

Open Connections

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Open Connections Magazine

Issue 75 | Winter 2020-21

Mission

Open Connections Magazine is a print publication devoted to extending the work of Open Connections, Inc.—our non-profit organization—beyond the physical boundaries of the Open Connections Village—our education center located on a twenty-eight-acre farm in a western suburb of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The work of Open Connections, Inc., is to promote an approach to human development that we refer to as Open Education. It includes: an emphasis on self-directed learning (as opposed to a compulsory curriculum); experiential learning (doing something vs. only hearing or reading about it); conceptual development (valuing comprehension more than memorization); flexible thinking (the ability to innovate and create solutions when conventional answers aren't sufficient); collaboration (vs. competition); real work (vs. make-work); and process consciousness (an awareness of how the quality of process impacts on the probability of success in any sort of undertaking).

Open Connections Magazine exists primarily to espouse this approach to Open Education in general and OC's process consciousness in particular. We welcome submissions by writers devoted to exploring the importance of Open Education in their own lives and/or in the lives of their young people. 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

MANAGING EDITOR: Margaret Welsh

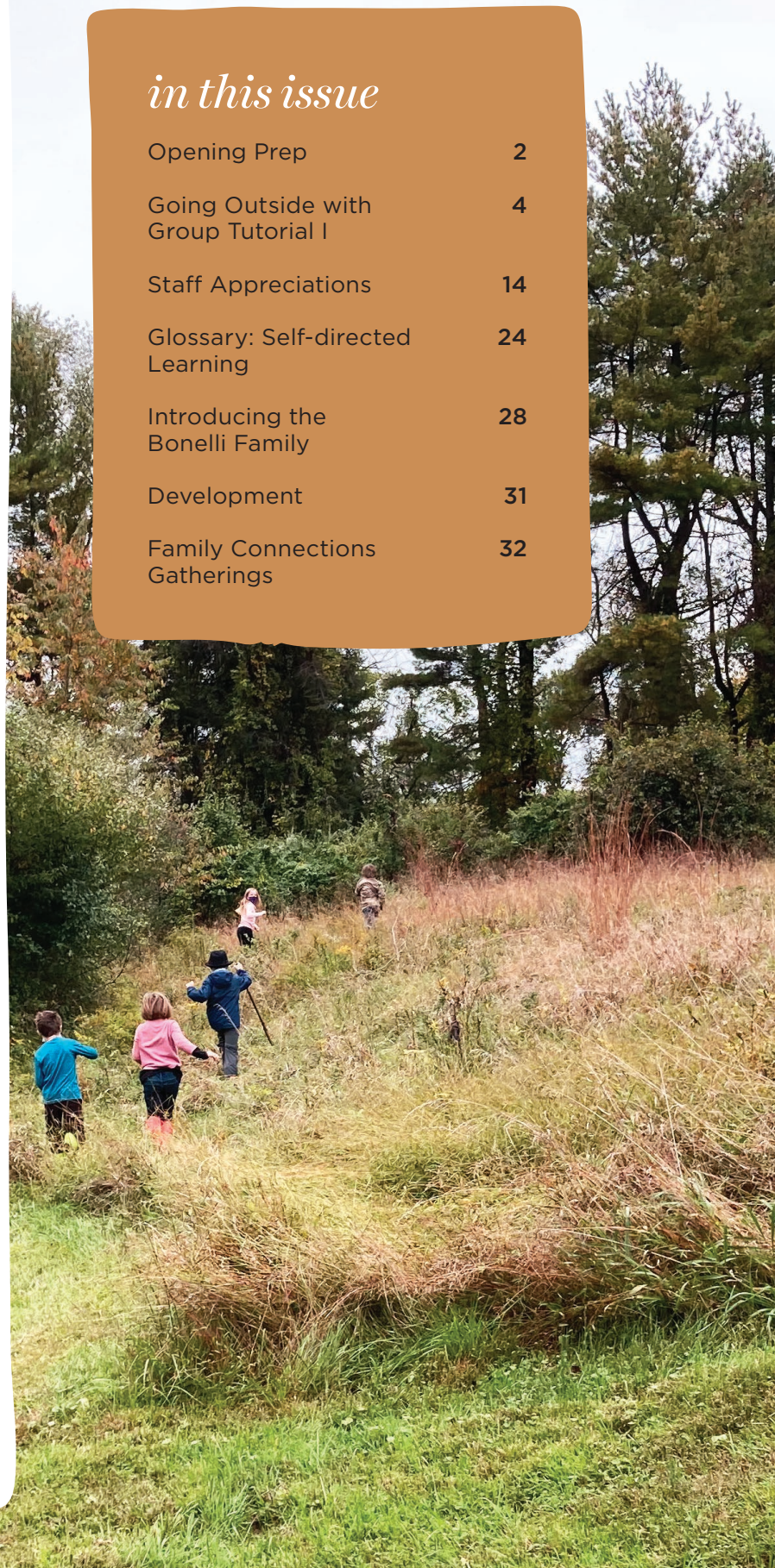
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FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR

Margaret Welsh



I was recently reading a friend's blog post in which he shared the Chinese blessing: "May you live in interesting times." He reflected that "Some people might—with a perspective of the past year—consider this more of a curse, and I think we could have a peaceable discussion about the merits of both ways of interpreting the saying." Indeed, this has been a year of many feelings and emotions during this unprecedented life experience of a pandemic. I would like to focus here on gratitude for unexpected results of these "interesting times."

This is the time of year when we pause to consider what we are thankful for; what and who we appreciate in our lives. I am grateful to be part of the community at Open Connections this fall when we have turned to each other more than ever in support of our shared goal of life-long learning. This year we have an enthusiastic Parent Connections Group who have been initiating

in-person gatherings outside on the OC campus to help us all feel connected even when our programs are virtual. People are sharing their skills and interests with each other so that the adults are learning along with their youth during these gatherings.

These pages bring you an inspiring and timely article about how the Group Tutorial I programs are taking advantage of our 28 acres of outdoor "classroom" space. You can also learn about how the Bonelli Family's journey of self-directed learning looks, following the leads of their youth and enjoying learning through life activities. What is "self-directed learning" as practiced at OC? Read an excerpt from The OC Glossary of Terms. We enjoyed 3 glorious weeks in October of in-person programming and hope that we will be able to have in-person programs again before too many months pass. This fall we asked the youth and staff to share their appreciations of our community and they are printed here.

With Gratitude, *Margaret*



OC youth, Søren, pitches in to spruce up the campus prior to opening week.

opening prep



“Grit is about working on something you care about so much that you’re willing to stay loyal to it...it’s doing what you love, but not just falling in love...staying in love.”
-Angela Duckworth

Going Outside with Group Tutorial I

By Linda Soffer, Megan Marran, and Jody Fitts,
Group Tutorial I Facilitators

Open Connections is surrounded by natural beauty. From the moment you turn onto the top of the driveway, the view of 28 acres of rolling meadow and forest, dotted with the stone farmhouse and reclaimed barn, is both relaxing and idyllic. Our spacious, verdant campus is a vital and unique component of our Open Education environment, where youth of all ages and abilities are encouraged to exercise, explore and embody our guiding principles of Respect, Freedom, Responsibility, and Natural Learning.

While the visual beauty of our campus is undeniable, our nature-rich setting does much more than just provide a pretty backdrop. There is a growing body of research indicating that direct exposure to nature is essential for healthy childhood development and for the physical and emotional health of people of all ages. In his seminal work *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder* Richard Louv asserts, “Stress reduction, greater physical health, a deeper sense of spirit, more creativity, a sense of play, even a safer life—these are the rewards that await a family when it invites more nature into children’s lives.”

OC youth love spending time outside on campus and it is often a focus of questions we get starting first thing in the morning, “Are we going to be going outside today?” To which the response is always, “Of course, we go outside everyday.”

Tuesday Group Tutorial I youth enjoy a spontaneous game of “Noodle Tag” around the Tire Swing Environment during free choice time. (Pictured L to R: Eli, Emmy, Lincoln, Gwen, Heather [Facilitator]).



One example of an outdoor collaborative project: the Blacktop Obstacle Course, where each group member created a section by drawing movement cues on the ground with chalk.

Spending time outdoors is a cornerstone of all OC programs, and each program group utilizes the campus amenities in different ways depending on the needs of the members and goals of the program. The Group Tutorial I program recognizes that the emerging learners in our 7-9 year old age group understand and integrate new knowledge best through hands-on experiences that engage the whole person and allow for flexibility and individual expression. Youth in this age group need to get up and move frequently and will readily use their kinesthetic impulses to integrate informal play with more formal learning. They are also seeking a deeper understanding of themselves in relationship with the broader community, and forming an overall view of the world and their place in its natural order. To this end Group Tutorial I Facilitators employ the campus as an outdoor classroom that encourages our youth to engage their senses, their bodies, and their imaginations in their learning process while simultaneously nurturing an intimate relationship with the natural world.

Group Tutorial I encompasses two separate days of programming, each with a different focus. On Tuesdays the emphasis rests on logic, math, and science while on Thursdays we explore cultures, the humanities and community service. Both program days seek to capitalize on opportunities to spend time outdoors engaging in a wide range of activities across a spectrum of structure to maximize kinesthetic and naturalistic learning. Youth attend one or both days. What follows is a glimpse of learning experiences utilizing the outdoors from Tuesdays and from Thursdays.

Tuesday Group Tutorial I

OC youth love spending time outside on campus and it is often a focus of questions we get starting first thing in the morning, “Are we going to be going outside today?” To which the response is always, “Of course, we go outside everyday.”

Getting outdoors is the goal for many of our activities throughout the year in Tuesday Group Tutorial I. We mindfully structure our math and science based projects to have outdoor components. One of our early activities in the year is a re-introduction of Venn Diagrams using Attribute Blocks. An engaging and kinesthetic addition to this activity that we have used over the years has been to create Venn Diagram circles on the Blacktop area and use youth chosen attributes for each circle. The youth then become the attribute blocks themselves by moving to the circle or set of circles which best describes them. This element of embodied experience helps youth to more fully integrate their understanding of this important conceptual model.

During our study of the science of sight one year we utilized the outdoors by staging three sight challenges on the Upper Terrace: a balance beam walk, throwing and catching a ball with a partner, and tossing a bean bag into a target at varying distances. Youth wore hand-made eye patches that were used to block information from one eye or the other during these activities. These tasks allowed youth to utilize full body movement to process new information about the role vision plays in balance and perception.

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Sliding Rocks is a favorite natural feature of the OC woods that were transformed into a kinesthetic challenge by the simple addition of an anchored rope. (Pictured: Gwen & Eli)



Thursday Group Tutorial I youth gathered materials for use in a natural dyeing project, and simultaneously cleared invasive plants from the campus. (Pictured: Lee)



"Doing it outside" can require adaptations, such as using a rock to secure your hundreds sheet when counting pumpkin seeds on a breezy day. (Pictured: Lincoln)



As Group Tutorial I youth develop kinesthetic confidence, they find new ways to enjoy our classic outdoor play elements. (Pictured: Emmy & Gwen)

We utilize the entire campus on a weekly basis as we hike through the Meadow and White Pines areas, across the creek and up into the woods, immersing ourselves in the natural world. Youth hone their observation skills as they gather natural materials and collaborate to build nature mandalas. During free choice times spontaneous games of tag will pop up, or youth will develop their balance and strength via the slack line and ninja line set up by the Blacktop. The Tire Swing Environment and the Sand Pit are utilized for games of house, feats of engineering, and other nature-based fantasy play. These daily opportunities support our assertion that the physical exercise and emotional stretching that youth enjoy during unstructured, imaginative and exploratory play are essential for healthy, wholesome development.

Youth in Group Tutorial I are responsible for researching and presenting a topic of their choosing to the group each year. These Mini Peer Facilitations (MPF) include an activity portion and the youth will often choose an activity that has an outdoor component. One year we flew carp kites outside after an MPF about Japanese cultures, we tested our camera obscura after an MPF on Polaroid cameras and we had a demonstration on the hearing of dogs after an MPF on Dog Senses.

Thursday Group Tutorial I

While it seems logical that the outdoors is the territory of math and science, it is also the realm of literature, poetry and the arts. The Thursday Group Tutorial I program focuses on engaging youth in the exploration of cultures and the humanities, as well as participation in meaningful community service. The different outdoor spaces, natural materials and built environments are ideal for hands-on learning. Four of the ways outdoor learning has been used in recent years on Thursdays are: 1) Activities for building collaborative and social skills. 2) Community Service in tending the Labyrinth area of Susan's Gardens at OC. 3) Activity challenges for reinforcing learning from stories related to foreign cultures. 4) Celebrating holidays from foreign cultures.

Early in the program year, activities are planned to help youth get to know each other better. One particular activity requires each pair or triad of youth to collaboratively create a design of their choice with natural materials gathered from the campus. Let loose outside, the groups settle on plans, scatter around the immediate area, find and collect materials and bring them back to their designated sites. What soon emerges are a collection of unique nature creations. One may be a picture of three hearts made from pink flower petals and leaves and "people" made from

acorns. Another could be a 3-D "fantasy retreat" with a lounging area under an umbrella made from a large hosta leaf. Still quite different from the others could be a symmetrical mandala design including pebbles from the nearby pebble harp in the Labyrinth. The mandala might be guarded from behind by two wooden statues. All teams work collaboratively, resulting in friendly connections between the group members at the beginning of the year, and original, creative pieces of natural art.

The gardens and terraces surrounding the OC Farmhouse are named Susan's Gardens in memory of one of the original founders, Susan Shilcock. Thursday Group Tutorial I adopted the Labyrinth area of Susan's Gardens as a way to provide community service. Twice a year, in spring and fall, the group performs a thorough clean up. With garden gloves, rakes, spades, trowels, clippers and wheelbarrows, the group removes debris and spruces up this beautiful area. After an hour or two of collaborative labor, a neat and welcoming space reappears. Through these efforts, youth have increased their knowledge of the plants and natural features of this space, their understanding of the seasonal cycles, and their sense of stewardship of this unique part of campus. In this pandemic year, Group Tutorial I is using the Labyrinth area as our main program space on both Tuesdays and Thursdays and

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both groups will contribute to the care of the space.

One year, Thursday Group Tutorial I studied Celtic Culture which offered rich opportunities for outdoor immersion in multiple ways. A fictional story of an Irish girl named Fiona and her intergenerational island family, *The Secret of Ron Mor Skerry*, led to a morning of five activities designed to experience Fiona's life first hand. In groups of three, the youth rotated through five stations on campus, practicing the activities as described in the story. Some of the tasks completed were: using a trowel to mix and apply "tar" (in the form of mud) to a wood plank (simulating the bottom of Fiona's grandfather's fishing boat); washing, ringing out, and hanging "laundry" on a clothesline; crafting an eating utensil out of aluminum foil, then setting a table in the outdoor kitchen; making footprints in the sand pit then raking them smooth (simulating the action of the waves at the edge of the sea); and rowing the OC canoe through an imaginary ocean. By physically going through the motions of these actions, youth were more able to grasp the meaning of the story and the experiences of the protagonist, as well as integrating these story elements into their memory. It was also great fun and good exercise!

Ireland is a land of many bogs, and the Ancient Celts were known to bury different things in bogs where they would be



Projects like making natural dyes feel more authentic when they can happen outdoors, even on wet days, thanks to our covered Art Studio patio. (Pictured: Cataleia)

preserved indefinitely. To experiment with burying something in the ground for a long time, and to understand and appreciate the connections that exist between our modern lives and those of these ancient peoples who so revered nature, Thursday Group Tutorial I carved and dried apple heads and then buried them in a far corner of the OC campus (our closest landscape to a “bog”). The individual burial sites were marked with personal flags created with each youth’s name written in the ancient Celtic alphabet, Ogham. This activity took place during the Celtic holiday Samhain, which celebrates the end of the summer harvest and the beginning of the “dark half” of the year. That same afternoon, the Open Program youth joined the the Group Tutorial I youth in a ritual ceremony, marching around and around a candle (symbolizing a bonfire) and meditating on the cycles of light and darkness (symbolizing life, death and rebirth) in nature.

Six months later, the Celtic calendar brought another ripe opportunity to enjoy celebrating and learning outdoors. The major fire festival holiday of Beltane falls halfway between the spring equinox and the summer solstice and for ancient Celts marked the “Light” half of the year. The first outdoor activity of the day was decorating three OC trees with flowers and colorful yarn to create traditional May Trees (also called Beltane Trees or Wishing Trees). Next, every youth found their own Ogham flag and dug up their apple doll from Samhain, noting the degree of decomposition that had occurred over six months’ time. For the final part of the celebration, youth from Thursday Group Tutorial I and the Open Program joined together again in pairs to hold hands, chant, and jump over a broomstick that represented a threshold into the future. Everyone was directly calling forth the fertile growing season of spring, summer and early fall, as Celtic people have done for centuries. In this tangible way, everyone welcomed the cultural experiences right into their very being.

For 2020-21, Group Tutorial I has expanded our outdoor programming on both days. On Tuesdays we are focused on a study of the air within us and around us, a topic that affords countless opportunities to incorporate nature-based and kinesthetic learning into our math and science studies. Our Thursday program plans to “stay at home” and dig deeper into the cultures of the native tribes and communities of North America, deepening our understanding of our own sense of place and the people who inhabited it in the not-so-ancient past. On both days we will continue to engage Mother Nature as our co-facilitator, taking full advantage of the fresh air, open space, and unlimited possibilities for growth and connection that the outdoor classroom provides. ©

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Sequencing, memory and synchrony are all practiced when we perform the Group Tutorial I “Greeting”—a series of movements chosen by group members that acts as a distanced alternative to handshakes & hugs.



“I enjoy being back on campus because I enjoy the change of scenery from my house. I enjoy helping set up outdoor program spaces so that we could come back in-person.”
 – Indi, Group Tutorial III

Owen, Caroline, and Seda discuss measurements for the railing as part of the ongoing Tree Platform Building project in Shaping Your Life.



Jack utilizes the Open Program woodshop for a new project—making stilts!

“Dear OC, I so appreciate this loving and accepting community that we have created. Even through all the struggles that have come with the pandemic I feel like we have come out the other side stronger than ever. It’s been so great to be able to be in person these past few weeks, even with restrictions. The staff have all done amazing jobs problem solving around all the challenges to give us great programs. This year I have already had so many great in-program experiences that I will remember for years to come. Even with the many obstacles this year has brought, we have stayed strong as a community and I look forward to the future with great excitement for what is to come.”
 – Ruby, Group Tutorial IV



Nova and Luna (sisters) enjoy a story of *Library Mouse* in the Open Program’s new outdoor reading space.



Brendan enjoys the outdoor program space in the Open Program.



Group Tutorial II members, Thomas, Elric, Max, Ollie, Silas P., and Shep engage in a newly invented game inspired by physical distancing guidelines.

I appreciate just being back; autumn olives; fun; friends.
 – Max, Group Tutorial II



Hannah checks out an interesting fungus while scouting locations for a Group Tutorial IV community scavenger hunt project.



Leo hones his fine motor skills as he connects gumdrop pumpkins with toothpicks.



Ruby examines leaves under a dissecting scope. She collected them from her stream site in order to identify various environmental factors impacting her stream health and characteristics.

“I appreciate being on campus because on virtual we’re just sitting there and not exercising our bodies. But on campus we’re exercising our minds and our bodies together.”
 – Ollie, Group Tutorial I



Ollie helps out an injured praying mantis during Group Tutorial II.

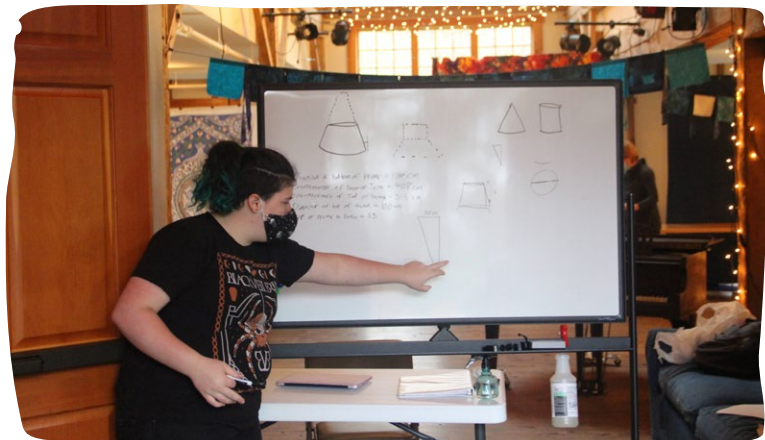


Group Tutorial I members play a “getting to know you” dice game on a rainy morning in our indoor program space.



A morning spent in the MakerSpace yielded logo-like designs to be used to mark ditty bags, blackjack covers and other personal works for Group Tutorial III youth, including Søren.

“I appreciate being on campus because I love seeing my friends and playing with them in person, and sharing experiences like when the bald eagle flew over campus today.”
 – Gwen, Group Tutorial I



Seda explains her thinking for applying the Pythagorean Theorem to calculate the height of a slice of red oak during an activity in Shaping Your Life.

“I appreciate the new flexibility in the small group. Though I do miss having many people due to the strength in numbers, I appreciate having an agile group that has the ability to follow whims and whips.”
 – Owen, Shaping Your Life



Elena gets comfy as she ponders a writing prompt in Group Tutorial III.

staff



CHRIS

When Chris isn't working at OC, he spends his time hunting and fishing, woodworking, playing guitar and the African djembe. He also enjoys camping, backpacking, hiking, restoring old cars, riding motorcycles, blacksmithing and metal working, fixing up his house and restoring old tools. He enjoys sewing, quilting and crochet too. Recently Chris has been learning to make sauerkraut and has been painting with watercolors. Chris and his wife, Amy have two youth, one currently attends OC and one is an OC graduate.

"I appreciate seeing all of the young people on campus these past few weeks. I have been on campus through the entire pandemic and the beauty of the campus never ceases to amaze me but after a while it gets very quiet and lonely. When programs started up the campus came alive! Seeing and hearing all of the young people running wild makes my heart sing. I feel more connected than ever. I guess my real appreciation is this wonderful community!"



HEATHER

In addition to spending time learning with her youth, Heather explores her own interests too, volunteering for women's public health organizations and a local CSA, as well as documenting life through pictures, running, journaling, planning family adventures and reading as much as possible. Heather and Sam's three lively young people all attend OC.

"I appreciate OC because it has provided a home away from home to us and a place to discover ideas alongside new friends, to explore our natural world in the most beautiful setting, to work on real things, cooperatively, to learn to disagree kindly, to hear others, to appreciate opportunities and to do so in the midst of other families and incredible mentors all seeking to better ourselves and others."



JANE

Jane enjoys gardening, daily morning walks in the park with her dog and best friend Amy, sewing, making up-cycled creations, hiking, camping, putzing in thrift stores, creating mosaics, crafting, and spending time in her cozy home with her family. Her husband, Rick, is the Interim Executive Director at Open Connections. Their son Locke attends programs at OC. Their daughter, Ella, attended programs at OC from age 4-15 and continues to pursue a path of self-directed learning.

"I am incredibly grateful for OC's influence in my family's life. The support we have received from OC over the past 16 years is immeasurable. The first time we visited OC, I knew that we had stumbled upon something truly special and unique. OC has inspired invaluable positive growth in every member of my family, and we are all better human beings because of OC's involvement in our lives. When I am at OC, I feel at home, loved, and energized. I feel free to be myself and talk openly about all the things that matter to me with people who are caring, open-minded, and accepting. The OC community has become our tribe and we cannot imagine our lives without it. OC is a gift to my family and the world!"



JEAN

Jean and Sean have 5 young people, 4 of whom have attended OC for varying amounts of time. The eldest is an OC graduate and the youngest is set to graduate from OC in May of 2021. Jean enjoys many creative endeavours in her "spare time". She likes to cook gourmet meals and is always looking for new ways to cook the wild game and other foraged foods her family brings home. Jean enjoys sewing, tie dying, repurposing old clothing and other items as well as making all-natural home, health, and beauty products. Jean is currently developing her love of gardening.

"I appreciate OC because it has been a supportive community during our homeschool journey in many ways. I especially appreciate all the friends my young people and I have made during our time at OC, they have truly enriched our lives. I also appreciate that OC has given me meaningful work to do. I have felt valued for my contributions, and it is a job I love doing."



KELLY DILLON

Passionate about the outdoors, Kelly continues to wander, observe and marvel at the cycles of the natural world. Kelly enjoys collaborating with young people as they develop their own passion for the planet, and is committed to doing her part in protecting and preserving the environment for generations to come. Kelly shares many interests with her daughter, who joyfully attended OC from Open Program through Shaping Your Life. She is grateful for the enlightening conversations, ranging from human rights and equality to popular culture, that continue to connect them in their curiosity and compassion.

"I am grateful beyond measure to be a part of the OC Community, sharing our passions, successes and challenges as we support each other, when and where we can, in both big and seemingly small ways, in the adventurous and often messy journey, of discovery and making of a life that fits."



KELLY DOWD

When not at OC, Kelly enjoys reading, hiking, DIY home renovation projects, and spending time with her family. Kelly holds a MSED in Elementary Education and is passionate about engaging youth in their learning and helping them connect in healthy ways. Kelly and her husband have three youth, all of whom attend or have attended programs at OC since 2009.

"I appreciate OC because it represents a place of consistency in our chaotic lives, especially this year. It has been tremendously healing to be able to come back on campus and to interact with staff, youth and families in person. I appreciate how the community is stepping up to problem-solve the myriad challenges inherent during this pandemic and is working on deepening connections with each other in flexible, creative ways."



LISA

Open Connections has been a huge influence on the Huis family since 2000. All three of Lisa's youth attended OC from the Open Program through their teen years. She loves spending time with community members of all ages, both inside and outside of programming. When not on campus, Lisa can be found hiking, puzzling, baking, eating chocolate and marveling at nature, though not usually simultaneously.

"One of the things I appreciate most about OC is the unique environment that allows for collaboration. I often feel that I learn much more in a day (sometimes about the world around me, sometimes about myself) from youth than I may have imparted to them! I am continually amazed and inspired by my facilitator colleagues for their ingenuity, passion and dedication to the growth and welfare of the young people each has in programming. I used to think that if I could be reincarnated, I would come back to the world as a dolphin. But now I think I might rather be an Op youth."



LINDA

When not at OC, Linda can be found with her family, including her daughter who is an OC youth. She appreciates being in nature—hiking, camping and gardening—and enjoys building connections in her Philadelphia neighborhood through community arts events. Linda also explores art in all mediums, with a focus on found object assemblage, and relishes making her home a haven for imagination, creativity and whole-hearted living.

"I appreciate working at OC because it allows me to combine my interests in arts and nature to create a learning environment that is mutually inspirational and nurturing. It is a magical place of infinite possibilities, where every individual is encouraged to embrace their true self."



MEGAN

Megan and her family, husband Matthew and young people, Hannah and Thomas live on a farm in Parkesburg. Hannah and Thomas both attend OC. Megan has lived in 3 states (PA, AK, and CO twice) and together with her family has traveled to several European countries in the last few years. Megan is a Certified Veterinary Technician and has a passion for all things animal.

"I appreciate OC because: It offers my youth (and myself) the opportunity to learn and grow alongside some truly amazing and talented individuals. OC brings joy into our lives through the beautiful and peaceful campus, the people with whom we have been blessed to spend our time and the ways our learning has expanded throughout the years. We will always be grateful for Open Connections and the wonderful people associated with it."



MICHELLE W.

Michelle met her husband, Jeremy, many years ago in the kitchen of a fancy restaurant where they both worked, and they still love sharing food and hospitality with the world. When Michelle's not working at their family restaurant, Bittersweet Kitchen, she can be found reading, laughing with friends and fighting for social justice. Michelle is a connector, building community is a passion. Michelle and Jeremy's three youth all attend OC programs.

"I appreciate the opportunity to join the staff I have long admired for their creativity, flexibility and respect for young people. I am enjoying the chance to be on our beautiful campus, celebrating what is possible in this strange time. My gratitude overflows for this community that has worked so hard to offer meaningful opportunities to learn, have fun and deepen friendships in a moment when so many in our world find themselves more isolated and distanced."

filled with natural landscapes to explore and enjoy. I look forward to every day I walk onto campus, ready to see the cheerful faces of other staff, families, and youth."



MARGARET

Margaret enjoys sewing and quilting, flower gardening, jigsaw puzzling, camp fires, taking snapshots, connecting with friends and family—she and her husband Scott dabble in farming too. Margaret and Scott have 3 young people all of whom are OC alumni.

"I appreciate the supportive community at OC. I could never have managed this homeschooling journey without its support. I am grateful for the friendships that my youth and I have made through OC. These are lasting friendships. The opportunity to be a greater part of OC by being in the Office has been a joy. I feel valued as part of furthering the mission of self-directed learning."



MICHELLE B.

Michelle was introduced to OC when she was about 10 years old, when her two younger brothers joined OC programs. At first sight she knew that when she started her own family they would somehow be part of this wonderful place called Open Connections. Michelle has now worked in the Open Program for 17 years and calls OC her home away from home.

Michelle has many hobbies including tending her farm with her four youth, all of whom attend or have attended OC. They call their small farm/homestead RowdyCrowd Farm and enjoy sharing the fruits of their la-

bor through a self-service farmstand. During her "free time," Michelle enjoys cooking and baking, reading, playing and creating games with her family, and hands-on creative endeavors such as sewing, tie-dying, canning and preserving food, hiking, exploring natural parks, woodworking, DIY, and gardening.

"I appreciate OC for so many reasons. First, OC is my extended family. I have made so many special connections with families and staff members that will last a lifetime. Second, the support from the community to gain a better understanding of what homeschooling looks like for my family. Third, the freedom, respect, and responsibility that is given to the youth to lead a life of choice, purpose, and fulfillment. Lastly, I appreciate this beautiful 28 acre campus

RICK



Rick and his wife delight in long walks and deep conversation. He is enjoying teaching his daughter to drive and supporting her as she pursues her self-directed path. Rick savors spending time with his son working through math problems and exploring electronics. Rick is currently reading books by Alan Watts and is looking forward to the time when he can once again experience live music of all kinds. He also enjoys a good joke. Rick and Jane's youth attend or have attended OC.

"I appreciate the OC community - staff, the Board, families, and young people. The gratitude I feel to be part of such a large group of life-long learners who take an active role in creating the life they want - full of purpose and fulfillment as they define it - is beyond words. The OC mission and philosophy are nothing without a group of dedicated people willing to engage, question, and evolve with it. I am a better father, husband, son, co-worker, and friend because of all of you."



SUE

Sue lives in Swarthmore with her husband, Mark, and their young people—two in college and one still at home. Sue likes to stay active by running, biking, swimming, hiking, and playing OC-style sports with the youth. Her favorite hobbies are collecting minerals, geology, bird-watching, and nature photography and she especially loves doing these while traveling. Sue also serves in her church as an elder.

"I appreciate OC first and foremost because of the amazing youth. It is a privilege to be their facilitator! Nothing energizes me more than coming alongside them as they explore their interests, take on new challenges, and develop deeper bonds with me and each other. You won't meet a more intellectually curious, kind, creative or inclusive group of teens than those at OC. I also appreciate the breathtaking beauty of the OC campus which is ours for the taking and exploration. And I love working with such interesting and caring fellow staff members who are as passionate as I am about the OC youth and philosophy."



"For a while I thought I wouldn't see my friends. Expecting it would be all in front of a screen all day and I expected that would be very boring. I'm glad that I can enjoy the creek this year, the woods and the birds. And especially my friends. So my appreciation is this, I'm glad to be on the OC campus."
- Elric, Group Tutorial II (pictured above with autumn olives that he harvested during Group Tutorial II.)



Group Tutorial I youth, Lee, Gwen and Emmy work together to make their way through a cooperative obstacle course on the Blacktop as Heather (Facilitator) cheers them on.

“I love being outdoors and going into the woods, and also doing activities with others like the blacktop obstacle course.”
– Eli, Group Tutorial II



Lily unveils her shibori (Japanese form of tie dye) gear bag. Once dry, it will get strung and be ready to carry much of what we need for our outdoor adventures!

“I appreciate how OC is so welcoming. Everybody here puts you first and everybody is so kind to one another. I feel so lucky to be able to go to OC twice a week! I look forward to it every day. I never doubt that the Facilitators are going to find a new way to change things up. I feel that I have come out of my shell that I never knew I had. Thank you OC!”
– Elena, Group Tutorial III



Owen enjoys some kinesthetic time in the Sand Pit during Open Program.

“Dear OC, I am ever so glad to be back here on campus! I am so grateful that the staff worked to put together restrictions and safety guidelines to keep everyone safe so we could be here on campus. When we went virtual in the spring I was kind of happy to be at home most of the time, but now that we are back here I am so excited to continue with the rest of the year on campus! I have had so much fun being outside all day and picnicking at lunch.”
– Hannah, Group Tutorial IV



Owen carefully examines a mushroom specimen during a youth facilitated activity about mushrooms in Shaping Your Life.



Albert fashions a smooth and sturdy walking stick. Group Tutorial III youth reviewed bushcraft whittling safety and then foraged potential walking sticks in the OC woods.



Chris passes information during Tuesday Group Tutorial II's hike through the White Pines area to determine where new trails should be created.

“I like playing in the sandpit and trying to figure out how to find Wally's boot. Just plain being back at OC felt really good.”
– Owen, Open Program



Aminah practices using her stopwatch in preparation for timing the speed of a ping pong ball traveling down a section of the stream on the OC campus.



Emmy considers how to break a large number into a smaller one using manipulatives. The outcome led to Real Work for Group Tutorial youth who then figured out how many stepping stones each of them would trim in the overgrown labyrinth in Susan's Gardens.

“I like being with my friends and seeing their whole bodies, not just their faces, and playing games like tag and Ghost in the Graveyard in the environment.”
– Lincoln, Group Tutorial I



Group Tutorial III youth, Declan, gathers his thoughts in preparation for a persuasive argument on whether or not having a lot of money is a good thing.

“I appreciate seeing all my friends again. I appreciate that we are doing more watercolor this year. I am excited to eat A LOT of autumn olives. I am very excited to be able to bird watch over on the TV. [Live stream from Cornell University.] I appreciate how all the Facilitators are working hard to make sure that we can get back on campus. I appreciate that we are creating our own games that fit with covid rules. I like that we have all kinds of new facilitators this year.”
– Silas K., Group Tutorial II



Cataleia proudly displays her fairy house that she has spent several weeks designing and decorating during the Open Program.

“I appreciate being with the Facilitators and my friends. I like being able to use the materials for projects and do things together. I love being able to do projects at the creek and the Sliding Rock and the Environment.”
– Cataleia, Group Tutorial I



Lincoln clips an Autumn Olive branch to clear a path down to the Creek in the Open Program.



"I appreciate being able to be back on campus and outside during such nice weather, as well as getting to know Seda and Owen better in my first year of SYL. Coming back and getting to see some familiar faces has been really refreshing!"
 - Caroline, Shaping Your Life, (pictured on a birdwatching hike about the OC campus.)



Leo explores physics in motion while cautiously maneuvering his body across the board during Open Program.



Silas P. gets his lap board set up before beginning his weekly watercolor painting in Group Tutorial II.



Aria relaxes on a tire swing following an afternoon of dreaming and clearing a Group Tutorial III outdoor program site and carefully choosing a walking stick for use on upcoming hikes.



During Group Game Time, Group Tutorial IV and Shaping Your Life youth plot a way to move a ball across the Blacktop while staying connected. Several of the members also had their eyes closed.

"I'm glad that we are back at OC because I get to see all of my friends. I am excited to be doing in-person this year."
 - Silas P., Group Tutorial II



Eli preforms a physical analysis of his pumpkin, including weight and circumference. He then records the data in his Pumpkin Booklet. This is an annual Group Tutorial I activity which includes carving the pumpkins and counting seeds.

"Appreciation for OC & Community, I appreciate that we can still feel connected even with the restrictions in place to keep us all safe. I like that while we are on campus we are spending most if not all our time outside, so that we are able to be in nature much more of the time. I'm enjoying and appreciating all the time spent outside more than I usually would when program was normal."
 - Aminah, Group Tutorial IV



Wally enjoys creating new and vibrant colors on the porch during Open Program.

"I am excited for this year. It has been very fun so far. Even though it will be different this year, I think that it will be very fun and we will have lots of possibilities. I am also excited to be outside more as well. I am also happy to see everyone in my program again."
 - Soren, Group Tutorial III

Self-Directed Learning

(with a lens on
Invited vs. Uninvited
Instruction)



Group Tutorial III youth, Aria, Lily and Albert, tackle one of a series of building challenges. Using a rubber band and three strings, they work out how to stack 6 plastic cups in a variety of ways while never touching the cups with their hands.

As with **Natural Learning (1)** and **Real Work**, among some other terms in this glossary, Self-directed learning (SDL) covers a spectrum of meanings for different users. We at Open Connections tend to use the term interchangeably with *Self-initiated learning*, *Self-managed learning*, *student-centered learning* and other options that are all intended to distinguish it from learning that has been initiated by—and usually *coerced* by—someone in a position of authority.

The content of the learning activity may be identical in the two different schemes. What distinguishes them is the source. Choosing *Moby Dick* from the library is one thing; having it assigned by a parent or English teacher is quite another. Similarly, learning to add and subtract so that you can balance your financial accounts is different from learning by way of completing assigned worksheets.

In both instances, the outcomes may seem similar—the book is read, the math skills are developed. However, most often there is another consequence that we at OC find invaluable: self-motivation and a sense of purpose. With SDL, there are likely to be long-lasting benefits that far surpass the skills learned or the data bits memorized (at least for the time being).

There is more likely to be a pride of authorship, or accomplishment, with SDL. There is less likely to be resistance, confusion, frustration, distress and certainly rebellion with SDL as well. This is because the learner is focused on his goal rather than someone else's. He is evaluating his own efforts as he goes—“*Am I getting where I want to go?*”—rather than fretting, “*Am I going to meet my teacher's and parents' approval?*”

Clearly, it is a much more efficient process. It has been reported by many homeschoolers (and students receiving homebound instruction) that the average student can master a year's worth of school curricula in *far less time than if they were in traditional school due to the nature of youth being able to work at his/her pace, and moving quickly through the content that clicks easily for them*. In the post-WWII generation, it was found over and over again that returning GIs were much better college students, much more serious about their studies, because they had chosen to be there after two years in the army than they had been right out of high school. The second time around, it was speculated

(and confirmed by the students themselves) that this time they wanted to be there, to learn the material and advance into their careers. They were now Self-directed.

At OC, we encourage SDL both within individual programs and in the broader arena of the OC community at large. The creation of the teen dances/Formal, and the yearbooks, are each a case in point.

At the same time, we subscribe to the notion that for all of us, “we can't know what we don't know.” That translates here to mean that **Facilitators** feel encouraged to introduce our young people to opportunities of which they are likely to be unaware. This in no way obligates them to pursue their suggestions. On the other hand, they sometimes open up a new interest area that becomes important to the young person (or young people, if it involves a group). The key to remember, however, is that the Facilitator is *offering* not *imposing*. Thus, the *Self-direction* component dominates with regard to the *choice* to engage and any choice to pursue further. There is no have-to here.

The above examples speak to the micro-level—thinking about different specific activities. SDL is also important on a macro-level.

Our goal at OC is for youth of all ages to be able to identify as Self-directed Learners. This obviously looks different for the various ages, as well as for each individual within each age group. Oftentimes, people hear the term SDL and they translate it to mean, “the young person can do whatever he wants, whenever he wants, and there is zero adult oversight and/or expectations.” This is certainly not the case (at least, it's not for the SDLers who attend OC.)

First, as registered Home Educated youth, there are certain legal expectations that must be met in order to comply with PA Home Education Law. (For more on this, speak to an OC director or OC evaluator.)

Second it is important to make the distinction between **invited** and **uninvited** instruction. When youth are participating in our younger programs at OC (Open Program), there is ample time and space for self-directed exploration, play and learning. There are also both Facilitator-initiated and Facilitator-led activities. The former are activities or materials that the Facilitator may have placed on a table (or floor, or at the Sand Pit) and left there to

“The outcomes may seem similar—the book is read, the math skills are developed. However, most often there is another consequence that we at OC find invaluable: self-motivation and a sense of purpose.”

see how young people organically explore or interact with the items with no set agenda. The latter are activities where the Facilitator often has an idea and/or goal for how to approach the material or activity, while still leaving space and opportunity for youth to make their own discoveries.

In regards to Group Tutorials (which start at age 7 and run through age 14), Choice programs (ages 8-15) and Shaping Your Life (15-18), SDL comes in two forms. At the macro level, when youth are choosing to register in those programs, they are demonstrating a level of self-directedness. Similarly, they are opting into a program where there is instruction--but/and it is invited instruction because the youth are choosing to enroll in the program. At a more micro level, meaning, in day-to-day programs, the level of self-direction varies. In some programs, there may be multiple hours carved out where the youth are self-directed, while in other programs, there may be little to no purely self-directed time. However, even in those instances, there is time and space carved out for youth to share their wishes with the Facilitators for the content that the group will be exploring during the program year. ©

[1] Words which are underscored and in **bold** have their own definitions described in detail elsewhere in the *OC Glossary of Terms* which is available to OC families on the OC website.

“I appreciate that we can be back on campus and I can hang out with my friends. I’m happy that I’m in GT II and Megan, Chris and Michelle W. are facilitating.”
 – Shep, Group Tutorial II

“I appreciate that I get more exercise. I appreciate that I get more writing practice. I appreciate that I see more of my friends.”
 – Thomas, Group Tutorial II



Thomas pauses during his weekly watercolor painting of campus during Group Tutorial II.



Cataleia and Lincoln enjoy a socially distanced game of Guess Who during the Open Program.

“I am really glad to be on campus because covid-19 made me feel like I was in solitary confinement.”
 – Elliot, Group Tutorial III

“Dear OC, I am very happy that we are able to be at OC. I am excited to be outside all day because it will be different from past OC years. I’m also happy that we have the chance to be in-person now even though we might switch to online.”
 – Declan, Group Tutorial III



Indi measures and marks vinyl in order to complete the traveler’s journal used to capture observations and notes throughout the OC year in Group Tutorial III.

“I have really been appreciating getting to be outside a lot this year. I’ve been getting to interact with nature in ways that I never have before, and have already learned a lot. The OC campus is so beautiful in many ways and it’s really fantastic that we get to spend our time here. This is my first year in GTIV, and it’s been really fun so far and I’m looking forward to the rest of the year.”
 – Ella, Group Tutorial IV



Aria’s pirate crew reacts with enthusiasm to a shark sighting during a group game in Group Tutorial III.



“The woodshop! Going to the creek. And I love playing with Brendan and my other friends, and I really love getting to spend time with Michelle and Jane. I missed OC so much!”
 – Jack, Open Program (pictured above in the Open Program outdoor classroom space in the woods.)

INTRODUCING

The Bonelli Family



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

Mike and Julie (dad & mom), Max (11), Leo (6), and Serafina (3 1/2).

How long has your family been on this path of self/family-directed Open Education?

We've been on this path ever since Max was born! When he was a baby we were introduced to and then followed gentle parenting. This naturally transitioned to baby/toddler led learning/playing.

What led you in this direction?

Homeschooling was the next natural step in our parenting journey. When Max was very young we weren't sure exactly what that would look like or how it would happen. That's when we started our search for a hybrid approach to combine outside learning, socializing, and gentle self-directed learning.

How did you get involved with Open Connections?

We first heard about Open Connections when Max was 3 yrs old and attended Gymboree play classes. Max's Gymboree teacher, Marianne Sutera Rhoads, is a former OC parent and she recommended I reach out for a tour. She was my first introduction to unschooling. As soon as we had a tour and learned about the philosophy we knew it was a perfect fit. We enrolled Max in the Pre-Open Program in 2012 and we haven't looked back! We knew OC would be our educational home.

What programs do your young people attend at Open Connections?

Max attends Group Tutorial II on Tuesdays and Thursdays and Choice on Wednesdays. Leo attends the Open Program on Tuesdays and Thursdays. We hope Serafina will be able to join the Open Program when she turns 4.

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

Our youth spend their time in a mix of self-directed time, direct instruction, sports, and family activities and outings. Max takes regular weekly language arts classes on Outschoool. Max and Leo both take karate classes. We enjoy family hikes and nature exploration. Our youth also spend a lot of time in free play building

Legos, building forts, building block creations, working on puzzles, reading aloud together, dance parties, and elaborate fantasy world play. Generally speaking, the 3 youth all play well together.

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

The biggest plus I see is how much free time our youth have to learn to play well together as I mention above and to explore their interests. We make sure not to over schedule their daily or weekly schedules so that they have free time. Another big benefit is participation in real everyday family life. All 3 of my youth participate in chores: cleaning, cooking, and laundry, as well as sibling care. I hope this emphasizes learning and life are not isolated but part of real life.

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

At times we had some concerns regarding academic development with our oldest. We turned to tutors and Outschoool classes. Part of the beauty of this approach is that it's incredibly individualized and personalized. We can fine tune our approach with all of our youth and take or leave whatever we determine are the best resources.

One other challenge with this alternative educational path is that it is not the mainstream and can thus invite unsolicited criticism from well meaning family and friends. We have learned to be prepared to explain and defend our choices. We've also learned to not invite the conversation if we're not ready to have a discussion.

What is your approach regarding academics? Real Work? Play? Self-direction/self-motivation?

Our approach combines all of the above. We believe to some degree our youth must be proficient in the 3R's (reading, writing, and arithmetic). We plan some academic instruction into the weekly school-year calendar even though it may not be a preferred task for some. (Outside instruction has been very beneficial in this regard). We also believe in following interests toward other "subjects" as well as lots of real work opportunities in day to day life.

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?

Some of our favorite resources are our field trip destinations! We enjoy the zoo, local arboretums (Morris, Jenkins, and Tyler), Valley Forge Park, the Please Touch Museum, the Academy of Natural Sciences, the Franklin Institute, the Aquarium and many more. We feel exposure to these enriching places help our youth to develop and fine tune their own interests.

Regularly scheduled extracurricular activities such as sports, karate, and piano lessons are integral to their development. I also can't leave out the library as a very valuable resource. Some specific math resources we've used are MathSeeds, Teaching Textbooks, and Life of Fred. My youth also enjoy monthly subscription clubs. They do a cooking club and a craft box subscription. Outschoool tutors and/or private in-person tutors have worked very well for our family.

Since the pandemic closure happened we have really valued the fellow homeschooling friends and connections we've made online, especially on Facebook. Program opportunities spread quickly via word of mouth. We've jumped into virtual field trips, science classes, music classes, dance parties, craft making and virtual storytime. This is all outside of the very rich virtual programming that Open Connections provides during this time. The OC community and our fellow homeschoolers are our most valuable resource.

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

Our youth are very happy with OC and they love making choices about how to spend their time. They recognize the difference between invited and uninvited instruction and they appreciate how their voices are embraced and valued.

From your young people's perspectives, what could OC do to further enhance their OC experience?

Max and Leo both say they would love even more outside and creek time. I think they both really love and appreciate their OC experiences.

“Our favorite days are probably the Community Days where our youth get to ‘play’ and be free to explore the campus with their peers in an unstructured way.”



“Our youth are very happy with OC and they love making choices about how to spend their time. They recognize the difference between invited and uninvited instruction and they appreciate how their voices are embraced and valued. ”

Looking back to when your family was new to OC, what events (Open Campus Days, Parents’ Meetings, Open Mic Night, etc.) helped your family become more connected to the OC community? We have always enjoyed and tried to participate in as many community events as our schedule allows. Our favorite days are probably the Community Days where our youth get to “play” and be free to explore the campus with their peers in an unstructured way.

What could OC do to further your (the parent’s) experience, help you reach your un-met goals, or pursue them in a more effective or enjoyable manner? I don’t feel there is anything else OC could add than what they already do! We already benefit from Facilitators’s input and conferences. I always feel welcomed and supported when asking for assistance and input in the partnership plan. I also always feel supported by having educational consulting available and in-house educational evaluations. I don’t think I could ask for anything else. ©

Development



As you can imagine this program year is full of uncertainty. The pandemic has rocked the foundations of many non-profits and OC is no exception. Our smaller community coupled with pandemic costs and the importance of keeping our staff intact will leave us with a large deficit that will be partially muted through the Payroll Protection Program and our limited reserves. We are working with a long-time supporter and major donor to cover a portion of the remaining deficit and we hope that our Annual Giving Campaign will serve as the final piece of the puzzle to ensure that OC is in a good financial state when we emerge from the pandemic.

Annual Giving donations are appreciated in any amount, truly! Potential funding sources look at participation percentages to see that an organization is supported by its community. **Donations can be mailed to:**

**Open Connections, 1616 Delchester Rd,
Newtown Square, PA 19073
or made via our website at [www.openconnections.org/
support-oc/make-an-online-donation](http://www.openconnections.org/support-oc/make-an-online-donation).**

In other news—OC was awarded a grant last fall for two specific projects. One was paving the lower parking lot, which we are happy to report was completed in July. The other project was the creation of a level playing field. OC is still in the early stages of this project, collecting bids and assessing the impact of the conservation easement on the costs. It’s important to note that funds received through a grant must be used as outlined in the original grant proposal. The total amount of this grant was matched by The Wyncote Foundation for the Sustainability Fund!

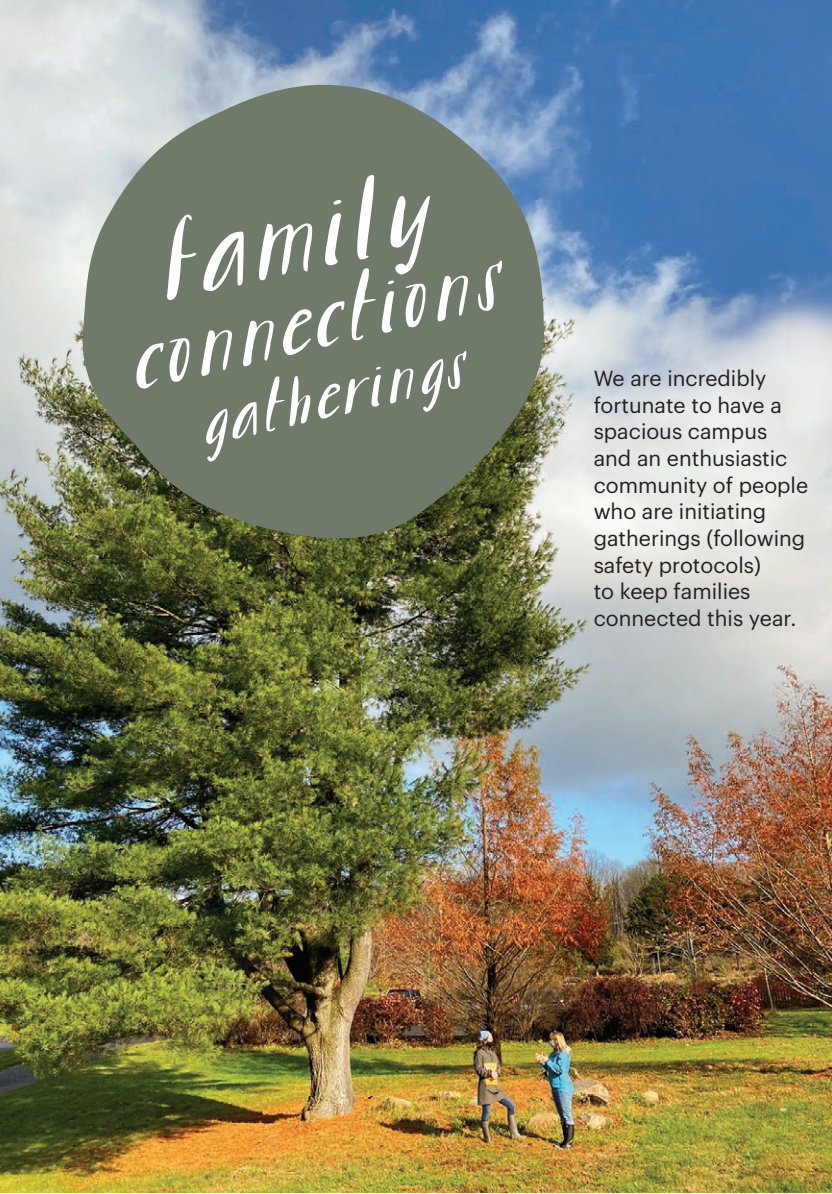
We applied for two additional grants this fall. One grant, offered by Exelon who owns PECO, would provide funds for an off-the-grid program space in the form of a yurt. The second grant, offered by The Foundation for Delaware County, provides assistance for COVID-19 related expenses. We have not heard back from The Foundation for Delaware County, but we are pleased to announce that the Exelon grant was approved! We look forward to working with the youth and broader community in creating this unique program space.

We look forward to keeping the community posted on these endeavors! **Thank you for walking the path with us.**

-Rick
Rick Sleutaris, Interim Executive Director

family connections gatherings

We are incredibly fortunate to have a spacious campus and an enthusiastic community of people who are initiating gatherings (following safety protocols) to keep families connected this year.



“I enjoy being back on campus to see all of my friends. I enjoy being able to spend so much time outside.”

– Aria, Group Tutorial III



“I appreciate being back on campus and seeing all the welcoming and smiling faces of the community. I appreciate that even though it is sometimes a challenge to collaborate with safety measures in place, it still is a joyous time here on the campus. I appreciate the facilitators and youth alike have been so flexible around the circumstances and have made the somewhat difficult time worthwhile.”

– Lily, Group Tutorial III

“I appreciate being back on campus and seeing my friends, and being able to socialize with them in person.”

– Albert, Group Tutorial III



“I never thought I could love OC, the staff and our community more. I have been proven wrong. I have such gratitude and appreciation for the people who have stayed and worked for our education. Seeing how hard the staff have worked to bring us back on campus fills my heart with warmth and proves how much they love the youth at OC. Over quarantine things have been weird and I’ve had to adapt. OC is my normal. OC is my connection to my friends. OC is my home. Thank you to EVERYONE who helped bring me home.”

– Norah, Group Tutorial IV

“I love being on campus because I get to see familiar faces and new faces. I love playing with my friends and I like going to the creek and playing outside. It’s so good to be back!”

– Lee, Group Tutorial I



“I realized something about this school. They don’t teach you things themselves. They give you things and if you do them you learn for yourself. It’s pretty cool.”

– Wally, Open Program

“I appreciate being able to see the facilitators and other youth as well as being outside all the time and getting to plan some of the things we will be doing this year.”

– Seda, Shaping Your Life



“I appreciate playing Ghosts in the Graveyard in the Environment with my friends, and seeing all of the trees that have wildly grown on campus.”

– Brendan, Group Tutorial I

“I am extremely excited to be able to collaborate with my peers on campus because I was missing that part of my life through quarantine.”

– Locke, Group Tutorial III

