

# VOICES

The newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project

August 2016

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## Mission Statement

Touchstones believes in a world where people of all backgrounds, beliefs, and ideologies engage in mindful and collaborative discussion to address complex local and global issues.

## Touchstones in Haiti: Exciting Expansion

Touchstones materials and method have been used for more than 20 years in programs in Haiti, where it is known as *Wonn Refleksyon*. However, only recently have translations of entire Touchstones Teacher's Guides been in use in Haiti. Beginning in 2012, *Touchstones Volume A* was translated into Haitian Kreyol through our partnership with [Children's Place International](#) (CPI), and support from the Rossman Family Foundation. At the time, CPI was launching a new multi-year program called Youth Ventures in the commune of Cap Haitien for youth afflicted with life-altering illnesses. Touchstones became part of its core programming during that first phase. Now, four years later, Youth Ventures has completed an entire programmatic cycle and is expanding to two additional sites and groups of participants. Touchstones will again be part of the first year programming at each site.



In Port au Prince this fall, Haiti Partners, with whom we have been associated for many years, will implement *Touchstones Volume A* in Kreyol. Haiti Partners runs a school called [Children's Academy and Learning Center](#) (CALC), and Touchstones will be an integral part of the school's professional and community development. Touchstones is able to provide the instructional materials for this project and additional program support thanks to funding received from the Laurie Michael's Advised Fund at the Aspen Community Foundation. Program Coordinator Benaja Antoine will run weekly Touchstones meetings with 23 participants,

including teachers, school administrators, and parents of children in the school. This group's weekly work will dedicate time to exploring and practicing Touchstones discussion leadership in a participant-centered and collaborative learning environment. The long-term shared goal for this initial project is to lay the groundwork for *Touchpebbles* and *Touchstones* curricula to be translated for teachers and students at CALC as the school grows and adds additional grades of students. Stay tuned for updates starting this fall!

- Stefanie Takacs, Executive Director

## A Retreat for the Future

Chris Howard, recently appointed president of [Robert Morris University](#) (RMU), is a person with vision. He always seeks new ground from which to achieve a wider perspective. Whether serving as president of Hampden-Sydney (a 200 year old, very traditional, all male college of 2,000 students in southern Virginia), or of Robert Morris (an urban university of 8,000 students in the Pittsburgh region), Chris has been a leader who strives for the best ways to develop his team. For years now, that has meant bringing in Touchstones.



In the first few days of August, I along with two faculty from Harvard Business School conducted a presidential retreat on RMU's campus. What was the goal for this retreat? We wanted to help this leadership team bring their values to the surface-specifically, their values for their institution-assess those values, and refine what they proposed for the next decade. I began the retreat with a Touchstones discussion of invisibility and blindness. What is invisible to us, and to what are we blind? We used Touchstones selections from the opening of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, as well as a short piece by William James entitled "On a Certain

"Blindness in Human Beings" to explore these topics. After the whole-group discussion concluded, we each gave it a grade and explored our own blindness: what had been invisible to us in our discussion with one another? After a break, we returned to our Touchstones work to examine Francis Bacon's claims of the causes, which he details as four barriers or idols that can blind us to what is in front of us. After preparing ourselves as a group and with these topics, we moved on to discuss a questionnaire they had completed concerning RMU's previous and future values.



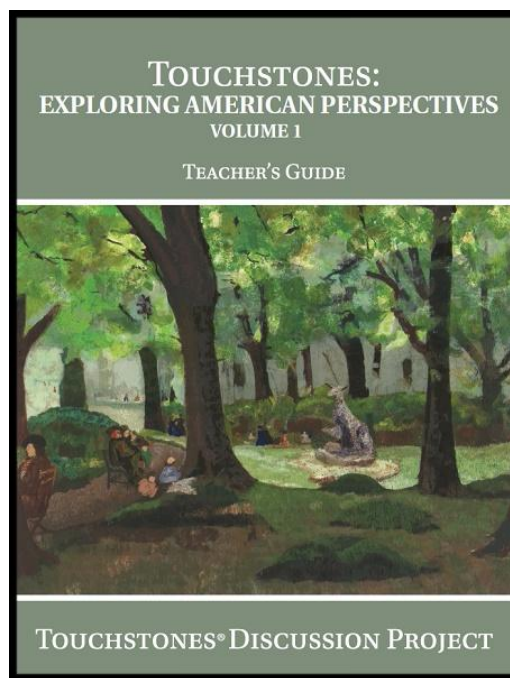
My two Harvard colleagues then took the exploration further that afternoon and the following morning. Professor Josh Margolis used the famous Harvard case study method to explore competition and institutional identity, and Professor Jan Rivkin, the next morning, examined the case of Ryan Air in order to look at the complex dimensions of strategic decisions. We all felt significant steps had

been taken and were delighted to join with Chris in glimpsing a new horizon for a four year university. Equally, we were all pleased to experience how two different pedagogical approaches, that of Touchstones and Harvard Business School, could meld together to reveal new possibilities.

- Howard Zeiderman, President

## A New Touchstones Volume Hits the Shelves

The Touchstones Discussion Project has released our newest book, *Touchstones: Exploring American Perspectives, Volume I*, to address the ever increasing need for educational platforms that overcome cultural and institutional barriers to academic success. The experiences of Black and African American writers, poets, philosophers, and visual artists featured in this book serve as powerful tools for students' shared exploration of uniquely American perspectives.



The lessons in *Exploring American Perspectives, Volume I* highlight the ways in which our cultural assumptions shape our perspectives. The passages and works from African American voices in this new book are clear and vibrant statements of the challenges, struggles, and successes that humans face in overcoming obstacles. With the texts presented as tools, students using this volume will engage in self-reflection on issues of power, legitimacy, respect, and community. And through Touchstones' structured approach to building cooperative discourse, students will learn and practice essential communication and collaborative leadership skills as part of their socio-emotional development.

This volume is the first in our new series that presents works exclusively from the Americas. The next volume will feature women writers, artists, poets, scientists, philosophers, and political leaders.

## Touchstones Giving Tuesday: Supporting the Women's Prison Program

*"The crowd at the happy hour in June was filled with energy and excitement about Touchstones' Women's Prison Project. But best yet, it brought so many people together who care about Touchstones in a fun atmosphere to learn about a serious cause." ~Alexandra Fotos, Touchstones Volunteer of the Year 2015*



In 2014 and 2015, Touchstones participated in the Great Give, an online 24-hour fundraising project sponsored by the Community Foundation of Anne Arundel County to engage people in supporting local non-profits. This spring, CFAAC decided not to host the event. Based on the success Touchstones had during each of the prior Great Gives, we decided to hold our own day-long fundraising campaign. We chose Tuesday, June 28th as our day of giving. We

called it "Touchstones Giving Tuesday."

The theme of the day was based on the Maya Angelou quote, "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside of you." This theme was chosen because the money raised by Touchstones would be applied in full to our program at the Maryland Correctional Institute for Women at Jessup (MCI-W). The participants in this program are learning the invaluable skills of self-regulation, self-expression, and reflective thinking. They are also learning together to lead their Touchstones discussions.

Touchstones Giving Tuesday culminated with a lively happy hour at the local Annapolis establishment, Café 49 West. Prison volunteers and Touchstones staff shared moving personal accounts from their work within the women's prison and offered unique insights into the need for Touchstones discussions with incarcerated women. Nearly 50 donors contributed more than \$11,000 to ensure this programming continues to empower and connect women in great need. In just its first year and thanks to everyone who has supported this endeavor, Touchstones programming at MCI-W has engaged more than 150 women!

Touchstones programs and supporters are found all over the world, so it's always a treat to have an in-person gathering where Touchstones staff, program participants, donors and friends get together to share their love of Touchstones and also to support an exciting and significant new program.

- Jenn Macris, Advancement Coordinator

## Touchstones in Schools - All Kinds of Schools

# Back to School

*Back to School*: an expression that conjures vivid images of school buses, shopping for school supplies, and wondering who will be in your homeroom class. We at Touchstones Discussion Project (TDP) are preparing for "back to school" with anticipation and excitement. *Touchpebbles* and *Touchstones* classes will be back in session, providing children with skills that enable them to become active agents in their own education.

Student-centered learning happens with practice and with the right tools, like carefully selected texts that bring an additional perspective into the classroom. The use of primarily non-contemporary texts aids students in examining their own contemporary perspectives through discussion. This methodology empowers students to cooperate and even lead one another across cultural and societal borders.

*Touchpebbles*, TDP's elementary curriculum, uses fables and stories to reinforce empathy, and to explore topics such as loyalty, revenge, fidelity, and deception. The *Touchstones* volumes, geared for grades 6 and above, are where students become participants in examining and discussing power structures and issues that are present in differing cultures.

For TDP, "back to school" also means the opportunity to provide professional development and workshops. Here are some of the exciting programs ahead:



\* **Learning Community Charter School** (Jersey City, NJ): new teacher training and mentoring for 3rd-5th grade teachers; creation of a Touchstones Teacher Evaluation Team for Professional Development

\* **Montessori Community School of Charleston** (Charleston, SC): a teacher workshop led by our Executive Director Stefanie Takacs; this opportunity represents significant outreach into the Charleston community and complements the work TDP is fostering through the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art (HICA)

\* **West Island College School** (Alberta, Canada): teacher observations and coaching, also led by Stefanie; WICS is implementing Touchstones at multiple grade levels after observing the program in action at Trinity College School.

\* **Middle Tennessee State University** (Murfreesboro, TN): a cohort of master teacher candidates and public school teachers will receive professional development and learn about implementation for new schools; this is just one

example of our growing relationships with Colleges of Education in various parts of the country.

\* **Frederick Douglass Academy 1** (New York City): a group of FDA 1 students will use our newest book, *Exploring American Perspectives, Volume I*, for a discussion led by Howard Zeiderman and Dino Murphy (who first started using Touchstones decades ago at the Edmund Rice School in Harlem). The discussion will be filmed by acclaimed documentary filmmaker Robert Wagner. Check out some of Robert's latest work featuring jazz artists at [www.robertwagnerfilms.com](http://www.robertwagnerfilms.com).

Back to school is a busy time for TDP, as for so many others. We are looking with anticipation toward new opportunities within our existing base, as well as reaching out to new schools and markets. Students are getting back to school, and we can't wait to hear about them succeeding, all across the nation, because of dedicated educators like you and life-changing programs like Touchstones.

- Craven Engels, Director of Global Business Development

## Partnership in Charleston

Touchstones Discussion Project is in the midst of a significant and exciting partnership with the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, HICA, located in Charleston, SC. This collaboration centers around the art and thought of Fahamu Pecou, an artist based in Atlanta. A local newspaper, the [Post and Courier ran a great article](#) on the Pecou exhibition. **Do or Die: Affect, Ritual, Resistance**, which opens this Friday.

Karole Turner Campbell, who introduced HICA to Touchstones gives her own assessment of the session:

*The Touchstones workshop held on Saturday, August 13th, at the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art was a training workshop composed of a very diverse group of Charlestonians, in terms of age, gender, race, occupation, etc. The workshop used printed text as a focus and was a training session for the participants on how to apply similar discussion leadership techniques to discussions on visual images. The artworks were five images from the Fahamu Pecou exhibition "Do or Die: Affect, Ritual, Resistance."*



*Workshop participants explore leadership techniques during the morning session at the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art.*

Karole's reflection on the workshop continues to describe the afternoon session:

*Organized into five groups after lunch, we then collaboratively worked to create lesson plans for discussions around five works in the Pecou exhibition. This was done and done well by all participants which, I think, ushered in a new, powerful community and education collaboration. In this day and age too often schools are losing funding in both literacy and arts programs. This new Touchstones/Halsey Project is bringing professional development, literacy, and arts enrichment to some of the most underserved children in Charleston, and it's FREE!*



Karole Turner Campbell works with her group to create one of five lesson plans for the upcoming HICA/Chucktown Squash Scholars Discussion Program with local high school students from Charleston's Title 1 schools.



## Are you the Next Touchstones Teacher of the Year?

The nomination period for the Cynthia M. Barry Touchstones Teacher of the Year Award is still open! Before October 1, submit your own nomination or nominate a colleague whose work with *Touchpebbles* or *Touchstones* is changing their students' lives and the world around us. [Click here to access the nomination forms today!](#)

For more information about this award and prior recipients, explore the [Touchstones website](#).



2015 Touchstones Teacher of the Year Shanelle Muse (r) accepts her award from Cynthia Barry last December

## Where is Touchstones Going Next?

Here are some schools and districts that purchased Touchstones materials this summer for implementation during the 2016-2017 academic year:

**CA:** Granite Bay Montessori, Tulare Joint Union HS

**CO:** Jarrow Montessori, Salida Montessori

**FL:** Mariner Middle

**MD:** St Mary's County PS, Anne Arundel County PS, Our Lady of Good Counsel HS

**NC:** Sterling Montessori Charter School

**NJ:** Learning Community Charter School

**NM:** Espanola Public Schools

**NY:** Frederick Douglass Academy 1

**PA:** Harrisburg Academy, Grey Nun Academy, Greystone Academy

**TN:** Currey Ingram Academy, Middle Tennessee State Univ. College of Education

**TX:** Corpus Christi Montessori, Esprit International School, Knoxville Jewish Day School, Tomorrow's Promise Montessori

**UT:** Elizabeth Academy Upper Elementary School

**VA:** Language Stars, Alexandria

**WA:** Seattle School District No. 1, Shoreline after-school group

**Canada:** Trinity College School in Ontario, West Island College School in Alberta, Fraser Academy in Vancouver, James McKinney Elementary in British Columbia

Thank you to the teachers and principals and everyone who invests in Touchstones in order to invest in their students!

Join us in this vital work to build critical thinkers, collaborative leaders, and community through discussion.

**Make a gift in support of Touchstones programs today.**

If you have already made a gift to Touchstones this year, thank you!  
Together, we are changing the world one discussion at a time.

*The Touchstones Discussion Project is a registered 501(c)3 nonprofit organization to which donations are tax deductible to the fullest extent of the law. A copy of the Touchstones Discussion Project's current financial statement may be requested in writing from the Touchstones' offices. Please send your correspondence to Touchstones, P.O. Box 2329, Annapolis, MD 21404-2329, telephone (410) 604 3309. Or you may request the financial statements from the Maryland Secretary of State for the cost of copies and postage.*

***Touchstones: Building critical thinkers and collaborative leaders***