



# VOICES

The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project

[www.touchstones.org](http://www.touchstones.org)

## Building Community through Discussion Everywhere

by Jenn Macris

During the first week of May, Touchstones organized “Touchstones Week” to promote civil discourse and build community engagement and connection. This week-long celebration brought people together to engage in lively discussion and the exploration of new perspectives.

Highlights of the week included more than 25 different community organizations and civic groups hosting discussions around the U.S. and the world. Touchstones hosted its own local event on May 2nd with over 40 individuals participating in two discussion groups in Annapolis, MD. All groups and participants discussed a tale from Bhutan called “Four Friends”. The text was available in English, French, and Spanish. The feedback from Touchstones Week has been great, and many attendees want to start their own Touchstones groups. Touchstones Week proved to be a wonderful way to introduce the

Touchstones method and mission to those who had never heard of Touchstones, as well as a great opportunity to re-connect with past and present Touchstones participants, friends, and supporters.



I'd love to join/start a Touchstones group or help somehow.

It was a great experience because it gave a lot of clarity as to what a good discussion is like... I left with the feeling of wanting to do it all again.

I would like to join [another discussion] and stay involved.

This was an awesome event!

I was really impressed with the explanations and analysis that came after our reflections had been considered. They gave me a new way of looking at a discussion that I am eager to put into practice.

In addition to participating in the local Annapolis event, Touchstones co-founder and member of the Touchstones Board, Nicholas Maistrellis, held a Touchstones class with a group that teaches each other conversational Spanish and English.

He reported, “It went very well. They indicated that they would like to do something like this again. They liked both the story and the activity. I should say that I made a short presentation about Touchstones in Spanish. We also had a discussion about that.”

This week-long project is one of the many ways that the Touchstones Discussion Project is committed to “building community through discussion everywhere!”

Thankfully there is no reason that every week can't be a Touchstones week. Wherever you are and whomever you are, let's keep the discussion going! Let us know how we can help get you started.

## Touchstones Texts: Tools for Self-reflection and Transformation

by Howard Zeiderman

The role of the text for discussion in Touchstones programs is perhaps the Project's most complicated and counter-intuitive feature. A touchstone originally meant a tool—a particular type of stone—that was used to evaluate the purity of gold. This name is appropriate for

*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.*



our work in education because we see texts as tools and not as they are more traditionally viewed: a source of information, knowledge, motivation, or wisdom. While most texts indeed convey those other elements, in Touchstones programs the text is intended to be used purposefully for a different set of outcomes. However, most Touchstones leaders are teachers. And teachers are typically trained to engage with texts as outlined above. Therefore, Touchstones texts can be easily misunderstood unless they are seen within the context of our programmatic goals and skill-building.

Many educators mistake the collections of Touchstones texts for anthologies that they can pick from or substitute for, as they wish. We often hear of English-Language Arts teachers who skip the math texts because they think no one will know how to discuss them or because they themselves are uncomfortable with them. That is precisely part of the reason for including them: to highlight and examine the structures in our culture that reinforce belief-systems that some people are legitimate speakers and some are not. Those structures must be challenged and dismantled. Touchstones is a systematic program through which a group of participants becomes capable of genuine exploration that includes all participants. In this environment, leadership and responsibility for the group's success are eventually shared. The Touchstones text serves as one of the tools for building inclusivity and collaboration.

All Touchstones groups develop through four sequential stages: participation, cooperation, listening, and leadership. In each stage, the selected texts play essential, integral, and strategic roles. They are always coordinated with three elements:

- a group's experience and history
- the dynamic process of discussion itself and group self-evaluation

- Touchstones' overarching educational goals of fostering independent, confident, critical thinkers who employ diverse points of view in complex problem-solving

Unlike in an anthology, the positioning of the Touchstones text is not thematic, historical, or simply a matter of choice. The Touchstones lesson plan in which the text is embedded provides the instructional support to effectively empower students to

#### Suggestions for Discussion Leaders during Touchstones Week

Here are some of the suggested questions provided in the lesson plan teachers and volunteers used for their "Four Friends" discussion. In Touchstones, the first question is only the starting point and will not be the only question raised during the discussion—by the leader and members of the group.



Who is the leader in this story?

What about working with others can be challenging?

When have you had to work with others to solve a problem?  
What did you do?

Which of the animals in the story are you most like and in what ways?

What is the most important message in this story?

explore their own thinking together and in relation to the text. This gradual development of a collaborative group takes time and requires consistent and deliberate focus. The cumulative results are indeed transformational and lasting, as each person learns to see her or his individual talents and how they can share these while gaining from others.

## An Update on Touchstones Program at MCI-W

by Craven Engels

The Touchstones Discussion Project started running discussion programs within the Maryland Correctional Institute for Women (MCI-W) in August 2015. Since then, our staff has provided educational training and leadership development to more than 155 women.

In the prison school at MCI-W, our two discussion groups are held most Wednesdays. The first group includes women who are serving shorter sentences and enrolled in a two-month office management program. Their required participation in Touchstones reinforces the development of active listening and critical thinking skills necessary to make independent and thoughtful decisions. The second group is comprised of women who volunteer their time in Touchstones to acquire valuable skills essential to rebuilding families and careers once they are released. Many of those women are serving long sentences.

By empowering the women to understand and actualize their own potential as constructive members of a community, Touchstones aspires to reducing recidivism. We aim to achieve this by helping the women to:

- Connect authentically with others to overcome their sense of isolation, shame, and marginalization.



- Engage in self-reflection as a tool for understanding themselves and others more completely and accurately.
- Employ discussion to broaden their perspectives and improve decision-making.

Research shows that the most critical factor in keeping women out of prison and reducing recidivism is increased educational attainment. As women educate themselves, they gain greater self-respect, sense of empowerment, value, and purpose. Of the 72 women who have participated in Touchstones programs and been released thus far, none has returned to prison. We are confident that the skills gained by the women in Touchstones are part of what is helping them to make wiser and healthier choices when they return home.

Prior funding for this program has come from The Pettus-Crowe Foundation, St. Margaret's Episcopal Church of Annapolis, Touchstones' earned income from work in schools and with executives, and through donations from around the country. We are seeking on-going funding to ensure this program remains available to the women at MCI-W and welcome your suggestions, contacts, and charitable support.

## An Interview with Howard Zeiderman



Howard Zeiderman  
Co-founder & President

*Roving Reporter: Clearly, the number of schools where Touchstones is being incorporated increases rapidly year after year, but how do they find out about the program when you do not use much formal advertising?*

**Howard Zeiderman:** You know, it is interesting because schools become involved in such different ways. For example, two years ago Columbia Secondary in NYC ordered a class set and we didn't hear more from them.

We didn't know if they were actively using the program or what might be happening there. Then, about four months ago, we received requests for review copies of our middle and high school volumes—pretty much all of them. When we looked more closely at the school, it turns out the principal, Miriam Nightengale, was a student of mine at St. John's College in Annapolis, MD in the 1980s and was there at the same time as our Executive Director, Stefanie Takacs.

I called Miriam to see if I could stop by and visit the next time I was in NYC. When I met with her, I described Touchstones as a project to build critical thinking and leadership. It was just what she wanted to emphasize the cognitive and social-emotional skill development she and her teachers are focusing on for their students. She and we at Touchstones were very excited.

*Roving Reporter: How does someone's initial interest translate into bringing Touchstones into the classroom?*

**Howard Zeiderman:** Of course, the key component is that the educator—principal, headmaster, coordinator, or teacher—sees the need for and



Touchstones Workshop at Columbia Secondary School, NYC



the benefits from Touchstones. In this case, Stefanie Takacs followed up with a visit to the school and filled in details about how Touchstones actually functions in a classroom. The principal has decided to implement school-wide in the fall with all middle school students, with the goal of introducing it into the high school as students move up through the grades.

The school's after-school director and high school teachers are already exploring how to bring Touchstones into their work sooner. And the middle school teachers aren't waiting to get started. The school has already purchased class sets and several teachers are diving in. When we ran a mini-workshop with about 17 teachers a few weeks ago, those teachers were eager to share their experiences. Each emphasized how different and engaging the approach is—for themselves and their students. They recognized right away that Touchstones is truly a

student-centered approach to teaching and learning.

*Roving Reporter: So aside from the serendipitous way in which Columbia Secondary learned about Touchstones, are there any other factors that make their involvement unique?*

**Howard Zeiderman:** It's important to note that Columbia Secondary, a 6 through 12 school, has a student body of "academically talented students who are interested in pursuing careers in Math, Science and Engineering," but who are also being prepared "for a life of civic engagement and life responsibilities." Touchstones is a perfect fit because of their whole-person emphasis. We're looking forward to working with the faculty again in September and November, as we bring continuing professional development to the school in support of their implementation.

**Here's who has brought new or additional Touchstones programs and training into their classrooms over the last few months:**

- Arizona:** Archway Lincoln in Chandler
- California:** Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo High School in Long Beach; Roseland University Prep High School in Santa Rosa
- Colorado:** Salida Montessori Charter School in Salida; Two Roads Charter School in Arvada
- Maryland:** Kent County Middle School in Chestertown
- Massachusetts:** Graham and Park Elementary School in Cambridge
- Mississippi:** Aberdeen High School in Aberdeen
- New Jersey:** Highland Park Middle School in Highland Park
- New Mexico:** John Adams Middle School in Albuquerque
- New York:** Columbia Secondary School in NYC; Renaissance Charter High School in NYC; Victor Intermediate School in Victor
- North Carolina:** Brevard High School in Brevard
- Pennsylvania:** Twin Valley Elementary in Elverson
- South Carolina:** James Simons Elementary in Charleston; Logan Elementary School in Columbia
- Tennessee:** Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro
- Virginia:** Floris Elementary in Herndon
- Wisconsin:** Bayside Middle School in Bayside
- Canada:** Montessori School of Regina, Saskatchewan
- Kenya:** International School of Kenya, Nairobi



Touchstones Week discussion group at the Wiley H. Bates Legacy Center in Annapolis

*Touchstones is only able to meet the growing need for community and school programs through charitable contributions from friends like you. Your gift to Touchstones today ensures that our work with children and adults of all ages and backgrounds continues to flourish and change lives throughout 2017! Thank you in advance.*

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