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OPEN CONNECTIONS™

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Cover: Everleigh, Nate, Maggie, and Ben share a trolley and work together as they attempt to climb the sledding hill.

Right: Group 2 embarks on a unique scavenger hunt. Teams of three worked together to create photographic images to fulfill all the prompts on a given list - some of which might require a bit more thought than others! Wonder what Henry has in mind with this location?

Open Connections Magazine

Issue 88 / Winter 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 trust, freedom with responsibility, and community. 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

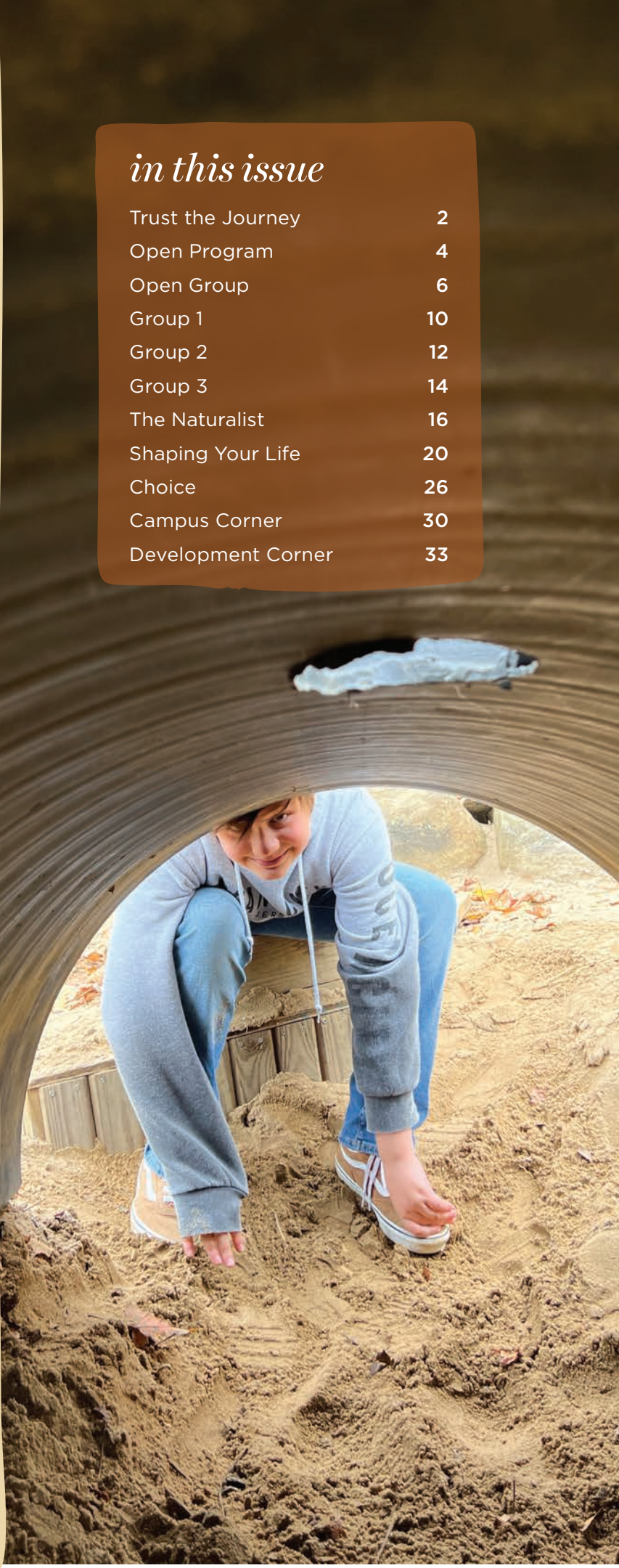
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FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR

Sarah Becker



Dear Open Connections
Community,

If there's one thing I've learned from being both human, and part of any community, it's that growth is rarely neat. It's winding, surprising, sometimes muddy, and always alive. And yet, how lucky we are to do it together!

In this issue, centered around our theme, 'Trust the Journey,' we celebrate the beauty that emerges when we allow space for things to unfold: imperfectly, authentically, and in their own time. The stories within these pages remind us that real learning, real connection, and real trust don't come from rigid plans or tidy outcomes. Rather, they grow from curiosity, compassion, and the courage to stay open, even when the path gets a little wild.

At Open Connections, we embrace the art of being in process, of learning alongside one another, of letting go of "shoulds," and of finding our footing (and oftentimes, our laughter) in the middle of the mess. Every shared challenge and every small triumph deepens our roots of trust, strengthening the web that holds us as individuals, and as a community.

So here's to the journey! We know it is full of as many detours, as discoveries, and delight. More importantly, here's to trusting our winding journeys, together.

With warmth and gratitude,
Sarah Becker

A handwritten signature of Sarah Becker in black ink.



Shaping Your Life youth pose for a group photo during a hike up to the tire swings, from left to right: Lincoln, Locke, Brian, Chase, Francie, Thomas, Uma, Hazel, Jack, and Søren.

TRUST THE JOURNEY

By Sarah Becker, Maggie DiBardino, and Makayla Brockway

In many ways, trusting the journey means trusting that people, especially young people, will learn what they need to learn, when they are ready to learn it. It is a faith in the natural unfolding of growth. A recognition that instincts and curiosities are not distractions from “real learning” but the very foundation of it.

A reminder that growth often unfolds in ways that we aren't able to predict. Like the quiet work of roots beneath the soil, so much of what matters most in our learning happens out of sight and in its own time. Trusting the journey means believing in young folks, ourselves, and the power of community. All of this happens even when the destination feels nebulous and impossible to imagine.

Along the way, the journey asks us to lean into the experiences that shape us: embracing failure, doing hard things, navigating conflict with mindfulness and calm intentionality, sitting in boredom, living with discomfort, and discovering the resilience that comes from moving through challenges rather than around them. These moments, which are often messy and raw, are where confidence and character are built.

Trusting the journey looks like young people taking ownership of their day, their work, and ultimately, their lives. It looks like an environment where learning is not measured in checkboxes, but in confidence, resilience, and joy.

Because in the end, Open Connections reminds us of something too often forgotten: we don't need to control every step of the journey for meaningful learning to occur. We only need to trust it.

Trust at Open Connections looks like: Choice over compliance, creativity over conformity, courage to try new things, collaborating with peers, and reflection.



The Naturalistr Group enjoys exploring Slide Rock while Madhava and Ash try the "no hands" method of reaching the top!



Gabriella spends time at the Open Program lab table experimenting with primary colors—blending them into new shades and adding cornstarch to give her mixture texture and density.



Two teams of blindfolded Group 2 youth navigate a roped-out maze through the trees and around obstacles, rotating leaders as they encounter a change in direction.



Michelle (Facilitator) asks Lee and Madhava if they are feeling the excitement during Pop-up Spanish.



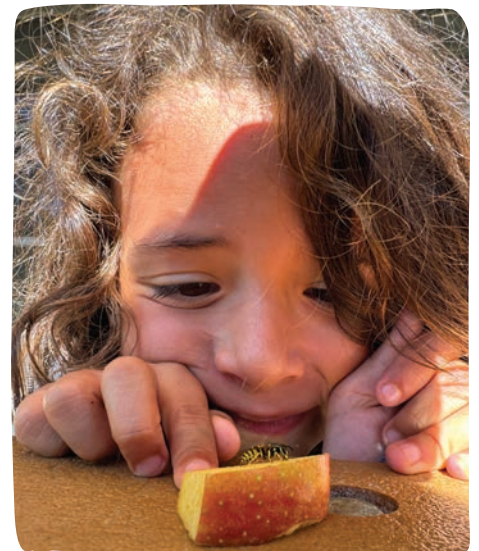
Several of the young people in Open Group enjoy playing chess together, making it a popular choice during self-directed time. They often help one another think through potential moves, strengthening everyone's gameplay skills. Pictured here are Bodhi and Michael.



Brian and Thomas examine stalks of goldenrod under the dissecting scopes, pursuing an answer to the question of whether insects are more likely to be found on stalks in a large group of goldenrod or on stalks in a small, isolated stand of goldenrod.



Levi fills in the gaps, grouting the flower pot and picture frame he decorated with patterns of colorful tile during Choice B: Mosaics.



During Open Program lunch, Luca spots a tiny bee looking for something sweet. He carefully offers it a bit of his apple and watches with quiet curiosity as the creature works a piece free and buzzes off.

The Compass Within: How Trust Turns Curiosity into a Lifelong Guide

By Makayla Brockway and
Maggie DiBardino, Facilitators



Top: Peter takes his time rolling out dough for his very own fresh, homemade personal pizza.

Middle: Gabriella experiments with jumping squids in a jar. It takes plenty of problem-solving to figure out just the right balance of air and water each little squid needs in order to float and jump inside the bottle.

Bottom: Everett works with steady focus and patience, carefully wrapping yarn around his pool noodle to form a pumpkin.

In a world that so often emphasizes rigid schedules, standardized outcomes, and measurable results, the Open Program offers something radically different: trust.

Trust in young people to make choices and in the natural process of self-directed learning. Trust in the belief that the journey, no matter how winding, messy, or unconventional, will always lead somewhere meaningful.

Step into the Open Program on any given morning and the first thing you notice is the absence of pressure. There is no bell demanding attention, no chart of mandatory tasks, no countdown to the next period. Instead, the space opens like an invitation: There is possibility everywhere.

"At the heart of the Open Program lies a simple conviction: young people want to learn, not because they are told to, but because they are naturally wired for it."

At one table, a group of youth might be using yarn and pool noodles to craft cozy autumn pumpkins, discovering textures, shapes, and patience in the process. Across the room, laughter rises as another group rolls homemade pizza dough, learning not only about measurements and ingredients, but also about collaboration, persistence, and the magic of making food.

In the lab area, a small cluster gathers around tubs of water, dropping in everyday objects to see what sinks and what floats. A hands-on exploration of density, buoyancy, and material properties. Nearby, someone else is tinkering independently with the shelves of open materials, following their own curiosity like a compass that only they can read.

This is not chaos. It is not directionless. It is structure born from freedom, learning shaped by authentic interest rather than imposed curriculum. At the heart of the Open Program lies a simple conviction: young people want to learn, not because they are told to, but because they are naturally wired for it.

When young people are given the space to choose, something remarkable happens. They begin to notice what excites them. They ask deeper questions. They take creative risks. And perhaps most importantly, they begin to trust themselves.

A young person who has never set foot in a woodshop might suddenly feel drawn to try. There is no pre-



Inspired by one of his favorite books, Vincent spends the afternoon in the Open Program workshop carefully shaping a homemade bow to give as a special gift to a family member.

requisite, no lengthy permission slip, no gatekeeping. They walk into the space, pick up a tool, with guidance from a facilitator, and begin. The goal is not mastery on the first attempt. It's about experience. It's about learning through doing. It's about discovering that mistakes are not failures, but stepping stones.

"I think I'm ready to use the saw today," says one youth after weeks of careful observation in the woodshop.

"I am going to sign up and read at group time now," another shares, inspired by watching peers take that step earlier in the year.

These moments are not small. They are milestones. They are affirmations of growth that cannot be measured by a test score. Each choice, each risk, each attempt is a young person taking their own journey at their own pace.

And no two journeys look the same. Some dive in quick-

ly. Others circle around an idea for weeks before stepping forward. Some need to observe. Others want to experiment right away. There is no right way, only their way.

Facilitators in the Open Program are not teachers in the traditional sense. They do not lecture, assign grades, or manage behavior through authority. Their role is subtler and, in many ways, more powerful: they hold space.

They provide materials, model curiosity, ask reflective questions and ensure emotional and physical safety so that exploration can thrive.

Sometimes they guide, sometimes they step back, and sometimes they simply witness. Their presence communicates a simple but profound message: I believe in your capacity to learn. I trust you.

And because of that trust, a young person can trust themselves.

OPEN
GROUP

THE JOURNEY TO THE

By Aliza Shinefield, Facilitator

RAINBOW FOREST



Each year, in the Open Group, young people embark on a new journey filled with hope, excitement, and perhaps, some caution as well. Who will they meet? What challenges will they encounter? What new knowledge will they gain? The opportunities for both self-discovery and discovering the world around them are vast and varied. Rich in invitations to try something new. They are trailblazers, leading their own personal voyage through the year. Often it is not the product at the end of the journey that is the true measure of what was gained along the way. Watching the young people begin their journey in the Open Group this fall, we have had the opportunity to witness incredible growth happening for our young people in small, magical moments along the way to the destination.

On the very first day of program, Open Group youth set out on a hike through the woods to find just the right branch to use in an art installation where they would paint and decorate the branches with fabric to welcome visitors to the Open Group space.

They were shown examples and ideas of how the final product could look but ultimately left to their own devices to choose the branch that spoke to them. Some young people ran through the brush, unafraid to jump right in. Others, more hesitant, gingerly stepped through the leaves, careful to be aware of every nook and gnarled vine in their path. While some went for the biggest branches they could carry, others were mindful to pick a branch that had just the right number of branches for their vision.

When it came time to paint, the young people quickly determined that

some of these super large branches were quite a lot of work! They teamed up together to help those with larger branches to tackle the large job of covering every part with color. The following week, each young person carefully chose fabric and yarn to tie and wrap around their branches before attaching them to posts outside of the Open Group space. In the end, they are all beautiful and unique representations of the wonderful young people in the Open Group.

At first glance, this was simply an art project with a goal to create an installation to welcome those who visit our space. Yet, there were so many meaningful learning moments that occurred through the process. The young people nervously navigating the wooded area were cheered on by other young people who either felt the same as them or were feeling more confident in the space. There was a sense of accomplishment when they made it back down the hill and saw how far they had come. The young person who went for the largest branch possible realized that the job of painting such a large surface required the help of others to accomplish the task of adorning it. There was frustration to overcome when the paint color a young person wished to use didn't immediately make it to their table and they had to wait for their turn for it. There was also pride and a sense of accomplishment when the young people had the opportunity to witness the final product. Each individual branch combined to make a beautiful rainbow forest. It is a representation of how unique and wonderful each young person is, and how incredible it is when we all work together.

Through trust, collaboration, and tackling personal challenges, Open Group youth created something uniquely theirs. Each branch reflects their individuality, and together they form a beautiful 'rainbow forest' as a testament to the magic that happens when process, support, and creativity come together.



Michael brushes vibrant orange paint onto his branch, watching the color brighten the dull natural wood.



Owen proudly shares his finished rainbow branch and invites the group to notice the way the fabric strips flutter in the breeze.



Alethea created a thoughtful color palette for her rainbow branch. Here, she brushes on the turquoise paint she intentionally selected.



Fiona pauses to appreciate her handiwork and determine if she would like to add additional fabric strips or yarn wrapping to her rainbow branch.



Bodhi ties a fabric strip to his branch, carefully spacing each one to create a sense of balance.



Group 1 transforms paper into pumpkins and themselves into pirates, superheroes, and creatures of their imagining—a full cast of characters celebrating the season together.



Noah, Annabelle, and Lincoln find the fun in contributing a sound and motion to a collective Group 2 'machine' with their peers—an impactful and amusing experience that demonstrates how each member has an essential and important role in the group, with a distinct impact on the whole of what we create together.



Open Program youth provide care and love to our sweet chickens. On one particular day, Sage found a beautiful green egg and shared her excitement with her peers.



Finch has spent some time during his Open Program days getting comfortable holding and snuggling our chickens. Little "Sweetums" feels safe by his side.



Leontine poses next to her handmade table after inspecting every edge and surface before prepping it for the final finish. Her attention to detail shows how craftsmanship in the wood shop is as much about patience and observation as it is about building.



Wally digs into a cuisenaire rod puzzle, testing different combinations to crack the code. Puzzle solving is a conversation between curiosity and persistence—his trial and error is how breakthrough sometimes happens.



After much waiting, Annie, Olivia, and Leo finally get to create the big volcano eruption they were hoping for and to test their predictions on which shape will explode the highest—the one with the narrowest opening pushed the lava up the highest and the one with the widest opening had the largest lava flow.



Youth in the Open Group program spent several weeks immersed in a straw marble-run project. Each youth sketched a design for the run they hoped to build, then spent several weeks transforming their two-dimensional drawings into functional three-dimensional structures. Here, Arlo and Bodhi examine the trouble spot where the marble repeatedly got stuck and work together to determine what adjustments might resolve the issue.



John collates his group's measurement expedition—the guesses they made, the actual numbers they discovered, and the surprising moments when estimates landed close or wildly off.



Mabel and Francie discover that they wore complimentary costumes to our all-campus Halloween celebration.



If goats can climb on tables, young people can too! Leo sports his 'one-of-a-kind' Nim-and-babies t-shirt as he and Rhea pose on the Open Program picnic tables with our sweet goats, Pip and Nim.



Group 2 engaged in different types of physical activity, and noted the varied impact on the writing process. Pictured here, Henry and Calliope orient themselves for a brief, timed upside down perspective, after which they sat down for some stream-of-conscious free writing.



During Monday Open Program, Daphne and Lucy amaze at how the water separates on their tray. They wondered aloud why the colors took so long to mix together.



The Choice A: Makershop Woodspace group pose with some of their creations over the past eight weeks. During their time using resources in both our Makerspace and Woodshop, youth created custom stickers, lightswitch covers, a table, custom t-shirts, and more.

GROUP
1

In Praise of the

Every morning at Open Connections begins with a journey—the winding, tree-lined driveway that leads us in, the conversations in the car, the small rituals of arriving. Families know that the word "journey" stretches far beyond that drive: it's the unfolding path of raising children, the meandering course of homeschooling, and the personal growth of each young person as they step into new experiences. Learning here mirrors those same kinds of journeys. It's not about racing in a straight line toward a single destination, but about finding our way through fresh understandings, building on what we already know, and sometimes playfully untangling a brand-new idea. Like walking that long driveway, discovery can surprise us with its twists, its unexpected turns, and the joy of finally seeing where it leads.

Growth often unfolds in ways we aren't able to predict. Like the quiet work of roots beneath the soil, so much of what matters most in our learning happens out of sight and in its own time. We can't always see it

WOBBLE

Mabel and Jett work alongside each other to measure the length of the slide in the Environment.

By Heather Hurley, Facilitator

"Growth often unfolds in ways we aren't able to predict. Like the quiet work of roots beneath the soil, so much of what matters most in our learning happens out of sight and in its own time."

happening—the connections being made, the confidence being built, the understanding taking shape. Trusting the journey means believing in young people, in ourselves, and in the power of community to hold and nurture this invisible work. All of this happens even when the destination feels nebulous and impossible to imagine, even when we can't yet name what's being cultivated in the dark.

A glimpse of the process came last year in Group 1 when we explored the idea of food webs. Instead of starting with neat diagrams or established categories, the group was handed a collection of words with illustrations and asked to make sense of them. Each group set out in a different direction—sorting and labeling in ways that reflected their own observations. Some were obvious, some unexpected, and some delightfully odd. Then came the chance to hear how other groups had approached the same pile. That sharing sparked fresh thinking, and soon the pieces were being reshuffled into entirely new patterns. What began as a jumble of leaves, seeds, and creatures slowly turned into webs of meaning that shifted each time we looked again. The power of the experience wasn't in "getting it right," but in realizing there are always multiple ways to see, connect, and make sense of the world.

That same spirit showed up again more recently when we explored measurement. Our home base was the Science Lab, full of tools to choose from. The challenges were open-ended: estimate first, then decide how best to measure. Some groups went for rulers, others for tape measures or yardsticks, each tool sparking its own strategy. The highlight was the driveway. First came our guesses about its length—some short, some wildly long—fol-

lowed by the trek outside to test them. The actual measurement surprised almost everyone. It was longer than we thought, and there was a collective buzz of delight at how far off our estimates had been. What mattered wasn't the precise number we landed on, but the excitement of discovery, the laughter at our miscalculations, and the new appreciation for just how big a space can feel when you measure it step by step.

The messy and raw moments: when a group's sorting system falls apart and needs rebuilding, when our estimates are wildly off and we have to recalculate, when we struggle to explain our thinking to others, this is where confidence is built. Tolerance for the "not knowing" or how to rethink an idea we were absolutely sure was going to work and it doesn't is the work of our lives. These moments teach us that being wrong isn't something to fear but something to learn from, that uncertainty is a natural part of understanding, and that the wobble in our step is often what helps us find our footing.

Both experiences—the food webs and the measurement challenges—remind us that journeys rarely move in straight lines. They twist, surprise, and invite us to pause and rethink along the way. At Open Connections, we don't treat learning as a march toward a single answer, but as an unfolding process of noticing, experimenting, and revisiting. Trusting the journey means trusting that the act of exploration itself is where the richest learning happens, even when we can't yet see the roots growing strong beneath the surface. And just like walking that long driveway each morning, the path may wind, but it always carries us somewhere new—somewhere we couldn't have imagined when we first set out.



Which weighs more: a stapler or a book? The answer matters less than the wondering—and the teamwork that gets you there. Charlie and Olivia use a triple beam balance to come to a proven conclusion.



What does 'community' look like when you sort it into words? Four minds discovering that our values aren't abstract—they're alive in how we show up for each other. Maka, Nova, Gracie and Lila sort words related to Open Connections, identifying the values that matter most to their community.

Trusting the Journey:

Lessons in Creativity, Collaboration, and Growth

By Kelly Dillon, Facilitator



When asked what "trust the process" meant to them, members of Group 2 responded with remarkably thoughtful clarity: "It means to wait and let things play out." "Trusting something will work when it seems confusing." "I think that it means to trust that there is a bigger part to something, even if it doesn't make sense right now." "It means going with the flow and trusting that people know what they're doing." These reflections speak to a shared understanding that growth often unfolds in uncertain, sometimes messy ways. When asked to give an example of this from their time together this fall, many pointed to one memorable experience: Team Nav-eggation. This challenge, which tasked teams with moving a bouncy egg through a winding course using only a paper cup, masking tape, and string, became a powerful metaphor for the importance—and the value—of trusting the journey.

In a challenge as unconventional as this, success wasn't guaranteed by technical prowess alone. Instead, it was built on

creativity, communication, adaptability—and most importantly, trust in the process.

Watching all three teams tackle this task with such distinct strategies and styles brought to light an essential truth: the journey matters just as much as the outcome.

At first glance, the task seemed deceptively simple. But as teams began designing their methods and assuming roles, the complexity revealed itself. How do you move a round, unpredictable object without letting it bounce out of control? Where should the string attach to the cup to allow maximum



Above: Group 2 Team "Nav-egg-ation" inspired some critical thinking and innovation. Henry, Calliope and Henry carefully test different iterations of string attachment points and angles to successfully maneuver a rubber egg through a path on the blacktop.

Left: Lincoln, Asher, Tanner, and Noah pause for a team photo before taking on phase 2 of the team building challenge: How to move a bouncy egg through a winding path. The only tools at their disposal—a paper cup, masking tape, and string.

Below: Josh, Luna, and Annabelle find they need to be on the same page if they are to succeed in the Group 2 Team Nav-egg-ation Challenge. Teamwork relies on a communication style that works for everyone involved.



control? How do you balance precision with speed, and communication with action? There was no clear “right way” to do it—and that was the point.

Each team faced moments of uncertainty. Initial ideas didn’t always work. Designs had to be adjusted. The egg took some unintended hops. But rather than letting frustration derail the effort, team members leaned into the process. They worked to listen to each other and to be heard, tested and retested their setups, and tried to allow failure to be a tool, not a threat. Trusting the journey meant accepting that not everything would go right the first time—and that each misstep held the potential to teach something new.

What stood out most was the uniqueness of each team’s solution. Some relied on tight coordination and synchronized movements. Others created innovative rigs that harnessed tension and balance. Each group adapted the materials in inventive ways, proving that limitations often spark the most creativity. The constraints of the challenge didn’t stifle innovation—they unlocked it.

Equally valuable was the way teams communicated. In such a hands-on, delicate task, clarity and patience were key. Some teams relied on designated roles and step-by-step plans. Others evolved their communication styles in real time, reacting fluidly to the egg’s unpredictable movements. No single method was better, yet all proved effective.

This highlighted another core benefit of trusting the journey: learning to value different perspectives and working styles.

By the end, all three teams had succeeded—not just in moving the egg, but in building something deeper: confidence, collaboration, and resilience. The finished course was the visible product, but the true outcome was the growth that happened along the way.

In life, much like in this challenge, we often don’t have all the answers upfront. We’re handed a set of tools—some useful, some puzzling—and asked to navigate winding paths. It’s easy to get caught up in wanting a perfect result. But the value lies in showing up, engaging fully, and trusting that the process, however messy, has purpose.

This activity was a powerful reminder that success isn’t always about having a flawless plan—it’s about having the courage to start, the flexibility to adapt, and the openness to learn. When we trust the journey, we allow space for growth, creativity, and connection. And sometimes, we even get a bouncy egg safely to the finish line. This is what Trusting the Journey looks like at Open Connections every day.

In Every Direction, Trust

By Michelle West, Facilitator

The first time it occurred to me that I might homeschool my own (not yet born) young people was in a class called Foundations of Education. I was working to complete a Master's degree in education and I was asked to read the essay, "The 7-Lesson School Teacher" by John Taylor Gatto. It is a scathing indictment of government schools penned by an award-winning public school teacher from New York City. Of the seven lessons that Mr. Gatto described, the one that struck me the most was the last: you can't hide. He described the hyper-surveillance of young people that was already familiar to me in my role as a public school teacher. Schools ask teachers to account for students' whereabouts, both in a building and on a chart of prescribed development. Trust does not enter the picture.

At Open Connections the adage, "Trust the journey," is a guiding principle in all that we do, both as parents and as facilitators. The decision to leave or skip traditional schooling is a leap of faith and the benefits are not always instant; the growth is sometimes incremental. Families new to homeschooling or unschooling may not yet have experienced the first joyous moment when that trust is rewarded. It might come as a book read, a puzzle solved, or a new strength uncovered. As the young people blossom and amaze us again and again, we gain practice biting our tongues, stifling our unsolicited instruction, and believing that they will find their own way. We become experts at trusting the youth.

Adults believing that young people will create lives of purpose and fulfillment on this unconventional path is essential, but it is not the end of the story. The young people too must trust the journey. When they join the OC community or return to the programs in September it is always as part of something new. Even when they are returning to some familiar faces, they are not yet a group. We leave the port a disparate collection of individuals and at journey's end we are a crew. Each member, then, must place their trust in the facilitators. Before this year is over they will each do hard things. We ask for their trust that it will be a safe place to try. We encourage them to believe in their own ability to grow and unfold in myriad and beautiful ways.

At OC, trust flows in every direction. It isn't a privilege granted by adults, but a principle that unlocks the full potential of learner-centered education.



"The young people too must trust"



Jack, Trey, and Madhava puzzle over how to make their bamboo structure sturdy using only a few attachments.



Maggie and Everleigh test the effectiveness of various antacids during a science experiment of their own design.



Jack, Madhava, Lee, Trey, Nate, and Isaac paint from life by the stream with watercolor pens.

ust the journey."

Experiencing the Journey through

NATURE

NATURA
GRO



There isn't a better example of the power of communities than in the natural world. Ecosystems HAVE to work together to be sustainable. To see this, one must experience the unknown, opening up and allowing all the senses to observe what is happening. It may feel overwhelming to glimpse a forest, meadow, or wetland and try to understand all that is happening there. But to a patient, quiet observer, the pieces of a beautiful cooperative system gradually reveal themselves.

In Open Connections' Naturalist Program, young people are given opportunities to make their own observations and be the quiet observer, not being given an answer or a particular destination to work towards. The Naturalist is all about the journey and the observations along the way. Some days, a walk on Campus leads to the woods. Someone asks a question about a berry they noticed growing along the trail and whether it's edible. A discussion ensues about who in the ecosystem eats the berry, whether or not it is native and beneficial or invasive and harmful. What happens when a bird eats it and discards the seed further into the forest or in another nearby property? During this journey and discussion, youth consider the many parts of the natural community, and the impact humans have on these processes.

Having youth sit on blankets in the middle of a meadow with a journal and pencil with no "answer" to get is a gift. What did you hear? Why might you hear a bird in the tree filled with berries? Why do the leaves sound so rough skirting across the parking lot? And when we eventually go back to those places, what new things can we hear? Why do we hear them at that time?

The sounds, the tastes, the smells, the sights, the feelings of the Naturalist journey all join together and help to understand the bigger picture. How the weather affects seasons affects the plants and wildlife, how plants and animals work together, when and why do mushrooms appear, when do the berries grow? Being a naturalist is about observing communities at work and discovering each individual's place in the larger puzzle. Every sound, sight, and sensation contributes to a deeper understanding of how life in the natural world, and in our learning communities, thrives through connection and cooperation.

NATURALIST GROUP



The group wanted to make Pokeberry Ink. The first step—collect pokeberry! This can be a messy endeavor, evident by Madhava's hand. Messy or not the group had a blast finding and collecting the berries.



While walking through the great field, Ash was fortunate enough to come across the remains of a whitetail deer.

To go from the creek bridge up to the tire swings you have to cut across the great field. This is where the Naturalists came across a whitetail deer, well what was left of her. Here Josh collects a "souvenir" to bring back to the room. We will use it later in the year for some drawing exercises.



Liv and Mabel share a special moment atop "The Stump", a favorite spot for youth. The Stump can serve as a gathering spot, a mountain to climb, a launch pad, or anything else the imagination can dream up!





Eve becomes more comfortable using a sewing machine with assistance from Jane (Facilitator) during the Choice B: Sewing program.



Open Program youth are thrilled with the new water pump and the extra-large water storage tank. Xander tests it out after setting up a pipe system to carry water to the sand pit—and it works perfectly!



With the skillful addition of fur and a textured fabric nose, Chase completed his wolf mask.



For his SYL Independent Project, Brian is learning how to play the cello and use music editing software. His goal is to add a cello track to an original song he recorded at a recording studio.

During some outdoor time, Chris snuggled Jeffery, one of our sweet hens, and gave her a little tour of the Open Connections property.



Kaspien is deeply focused on building electrical circuits. With Snap Circuits, he explores a world of sounds, flashing lights, and even spinning gadgets—each creation sparking excitement and curiosity.



Delilah and Alethea are exploring the book *365 Things to Make and Do* for inspiration on what to create during self-directed time. Learning how to manage and make the most of self-directed time is an important skill, and this book has become a popular resource for sparking creative ideas.



Landon poses with a character she created during Open Group self-directed time using materials from the art and recycling center.



Owen whittles a stick after a demonstration of safe whittling practices during Open Group's "Day in the Woods".





Jackson and Serafina, full of smiles and laughter, enjoy a lively conversation together on the sunlit porch of the outdoor environment.



Leo carefully takes his time turning each screw as he creates his project. Young people in the Open Program work with real tools developing skills to keep themselves, others, and the tools safe.



Bell, eager and ready, puts on her safety goggles and works to cut her piece of wood in half with a saw.



It has become an annual tradition for the youth in Open Group to spend a full "Day in the Woods"—basking in nature and appreciating this special part of OC's beautiful property. This year's outing included building and tending a fire, roasting cinnamon-coated apples, whittling sticks, making forts, using field microscopes to examine natural objects, eating lunch by the fire, and romping through the woods. Here, Juniper and Ari enjoy the delicious apples they roasted in foil packets over the fire.

Nate finds that his second mosaic flower pot in Choice B: Mosaics is coming along more easily—he's better informed having navigated the nuances of the process his first go-around.



The Naturalists gather around a campfire in the white pines to cook lunch after cleaning up around the tree platform.



A stuffy has a new table and chair thanks to the work of an Open Program youth.



By Linda Soffer, Sheila Pai, Facilitators and the SYL Youth



The current band of SYL travellers model their masks and headpieces that each began with a single sheet of aluminum foil and a piece of masking tape, a project they received with significant skepticism. Despite their doubts, each youth forged ahead and has created a strong base, ready for the next layer of media that will add color and texture to their pieces. Back row: Søren, Thomas, Locke, Jack, Brian, Uma, Francie. Front row: Lincoln, Hazel, Chase, Linda (Facilitator).

Trust is a tricky thing when it comes to teens, who are highly capable while also being impulsive and unpredictable at times. Unlike their younger peers, teens can arrive in the Shaping Your Life program as weary travellers, already carrying baggage acquired along their varied educational paths. This can take the form of negative self-talk or unproductive work habits that can lead to teens not even trusting themselves, let alone their ability to create the lives of which they dream.

The SYL program utilizes the structure of long-term projects (like Symposium, Independent Projects, and the whole group collaborative project-which often takes the form of an overnight trip) balanced with shorter term service work, teambuilding, and a variety of hands-on activities in all disciplines, designed to embrace the wholeness of each teen. We aim to support our teens in strengthening trust and belief in themselves and in the group, alongside an awareness of the resources and support that is here

for them and within them as they navigate their unique journeys both throughout the SYL program and after graduation. When asked what they think it means to “trust the journey” SYL members identified three key elements to consider when wayfinding:

1. *The Traveller's Mindset*
2. *The Toolkit*
3. *The Route*



The Traveller's Mindset: Know & Trust Thyself



Group games may sound, literally, like all fun & games, but they can be a significant challenge for youth who are less confident and comfortable with interaction centered around physical activity. Rather than avoiding this discomfort, we practice stepping out of our comfort zone by regularly playing games with our whole group.

As individual travellers, there are essential qualities that we aim to develop within ourselves to assist us in making the choices and decisions needed on the journey ahead. Important aspects of this mindset include motivation to get started & keep going; perspective that acknowledges both being aware of the next steps we need to take, as well as keeping our eyes on the end goal; flexibility to adapt and change course as needed; perseverance to keep going, get back up on your feet after you fall, and see failure as an opportunity to grow; and stepping out of your comfort zone to try new things, meet new people, and risk sharing your thoughts & ideas out loud.



Like planting seeds, starting any journey requires some faith in the future. Uma and Hazel carefully begin the SYL square foot gardening project in the greenhouse, placing their seeds mindfully in the raised bed. A week later, the group was thrilled to already see some sprouts.



The Toolkit: Accessing Resources & Support



Lincoln creates a kanban for his Independent Project, designing and creating a chess set. This planning tool will assist him in visualizing the steps needed to complete his project, manage his workflow, and increase his efficiency.

When we have a toolkit we can spend more time enjoying the journey and learning new things rather than putting out fires (though there is plenty of real learning in doing this too!)

Preparation has physical, emotional, and cognitive aspects: gathering needed supplies & information, identifying resources, and establishing a support system. You can get a lot farther when you have resources and support instead of doing it on your own. Some key elements to put in our toolkits for the journey include vision and planning, research & reflection, maintaining a sense of direction, and self care & nourishment.



SYL incorporates a number of opportunities for youth to develop and apply their reflection skills. A new project this year was the "Origin Story Speech" that required each group member to compose and present a 2-3 minute self-introduction that focused on one significant life influence. Here, Chase tells the group about the ways making his own YouTube videos has had a positive impact.



The Route: Charting a Course into the Unknown

When confused, bored, or in need of clarity, you might find your way by consulting a “compass” in the form of a facilitator, peers, or even yourself to get back on track.

While sometimes starting is the hardest part, you can simply decide to start where you are (not necessarily all in the same place), accepting that you are exactly where you are meant to be.

When sitting at a fork in the road you might be scared to pick the “wrong” path, but it can help to dive in and trust that it will work out.



Starting the program year, like beginning any new journey, can be fraught with apprehension. The SYL Intro Meeting, held a week prior to the beginning of the program year, serves as a release valve, giving group members a chance to meet and connect in a less threatening context. Here, Søren, Jack, Francie, Chase, Brian, Thomas, Locke, Lincoln, Hazel, and Uma, play a cooperative game at the Intro Meeting.



Art projects invite innovation, creative thinking, and finding one's own way. Here, Jack follows his instincts in using an alternative approach to his mask, working to manifest a vision he sketched out ahead of time, while being open to the process as it materializes.



Encouraging youth to work through solutions and decision-making together helps to hone their abilities to guide themselves. Søren, Locke, Jack, and Lincoln discuss options for 2 distinct field research projects focused on a shared interest in birds.

Getting lost can feel stressful, but sometimes you need to get off the beaten track for an unexpected adventure that can stimulate new ideas and invite insight.

You will encounter obstacles, this is inevitable. There is value in facing and working through challenges, rather than trying to avoid them.



Brian, Lincoln, and Francie delight in discovery while examining a sample of pond water at the conclusion of a habitat study.



Heather (Facilitator) supports Jack on the ladder as he and Chase remove a dead branch dangling too close to the fire pit, while Søren (background) clears some ground weeds during a group clean up in the White Pines area of campus. This real work experience afforded youth an opportunity to work together, take risks, and have fun while serving the community, both giving and receiving trust & support.

Believing in ourselves, and knowing we have care and support, we find the courage to take one step and then another, even when we are steeped in uncertainty, fear, or confusion. Sometimes there is just a sliver of clarity to be your guide, and surprisingly you discover that despite what appears on the surface, you already have everything you need. Most importantly, through showing up in the SYL program, we learn to trust that even if we don't know the way or are not yet sure of our destination, our traveler's mindset, tool kit, and map will serve us as we continue to build the lives we imagine.



Keira spends time creating a frame at the Open Program crafting table.



On a Thursday in the Open Program, Adeline and Adelaide set up a bustling little shop, selling mushrooms, berries, rice bags, and more. Each item was carefully labeled with a price tag and offered for sale using their homemade money.



Peter dips his finger in the cold water of the Upper Pond during an Open Program campus hike.



The lab table in the Open Program is a popular space for experimenting with color gradation, potion making, and sensory play. On this day, Emmy carefully prepares her vials with food coloring before she begins her experiments.



Uma, Hazel and Søren pose with our enormous radishes. The first official harvest from the OC greenhouse!



Adeline and Everett engage in a scavenger hunt during their time in the Thursday Open Program. The two take a moment to collaborate on the hunt and help each other find some of the more challenging pictures.



Ben, Jack, and Nate take on a logic challenge as they create new territories for fire and ice dragons who, everyone knows, cannot cohabitate!



During OC's annual Cardboard Challenge Day, Juniper creates a marble run, while Landon builds a cardboard car.



Matteo carves, practicing the techniques he'll use in an upcoming whittling project. A block of soap becomes an animal under patient hands.



Gabriella dissects a barn owl pellet, discovering the tiny bones of the critter it fed on. After retrieving the tiny bones, she examines them under a microscope.



Serafina and Fiona share a joyful moment on the tire swing, swaying beneath the trees on a beautiful autumn day in the woods.



Lincoln, Luna, and Tanner collaborate to design a way to insulate a pumpkin so that it will remain intact for the Group 2 Great Pumpkin Drop.



Violet transfers her design onto her pencil pouch, beginning her batik project to create a colorful, one-of-a-kind piece.



Bell and Daphne spend time at the Open Program art table painting and decorating their fall pumpkins. The two enjoy connection and conversation while they work.



Open Program friends gather for a youth created game using dice, homemade money, and multiple additional objects discovered around the Open Program space.



Locke troubleshoots how to achieve the needed level of precision and accuracy in movement of the electromagnetic pendulum he is building as a major component of his SYL Independent Project.

Choice A: **Drawing and Painting**

By Kelly Dillon, Facilitator

Each day begins with exploring an art element like line, shape, or value. We study artworks to see how artists use these elements, and youth try a new medium weekly. Each exercise sparks curiosity, voice, and choice—encouraging self-expression and creative risk-taking. Art isn't about perfection; it's about exploring, experimenting, and growing. By trusting the journey, young artists build confidence and discover the joy of making art in their own unique way.



Maks investigates line as an element of design while engaged in a foundational exercise of blind contour drawing, intended to develop eye-to-hand dexterity, while also supporting what we see as opposed to what we know.

Choice A: **Makershop? Woodspace?**

By Rick Sleutaris & Chris McNichol, Facilitators

This one-of-a-kind, first-time offering provided youth an open-ended opportunity to create using resources in both the Woodshop and Makerspace. Trusting the journey was crucial as we provided the time and space for each youth to engage in their own way—without the well intentioned, but sometimes derailing adult suggestions, guiding questions, and unspoken expectations. Each youth interacted with these spaces differently—some spending the majority of their time in the woodshop, others rarely leaving the Makerspace, some came with a fully formed idea for their project while others explored a variety of tools without any big idea in mind.

While in the Woodshop, learning to “trust the process” is just as important as mastering the tools. Youth discover that projects don't come together all at once—each measurement, cut and joint is a step toward the bigger picture. Mistakes become lessons, patience builds confidence, and the satisfaction of seeing a project take shape reinforces the value of persistence. By slowing down and trusting the process, students not only create with wood, but also develop resilience, focus, and a deeper respect for craftsmanship.

Mabel assembles a “button box” she created for a family member. Before final assembly Mabel took the front of the box to the Makerspace and used the laser cutter to etch a heart in it.



Lincoln shows what it means to trust the process as he learns new tools and techniques in the wood shop. Starting with a full sheet of plywood, he carefully measures, lines up his cuts, and works step by step to break it down into usable pieces—proving that patience and focus turn big challenges into manageable parts.



On week one, Arthur's goal was to explore both spaces and familiarize himself with the variety of tools available. Here he poses with a sticker he designed using Adobe Illustrator and printed on the Roland vinyl printer/cutter. He attached his sticker to a piece of wood cut using the Glowforge, a laser etcher/cutter.

After a first pass at exploding volcanoes, the group decided to go bigger and to explore ways to increase the explosion height by building new volcanoes using three different large vase shapes – one with straight sides, one with concave sides and one with a bulbous base and narrow opening. They also experimented with different chemical combinations including Pop Rocks. Here Leo puts the first layer of papier mache on a volcano that will be textured and painted before testing.



Choice A: Creative Geography

By Sheila Pai, Facilitator

In Geography, the young folks' fascination with building and erupting volcanoes can become a powerful launchpad for deeper learning. With a facilitator's guidance, that spark of curiosity can open into rich exploration about tectonic plates, volcanic types, mapping skills, and broader geographic terms and concepts. The ability to trust and support the evolving learning as it unfolds engenders space for discovery where the oohs and aha moments become memories for a lifetime or even inspiration for a meaningful future.

Choice B: Storytelling Through Film

By Sarah Becker, Facilitator

In Creative Storytelling Through Film, young folks have stepped behind (and in front of) the camera to bring their ideas to life. From brainstorming and storyboarding to filming and editing, they've discovered that every creative process has its twists, turns, and unexpected moments of magic. By trusting the journey, together, they're learning that the best stories often unfold in ways no script could predict.



Uma, in full costume, works to film an intimate scene featuring Everleigh and Emma that will be featured in an upcoming piece in the OC StoryFest.



Lee and Nate show off a set piece that the entire cast and crew collaborated on for the film, "The Montgomery Case."



Isaac shares with Zeke some features of the editing software that he is familiar with from previous film projects.



A group of folks (Madhava, Lee, Everleigh, Nate, Uma, Eve, Magnolia, Andi, and Emma) involved in a larger-scale film project together gather to watch the first cut draft of their collaborative project.

Choice Pro•gram

[chòis prō-gram] : noun

Meets on Wednesdays and provides youth an opportunity to spend significant time *DIVING DEEP* into topics mostly of *THEIR CHOICE*. Each eight-week session consists of a morning and an afternoon topic separated by time to eat lunch, socialize, enjoy the outdoors, and play a game or two. Different topic areas are explored every eight weeks and typically utilize a variety of campus resources including the Makerspace, Multimedia Room, Woodshop, kitchens, Art Studio, and the outdoors.

Choice B: Preserving Food

By Heather Gosse, Facilitator

The concept of trusting the process applies to facilitators as well as young people! On the first day of Preserving Food, the group expressed a lot of interest in making mozzarella cheese. I'd never made mozzarella before, but it is one of the few types of cheese that can conceivably be made in under two hours. It took a leap of faith to begin the two-hour session with two gallons of milk, a few other ingredients, and an untried recipe, but together, we followed the instructions and made some very tasty cheese!



The process of cheesemaking was already well underway, citric acid and rennet having caused the milk to coagulate into a large custard-like mass. After we cut the mass into separate curds with a knife, Madhava and Andi gently stirred the curds as they heated them. As indicated in the recipe, the curds started to expel the whey, getting smaller and denser. It was rather magical to watch the cheese forming before our eyes!

Masked up for safety while mixing grout - Choice B: Mosaics (Emma, Everleigh and Maggie pictured here) filled in the gaps on flower pots and picture frames decorated with patterns of colorful tile, bringing another level of very satisfying completion to these projects.



Choice B: Mosaics

By Kelly Dillon, Facilitator

Choice B: Mosaics folks are encouraged to trust the journey—understanding that great things are built one piece at a time. Beginning with small-scale projects like flower pots and picture frames, helped youth build skills, confidence, and creative voice. These hands-on experiences prepared and inspired them to plan and craft a mosaic mural, continuing the project in the Farmhouse silo that was crafted many years ago. Along the way, we learn that mistakes, experimentation, and patience are all part of the process—and that each step matters in creating something meaningful.

The Pollinator Garden

By Julie Smith, Resident Nature Lover



What does it take to belong to a community, and how does one learn to fit in? At Open Connections, community members are invited and encouraged to bring their ideas to life, creating initiatives and events that reflect their passions and curiosities. Staff, in turn, trusts the unique journey of each person.

When the idea for a Pollinator Garden was proposed, it was met with open arms and wholehearted support. In a short time, the garden blossomed into more than just a physical space. It has become a gathering place, a symbol of belonging, and a promise of life that will, hopefully, continue to flourish for years to come.

Gardening is a community building activity and a journey that has seemed to speak to many people at OC. What was once a patch of grass outside the Farmhouse held a dream of flowers and grasses filled with butterflies and bees has become a garden of native plants growing their roots and reaching towards the sun. One of the most amazing parts of planting this garden was how the invitations to help plant were received during the summer. So many families and friends showed up to help, some who have never even picked up a shovel. People were able to garden side-by-side, lost in their conversations, new families and existing families, younger and older folks alike.

The opportunities that plants and digging in the soil provide for people to connect are endless.

Now as the last of the leaves are fluttering down and everything in nature is settling down for a long winter's sleep, we trust that the little plants that were so lovingly tucked in the soil are safe and sound. We trust that we will see their green sprouts this spring with the promise of flowers that will feed the butterflies and bees we dreamed of when the garden was just a hope. And we trust that the Community will continue this journey with us, celebrating our wild friends who visit and continue to steward the garden – together (even when it's messy).



In the Open Program, Asher devotes his morning to planning, sawing, and carefully attaching pieces of wood to build his own adze for carving. Some days, an idea comes to us fully formed, and we're eager to get started right away.



During OC's annual Cardboard Challenge Day, Theo uses string to create straps for his cardboard jet pack.



Keira carefully works with felt and hot glue, crafting a delicate and beautifully detailed bird to gift her grandmother for her birthday. Each piece of felt is placed with patience and care, a reflection of the love and thoughtfulness behind her handmade creation.



Team *Teary Pumpkin*, Henry, Jack, Calliope, and Annabelle, pauses for a team photo with their well insulated pumpkin. Will it survive the 3-story drop during the Group 2 Great Pumpkin Drop?



Rhian, Maggie, and Everleigh express themselves in Seussical fashion for the all-campus Halloween celebration held in the Gathering Space.



Lucy, pictured, and her friend Fiona repurposed an old craft project and added decorations inspired by a favorite book, Jan Brett's *Mossy*. This collaborative effort gave them a wonderful opportunity to practice communication skills as they shared ideas, made decisions together, and brought their vision to life.



Luna pauses to consider what's next after her team solves 'something pink' among the list of prompts for a Group 2 photography scavenger hunt.



Alethea uses a field microscope to examine pieces of moss and turkey tail fungus during Open Group's "All Day in the Woods."

DEVELOPMENT CORNER

Dear Friends of Open Connections,

At Open Connections, we don't follow a curriculum, instead, we follow the lead of the young people that we are on this journey with. Each one charts their own path, explores their own interests, and works to discover what truly inspires them. And as these folks navigate that journey, they are wholly supported by a community that trusts them to learn, grow, and lead, in their own way.

This year, we're inviting you to trust the journey with us. Your support helps create the spaces, resources, and opportunities that allow our community of young people to take risks, ask questions, and discover their own answers. Every contribution, big or small, fuels experiences that spark curiosity, creativity, and confidence.

By investing in Open Connections today, you are investing in the next chapter of exploration, growth, and possibility for every learner who walks through our doors. Together, we ensure that our community remains a place where young people can be fully themselves and chart fulfilling and meaningful paths.

Thank you for trusting in our journey, and for being a part of theirs.

With gratitude,
Sarah Becker

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YEARS



All hands on deck to install the mural designed and prepared by Choice B: Mosaics, Maggie, Everleigh, Emma, Nate, Lee, Isaac and Levi (not pictured here). It's exciting to see this project take shape and know that it will be a lasting, treasured campus artifact to be enjoyed for generations.



On a sunny afternoon in the Open Program, Rhea and Nora giggle as they bury their legs in the sand, enjoying their time together in the sand pit.



Charlie drills a hole in his block while Matteo holds it steady as they work together in the woodshop. Group 1 is creating a Tower of Values to display in their new space.



In Choice B: Preserving Food, our first experiment addressed the question of how different concentrations of sugar, salt, and vinegar affected the germination of radish seeds. This was a proxy for examining how these chemicals, commonly used in preserving food, affect the growth of organisms in general. Here, Eve and Zeke create different concentrations of salt solution, which turned out to be highly effective at preventing radish seed germination even at very low concentrations.



Ari strengthens his fine motor skills and spatial awareness while using rubber bands to create shapes on the geoboard.



Nova uses natural inks made from berries, dirt, water and chalk, exploring ancient cave painting techniques as part of G1's ongoing storytelling investigation.



In Group 1, Gracie figures out how to take her paper experiments with masking fluid and watercolors into hot wax on fabric—bringing her exploration to the next level.



FREEDOM *to*
LEARN *and*
CREATE

