

November 2016



# VOICES

The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project

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

## A Call for Annual Support

*Gregg Steinberg, Touchstones Board Chair*

**T**ouchstones is proud of its status as a non-profit. Education is the soul of our nation's and the world's future, and no dollar can be more wisely allocated than to the enormous task of accomplishing our educational mission. Touchstones programs are funded by friends like you, foundations, grants, and with income we earn through goods and services sold to schools and organizations. Please make a gift to Touchstones today to further support this vital work in education.

Part of our distinctive mission dictates that our programs are available to all who wish to use them. Therefore, we run and support numerous programs at no cost to participants, such as our programs in prisons and for the elderly. Most significantly, we give Touchstones books and training to many teachers who work with thousands of students in areas where there is little or no money or resources and little or no hope.

No Child Left Behind was an admirable title and the newly minted Every Student Succeeds Act is also appealing, but we know that quality education is mostly delivered to those who already have resources. In part, this is because the parents of those students advocate for their children. In many cases—and these are not

infrequent—among students in greatest need there is little family structure and no knowledge of how to advocate for their child's education. Teachers themselves become the students' advocates, but they are increasingly limited due to continued over-emphasis on standardized testing, less focus on preparation of students as educated and civil citizens, and diminishing local and federal funding.

Together, we can help teachers to deliver an education that gives all students a voice and that teaches them to advocate for themselves, to think critically, to work cooperatively, and to lead collaboratively. Again, I ask you to give, and give generously, to Touchstones today to change the lives of these students. If you have already made a gift to Touchstones this year, thank you.



A high school student at Annapolis H.S. shares his ideas in a discussion using Touchstones Volume II.

*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.*



## When 1 = 2

*Sarah Gadd, Touchstones Board  
Co-Vice Chair*

**I**t continues to be my great privilege to be part of an organization such as Touchstones Discussion Project. Touchstones has spent over 30 years serving the most unheard members of society, with over five million individuals participating worldwide. Touchstones is in more than 40 countries and texts are translated into six different languages.

What does it mean to fulfill Touchstones' mission? Touchstones' focuses on collaborative learning through discussion by engaging in structured dialogue around selections of poetry, philosophy, fables, myths, speeches, historical documents, math, science, and fine art that activate and enliven thinking. We work globally, and our classroom programs are used with students—grades 2 and up—within prisons, with veterans, the aged—across a broad spectrum of underserved society. This is achieved annually on a shoe-string budget and with a tiny but dedicated staff.

While I can offer very little of my time to Touchstones because of my corporate workload, I'm happy to say that my company runs a corporate matching program that enables me to effectively double any donation I personally provide. I see this donation put into action directly with Touchstones donating materials and training to underserved communities such as those on Maryland's Eastern Shore and through the prison programs that have engaged and continue to engage hundreds of prisoners, both men and women and their families, every year. I was lucky enough to participate in a Touchstones discussion in the women's prison this year. It was an enlightening and humbling experience that will stay with me forever.

As to impact, not only does Touchstones help people collaborate, appreciate other points of view and

think constructively, Touchstones leads to observed reduction in bullying when used in schools. It helps communities develop among people who are excluded from community, like prisoners and our eldest citizens. Touchstones gives voice to those who often remain unheard.

Find out if your employer will match all or part of your contribution to Touchstones this year and make your gift doubly powerful.

## Completing the Odyssey

*Stefanie Takacs,  
Executive Director*

**I**n 2015, Touchstones learned about an exciting grant opportunity through the National Endowment for the Humanities. *Standing Together: Dialogues on the Experience of War*, seeks discussion-based programs that recognize and support veterans' distinct needs to reflect on and apply their service within a group of their peers. The former director of Education Programs at the NEH, Bill Rice, personally contacted Touchstones about this open call to qualifying non-profit organizations. Touchstones submitted a proposal we were very proud of, but it was not selected for funding.

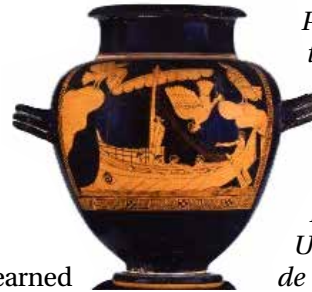
Very sadly, Bill passed away unexpectedly in June this year. But his reaching out to us opened the door for Touchstones to see how our programs can serve veterans outside our prison programs. In the process, Bill had connected us with others at the NEH. This year, with feedback and counsel from them, we have submitted a revised proposal. If selected, Touchstones will create three Touchstones discussion groups with veterans in Anne Arundel County and surrounding areas starting in the fall of 2017. Those groups will read and discuss *The Odyssey* and the enduring themes of duty, courage, sacrifice, and loyalty that are echoed

in works from the humanities—poetry, photography, short stories, and memoirs—from WW II through present conflicts. Participants will be invited to develop their own personal narratives in writing, through oral histories, or other media over the course of the program for submission to the Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress. Stay tuned for updates in 2017!

*Touchstones is indebted to our extraordinary Project Advisory Panel and thanks them for their service and contributions to this effort:*

*Maryland State Senator John Astle, (USMC Col., retired); Prof. Paul Barolsky, Ph.D.; Lt. Col. Roger Carstens, USA (retired); Prof. Margreta de Grazia, Ph.D.; Master Sargent Danielle Harmon, USAF; Lt. Col.*

*Chris Howard, Ph.D. USAF (retired); CAPTAIN Jeffrey Macris, Ph.D., USN; Michelle Montemayor, Ph.D., M.D.; CAPTAIN John Ralph, Ph.D., USN; Joe Smith, USA (retired); Captain Erinn Woodside, USAF (retired).*



## Looking More Closely

*Howard Zeiderman, Touchstones  
Co-founder & President*

**T**ouchstones' vision asserts that all people have talents and all people face obstacles in achieving their greatest potential. What we often see in school and work, however, are systems that fail to address directly the ways we can improve as individual contributors so our collective efforts are more effective. At a recent Maryland Educators for Gifted Students (MEGS) conference, we ran an interactive presentation with about 30 teachers to investigate specific barriers to leadership that are common in academically accomplished student populations.

The teacher-participants understood exactly what we described about their students. And while they are proud of what their students accomplish, they





were eager to see how discussion can be used deliberately to strengthen their students' socio-behavioral and leadership skills. Often, gifted students demonstrate an unwillingness to listen to others, dislike collaborating, resist examining their own assumptions, and lack appreciation for diverse perspectives—particularly those from fellow students outside their academic or social circles.

During our mini-workshop, we modeled a typical Touchstones class—with the teachers in the role of their students. Using a selection from William James about how we as humans are blind to one another's conditions, the group wrote and shared questions about the text they thought should be explored. Following a short discussion on one of those questions, the group evaluated their work and considered how they might improve—as participants and as members of the group. Throughout, the uniqueness in the Touchstones approach was apparent. The teachers felt an acute sense of recognition as they reflected on James' acknowledgement of his own blindness. The Touchstones discussion and evaluation offered them a method for reflecting on the serious liabilities that limit their gifted students' abilities as collaborative leaders. We enjoyed the enthusiastic reception and feedback to our presentation and look forward to bringing Touchstones to the schools and districts represented within this group.



A sophomore class at Annapolis High School begins their full group discussion

## Smarter Together. The Campaign for Growing Touchstones

*Alice Ericsson - Campaign Co-Chair*

**T**ouchstones proves it every day: students learn best when they are active agents in their own education. In group after group of kids sitting in a circle, discussing big questions raised by short, accessible texts from classic sources from around the world, students show their ability to ask and answer important questions for themselves. In every group, a girl who is afraid to speak up startles us with her perspective. A “follower”

starts to lead a discussion or idea. We see kids from totally different socio-economic and academic backgrounds appreciating each other's insights and working ideas out together. And we see teachers who may have misjudged a learner's potential gain an exciting new view.

Wonderfully, teachers who participate in Touchstones are as changed as the students. Teachers gain a new respect for diversity of mind, learn to listen to their students anew, and become smarter—together with their students.

So how do we put this mind-changing tool in more hands? It's simple. The more funding Touchstones has, the more teachers and volunteers we train. The more programs we start, the more minds we touch. The more Touchstones develops and provides new programs and free books and training where there is no money, the more the magic grows. This year, we set ambitious goals for Touchstones growth. We are on schedule to meet our goal of tripling our reach in three years through a capital campaign. Now, with a shift in the administration and the priorities of our leaders, we have to dream even bigger.

More than ever, students and schools in disadvantaged areas need help to grow the skills that will create positive communities for the future.

*“It is eye opening and so uplifting to hear a student verbalize that he or she now understands how to listen to others' perspectives. While many of my students may not have had a hard time talking, in doing Touchstones, they have learned how to speak with purpose and to truly listen to others. The cooperation and commitment that they made in the circle has poured over into their everyday lives. The kids believe in themselves and know that they have the ability to set and reach goals. My students are not the only ones to have made progress. I have learned to be open to the Touchstones process. I concluded that Touchstones touches me as much as it reaches the kids.”*

*—Tricia Miller, Grade 6 Language Arts teacher, Elkton, Maryland*



And here is a program proven to grow civility, cooperation, and self-efficacy while improving all students' thinking and leadership skills! Let's be smart, together, and grow this resource today for all our benefit tomorrow.

Stay tuned for exciting updates on the Campaign early in 2017. To learn more about how to get involved now, please contact the Touchstones offices at (410) 604-3309 or Touchstones' Executive Director, Stefanie Takacs: [st@touchstones.org](mailto:st@touchstones.org).

## It's How We Grow

*Rachel Lewis, Member of the Touchstones Board of Directors*

Sometimes it's hard to look outside ourselves and see a new perspective. It's hard to imagine how the same words or same picture or same song can evoke such different thoughts and emotions in different people. We like those best who agree with us most, tending to surround ourselves with like-minded people, while consciously or unconsciously avoiding interactions with people dissimilar from ourselves for any number of reasons.

My first introduction to Touchstones was through its Washington DC Executive Program, in which we are using works from the Renaissance to explore contemporary thinking. At first I was intimidated and nervous. I was afraid I didn't have anything to contribute to the discussion and even if I did, it would be so banal that I would have wished I'd kept silent. Fortunately for me, Touchstones creates the kind of caring and cultivating

environment in which I am able to overcome insecurities and express my thoughts. Touchstones was designed for students like me. It doesn't matter whether the student is in elementary school, high school, graduate school, or prison. What brings us together is the willingness to connect through active listening and active discussion to understand a common text and each other—free of judgment and criticism. What a gift! What a wonderful thing to give to ourselves and our neighbors, children, spouses, parents, and colleagues!

One of the greatest gifts Touchstones gives all its participants is the ability and indeed the mandate to actively listen and engage with people we may not have the opportunity to otherwise know in our daily lives. After the presidential election, the thing that seems most clear to me is that we, as a country, are unable to actively listen to each other. As a society, we have the right and responsibility to respect our neighbors and learn from their experiences. It's how we learn. It's how we grow. Unless and until we are able to enter into civil discourse with each other, we will con-



#GIVINGTUESDAY

tinue to devolve into further conclaves of socio-economic, religious and political factions. However, we have a choice. We can choose to engage with each other to gain new perspectives. In my social media feeds, I've seen such intolerant discourse; people who have known each other for decades hurling virtual insults and slurs with righteous indignation and a complete lack of respect for strangers and friends alike.

Touchstones shows us we should strive to be better. Touchstones affords

us a way to listen, speak, observe, learn and grow. And, we have to grow—to bring more people together to understand our differences and respect each other. As members of the Touchstones community, we are able to cultivate the growth and education of ourselves and others who will benefit greatly. This November 29—Giving Tuesday—join me in making a contribution to Touchstones. All gifts received this Giving Tuesday will provide free Touchstones class sets to expand educational programming with our most underserved students in rural and urban schools around the country. Learn more at <https://donatenow.networkforgood.org/touchstonesdiscussionsgivingtues> and get ready to give.

### Special Thanks

Touchstones acknowledges special support this year from the following donors:

- Laurie M. Michaels Advised Fund at the Aspen Community Foundation
- Pettus Crowe Foundation
- St. Margaret's Church in Annapolis, MD

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