



Open Connections Magazine

Issue 78 | Fall 2021

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 Campus—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

CO-EDITORS: Margaret Welsh and Sarah Becker

LAYOUT AND GRAPHIC DESIGN: Jacey Lucas

We want to hear from you: To contact Open Connections Magazine, e-mail us at oc_magazine@openconnections.org. Unsolicited articles and photography submissions are welcome. A word about photography: Unless specified by a caption, photographs are independent of articles and do not illustrate their content. Sign up to receive Open Connections Magazine free as a PDF e-magazine at: www.openconnections.org/oc-blog. Keep grandparents, friends, and neighbors up to date on OC articles, news, and events. For each issue, you will receive an e-mail listing the contents of the magazine as well as a link to download the publication in its entirety. You may also view previous articles on the same web page. Open Connections Magazine is published and distributed by Open Connections, Inc. 1616 Delchester Road, Newtown Square, PA 19073, (610) 459-3366, www.openconnections.org. Open Connections is a 501(c)3, tax-exempt non-profit organization.

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Cover: Youth watch as a snapping turtle lays her eggs in the edge of the Sand Pit.

Left: Locke roosts atop a set of nesting boxes designed and built collaboratively with Indiana in the Choice program.

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FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR

Margaret Welsh



Just this morning I was feeling a hint of fall in the air, the fog was hanging over the fields and I heard a few geese fly over. The OC Campus is humming again with the chatter and laughter of community members who are catching up with each other and excitedly discussing plans for the new program year.

This summer the Open Connections Magazine team has taken a moment to reimagine the magazine, incorporating input from our readers. We are bringing you several new regular columns including a question and answer feature, "Ask OC". Do you have a homeschooling question, or maybe you have wisdom to share? In addition to the standard Family Interview and Alumni Profile, we are now bringing you "A Day in the Life," which gives you a glimpse into a non-OC day with one of our families, and "Community Connections" introducing you to a member of our community.

This fall our feature article shares a look at the core skills that we hope our programs instill in youth during their time with us. Have you given thought to what core skills you use most in your day-to-day life? What skills contribute to a fulfilling life? Make sure to check out the interactive activity on page 7, too.

The fall issue is always a time that we have the pleasure of introducing you to the new members of our staff; this year we are especially excited that two OC Alumni will be joining us as facilitators! We also share an overview of who will be facilitating each of the programs this year.

We have an exciting year ahead of us as we grow, explore, and learn together in our vibrant community!

Hope you feel inspired after spending time with this Open Connections Magazine!

Margaret



During Group III, Aria, Elena and Heather (facilitator) slingshot wildflower seed bombs over the upper meadow, hoping many will grow and fill the area with pollinator-friendly blooms.

*Pausing
Ceremony*
JUNE 2021



Broad Life Skills as nurtured at Open Connections

by *Rick Sleutaris*, Director and Facilitator and *Sarah Becker*, Assistant Director and Facilitator

Before you read any further, please pause for a moment to reflect: imagine your young person has transitioned into the adult world. What crucial life skills would you hope they have developed—we are talking about broad skills that are important regardless of their occupation, interests, and age? Furthermore: what broad life skills have *you* found to be indispensable through *all* facets of your life: occupation, hobbies, relationships? What would be your top three?

Have you been able to identify your top three life skills? If not, please sit with the question a bit longer. Get clear on what *you* value for yourself and your young person before hearing the thoughts of others.

Rick Sleutaris, the Director of Open Connections, has been grappling with this question for some time now. Through extensive research and community engagement, three overlapping categories of broad life skills emerged. These categories can be classified as: Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, and Impersonal. Let's explore these more deeply.

the **I** INTRAPERSONAL

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 voice, wants, and needs.

INTRAPERSONAL skills in action at Open Connections:

One illustration of developing intrapersonal skills while in programming at Open Connections is having an opportunity to do a Mini Peer Facilitation (MPF). An MPF involves young people's pursuing of a topic that they are passionate about and then leading a session with their group and facilitators where they all get to explore the topic together. As one could imagine, preparing to present an MPF requires a lot of work, dedication, and various skills. Among them is the self awareness to know what one is passionate about in order to even choose a topic. One also needs self-confidence to stand in front of a group of peers and speak with authority on the content matter. For most young people, the MPF may be the first time that they are being asked to put these skills into action. In this particular example, a young person was really struggling with this task. The youth did not know where to start, and was also apprehensive about the prospect of presenting their work. Here, as an observer, we can see that the young person was using their intrapersonal skills to articulate their discomfort to their parents and their facilitators. The young person worked diligently to overcome their apprehensions, to push themselves to the very edge of their comfort level. After presenting their MPF, the young person felt a sense of accomplishment and eagerly started to look forward to other opportunities like this. MPFs and other projects like them, are designed to help young people develop and strengthen their intrapersonal skills.



Silas takes questions from his Group II peers after his Peer Facilitation on Artificial Intelligence.

the **We** INTERPERSONAL

This category might be called the “we” realm of life skills. As Theodore Roosevelt once mused, “The most important single ingredient in the formula of success is knowing how to get along with people.” And it is clear that this sentiment has withstood the test of time! Some of the attributes that were named as part of this realm are: communication, socialization, conflict management, and resolution skills, social skills, the ability to advocate for oneself, public speaking, collaboration, and leadership skills.

INTERPERSONAL skills in action at Open Connections:

This past year, in the Open Program (ages 4-9 years old), facilitators provided the youth with an abundance of cardboard boxes to use as they wanted. While initially everyone was playing separately, eventually they all came to the consensus that they would like to build an “epic” fort system. The group communicated about the master plan and worked out the intricacies of how the rooms would be arranged, how the cardboard would be fastened together, how windows would be positioned, who would be neighbors with whom and so on. There was a lot of interpersonal growth and development of skills at play.

Open Program youth, Wally, Brendan, Jack and Owen started out building individual cardboard houses and then moved to collaborating on a multi-sectional cardboard village.



Owen and Seda install the railing on the tree platform that was dreamed of, designed, and built by the Shaping Your Life teen program over a span of four years.



the *It* IMPERSONAL

This final category speaks to the “it” section of the broad life skills set. These could be described as the mechanisms that best support learning and the ability to support the other two endeavors of intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. Some things that were uncovered in this category include: creativity, flexible thinking, creative problem solving, time management, critical thinking, and self-expression. Of note, things in this category spoke to “doing,” not just “problem solving,” which implies that writing a poem, composing a song, or creating some other work of art would be included here.

IMPERSONAL skills in action at Open Connections:

The young people at Open Connections are full of grit. This term, as defined by Angela Duckworth, is “passion and perseverance for long-term goals.” One way to think about grit is to consider what grit isn’t. Grit isn’t talent. Grit isn’t luck. Grit isn’t how intensely, for the moment, you want something. Instead, grit is about having what some researchers call an “ultimate concern”—a goal you care about so much that it organizes and gives meaning to almost everything you do. Grit is holding steadfast to that goal, even when you fall down, even when you screw up, even when progress toward that goal is halting or slow. Talent and luck matter to success. But talent and luck are no guarantee of grit. In the Shaping Your Life program, some participants set their mind to building a treehouse, of sorts. This endeavor ended up spanning multiple years, and several setbacks (like a pandemic!). By the end of the 2020-2021 program year, however, the project was completed and youth of all ages are now able to reap the benefits of the grittiness of the teens who held onto this project for years!

“I view math as an important tool that allows me to solve problems, bring ideas to reality, and communicate information. Math is not the end game. Reading and writing follow similar paths—important and useful, but still tools to reach a goal, not the goal itself.”

What about academics?

Rick reflects, “One particularly interesting revelation in this exploration of broad life skills was that reading, writing, and math did not show up as a main category. Instead, they were viewed as tools in service to broader skills. Through this lens I view math as an important tool that allows me to solve problems, bring ideas to reality, and communicate information. Math is not the end game. Reading and writing follow similar paths—important and useful, but still tools to reach a goal, not the goal itself.”

The Magic Potion: Putting it all together

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. ©

Broad Life Skills Diagram Activity

Strong intrapersonal, interpersonal, and impersonal skills are not mutually exclusive and perhaps can be best shown as three overlapping circles of a Venn Diagram. We invite you to interact with the diagram below. How do you interpret these skills?

Please feel free to send us your thoughts, send in pictures to Sarah at Sarah.Becker@openconnections.org or tag us in any social media posts @open_connections on Instagram or use the hashtag #BroadLifeSkills

- Agency
- Applied Academics
- Appreciations
- Assume Good Intentions
- Autonomy
- Balanced Response
- Be Present
- Clientship
- Collaboration vs. Competition
- Conceptual Development
- Community
- Create and Adjust
- Descriptive vs. Evaluative
- Facilitating vs. Teaching
- Flexible Thinking
- Freedom
- Group Collaborative Projects
- Hazards of questions masking suggestions
- “How to”
- Invited vs. Uninvited instruction



- Independent Projects
- Lifelong Learner
- Multiple Intelligences
- Natural Learning
- Ownership
- Partnership
- Peer Facilitations (MPFs)
- Process Consciousness
- Process Language
- Pro-social
- Real Work
- Respect
- Responsibility
- Science Expo
- Seek to Understand
- Self-Directed Learning
- Stretching Exercises
- Word Presents
- Vertical Age Groups

The three broad areas are not new concepts to the pedagogy at Open Connections. In fact, these principles have been floating around in our literature for over 14 years. This article, written by a former OC Facilitator, Janet Wheeler, back in 2007 is a great example of how Open Connections fosters an environment to hone these skills. While Janet does not explicitly call out the “interpersonal,” “intrapersonal,” and “impersonal” aspects of this experience, we can observe where they are. From the youth who was expressing diligent grit to stick to the task of removing the small part, to the teamwork that we see when the youth approach the tasks together, and the fine motor skills and determination needed to complete the exploration. When you read this story through the lens of the three circles, how do you see them being applied?

Vintage Article
reprint from September 2007

Dismantle a Stereo

by Janet Wheeler, former OC Facilitator

For my birthday in December, a friend gave me an all-in-one record/CD/tape player. I was glad to have a replacement for my twenty year old stereo equipment and was about to throw everything away when I started to wonder what might be inside...

A few weeks later, the young people of the Thursday Open Program were met with a sign on the art table that said, “What is inside?” My old tuner and amplifier were on the table along with various tools from the wood shop. Within a few minutes, several folks were busy with screwdrivers and hammers, eager to dismantle the equipment because of their interest in the contents or just for the fun of taking something apart.

Throughout the morning the young people would come and go, working alone or in small groups, enjoying the physical challenge of removing pieces (“You bend it, then you cut it, then you get it out!”), asking questions and offering comments about the contents (“This looks like a battery.”), and making discoveries about the function of the pieces (“Look, when you turn this, this goes up and down.”). For some folks, the motor skills involved in this work were demanding. I watched one youth struggle and struggle to remove a small part. She alternately used fingers and tools; she tried changing the position of her body and the position of the tuner. She asked for help and then almost immediately changed her mind, and she stopped a few times to let out a long sigh before starting again. Many minutes passed, and I was concentrating on tracing some wires when she squealed, “I got it! I got it!” For other folks, their involvement was all about the function of the pieces and they peered and puzzled and tapped into their spatial and logical knowledge to make guesses about what the different parts did. Still others found challenges in sharing and collaborating.



When a conflict occurred over a wire cutter, voices began to rise. A few minutes of listening and paraphrasing allowed the youths the time and space to find their own solution to their dilemma, and I was called in only to keep track of the seven minute time contract they had made with each other.

I’ve been enjoying my new “stereo” system; I hadn’t played any of my records in years. Just as fun, though, was the opportunity to be a witness to the wonder, growth, and enjoyment that occurs when young people have the freedom to explore. I wonder what I’ll get for my birthday next year... ☺

From the OC Glossary of Terms

Stretching Exercises



Group III youth, Lily, Aria and Elena creatively vie against other groups to move a ball and a frisbee down the basketball court and back with pool noodles. No hands allowed!

Stretching Exercises is a term coined by Synectics* to designate activities meant to limber up the imagination and the connection-forming part of the brain prior to creative problem-solving activities (or any other activities that require Approximate or Flexible Thinking).

As usual, examples are probably better at communicating meaning than mere dialogue, so here are some Stretching Exercises along with some sample responses. Remember: as with all of the metaphorical questions, there are no wrong answers to any of these questions.

In the comparisons below, note that each response can be met with the question “Why?,” “How so” or some other phrase that elicits the connections that the speaker has made. This is where use of the imagination is most evident and can be deepened and appreciated by others. The richness of the connection-making really comes through in the follow-up explanations. Plus, the provider is more likely to feel heard and understood (see Effective Listening—Part I) when (s)he has a chance to explain the thinking behind a response.

“Which is faster, a nickel or a penny?”

- “A penny, because it’s smaller and can go places more easily.”
- “A nickel, because it’s worth more so people would pick it up quicker if it were lying on a sidewalk.”

“Which is smarter, an iceberg or a pond?”

- “An iceberg is smarter because it can poke up out of the ground and see.”
- “A pond is smarter because it contains living things with brains, like bugs and fish.”

“Which is funnier, red or orange?”

- “Orange, because it’s the color of clowns’ costumes.”
- “Red, because that’s the color of the inside of watermelons, and watermelons make people smile and laugh.”

“Which is more likely to be sad—an oven or a refrigerator?”

- “An oven, because it doesn’t get cleaned as often as it would like.”
- “A refrigerator, because it gets tired of always being cold.”

* Words which are underscored have their own definitions described in detail elsewhere in the OC Glossary which is available in the OC Parent Resource Library.

Parent Connections



Looking back at a year of events

- Cider Pressing
- Needlefelting
- Raptor Jawn visit
- Bonfire/Movie Nights
- Summer Campout
- Ceramics
- Community Garden Planting
- Seed Swap
- MLK Day of Service
- Social Justice Library
- RC Car Demo
- Volunteering for Kids Against Hunger
- Sewing Workshop
- Strawberry DNA extraction
- Winter Craft Marketplace
- Math Meetup
- Basketweaving with Colonial Plantation
- Pie-making with Lisa Huis
- Family Yoga with Liz Bradley
- Bike Days
- Pizza in the Cob Oven
- Sledding on OC Hill
- Stream Study at McKaig Nature Center
- Orienteering at Ridley Creek State Park
- Pit-fired Clay Projects
- Scone Baking with Jeremy Pflug
- Ski Days at Bear Creek
- Park Day Meetups

Parent Connections grew out of the question, “What can OC offer parents beyond a valuable experience for their young people?” Whenever we gathered for special community-wide events, as parents we were able to experience the unique joy of this place. We wanted more! We expressed the wish that we, too, could learn together, enjoy the beautiful campus together and grow our connections to one another. Informal chats at the Sand Pit and long, excited Zoom calls led to a common dream—a dream that was fulfilled in a year of turmoil and loss. During the 2020-2021 program year, Parent Connections created many new events and continued/expanded beloved traditions. As a group we worked hard to meet the social needs of our youth and leaned on one another for support. It was magical. The year ahead holds the promise of even more—more workshops, more bonfires, more Zoom cooking, more field trips!

Together we can continue to conjure delight for ourselves and our families. What are your dreams for partnership education? Knowing that you are not alone, what impossible wish might we fulfill together?

Parent Connections wants to support the amazing work of our facilitators and help bring to life the dreams of all of our community’s members. If you or your young person has an idea for an event, workshop, Zoom call, or anything else, please reach out to Michelle West, Parent Connections coordinator, at michelle.west@openconnections.org, or submit a request to Rick and Margaret via Google form.





Albert and Declan work together to put the finishing touches on a rocket stove made from repurposed cans in Group III.



Seneca practices his fine motor skills while sorting colored wooden balls in the Open Program.



Group IV youth, Ruby, gives instructions to all of the young people on campus who gathered to play a campus-wide game of Capture-the-Flag as part of their end-of-year celebration.



Youth in Group IV and Shaping Your Life join together on a field trip to nearby Ridley Creek State Park for a program with Ranger Gary.



(L to R) Emmy, Gwen and Cataleia model selections from the OC costume collection during at Group I Free Choice/Drama activity.



Michelle (facilitator) and Leo work together to add photos with captions and original artwork to his Open Program End-of-Year book.



Shep shares information on how to access a graph of the changing prices of various cryptocurrencies during his Peer Facilitation in Tuesday Group II.



Madelyn uses her fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination to carefully hold a nail in place with one hand while using a hammer to tap it in with the other during Open Program.



Hannah visits the Choice program to assist in the production of a short film collaboratively created by Thomas and Max—the scene pictured here features Indiana as well.

New Staff Introductions



Allie Neilson

Allie facilitates the Open Program on Tuesday. She joined the OC Staff in 2018, and returns after a year away. Allie is an OC alumna and attended OC for 12 years, starting in the Open Program room at the original OC campus in Bryn Mawr. She stayed at OC throughout her entire educational journey, including the initial years of the Shaping Your Life program. Allie experienced OC with her siblings in her Group Tutorial Programs, and spent many happy years being facilitated at OC by both her mother, Diane Webber, and OC Co-founder Susan Shilcock. Allie's Open Connections experiences and relationships were formative.

Allie has been working with children for more than a decade in various capacities: baby-sitting, nannying full-time, facilitating after school programs in rural Tennessee, and teaching at children's gymnastic centers and preschools.

Allie attended Chestnut Hill College, working toward her teaching certificate in Montessori education. In connection

with her education, she taught at multiple Montessori schools in Chester County. During this time Allie became amazed and enraptured with seeing how children's minds learn and grow through daily tasks and situations. She watched them gain confidence when they were trusted to help with important tasks, and she watched their unparalleled joy over gaining new skill sets.

Allie is married to her "highschool" sweetheart, Billy Neilson, who is also an OC alum. They currently hold the title of the only married couple who both attended Open Connections as youths. They are the 3rd family to have 2nd generation OC attenders, as their youth now attend OC.



Carole Smith

Carole facilitates Group I on Thursday. A graphic designer and watercolor painter, Carole lives in Media where she maintains a studio in her home. In the early years of her career, Carole worked for Instructo/McGraw Hill as an educational illustrator, developing educational materials for K-6. She left Instructo to start her own business and has enjoyed working creatively for a diverse group of clients since.

Carole enjoys interacting with young people whenever she is given the opportunity. She has worked in the summer art program at Friend's Central, shared her passion for art in educational settings and recently, she introduced preschoolers to new technologies through game playing

and problem-solving activities that were fun and creative.

Balancing a creative life has always been important to her. Bringing creative solutions to her corporate clients has been fulfilling, but for Carole it has always been important to make time to paint for herself. Over the last 10 years she has been exploring the philosophy and symbolism of Chinese brush painting and creating watercolors in the Chinese style as well as continuing to paint traditional western style watercolor. Being creative in any medium is fun and recently she has been playing with mosaics and beading.

Carole enjoys learning about and visiting other cultures and has been fortunate to travel for business as well as for pleasure. She is interested in history and ran a Bed & Breakfast in a 1715 Quaker farmhouse in Edgemont for 5 years. She is passionate about her garden and enjoys visiting gardens. She advocates and volunteers for the environment and a greener world.



Heather Gosse

Heather is a facilitator in the Group IV and Shaping Your Life programs on Tuesday and Thursday and in the Choice Programs on Wednesday.

Heather's life has been full of educational adventures—both the formal and informal kinds. In the years following high school, she spent a year in southern Germany as an exchange student, earned

a B.A. in Economics, worked in economic consulting, spent time volunteering for the Forest Service and Park Service, and managed a small native plant nursery. Later, she turned her attention to teaching, obtaining a Pennsylvania General Science teaching certification and a Masters in Education from West Chester University. Heather has extensive experience exploring all sorts of science with middle and high school students in the Delaware Valley and in Monteverde, Costa Rica. She also has worked with young people in other roles, including advising, lending math support, teaching various electives, and minicourses from bread-baking to folk dance, and directing plays and musicals.

Heather enjoys a multitude of activities. Lately, board games and gardening have been prominent. Other hobbies include playing the violin and viola, hiking, several kinds of folk dance, and singing. Heather lives in Lansdowne with her partner and her cat.



Peter Huis

Peter is a facilitator in the Wednesday Open Program this year. While it is his first year on staff, Peter spent the majority of his youth attending OC. From beginning in Open Program to graduating from Shaping Your Life in 2015, OC has been an instrumental influence in who he is today. He is excited to be able to give back to the community he grew up in and help share the

OC experience with the next generation.

Peter is currently located in West Chester where he is attending online university classes working towards a degree in psychology. He is also highly interested in studying alternative education and learning about the development of young people. In the past, Peter has enjoyed working at summer camps as well as doing some occasional work within the OC community. In his free time, Peter enjoys reading and studying literature, hiking, training in Jiu-Jitsu, and various forms of writing.



Sue Nagy

Sue is a facilitator in Group III on Tuesday. Through her grandchildren attending Open Program several years ago, Sue found that the Open Connections philosophy, mission and community resonated with her. She is pleased to have an opportunity to be a part of this special community.

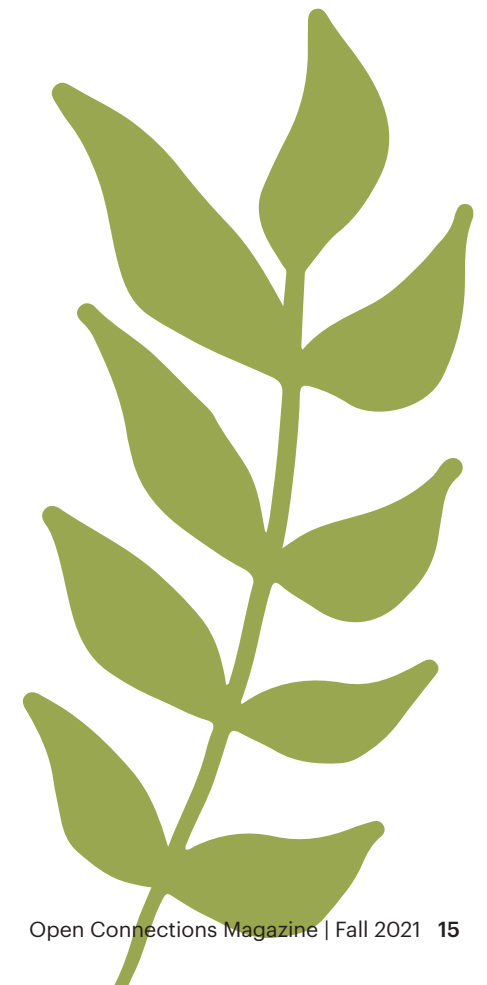
Working with young people of all ages has always been a significant part of Sue's life, starting with babysitting and summer counselor jobs before earning her degree in Individual and Family Studies with an emphasis on Child Development and Home Economics Education. She taught middle and high school for 12 years in a very hands-on classroom creating experiential activities and self-directed projects.

Homeschooling her own daughters from kindergarten through high school was her

opportunity to enjoy all the many blessings of less traditional schooling. Sue delighted in the opportunity to partner with her daughters in their exploration and discovery as they pursued their interests. Now she loves being a part of her grandchildren's learning!

Having a keen interest in living history led her to create and develop a living history program involving homeschoolers of all ages. At an historic property in Newtown Square the young people portray 1850 mill workers in an interactive hands-on living history experience for 5th graders. Over 20 years this annual event has grown with input from the homeschoolers involved.

Sue enjoys pursuing her own interests and is committed to lifelong learning. She is currently taking watercolor and drawing classes, enjoying crafts, sewing, cooking, gardening, exercising for functional health, home decoration (she is also a trained home stager) and DIY projects. Most of all she enjoys time with her family and savoring the beauty of nature. ©





During a Thursday Group I field trip to Brandywine Red Clay Alliance's Myrick Conservation Center, youth handled tools and materials used by the Lenape people. Here (L to R) Miles, Lee, Cataleia, Lincoln and Brendan gather with Program Guide Alexa inside a replica of a wigwam.



Ollie carefully places the hinges on the wooden picture box he built during Tuesday Group II.



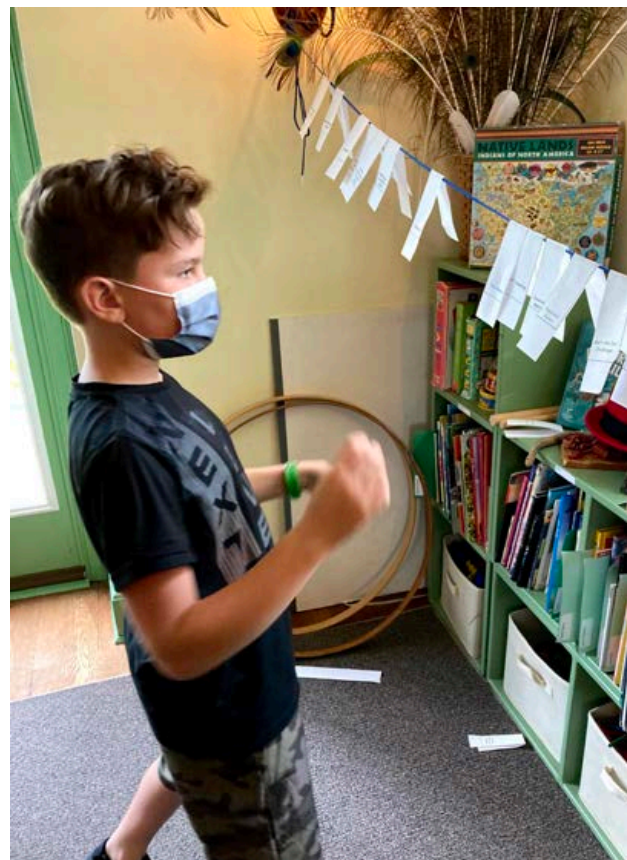
Sue (facilitator), Owen and Seda look to see how their clay creations came out of the firing process. Shaping Your Life teens harvested clay and followed the process through to firing!



As a first step in an end-of-year project, Søren creates a unique symbol with gel glue. Group III youth "signed" each other's t-shirts, then, after a week of drying, youth painted over the glue and revealed resist designs.



Luna carefully drips paint onto a piece of paper spinning in the Open Program spin-art machine donated by a longtime OC family.



Lee completes the *Group I Year-in-Review Line Up*, a sequencing activity that involves arranging program activities along a string in order of preference.



Cuisenaire rods are a Conceptual Development (CD) material used in the Open Program and beyond. This material can be used in many different ways from creating beautiful patterns, to counting and solving equations.



Ruby's Group IV Science Expo project focused on bacteria growth in reusable straws.

Who's Who? FALL 2021

The staff at Open Connections is comprised of a vibrant, committed and highly educated group of individuals. They represent a diverse set of professions (from engineers to former public and private school teachers, artists to Master Naturalists). A number of staff members have spent time living, teaching or working internationally (from Macedonia and Germany to Costa Rica and Bolivia), bringing a global perspective to their work (play!) at OC.

What distinguishes the OC staff is their unparalleled commitment to providing meaningful learning opportunities in a collaborative and nurturing environment, as well as their desire and ability to develop lasting connections with the OC youth. In short, the OC staff are life-long learners, naturally curious about the world around them. OC is a home-away-from-home for our staff and many of our staff have been with us for well over a decade.

Each fall we include a Who's Who Among the Staff piece in the OC Magazine. This article serves two purposes; a practical one—to see who facilitates which programs, and a fun one—to hear a tidbit from each. This fall we asked each staff member a “stretching question,” a question that requires creative thinking. (See additional explanation of Stretching Questions on page 9.)

Alphabetical by first name

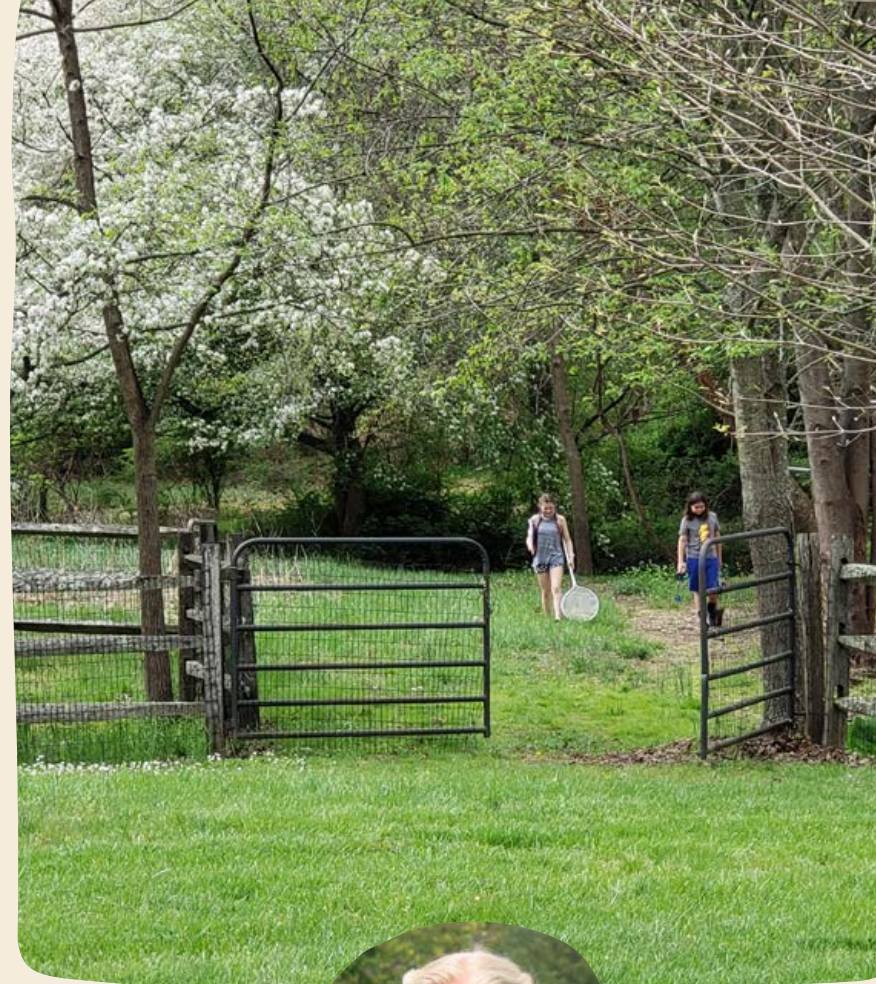
“Which is kinder, a fence or a gate?”



Carole Smith

Facilitator for Thursday Group I

“It’s always good to know why the fence was put there. There could be a kind reason for it. If I can’t find one then I need to jump the fence or walk through the gate.”



Heather Gosse

Facilitator for Group IV, Shaping Your Life, and Choice Programs

“As long as the gate is not locked, I’d say a gate is kinder than a fence because an unlocked gate invites the possibility of passing through, while still demarcating a boundary. However, a fence is kinder than a locked gate, because it is more neutral. It does not invite the opportunity to pass through—though I have gone over and under many a fence in my lifetime—but neither does it explicitly say ‘keep out’ the way a locked gate does.”



Heather Hurley

Facilitator for Tuesday Group I and for Thursday Group III

“I think a fence is kinder, even though at first impulse I would choose a gate. Why? A fence provides a boundary while a gate is ever available. When I started thinking about a fence as a metaphor, it struck me that when I am “ever porous” or not boundaried—in home life or friendships or at OC, I end up feeling resentment. The gate of never ending in and out can wear a person out! By having a fence, you can invite conversation: “hey! Neighbor! I love your flowers!” Or it can be a respite as you lean against it. A fence can be a tool to use when you might not be strong enough to say no even when it’s in your best interest: “I’d love to come over there but...there’s this fence here! (Shrugs) Maybe next time!”



Jane Sleutaris

Lead facilitator for Group I on Tuesday and Thursday

“A gate is kinder than a fence, because a gate lets people in and a fence keeps people out.”



Allie Neilson

Facilitator for Tuesday Open Program

“I think a gate feels more kind because it is something used to let people in, rather than to keep them out.”



Chris McNichol

Property Manager, Lead facilitator for Group II on Tuesday and Thursday, and Facilitator for Choice Programs

“A ‘fence’ is a person who deals in stolen goods...not very kind. Bill and Melinda “Gates” Foundation gives away billions of dollars a year to fight poverty, disease, and inequity around the world...extremely kind. So, I’m going to say a gate is kinder than a fence.”



Linda Soffer

Lead facilitator for Group IV and Shaping Your Life

“I think a fence is kinder because it doesn’t favor one side over the other.”



Megan Marran

Facilitator for Tuesday Group II and for Open Program on Wednesday and Thursday

“A gate is kinder because of the flexibility that it has in allowing movement from one side of a structure to another.”



Peter Huis

Facilitator for Wednesday Open Program

“I think that a fence is kinder than a gate. A fence may seem less kind at first because it impedes progress, but much of the time fences are there for a reason; like to stop your dog from running in the road. Sometimes a fence is misplaced, and through no fault of its own, holds us back from exploring where we want to go. However, a well placed fence can be both a guide and a protector of things we care about.”



Lisa Huis

Facilitator for Tuesday Open Program and for Group IV and Shaping Your Life on Thursday

“I would say a gate is kinder. To me, an open gate might signify an opportunity, a kind invitation to explore or connect with another being on the other side. A closed gate is a boundary, sometimes a temporary one, but a way to be kind to oneself until the time feels right to open that path again.”



Michelle Brockway

Lead facilitator for all days of the Open Program

“A gate is kinder. It allows people/ animals to move in and out as they choose. When a fence locks you in, trapping you against your will, a gate opens and gives you the freedom to choose where you want to be. A gate will also dance in the wind with you, swaying back and forth. A fence ignores the rhythm and is quite a “party pooper.”



Rick Sleutaris

Director, Facilitator for Choice Programs

“Hmm, I expect most people to pick a gate, so I am going to go with a fence. A fence could be kinder because it can provide a rail to sit on and/or lean against during a nice conversation with the neighbor on the other side. A fence can also be kind because it protects your dog from running into the street and getting hurt.”



Kelly Dillon

Lead facilitator for Group III and Coordinator for Choice Programs

“Pushing beyond my first thought that there is nothing kind about either a fence or a gate, I’ve decided that a gate is kinder than a fence. It clearly indicates a point of access, and as the gate swings to and fro, it welcomes all coming and going, much like a beckoning hand gesture.”



Margaret Welsh

Admin Guru

“I think that a gate is kinder as it offers flexibility in setting boundaries.”



Michelle West

Facilitator for Thursday Group II

“A gate is kinder. It can be a gentle boundary but it opens. The kindest gate can open from either side.”



Sarah Becker

Assistant Director, Facilitator for Group IV and Shaping Your Life on Tuesday, for Choice Programs, and for Thursday Open Program

“A gate is more kind, as it invites entry and provides a passageway to new destinations! I love when I get to open the gate to Open Connections!”



Sue Nagy

Facilitator for Tuesday Group III

“It depends on what is on the opposite side of the fence. If it is something truly dangerous then the fence is kind. If there is nothing dangerous then the gate is kind because it invites and allows someone on either side to discover and explore what is on the opposite side of the gate!”

Programs

FALL 2021

Open Program

Tuesday:

Michelle Brockway, Allie Neilson, Lisa Huis

Wednesday:

Michelle Brockway, Megan Marran, Peter Huis

Thursday:

Michelle Brockway, Megan Marran, Sarah Becker

Group I

Tuesday:

Jane Sleutaris, Heather Hurley

Thursday:

Jane Sleutaris, Carole Smith

Group II

Tuesday:

Chris McNichol, Megan Marran

Thursday:

Chris McNichol, Michelle West

Group III

Tuesday:

Kelly Dillon, Sue Nagy

Thursday:

Kelly Dillon, Heather Hurley

Group Tutorial IV

Tuesday:

Linda Soffer, Heather Gosse, Sarah Becker

Thursday:

Linda Soffer, Lisa Huis, Heather Gosse

Shaping Your Life

Tuesday:

Linda Soffer, Heather Gosse, Sarah Becker

Thursday:

Linda Soffer, Heather Gosse, Lisa Huis

Choice A and B on Wednesday

Kelly Dillon (Coordinator), Heather Gosse, Chris McNichol, Sarah Becker, Rick Sleutaris, and additional Visiting Artists. ☺



We all know that homeschooling looks different for everyone! We want to know what our community does on days when the youth are not running around Open Connections! Here is a glimpse of how one family handles their days.

We asked the Bradley family (youth ages 4 and 8 years old) to take us along on a typical non-OC day.

On a typical non-OC day you will most likely find our youth spending the morning in pajamas, reading and having a leisurely breakfast. The mornings usually consist of a lot of quiet reading, crafting, listening to music, and lots of play. Play is sacred work in our home and we make lots of room in our schedule for uninterrupted play. We aim to have circle time with time to read aloud. We like to encourage our youth to practice their music instruments daily so that they can continue to grow in the music they are studying. We cook meals together, bake, ride bikes, ice skate, ski, and solve math problems.

Twice a week we meet up with other youth and families to go on adventure days. For example, this summer we spent Tuesdays at Winterthur Gardens with friends. Other days we spend time playing with our youths' friends. We explore the museums, hiking trails, and learning opportunities that living in southeastern PA offers.

Our youth participate in just a few structured activities such as art classes at the Philadelphia Art Museum, Suzuki violin and guitar, and gymnastics. All of these activities are youth led. We listen to how our youth feels about them and enthusiastically let them go when our youth no longer has an interest.

We spend our non-OC days sharing life with our youth. OC has been such an enriching experience for our family and we value the connections and experiences our youth have at OC. OC has always reminded us that life is happening now for our youth and that having a choice over your life as a youth will encourage them to live an interesting, fun and free life as adults.

PS. I wanted to include so many additional things but certainly these: swim lessons both formal and free, visits to the different libraries as we do twice a week trips, as well as spontaneous learning. For example we know someone who just got a new Corgi so that was an opportunity for our youth to learn about the breed and share some fun facts with them. We also visit farms regularly and talk about what healthy farming looks like and we always make food with what we've purchased from the farm. ☺

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

Community Connections



Ros Fenton

Gardening, observing the details of nature (insects endlessly fascinate me!), cooking, savoring good food are a few of the things that

compel me to learn more daily.

Growing up surrounded by gardeners, I knew that was a part of me. But it wasn't really something I engaged with fully as an adult until we moved to PA 10 years ago, landed at Longwood Gardens (Steve's workplace), and gained a little patch of borrowed earth at our rented home on the property. From exploring our "backyard" botanical garden to interacting with professional horticulturists as neighbors, we have learned so much in living here. I enjoy the process of gardening all kinds of plants, but I am particularly drawn to herbs.

My passions for gardening and food converged over the years in a love for local agriculture. Looking back, this certainly took root with my childhood experiences, grew while living in LA during a rise of "farm to table", and deepened when we moved to this rich agricultural area.

I left a career in design (interiors & environmental graphics with a food/retail focus) when Elric was born, and for a while I didn't have a clear vision for what was next. Five years ago, I jumped at the chance for a part-time job managing the Kennett Square Farmers Market, seeing an opportunity to utilize some skills from my design days (branding/storytelling, basic graphics, space planning, etc.) for something that I truly love. I continue to find new paths to follow along the way, always weaving new and old skills with new and old passions, stretching myself to find what's next.

I really enjoy connecting with others to learn more about gardening, swap plants and seeds, and grow things...and of course to cook and appreciate good food together. ☺



Campus Corner

by Chris McNichol, Property Manager and Facilitator

The White Pines

Pinus strobus, the mighty White Pine! White pines are a dominant tree species of the northeast and also happen to be dominant on OC's campus. The northern border of OC's campus is lined with white pines; they separate the campus from the large corn field next door. In the 1970's the farm next door went up for sale and it was rumored that a developer was going to build a golf course there. Mr. Hare (who lived here at the time) did not like the idea of living next to a golf course and proceeded to plant white pines as a privacy screen. The golf course never happened and the farm was saved! (You were waiting for the happy ending weren't you?)

White pines can grow more than 24 inches per year and can live as long as 450 years though 150-200 years is more common. Many animals rely on the white pine. Songbirds and small mammals eat the seeds, deer and rabbits browse on the foliage and pocket gophers chew the roots. Black bear cubs are often found in white pines because they are easy to climb.

Young folks here at OC do not eat the seeds or chew on the roots of white pines but they do climb them! Our teen program, Shaping Your Life, often finds large collaborative projects to work on as part of their program. One group decided they were interested in designing and building a tree fort on campus and the White Pines area was a natural fit. The tree fort was worked on by successive groups over the last four years, with completion happening in May 2021! We now have a wonderful tree fort complete with a cargo net, fire ring and a fantastic view. If you have not seen it yet, I encourage you to go and check it out! Look for the grass path leading away from the handicapped parking area by the Barn. Follow it into the white pines and you cannot miss it. ☺





Jack uses parachute cord to attach a plastic jug to a boat that he started at home but finished and tested during the Open Program.



Silas taps in small brads to attach the corners of the wooden picture box he built during Tuesday Group II.



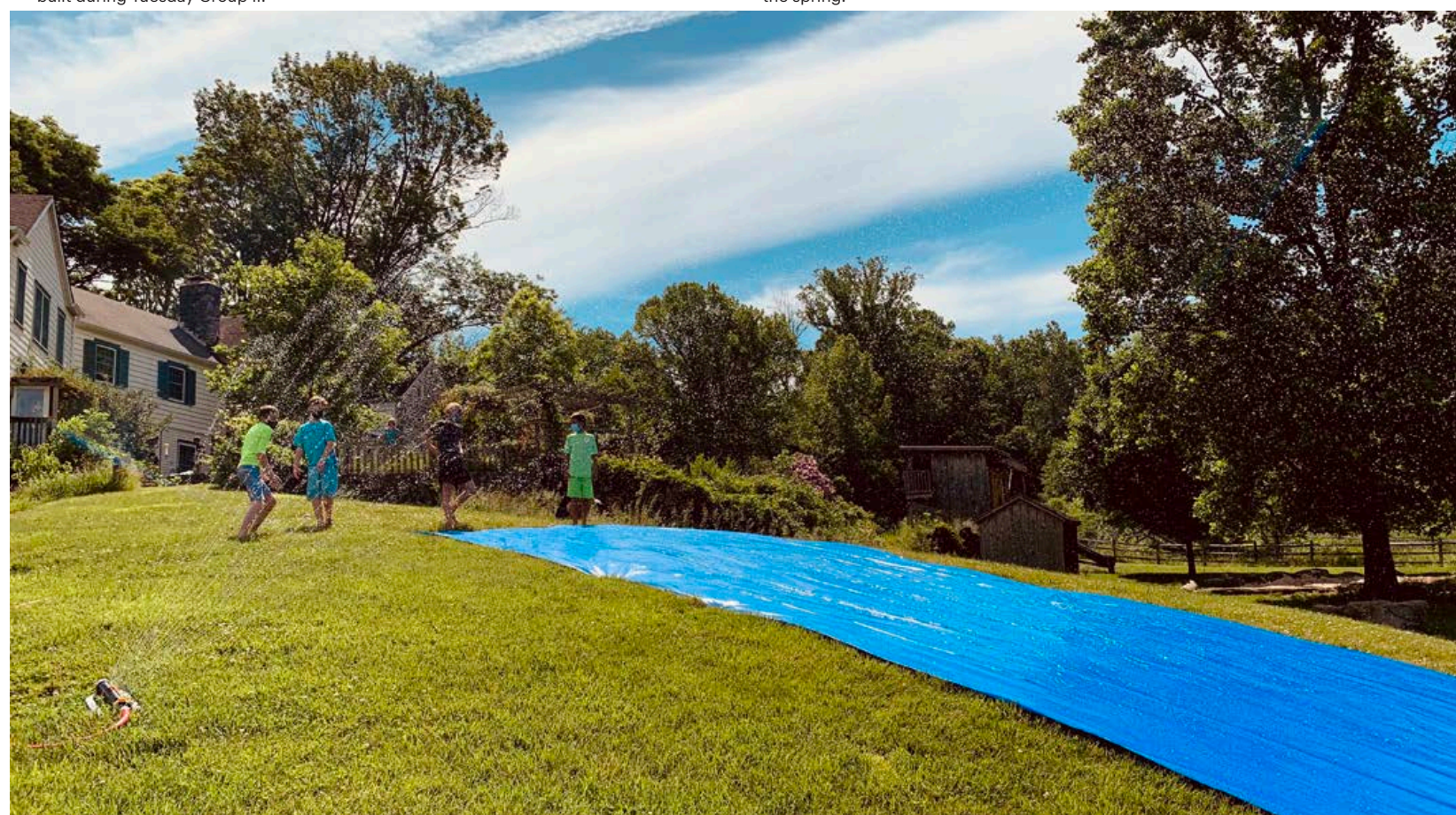
Ella and Norah pause during a game of Bocce on the last day of Group IV in the spring.



This is a pencil drawing from a battle timeline created by Miles for his Group I Mini Peer Facilitation on the Civil War.



Youth in the Open Program develop their kinesthetic strength as they take turns making their way over the climbing wall.



Youth from Group II enjoy a slip-n-slide activity on the last day of programs in May.

INTRODUCING

The Becker Family



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

Justin (Dad), Sarah (Mom), Evelyn (13), Jude (11), Magnolia (9).

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

Before we had our own young people, I knew that Open Connections existed and was essentially my ideal educational model. When we finally became parents, we were living in South Philadelphia and worrying about what the educational path would be for our youth. We found out about Philly Free School, a self-directed democratic school, that was a mile away from our house at the time. Evelyn enrolled there when she was four years old, followed by her siblings when they were old enough to join her. About three years ago, all of the Becker youth transitioned into another

Self-Directed model (Philly Agile Learning Community School). This year, Evelyn has decided to pursue her education through programs at Open Connections, while Jude and Maggie will stay at Philly ALC. In short, the Becker youth have been directing their own education their whole lives, and are flourishing in their own ways!

What led you in this direction?

During my own educational journey, as a young person myself, the best two years were spent as a homeschooled student. My grandparents were recently retired from their careers as elementary school teachers and spent a significant amount of time taking my brother and me to museums, parks, and trips. When I became a parent, I knew that I wanted my youth to have experiences like that, as opposed to the rigid and compulsory schooling of conventional options.

How did you get involved with Open Connections?

When I was in my early twenties, I nannied for a family who sent their youth to OC and I was immediately enchanted with this place! Open Connections was always present in my mind, and I would frequently look to Open Connections as a thought leader in the field of Self-Directed Education while I was doing work for places like Philly Free School and Philly ALC. When a job opportunity presented itself, I jumped on it immediately. Now, as I mentioned, my oldest daughter will be attending in the 2021-2022 program year (and we anticipate that the other two will join her in coming years!)

What programs do your young people attend at Open Connections?

Evelyn (13) will be attending Group IV and Choice!

“A lot of learning happens through play! Play is work, and so we allow for a lot of play, and feel comfortable with that approach to learning. We all learn better when we’re having some fun doing it, too!”

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

Evelyn enjoys making engaging multi-media content on various social media platforms and fabric arts (finger knitting, crochet, cross stitch etc). Jude (11) loves video games and drawing. Magnolia (9) loves any and all things athletic: climbing, gymnastics, roller derby, circus school, playing ball in front of the house.

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

What I really like about self-direction is that it has really allowed every member of the family to truly explore who they are, and what they want to do in this world. More than anything, though, the community aspect of raising a family with a group of other like-minded people has been beyond amazing and far better than anything that I could have ever imagined.

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

I think our biggest challenge has just been that there is always this curiosity about what it might be like to attend a more conventional school, much like some of our family friends and relatives have. We have a lot of discussions around this and, ultimately, if they wanted to try this path, they could! Thus far, all of them have continued to stick with the self-directed approach to education. Looking forward, while I don’t have any concerns, I know

that Evelyn is starting to think about higher education and feels some anxiety around it. We will continue to explore that together as a family.

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

We are firm believers in self-direction. We support any endeavors that any Becker wants to explore. As a family, we also value real work! Since we have been parenting, I have been a huge advocate for a lot of what author Peter Gray advocates for: a lot of learning happens through play! Play is work, and so we allow for a lot of play, and feel comfortable with that approach to learning. We all learn better when we’re having some fun doing it, too!

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?

Peter Gray, Akilah Richards, and Blake Boles have been inspiring authors. And more than anything, having a supportive community around our family has helped. We definitely lean on the resources that the city has to offer as well: Free Library of Philadelphia, Penn Museum, Franklin Institute, Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia

Art Museum, community centers, community events, Fairmount Park System, etc. Again, we think that learning is natural and happening all the time, there are so many learning opportunities and experiences that the Becker family gets to take advantage of.

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

“You get a chance to learn more of what you actually want. I don’t know much about other forms of education, so it is hard for me to compare and contrast.”

What could OC do to further enhance their OC experiences?

We’ve been fortunate to know several OC families over the years, and love that this is a very close and tight-knit community. We look forward, as a new family, to getting to know more of this community, especially as COVID restrictions are lifted and society gets back to in-person activity. We are all very grateful to be here. ☺



Ask OC!

At various points in our homeschool journey I hit patches where things feels harder and I know I'm not alone in this! (Based on SO many conversations over the years.) Keeping in mind everyone's homeschool path looks different...are there any words of wisdom that guide you or have helped you through the years? Looking back...what would you have told your earlier self? What gets you through the burnout or harder moments?

– Jacey, OC parent

Hi Jacey! Seeing you and hearing you right now. I decided this year to support our family in a different way. I am consulting with Diane Webber at Shared Living and Learning to help me plan our year. She is a former OC parent. She does a check in every 2 weeks to help you and your youth. That's one idea. Another idea is perhaps we can have a OC parent meetup and talk only about homeschool topics! Renewal is important for all of us!

– Liz, OC parent

Reach out and talk to others when you're in that spot, especially those "ahead of you." Trust in the journey. Do not be too hard on yourself.

– Margaret, OC Alumni parent

I am so here for this conversation!!! I notice that when I am most full of doubt is also when I am most full of shoulds. My youth should be here by now. I should be able to do this more easily. I should do more math with them. When I am able to stay in the moment and see what is happening and appreciate all that we are able to share together I am more grounded in the choice to homeschool. Also, we had two years of experience in public school and it really didn't work for our family. I have often thought that it is helpful to me to have those memories to remind me that no choice is easy or easier. Just different kinds of hard.

– Michelle, OC parent

Hey! So, long ago I decided to get "picky" about the fewest things possible, and to let the other things evolve organically. For us, that meant choosing (and consistently using) a math curriculum, and self-selected reading every day. We also set

Choosing the path less traveled is not always an easy, nor straightforward, journey. The good news is that you are not alone! Part of what makes Open Connections so wonderful is that a supportive, knowledgeable, and encouraging community is built-in. We know that there are questions that arise as you and your family continue in your educational endeavors. Use this column as a way to crowdsource some answers and to get inspiration. Have a question that you'd like to see answered here? Send your questions to askoc@openconnections.org

For next issue, we would love to hear your answers to the following question: *"How do you avoid being overwhelmed? Feeling like you have 'too much on your plate' between scheduling activities, juggling young people's educational/life needs, and the rest of family life? How do you create balance?"*

Please feel free to respond to this question via email to askoc@openconnections.org and look out for other questions to be posted to social media as well!

limits on recreational screen time. Beyond that? Flexible. (Caveat: 2020-2021 is an exception. Nothing was/is normal.) My motto is to do the least possible that has the greatest positive impact on future choices. So far so good.

– Kelly, OC parent

I have a somewhat similar to Kelly take. Pick a few "must have's" and stick to them, and don't worry about other things. Math and daily reading are required (keeping a stack of good books to choose from to keep the flow), other topics come and go.

– Victoria, OC parent

I love all of these ideas! The end of summer is typically when my "cloud of doubt" settles in. I notice it is no longer as dense as it used to be when my teen was younger (despite the increased stress in the world). I think this is because we follow an un-schooling approach which has allowed me to experience the benefits of my trusting in her ability to naturally develop skills when she is ready to (i.e., when she tells me she wants to or otherwise indicates an interest in developing skills), rather than when I or someone else says she is "supposed" to. This has happened with reading, writing, math, and even when she stopped sucking her thumb (we tried a "structured, reward-based approach" when she was 7 that failed miserably, and then she stopped, effortlessly & all on her own, a year later. This was a life-altering experience for me!) She has "must haves" that she has chosen for herself. I have done a lot of personal work around the area of "trust" that has been really valuable for me.

– Linda, OC parent

I think the big thing we learned from our first two (21 and 18) is to trust our gut and not to let others "uninvited" opinions persuade our decisions, and it will all work out like it should. I will also add that keeping connected with friends is so important for the youth and for us!

– Michelle, OC parent ☺

Development



Dear Open Connections Friends and Family,

What a wild year! This was one for the books, for sure. I wanted to take a moment and introduce myself a bit. My name is Sarah Becker, and I am the new Assistant Director here at the

ever-amazing Open Connections. Part of my role is to take on many of the Development efforts at OC, and I could not be more excited to get to do what I love for such a fantastic organization.

To review the past year in giving, our community contributed an impressive \$17,014 to our Annual Giving campaign. This allows us to continue to deliver the highest quality services to families, regardless of any turbulence (ahem, global pandemic!).

In the coming months, we are going to be celebrating what we love, Creating Connections! Look for some exciting announcements in coming weeks on social media and in your mailboxes. In the meantime, if you have any suggestions for local organizations or individuals that you would like to see Open Connections create connections with, please reach out to me! I look forward to creating connections with all of the members of this community and expanding the Open Connections reach and impact by collaborating with organizations and individuals that spark inspiration and support our mission of empowering life-long learners to lead lives full of purpose and fulfillment.

Have a wonderful start to the year!

With excitement and gratitude,

Sarah Becker and the Development Committee



ALUMNI PROFILE

Nora Gillern

What led you/your family to OC?

I was going to a private school at the time and had been diagnosed with dyslexia, I was really struggling to keep up with the other kids and asked my parents if I could homeschool. They had trepidations at first but once we did some googling and found OC, it all fell into place!

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

I started OC when I was 11 in Monday Ventures. After the first year I started going twice a week within various Tutorial programs until Shaping Your Life was created.

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

I went straight to college at The New School, studying Art History and am now a recruiter within the creative field. This month will be my 9 year anniversary of living in New York!

How did OC impact you? What did you find useful?

In so many ways I don't even know where to start! While I was homeschooling, OC was truly the center of my social world, it created a very important sense of community that is hard to find when you are a homeschooler.

How did OC hone your Self-Understanding?

OC allowed me to follow my passions and be myself without fear of being judged by my peers or community, and in turn taught me to treat others with the same respect. I carry that with me to this day.

How did OC help you grow your Effective Communication skills?

This is one of the things that I credit OC for the most. By fostering a community in which we do not put each other down and we communicate with Balanced Responses*, it ingrains in you a deep respect for others' opinions and ways of thinking/communicating. Speaking within the balanced response format is something that I use in my everyday life as well as throughout my career.

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

I work a lot within the creative spaces, advising people on their careers and working closely with sometimes quite difficult clients. Being able to think strategically and outside the box has allowed me to not only constructively advise others but also navigate often contentious situations.



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

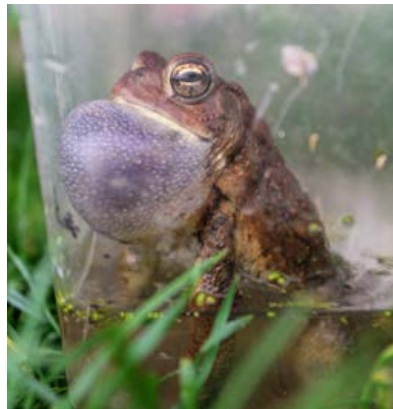
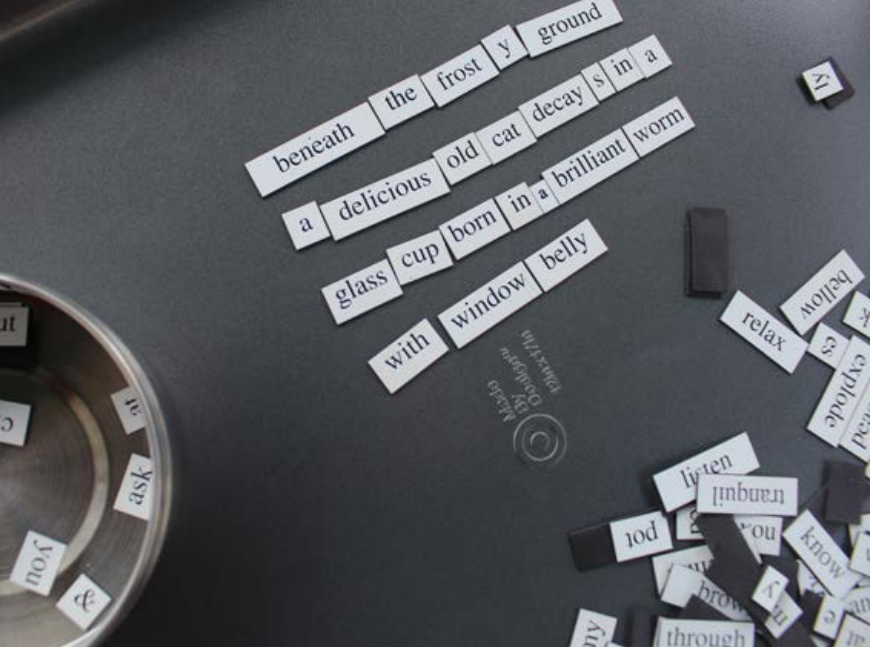
I would likely still be struggling with my dyslexia. By homeschooling and being able to take my time to work closely one-on-one and at my own pace, I have been able to overcome my dyslexia and now truly enjoy reading and writing. In terms of OC more specifically, I think if I had homeschooled and not gone to OC, I would have pretty quickly ended up back at school. OC provided an essential community for me.

What favorite memory of OC would you like to share?

I have so many favorite memories at OC I couldn't pick one. I met so many inspiring people who have gone on to do incredible things and have their impact on the world. I feel lucky to have been able to be a part of such an inclusive and dynamic community. In general I would say most of my fondest memories are from our theater performances (I did the costumes, NOT one to be on stage) or our Shaping Your Life program trips. ©

**Balanced Response is a format for feedback. You offer at least 3 positives and then phrase your possible changes in the form of "How to...". We use this format extensively at Open Connections.*





In a world where you can be anything, be kind.

