing, now it's more baby care. Our local YMCA is nearby and especially in the winter, visits there happen regularly whether to swim, or compete with Anton on the step machine. Scouts is a weekly commitment and Aria recently got a big speaking part in the Kennett Area Theater group, KATS, production of *Mother Goose* and the *Rent Collector*. Basically, no two days are alike or have been for the last 21 years.



Cataleia, Tulsie, Addie, Logan, Brendan and Marlon create a 'birthday phenology wheel' during Choice A: Field Notes and Phenology, recording the seasonal occurrences they recall in the month they celebrate their birthdays.



Group III youth Thomas, Elric and Silas chop spinach, squash and onion to add to the Three Sister's Stew recipe, that will be cooked over a campfire in the white pines area.



Ruby prepares the carrots for the Vegetarian Qabili Pilau the Shaping Your Life members made during their exploration of Afghani culture through food.



Heather (Facilitator), with Leo's help, traces Serafina's outline on paper; to be filled in afterwards. Delilah and Gracie observe and wait for their turn to be traced.



Jack works to clean up a spill from his lunch. Open Program youth have daily opportunities to further develop real life skills.



Development Corner

Wow! So much has happened since the last Development Corner update!

Creating Connections, our Annual Giving Campaign, is well underway. We are getting close to our goal of \$15,000! So far, at the time of printing, we have raised \$13,752. We offer a HUGE thanks to all of our community for showing up for this campaign. There are a number of ways that people have engaged with this campaign, from volunteering time and energy to donating financially or helping Open Connections to create connections with other organizations. We are looking forward to a future where we are working with our neighbors and friends to help empower people to live their lives full of purpose and fulfillment.

Additionally, our Open Connections Winter Marketplace, hosted by OC Parent Connections and organized by parent volunteers, brought in \$1,010 for the Sustainability Fund during the event on 12/17. This annual event is a marvelous opportunity for community members and vendors to sell artisan and specialty items. I can personally attest to the ability of youth also being able to get some wonderful holiday gifts, as my son gifted me items that he procured exclusively at the Marketplace. The bakesale was out of this world too! Thank you to Liz Bradley (OC Parent) for facilitating this magical event. The donations from the Marketplace are placed directly into our Sustainability Fund, which ensures a secure future for the organization and allows OC to provide tuition assistance to those in need.

Throughout the rest of the program year, the Development Committee will continue to raise funds towards Creating Connections. We are so grateful for every donation to this campaign, regardless of the size. We love being able to show funders to whom we are applying for large grants and donations that we have a strong and committed community, so thank you for helping us to be able to claim that!

I hope that everyone stays warm and healthy for the rest of the winter, and I look forward to connecting at an on campus event soon!

Thank you again for your dedication, support, and warmth!

Sarah & Becker

With gratitude,
Sarah Becker and the OC Development Committee



Locke, Ollie, Sebe, and Carter pose under their "almost completed" Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwich Making Rube Goldberg machine. Youth embraced the numerous opportunities to learn a new skill, problem solve, and think flexibly over these past eight weeks with the result being a truly collaborative, intriguing, whimsical machine. Choice B: Rube Goldberg



Ben pinned and then cut batting to fit the top of his quilt. He then added backing fabric to "sandwich in" the batting. He plans to tie quilt it all together with his grandmother and then bind the edges.



Yay, snow day!! Thanks to the community for packing down the snowy hill on Monday, creating great conditions for the Tuesday Open Program crew to take advantage of!! Here Theo hoofs it uphill for another ride.



In a lovely sunny space, Evie and Aria first cut, then serge, sew, and iron cloth napkins for each Thankfulness Meal participant. Fabric for the napkins was coordinated with the table runners and decor, which included natural materials, candles and fall harvest foods.



ALUMNI CONNECTIONS

First Annual Winter Event

Alumni Connections is the Open Connections network of individuals who spent a meaningful portion of their learning journey here, as a youth, a parent, or a facilitator. We love staying in touch with our extended OC community, and our new, semi-annual, Alumni Connections Events aim to help foster and maintain the community and connections that people made while they were here.

On a beautiful day in December, we kicked off this new series of Alumni Connections events. OC alumni met on campus to connect with each other, catch up, rekindle old friendships, make new friends, and warm up together by fires! That same day we hosted our annual Winter Marketplace event and a Community Day, allowing alumni to engage with current community members and get real-time updates about what is happening on campus this year.

Attention OC Alumni: If you'd like to attend the next Alumni Connections event, please save the date of June 11, 2022! We will be grilling and playing lawn games together at Open Connections. (Of note, Pausing Ceremony will be the day before and we hope that you can attend that, as well!) If you'd like to be added to our Alumni Connections mailing list, please visit or reach out to Sarah Becker, sarah.becker@openconnections.org.

Huge appreciations for our impressive Alumni Connections Advisory Committee: Eva, Hannah, Seda, and Pie. Thanks for making this event so special! @



