

winter
2024-2025

5 YEARS



OPEN CONNECTION

Volume XVIII | Issue 86



Cover: Open Group youth pose for an enthusiastic group photo in their sunny program space.

Right: The Choice A photographers—Jett, Kai, Wally and Lincoln pause for a group portrait while field testing the theme: Thinking in 3D; considering foreground, subject and background.

Open Connections Magazine

Issue 86 | Winter 2024-2025

Mission

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

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

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

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

Staff

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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/support-oc. Keep grandparents, friends, and neighbors up to date on OC articles, news, and events by encouraging them to sign up too! *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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FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR

Sarah Becker



Dear Friends and Fellow
Perpetual Learners—

50 years of Open Connections!

What a monumental milestone and
a real occasion to celebrate.

This particular season of Open
Connections is so bright, optimistic, and
full of hope. Our community continues to grow, the pro-
grams are all engaged in a number of fascinating experi-
ences, our campus is constantly humming with activity,
and all around us we see smiles and hear laughter.

Of course, that does not mean by any extent of the
imagination that everything is always perfect here at OC!
There are plenty of challenges and growth opportunities
that are consistently popping up. What is special about

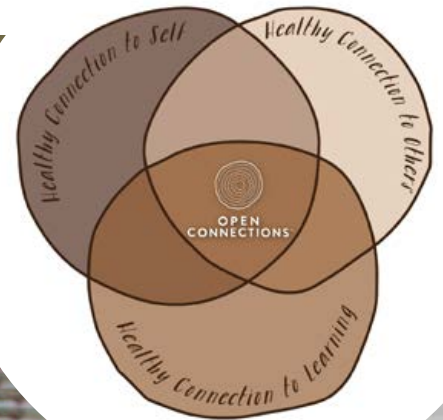
OC is that we view these harder moments as possibilities.
We value our fundamental belief, “Freedom to Learn and
Create” in a deep way, while also acknowledging that with
that freedom comes great responsibility.

Within the pages of this magazine, the OC community
has outlined what the “Freedom to Learn and Create”
looks like in programs, on a daily basis, and across the
past 50 years of the entire Open Connections organiza-
tion. We have faced challenges, we have grown together,
and we continue to explore, experiment, play, learn, and
create *together*.

Enjoy this issue of the magazine, and please, find a way
to connect and celebrate with us this year!

Warmly,

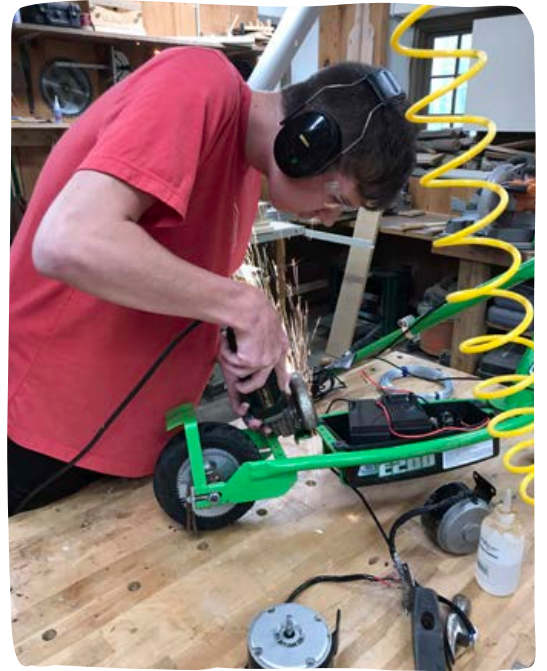
A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sarah".



Delilah works at the lab table in the Open Program, mixing primary colors together to make various color combinations.



Everleigh works on her hand over hand descent while training climbs in the silks during Choice B: Aerial Arts.



Indi uses a grinder to cut the kickstand off of the scooter that he and Locke are fixing as part of their collaborative Independent Project in SYL.



Silas, Ollie W., Sheri, Francie, Hazel, and Everleigh work together to get across the finish line on walking skis.



Leo B. and Kellen challenge each other to a focused game of Chess during the Wednesday Open Program while Owen watches and waits for a turn. Chess is a popular game in the OP.



With support from OC parent, Lizzie Rumbaugh, Serafina measures and cuts fabric squares for a patchwork quilt that she is making for her baby cousin during self-directed time in Open Group



To the tune of Balaio, Open Group youth, Crosby and Nico, play a rhythm routine using rhythm sticks.



Zak and Ari started a new friendship, working together with the geo-boards in the Open Program. First building on their own boards, and then deciding together to combine them and build a larger creation!



Nora, Ari, Bodhi, Kellen, and Kaspian share some silliness and take an upside down picture on the sofa in the Open Program.



Using paper dot grids that simulate a traditional geoboard, the young people in Open Group applied visual and spatial awareness skills to create pictures using dots. Many youth were inspired to copy pictures from examples that were available to them, while others chose to create their own original dot drawings. Here, Levon creates an original dot drawing.



Parker works on a sketch of her executive functioning poster on organization, determining where the title, details, images and more will go for best impact.



Olivia and Lucy share some love with our chickens and feed them some grass, freshly picked and delicious.



Jett models a "Colonel Corn" mascot costume he designed to assist with advertising in the lead-up to Group 1's Food Truck Festival.

50TH ANNIVERSARY

It Takes a VILLAGE

A Word Present to the *Dreamers*, the *funders*, the *Implementers*, and the *Risk Takers*

By Rick Sleutaris, OC Co-Director

Open Connections was founded by husband and wife, Peter Bergson and Susan Shilcock, and incorporated on February 13, 1975. This special organization was born of the marriage of two growing bodies of knowledge—the world of “progressive” education and the creative group process known as Synectics¹. What began as a series of talks and workshops led to the opening of a Montessori-inspired preschool in 1978 that operated out of a cozy one-room school house in Bryn Mawr, PA. OC’s approach resonated deeply with the families who were fortunate enough to discover it, and its continued growth necessitated its relocation to a larger space. In the fall of 2000, OC moved to its current home, the enchanting 28-acre old sheep farm, we all currently know and love.

¹Synectics describes a way to approach creativity and problem-solving.



OC has been my family’s home away from home for the past 20 years, and I can think of no better way to share my appreciation at this milestone than with a Word Present to all those who collectively made this dream a reality.





To Peter Bergson and Susan Shilcock, the founders of Open Connections: Thank you for your extraordinary vision, grit, and creativity. OC exists because of your willingness to share your vision of offering young people a place that celebrates their freedom to learn and create. The real life impact of your dream has changed the lives of countless people in beautiful ways. May your inspirational legacy live on for 50 more years and beyond!



To Our Angel Donors: You believed in Peter and Susan's vision and wholeheartedly supported it. Your generosity allowed OC to move to its current beautiful location in Newtown Square and gave OC time to grow and become financially sustainable. You helped fund the construction of the Barn and you contributed substantially to OC's Sustainability Fund. You provided the critical funding that allowed Peter and Susan's to realize their dream.

To the Staff (both past and present): You've brought (and bring) the OC mission to life—co-creating, with the youth, opportunities to nurture healthy connections with self, others, and learning—assuming good intentions, seeking to understand, and modeling a life of purpose and fulfillment. Thank you for translating Peter and Susan's vision into the countless imaginative activities, collaborative games, deep discussions, and creative projects that I have witnessed during my time here!



To the Families (both past and present): you had (and have) the courage to choose a path less traveled, to wish more for your youth than a traditional, predetermined curriculum based on an outdated educational model. You see value in a learner-centered approach to education and wish for your youth to live a life full of purpose and fulfillment. As with all paths, this one is not always easy, but it is rewarding. Thank you for sharing your children with us!





To the Youth (both past and present): You bring (have brought) your eagerness, your inquisitiveness, and a willingness to learn and try new things. You persevere when hard things arise. You lovingly challenge yourselves, your peers, and the facilitators—creating opportunities for us all to be more intentional in our actions. May your educational journey delight you, surprise you, and never end.



How OC Got Its Name

An email from Peter Bergson, co-founder of OC:

“When it came time to create a name for our new venture, we elected to use a process to create a two-word phrase that, like so many book titles, was an Essential Paradox. We wrote in two columns: one included words that represented the essence of what our philosophy was all about, the other about the ways in which we were different, outside the box, on a different path from tradition (especially traditional parenting and schooling). We then circled on each side our favorite words, the ones that attracted us, and through trial and error tried to match them in pairs. “Connections” was the essence word, “Open” was the innovative one.”

“All of this happened while seated at a makeshift desk in the open space of my Boston apartment that connected my bedroom with the living area. I remember the moments as if they were yesterday. We were so proud of ourselves for running a successful creative session—for practicing successfully what we were preaching. We fell in love with Open Connections immediately. Our only concern was that it wouldn’t be available because someone else may have grabbed it.”

Fortunately, Peter’s concern was unfounded and on February 13, 1975, Open Connections was born.

I feel a deep appreciation to everyone who has made the Open Connections’ dream possible. With excitement and wonder, let’s imagine what the next fifty years might bring! ©



Rhian and Andi pose with the spoons that they recently handcrafted in Choice B: Woodshop.

The “Freedom to Learn and Create” manifests in different and unique ways in all of the programs at OC, meeting **imagination** and **wonder** with endless possibilities.

A crowd of Open Program youth explore campus with their pal, Olive the goat. Zak, Delilah, Luca, Adeline, Kellen, and Osai are ready for their adventure!



FREEDOM TO

Learn *and* Create

By Sarah Becker,
OC Co-Director

Open Since 1975, Open Connections has existed with a mind to create a safe space where young folks and their families can live and learn together, in an environment that values the “Freedom to Learn and Create.”

This principle hasn’t changed much in the past 50 years. At OC, people are free to explore what lights their fire and fans their flame. From investigating the wildlife in the lower pond, or testing their physical abilities on the climbing wall, to diving deep into robotics, and exploring the nuances of different types of cinema, OC affords people the opportunities to really get to know themselves, what they love, how they learn,

and how to share their passions with others.

This freedom allows learners to pursue their interests, ask questions, experiment, and innovate at their own pace and in their unique ways. It’s about nurturing a space where creativity, self-directed exploration, and independent thought are encouraged, while empowering individuals to take ownership of their learning journey and creative expression.

The “Freedom to Learn and Create” manifests in different and unique ways in all of the programs at OC, meeting imagination and wonder with endless possibilities. ©



Just another Wednesday of Open Programmers playing "Squish The Lemon." Serafina holds firm at the bottom followed by Bodhi, Olivia, Leo B., Kellen, and Osai at the top of the environment slide.

CREATING THEIR OWN

By Maggie Edinger, Facilitator

ADVENTURE



"Creating their day with their own ideas and self-direction allows learning to blossom in a way that feels like it is coming from within, an internal spark."

Although no fish were caught on this particular day, Adeline, Owen, and Bodhi gave it a good try. Owen brought his fishing rod from home after hearing some of his peers had some luck on other days in the OP. We will give it another try in a few weeks.





Delilah facilitates Nico in a game of Feel and Find Tactillo while Bodhi and Nora watch and await their turns. Nico works to keep his eyes on top of the box while finding shapes to match the card on top.



This year Open Program youth are learning the art of Batik and creating book covers to decorate their OP yearbooks to take home at the end of the year. Here, Ari adds his first coat of ink while his peers in the background add hot wax.



IF I COULD GO ON AN ADVENTURE, IT WOULD BE...Keira places her name on "in a hot air balloon" while her brother Vincent decides what adventure he would like to take before placing his name.

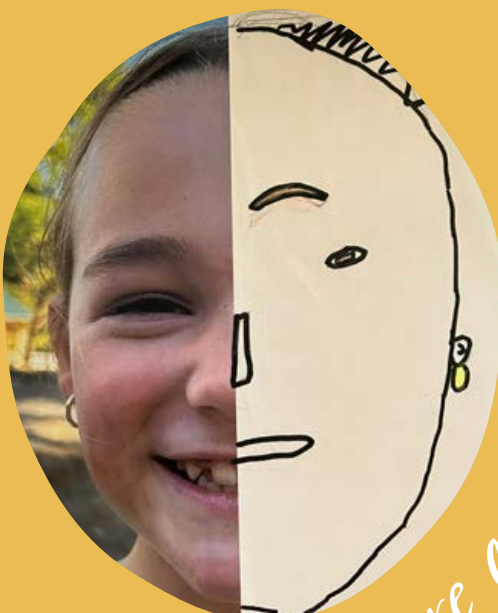
Open Connections is celebrating its milestone 50th anniversary this year: fifty years of Open Program, can you believe it?! To be able to stand here and say that we have kept our roots and foundations intact for this long is a celebration in its own right.

Here in the Open Program, we are just that—OPEN. The belief surrounding the Open Program has always been that young people are natural learners. Young people are curious and when they are in an environment that gives them the freedom and openness to explore their interests...magic happens. When young people are given the chance to create their day, learning begins naturally and organically. The OP, for some, is the first experience a young person might have at Open Connections. It could quite possibly be a youth's first experience being separated from their caregivers and their first time having the freedom to make their day what they wish.

A young person's day in the OP often looks different from week to week. We have always believed that "you don't know what you don't know," so every program day has a wide

variety of exposure to projects, tools, games, art and activities. Whether it be lab table science experiments, mini house creating at the art table, or a group song and dance collaboration, young people are given opportunities to explore areas of interest that help guide them to create a life of purpose and fulfillment. 50 years later we believe the program is just as revelatory for young people as the day it began.

The Open Program gives youth freedom. Creating their day with their own ideas and self-direction allows learning to blossom in a way that feels like it is coming from within, an internal spark. This internal, naturally curious, ball of excitement fuels independence and the confidence to keep exploring. We strive to harbor an internal excitement for learning and create lifelong learners who see the joy in the world, the freedom to explore, to create, and to nurture their lives in their own unique way. 50 years from now we hope to be writing an article about the 100 year anniversary of Open Connections! @



Share a Pet Day



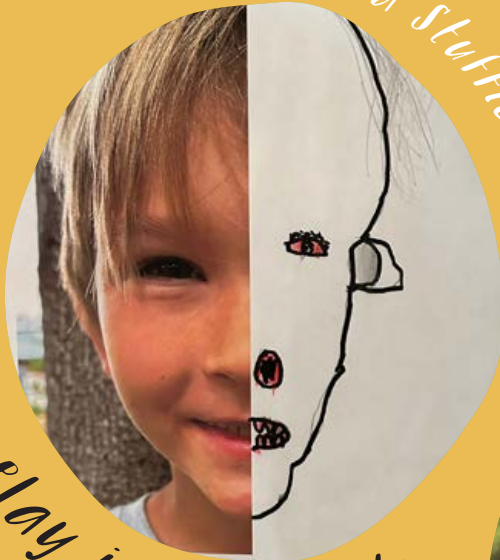
Potluck Meal



Pajama Stuffed Tea Party



Make dog Treats



Play in the woods

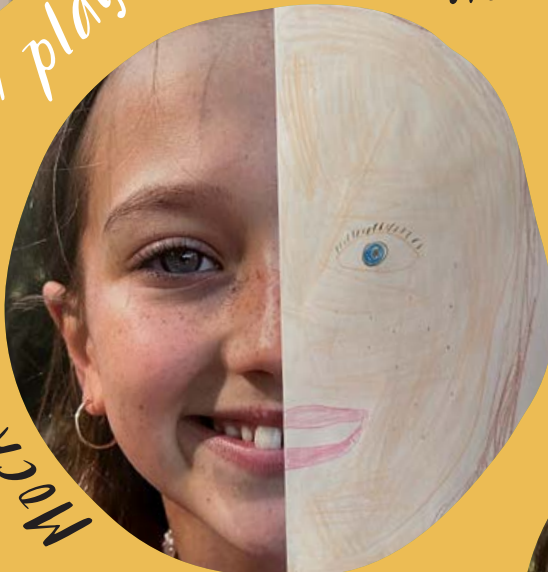


Perform a play

Create a vat of slime



Mock election



Bring a book day



Each youth was given a photo of half of their face. Markers, colored pencils, and graphite pencils were provided with the photo, but no instructions were offered. Some youth chose to draw a realistic representation of the other side of their face using graphite pencils and/or colored pencils, others chose brightly colored markers, while some chose to make the other half of their face look like an animal or a skull. Providing only materials, with no instructions, gave each young person the freedom to create something of their own choosing.

SHARING THEIR INTERESTS *and* WISHES

By Jane Sleutaris, Facilitator

In Open Group, much of what we do during program time is inspired by the wishes of the young people themselves. In the Open Group program, a “Wish List” is collectively created by the members of the group at the beginning of each program year. The content of this list strongly influences how we spend our time throughout the year. Some of the youth’s requests might be accomplished in an hour, such as mixing up a vat of slime or making soft pretzels. Others might revolve

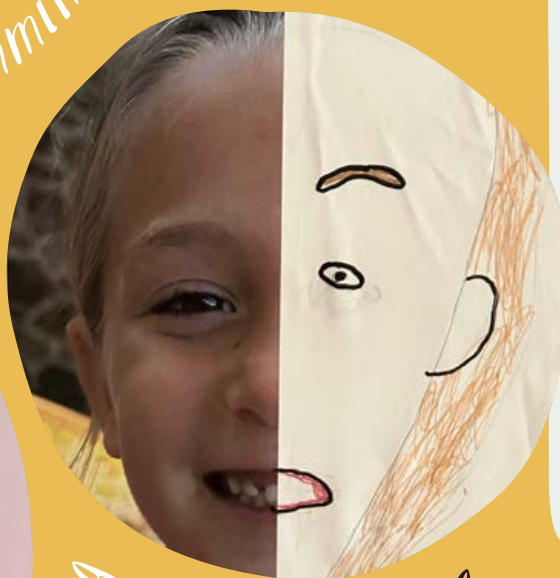
around a theme and take place over the course of a day such as a request for a Cafe Day, in which youth create menus, cook real food in the kitchen, take each other’s orders, and serve each other the food they prepared. Some requests may span several weeks, such as that of putting on a play production based on a script written by a young person, including creating costumes and scenery, making a Playbill program, learning lines, and performing for members of the community. ©



Pond Swimming



Make wire sculptures



Fishing



Baking

One of the many special things about Open Connections is the freedom young people are given to learn and explore things that are of interest to them. **We have no predetermined curriculum at Open Connections, because the content for each program comes from three ever evolving sources.**

1) *The interests of the young people*

2) *The interests of the facilitators*

3) *The world around us*

—ie. the campus (28 acres of natural environment, as well as indoor specialty spaces including the art studio, wood shop, maker space, and kitchen); current events; books; service projects, etc.

By Heather Hurley, Facilitator

TRANSFORMATION THROUGH COLLABORATION

GROUP
1



Two years ago, our group hit a snag with a favorite game, Robin Ball. The rules were unclear, and some young people felt it wasn't fair, but no one wanted to stop playing. Instead of giving up, we turned that frustration into a group conversation. Everyone listed their concerns, and we talked about how we could fix it together. It wasn't just about complaints—it was the first step toward a solution.

What started as a tough conversation became a space for creativity. We realized we had the power to redesign the game ourselves, and suddenly the frustration turned into excitement. Through brainstorming, we tweaked the rules so everyone could enjoy, and it made the game even better. Plus, it gave the whole group a sense of ownership over the process.

That experience is just one example of how group collaboration can actually boost creativity. When we worked together

to solve the problem, each young person brought their unique perspective, but the magic really happened when they built on each other's ideas. By the end, we didn't just fix the game—we improved it, and everyone felt proud of what we accomplished. Fast forward to this year, and we're using that same collaborative energy as we work on our upcoming Food Truck Festival. Just like with Robin Ball, we're leaning on the freedom to learn and create to design something new as a team. Everyone is contributing, and the process of working together is inspiring some pretty amazing ideas.

That sense of group ownership and creative problem-solving continues to be a key part of how Group 1 works. Whether it's reinventing a game or building a food truck experience, we've learned that when everyone's voice is heard, the results are better—and way more fun! ©

“What started as a **tough** conversation became a space for creativity. We realized we had the **power to redesign** the game ourselves, and suddenly the frustration turned into **excitement.**”



Jett gazes at the delectable sparkling drink he concocted during recipe creation for the Group 1 Food Truck Festival.



Wally, Weston and Noah estimate how many unpopped popcorn kernels might fit in their self-sized container in order to better understand the amount they may need for The Popcorn Truck to serve the community.



Lila and Luna worked together to design the side panel of the ice cream food truck, measuring and planning the paper needed to create a tempting visual display.

GROUP 2



FREEDOM

By Kelly Dillon, Facilitator

to Find Their Process

In Group 2, as in the real world, there are neverending decisions to make and challenges to be navigated within our days together that can impact all involved. How do we engage all participants in the process? How do we hold the space to make sure that everyone is heard? Which ideas and strategies do we test? How do we prevent viable possibilities from being dismissed? These questions arise regularly during the collaborative team building challenges taken on during Group 2 that support development of valuable intrapersonal and interpersonal life skills and a healthy relationship to learning. These challenges can help us to learn something about ourselves, others and how we find our way through successes and failures as we build skill and knowledge.

Caption TBD.

↑ *Run Mats*

These are a new material at OC this year! These items were conveniently packaged and delivered with merely a few tips for use, but no true instructions, in true OC fashion. Two separate teams tested the two continuous narrow fabric rings. They used a method of walking along the inside and pulling the outside of the fabric over their heads and behind them as they moved forward like a tank tread or caterpillar track. Starting with two team members, they would walk a lap and then add another team member each time they returned to the 'bus stop.' Another possible use was tested with team members inside the ring, wearing the fabric like a belt. The mats were held fast with the tension created by the young folks leaning into it, the group then coordinated to collaboratively maneuver forward as a unit, maintaining the tension so as not to lose their 'belt.'

The path forward is often a bit messy, rarely linear, at times frustrating for some while dull for others. There are often redos, iterations with informed modifications, pauses, debriefings, and pauses with promises to revisit soon. Rarely, if ever, is there a 'wrong' way to succeed and the reward is always sweet, and of course amply celebrated as a collective win."



Nate, Calliope, and Lee team up during Group II to build a free-standing "tree" with a single point of contact, using pvc components and water bottles.

←--- *Water Bottle Trees*

Youth were tasked with using PVC tubes, connectors, and water bottles, with the aim to build a balanced, freestanding 'tree' that has a single point of contact with the ground. The water bottles can remain empty or be filled to any level desired. A variety of configurations were created by several teams of three young people, with mixed success. Some teams joined forces with others and pooled their resources to make a larger water bottle tree. Eventually, plans evolved for all teams to collaborate in the construction of a single large tree spanning three contact points over the patio on the upper terrace.



caption TBD

↑ *Duct Tape Challenges*

There are books devoted to the many challenges that exist using this versatile tape material! Group 2 has taken on the 'Yurt Circle' trust challenge and the Inhuman Knot thus far. The entire group was tasked with organizing, strategizing and implementing a challenge to make a continuous loop of tape to be held by everyone in a circle. The circle would need to be strong enough to support the weight of the group as they leaned back in unison. The group later divided and worked in two teams to tie the biggest knot they could from three equal lengths of duct tape, without letting go of the ends of the tape at any point. In the end, knots were swapped and untied using the same team work.

←--- *Pipeline*

This activity generally involves collaboratively building a structure, often mobile, to move a ball from one point to another at some distance. Open Connections has some well-loved and oft-used, stretchy, narrow fabric pieces with handles along the sides for this activity. First, they broke into small groups for an opportunity to build skill and strategy using the material to get a ball across smaller distances. Then the entirety of Group 2 collaborated to move a ball, without dropping it, from the top of the driveway to the gravel yard at the bottom. ©



Following an opportunity to build skill and strategy using the material in smaller teams, Group 2 collaborates to move a ball, without dropping it, from the top of the driveway to the gravel yard at the bottom.

GROUP
3

FREEDOM TO TRY AGAIN

By Michelle West, Facilitator

Chase O., Everleigh F. and Uma P. use random and recycled materials to create the tallest possible marble run.



With great freedom comes great responsibility. Is that how the saying goes?

At Open Connections we believe that every person, young and older, can create a life of purpose and fulfillment. This is a tantalizing promise but it is not a guarantee; it is a possibility. Our role is to empower young people to see themselves as writers of their own stories and makers of their own luck.

Here at OC youth can find the freedom to learn and create, but they must also be partners in their educational journey. The early weeks of programming in September always involve surveys, goal-setting, and the making of agreements. Youth are encouraged to be responsible for the culture of their program and the co-creation of a great year. Unlike traditional teachers who must deliver pre-determined curricula chosen by far-off administrators, OC facilitators are able to respond to the young people's hopes and wishes. Youth have a job too! They must advocate for their vision, and give voice to their dreams.

The freedom from the confines of a traditional classroom offers so many opportunities for deeper learning. When G3 youth built cardboard boat prototypes and tested them in a lab, that was only the beginning of their exploration of buoyancy. The next step was to build them full-sized and set sail. Four youth piloted their teams' creations across the Upper Pond to great fanfare despite the very real risk of failure. That risk is inherent in freedom and is embraced in every project the young people tackle.

No project that allows for young people's extraordinary creativity can protect against the possibility of failure. What's more, shielding them from the chance to grow through struggle would deny them such a wonderful opportunity! G3 youth love spending time creating in the Makerspace, the Art Studio, and tackling sewing projects in the Annex. Everytime they experiment with new materials, they run into the inevitable challenges of new learning. After deciding on a list of words representing how they want to feel in their program space, G3 youth created window clings using Illustrator and the fabulous Roland printer. After seeing the final products come to life and clinging to the windows in Upstairs Blue, they decided they wanted another crack at it. They adjusted sizes, fonts, colors, and designs, and chose to print on a different material. This freedom to revisit and revise is so vital to their ability to learn and create.

OC programs offer youth the freedom to show up as themselves, and the responsibility to share who they are with one another. They can explore subjects more fully, not tethered to bell schedules and arbitrary chapter tests. G3 will challenge youth to create something new and take risks. They are free to make mistakes, sink in the pond, revise, try again, rip out the seams, start over, and keep learning through it all. ☺

"They are free to make mistakes, **sink in the pond**, revise, try again, **rip out the seams**, start over, and keep learning through it all. "

Carter R. and the U.S.S. Francesca Trevani the 7th sail into port, battered but very much alive.



SYL

SHAPING YOUR LIFE
Freedom to



By Jack Gainey, Søren Kent, Brian Fitzhenry, FinnMcCool, Karl Engle, & Thomas Marran

Trust, Autonomy & Personal Responsibility

In many ways, the freedom to learn and create reaches a peak in Shaping Your Life. Among the elements that contribute to an environment that promotes freedom for teenagers, trust is a cornerstone. SYL facilitators trust group members to contribute their fair share towards group work and be capable of making decisions and guiding themselves. SYL group members must also be able to trust themselves in their ability to perform and manage projects and to complete tasks. Without grading, evaluation, and outside approval, the freedom to learn and create allows us to hold a strong personal vision while still applying feedback from others. It also lets us take a deeper look at the facilitators' suggestions without the worry of satisfying someone else's idea of perfection. Overall, the freedom to learn and create comes with responsibility, as described in our peers' own words about their SYL experience...

Parker, Karl, Søren, Cadence, Facilitator Chris, Brian, Jack, Finn and Thomas puzzle out how to get the finicky panel into the grooves of a main rib while assembling the greenhouse.

“During our Independent Project last year there were times when we would just be alone in the kitchen by ourselves for hours. Heather would pop in every so often, but for the most part we were operating freely. The project was also on a tight timeline, so if something went wrong or a change of plans was needed we couldn't wait for her to come back and consult and just had to find a solution ourselves. I think that the trust she put in us to know what we were doing, and to make good choices really helped us feel like it was really ours, and it really helped me at least feel more confident in myself.”



Finn works on the door while Karl deconstructs pallets as they re-engage with their Independent Project of a playhouse made from repurposed materials.

“During our Independent Project last year there were times when we would just be alone in the kitchen by ourselves for hours. Heather would pop in every so often, but for the most part we were operating freely. The project was also on a tight timeline, so if something went wrong or a change of plans was needed we couldn’t wait for her to come back and consult and just had to find a solution ourselves. I think that the trust she put in us to know what we were doing, and to make good choices really helped us feel like it was really ours, and it really helped me at least feel more confident in myself.”

“Throughout the many projects and goals that our group has collectively worked towards, the one that stands out to me the most has to be fundraising and financial management for the trip—tasks usually reserved for adults. While it is sometimes difficult for me to adjust to the nature of having autonomy, having facilitators that trust me to perform complex tasks involving something as important as money without constant supervision or management has helped me rebuild my ability to make my own judgment calls and decision—and to trust myself.”



Søren and Cadence work together to craft a full-size, viable vessel based on their prototype during the Cardboard Boat Challenge. Their creation remained afloat on the pond (captained by Cadence) for 14 minutes.

“Last year during my second independent project, my point person trusted me to work on my project outside alone. I had to plan out what I was going to do with each session, and I had to make decisions on my own. This experience made me better with time management and led me to feel more confident in my decisions.”

“I have spent most of my education under constant evaluation and grading, and the shift from worrying about my final grades to focusing on making my projects the best they can be has been an interesting one. Overall, I’d say that the most impactful aspect of this is that it’s more applicable to life—in most cases, the only person to tell you if you did something correctly or incorrectly is yourself.”



SYL youth share how they are incorporating peer and facilitator feedback into revisions for their Executive Functioning Skills posters.

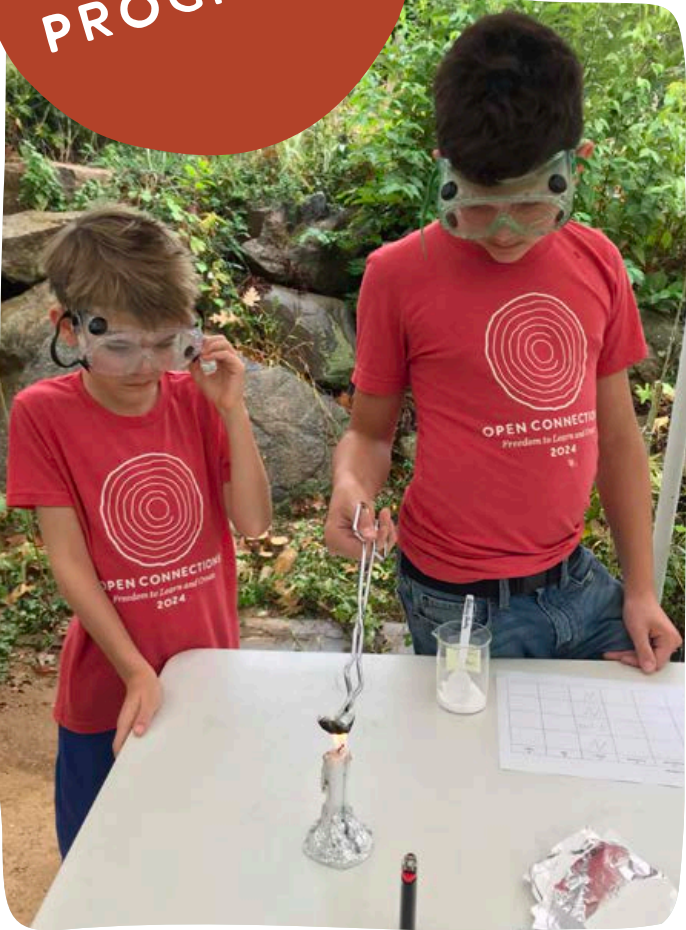
Without traditional grades, I tend to think **deeper about the feedback**

I receive from facilitators rather than accepting their suggestions as fact.

“Without traditional grades, I tend to think deeper about the feedback I receive from facilitators rather than accepting their suggestions as fact. I am then able to evaluate if the suggestion would improve the overall product, or draw the project further away from my personal vision.”

“I feel that the lack of grading/evaluation makes me feel more confident to express my ideas and pursue my personal vision because I can create what I want, rather than what a specific teacher might prefer. And it’s actually enjoyable to get feedback in SYL because we have the choice whether or not we want to incorporate the feedback in our projects, and the degree to which we might want to do so.” ©

CHOICE PROGRAMS



Today we explored some properties of different white substances—baking soda, cornstarch, plaster, salt, and sugar. The youth made visual observations with magnifying glasses, noting color differences and which substances were crystalline. They tested how the substances reacted with vinegar and with iodine solution. Above, Maks and Levi carry out the group's favorite test—the heat test! After each substance was tested separately, the group turned their attention to some Mystery Mixtures to see whether or not they could correctly identify the components.

Choice A: Exploring Properties of Matter

By Heather Gosse, Facilitator

Choice A: Exploring Properties of Matter, youth have had an opportunity to explore many different substances in multiple ways. One popular activity was the White Substances Investigation, where youth ran four different tests on five substances, then used what they had learned about the individual substances to identify the components of several Mystery Mixtures. It took a careful eye to pick out what was going on with the mixtures, but our detectives were on the case!

Choice A: Survival Skills

By Kelly Dillon, Facilitator

The survival rule of threes is a set of guidelines that help people remember what to prioritize in a survival situation:

- *3 minutes: A person can survive three minutes without breathing or in icy water*
- *3 hours: A person can survive three hours without shelter in extreme temperatures*
- *3 days: A person can survive three days without water if they have shelter*
- *3 weeks: A person can survive three weeks without food if they have shelter and water*

Over the last several weeks, Choice A survivalists have had the opportunity to build and test a number of strategies to apply in situations requiring first aid, shelter construction and water collection—giving them insight into what is possible and most efficient with regard to time, energy and available materials.



Maks, Jett and Asher stand beneath one of the water collection systems the Choice A: Survival Skills group is investigating. Over the course of the day the plant will transpire and produce moisture that will collect at the low point in the plastic bag that is secured to the tree. The youth will evaluate the efficiency of three methods: rainwater collection, transpiration and below ground/solar still.z



Decked out in select costume pieces from the attic, Choice A photographers explore being both in front of the camera and behind, posing and composing portraits of each other. Curiosity about foreground, subject and background, quality of light and mood all lead to new learning and some pretty cool photographs.

Choice A: Photography

By Kelly Dillon, Facilitator

Once Choice A photographers understand the basics of how to operate a digital camera, they are free to apply what they've learned in photographing subject matter of their choice. Their experience and resulting images generally generate questions about technical camera functions, technique, skill and strategies. The freedom and flexibility to explore and test their ideas, and access to equipment and resources, is a winning combination for hands-on learning and developing creativity.

“The freedom and flexibility to explore and test their ideas, and access to equipment and resources, is a winning combination for hands-on learning and developing creativity.”





Andi, Maggie, Eve, Uma, Everleigh, and Rhian all worked to coordinate their outfits to perform in the Aerial Arts Choice offering. While their outfits were awesome, it didn't outshine their skills on the silks!

Choice B: Aerial Arts

By Kate Johnson, Facilitator

When it comes to learning, people often conflate the ideas of “freedom” and “creativity” with a lack of strict rules or instructor supervision. So how, then, does one provide such freedom and creativity when the subject matter is -by definition- a ‘discipline?’ The answer, believe it or not, is language.

With the aerial arts, we aim to teach students proper technique not to control the outcome of their efforts, but rather to equip them with a new vocabulary which they can then use to tell their own stories in their own unique ways.



Sometimes the freedom to learn and create comes in the form of meeting the youth where they are at. Here Uma, a returning aerial adventurer, lands her Rebecca Split for the first time. This is not a move we would be able to do with a first-time learner, but having the option to build on what she learned last year has given her the opportunity to deepen the knowledge she already has in safe and empowered ways.



In addition to more structured challenges like the rubber band cars, the youth in Choice B: Engineering Challenges using the 3D Printer had opportunities to follow their own interests by choosing among several possible projects. Here, they examine and test the results of the previous week's print jobs. Nate and Isaac glue and test an iteration of their spinning tops, Ollie assembles the pieces of his spring-loaded shooter, and Danny examines materials for a possible next project.



One thing Danny, Ollie W., and Silas observed was that their initial car with rubber “tires” on the wheels worked much better on the hardwood floor than on rugs. This led the group to wonder what sort of tire would work well on rugs. Each team member created a new wheel design in Tinkercad, which they then printed and tested. In the end, one of their designs ended up making the car go significantly farther on the carpet than any of the original wheels had gone on the hardwood floor!

Choice B: Engineering Challenges

By Heather Gosse, Facilitator

In Choice B: Engineering Challenges using the 3D Printer, the youth constantly test things out, evaluate how well they work, and design new solutions based on what they have learned. The groups tested different factors affecting the distance a rubber-band car would travel, adjusting everything from wheel size to adding weights for traction, then they designed their own parts for the cars in Tinkercad, which they were able to test out the following week. Combining multiple improvements, they were able to improve the distance their cars traveled from around three feet to over fifteen feet!

Choice B: Woodshop

By Chris McNichol, Facilitator

The wood shop serves as a sanctuary for creativity, where the freedom to learn and create flourishes. Within its walls, individuals can explore the tactile beauty of wood, transforming raw materials into unique creations. This space encourages experimentation, allowing beginners and seasoned craftsmen alike to hone their skills through hands-on experience. As tools clatter and sawdust settles, collaboration and sharing ideas become vital aspects of exploration. The wood shop not only fosters individual expression but also cultivates a community of makers, where every project becomes a testament to the power of imagination and craftsmanship.



Sometimes you can build from plans and sometimes you just wing it! Creating as you go offers creative freedoms and can be really fun. Eve's stool went through many iterations before it was complete.

“The wood shop serves as a sanctuary for creativity, where the freedom to learn and create flourishes. Within its walls, individuals can explore the tactile beauty of wood, transforming raw materials into unique creations.”



Our most delicious day making souvlaki, tzatziki and pita filled the kitchen with mouthwatering aroma that left us all waiting to dive in; here, Lee, Jay and Nate learn to trust the process as they push past the doubt about how much flour to add and complete the multi-step pita dough.

Choice B: It's All Greek to Me!

By Sheila Pai, Facilitator

Greek Choice was shaped by individual and group choice across a framework of Greek history, architecture, mythology, cooking, baking and more. Making a timeline introduced us to key figures, events and ideas. Building Greek inspired structures involved problem-solving as well as opportunities to learn tools OC offers such as the Glowforge, the 3-D printer and Adobe Illustrator. A fan favorite was our Great Athens-Sparta Debate/Kahoot based on team research and presentations about these mighty rival city-states.



Silas, Danny and Maggie glue delicate Glowforge pieces for a second layer of the labyrinth before spray painting and placing the previously painted 3-D printed minotaur miniature and other elements.



1.6

1.7

1.9

CAMPUS CORNER

The GREENHOUSE

By Sarah Becker,
OC Co-Director



SYL stands proudly in front of the green house they worked together to assemble for the community.



Karl and Locke collaborate to get the front side of the frame assembled and attached to the base, while other SYL members hold the back panel steady.

The OC Greenhouse is a project that's still under development, but what a fantastic exemplification of how the "Freedom to Learn and Create" manifests within this community!

This greenhouse project started in the spring of 2021 with a small group of dreamers that saw the potential that a resource like this could have on campus. From the dreaming stage, we moved on to more tangible decisions like size requirements, responsibilities, maintenance plans, and placement. All of these decisions were thoughtfully discussed and decided upon with the long term best interest of the campus and community in mind.

After the dreaming, discussions, and decisions, the greenhouse arrived. It was delivered in several large boxes and crates, with an instruction manual that made it appear like the assembly would be a snap! Naturally, the excitement started to grow! However, as is usually the case with large scale projects, there were some obstacles, ultimately postponing our gratification. The construction of the Pavilion, which needed to be completed first, took much longer than expected. The ground had to be cleared and leveled in preparation for construction. Then there were the instructions, which were, as it turns out, misleadingly simple. There was a huge element of teamwork that would be required to pull off the task of construction.

Enter the Shaping Your Life team in the Fall of 2024! This crew worked together to erect this structure—thank you for the teamwork, grit, and resilience! Soon, we'll have power and water running out to this new resource and programs will be able to roll up their sleeves, get their hands dirty, and start growing (literally and figuratively, of course)! We can't wait to see how this new corner of campus impacts our community for years to come. ©



Ari builds strength, coordination, and balance while climbing a favorite tree by the sand-pit during his time in the Open Program.



Jack's plate and printed portrait bear a resemblance to the Group 2 artist who created them.



9-square, a new to Group 1 game, provided challenges; group members brainstormed how to get as many youth involved and feeling accomplished by changing some of the standard goals. Here you see members of the group throwing and catching to one another.



Carter, Rhian, Francie, and Uma perform an original song and dance about the parts of a great editorial.



Brian and Søren are collaborating on creating a video game for their SYL Independent Project: Brian is composing the music while Søren creates the visual elements.



During a Group 2 'math moment', all youth studied a youcubed illustration of 3 sets of cubes; teams were challenged to think critically about how the set of cubes was growing. Henry is pictured here, illustrating the pattern that he and his team mates, Lee and Trey, dialed in on.



Mara, Gracie, Savannah, and Fiona use a variety of art and recycling materials to make creations during self directed time.



Monday Open Program spent time working on clay in the studio with Makayla. Mugs, silverware, and many little creations were constructed during their visit. From left to right, Fiona, Olivia, Keira, Vincent, Lincoln, Makayla, Luca, Delilah, and Osai.



Lincoln dips in to the world of tabletop photography during Choice A: Photography, building and lighting a still life that may result in an image that looks like a full scale, real-life scenario.



Open Group youth were given the challenge to build the tallest free standing tower they could make using cornstarch packing peanuts that stick together when dabbed with a damp sponge. Theo and Savannah work together to build their tower.



While John holds a pose in a group tableau, other members of Group 1, in this case, Ollie, imagine what he might be thinking or trying to communicate, writing that dialogue in a conversation bubble.



The Ice Cream Truck: Josh, Lila and Luna enthusiastically served up ice cream sundaes at the Group 1 Food Truck Festival.



In SYL, two-person teams used a big stack of cardboard, a roll of duct tape per team, and a block of paraffin to construct pond-worthy single-seater boats. Finn and Jack stand by their finished structures, complete with names, a helmet, and a flag!



Leo F. works on the ink step of his Batik book cover for his OP yearbook during his time in the Open program. This process takes a repeated three rounds of hot wax, ink application, and wax removal with a hot iron.



Cadence, Jack, Parker and Brian, along with members of Groups 1, 2 & 3, prepare to run an obstacle course (designed by Group 3 members) during All Campus Recess.



Hazel, Uma, Shep, Silas, Ollie W., and Sheri work in Illustrator to create window clings of the words the group chose to represent the culture we are working to cultivate this year in Group 3.



Open Group experimented with sound and foley because they will be applying this concept to the play they will perform this year. The setting for the play will be a village in a wooded area, so the youth will get to identify sounds that one might hear in this type of setting, in addition to the action sounds that are a part of the story.



Jay, Lee, and Nate make kourabiedes (Greek butter cookies) during an afternoon session of "It's All Greek to Me!" while others work on finishing a project on the Glowforge.



Delilah and Luca snuggle our oldest and most loved chicken, Paloma, in the Open Program sand-pit on a Monday. Paloma is cared for here at OC and is fed lots of treats, veggies, and yummy bugs.



A special thank you to Fiona's family for donating a honey comb for the young people in Open Group to investigate! Fiona kindly shared her extensive knowledge about honey bees, bee keeping, and the process of honey production.



Everleigh, Hazel, Chase, and Sheri work together on a zombie-escaping word problem during Group 3.



Ollie O., Maks, and John work on a time telling challenge in Group 1.



Owen has been working on this fort in the "White Pines" since program time last year. This has been a collaborative project which many youth have enjoyed. The group has worked to collect logs and sticks and stack them up on trees to create a natural fort. On this particular day Levon, Bodhi, and Owen work together to add more sides to the fort and take some time to sit inside.



SYL members, Søren and Cadence test the functionality of their cardboard boat prototype in terms of its stability and ability to carry weight. They planned carefully before constructing their model, and were pleased with the success of their trial.



Choice A survivalists, Wally, Maks, Lincoln, Asher, Jett, Madhava, Kai, Josh and Levi team up to demonstrate their success in building 3 different rescue stretchers; one using a tarp, one utilizing 2-3 jackets, and one crafted from straps made with duct tape.



Open Group members, Violet and Mara prepare, themed foods for their collaboratively planned Halloween party.



Lincoln, Annabelle, Harrison, Nate and Maggie test the rescue stretcher they designed for a Group 2 duct tape challenge.



Kaspian enjoys spending time with our goats Pip and Nim during his time on campus. Here, Kaspian leads Pip to a pile of yummy leaves as he tempts her with one special snack.



Indi selects a card at the beginning of a game of Flip Over 10, a number sequencing & memory challenge, while Jack, Søren, Locke, Brian and Parker watch to see what number is revealed during SYL.



Eve and Shep paddle their teams' creations back after a successful crossing. Ollie W. and Silas offer their teammates support from the chilly water.



Adeline and Delilah use baking soda and white vinegar to make chemical reactions for their potions in the Open Program.



Uma and Everleigh look like their spooky pumpkins in Group 3.



In Choice A: Exploring Properties of Matter, the group started by distinguishing different materials and starting to explore and name their properties. Here, Madhava uses the conductivity tester he created to test the electrical conductivity of different materials, including aluminum foil. One of the more surprising findings of the day was how well a silver cup conducts heat energy!

Development Corner



Dear Open Connections
Community,

We are overjoyed to be celebrating Open Connections' 50th anniversary! This moment is providing an opportunity to fondly reflect on five decades of growth, curiosity, and profound learning experiences shared with our community. Since 1975, Open Connections has been a haven for young people and families, fostering self-directed, experiential learning that empowers individuals to navigate their unique paths with confidence and purpose.

Even though I had spent a bit of time on campus back in 2007-2010, it took a while for our whole family to circle back around to this wonderful place. From the time that we reconnected with this campus and community, when my family toured Open Connections in 2021, we recognized that we had all found a place that would play a large part in our lives for years to come. Open Connections has profoundly changed the course of the lives of the Becker family for the better, and we've all witnessed and experienced immense growth because of it, with more to come, I'm sure.

This milestone anniversary is not only a time for reflection but a moment to dream and envision the future. With each new gener-

ation, we continue to adapt to their evolving needs, and keep the heart of Open Connections alive. This will always be a place where creativity, connection, and discovery come together to inspire and nurture lifelong learning.

Your support has been crucial in making Open Connections what it is today. Every gift has helped us offer financial aid, improve our learning environments, and attract talented and committed facilitators dedicated to the learning journey of these wonderful young folks. Today, as we look to the next fifty years, we invite you to join us in ensuring that Open Connections remains a thriving resource for at least another 50 years, and dream about what tomorrow can offer.

We hope that you consider making a gift in honor of this special anniversary. Your generosity will not only help us celebrate this milestone but will also lay the foundation for many more years of meaningful explorations. We look forward to welcoming you back to campus every year to see the positive and powerful impact that your gift generates. This will always be a haven and home for you and your family.

Thank you for being a vital part of the Open Connections family. Together, we will continue to cultivate a community where each individual can play, learn, dream, explore, and grow.

With heartfelt gratitude,
Sarah Becker

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Support Us



Kai shares the grand total of about 100ml of water collected over 2 weeks from the 3 different water collection methods tested during Choice A: Survival Skills: below ground solar still, transpiration collection and rain water collection.



The gang's all here! 6 veteran program youth (Cataleia, Maggie, Lee, Trey, Madhava, Isaac), 7 'rising' (Asher, Calliope, Tanner, Harrison, Henry, Annabelle and Lincoln) 2 folks new to Open Connections (Jack and Nate) and our newest Group 2 facilitator, Kate! (Kelly and Chris not pictured here :-)



Typically youth in the OP practice hand-sewing to develop fine motor skills. On this particular week, youth had the opportunity to learn the skills of the electric sewing machine. Youth sewed pillows, stuffies, trick-or-treat bags, and many other treasures. Sian carefully guides his fabric to sew the stitches on his plaid pillow.



OC parent, Aliza Shinefield, joined OG to make gluten free donuts with the young people. They helped with the tasks of measuring, mixing, greasing pans, spooning batter into donut molds, and cleaning up afterward. Everyone loved eating the delicious, warm donuts!



Carter, Ollie W., Silas and Shep cut apart their faces to make cubist self-portraits inspired by Pablo Picasso in Group 3.



These two have become fast friends this year in the Open Program. Osai and Kellen experiment with climbing and sliding down the outdoor environment slide together, creating memories and sharing smiles and laughter.



FREEDOM *to*
LEARN *and*
CREATE

