

VOICES

The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project

October 2016

WE BUILD CRITICAL THINKING, COMMUNICATION, LEADERSHIP, AND COMMUNITY THROUGH
RESPECTFUL, ENGAGING DISCUSSION-BASED PROGRAMS
FOR ALL PEOPLE.

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[Click here to watch part of this Touchstones discussion.](#)

Students at the Frederick Douglass Academy in Harlem, NY discuss the ways in which one assumes different approaches depending on different audiences, as part of their larger discussion on William James' "A Certain Blindness in Human Beings." Touchstones President Howard Zeiderman thanks FDA teacher Fred Murphy and his seniors, Film Director Robert Wagner, Producer Joan Babchak, Camera man Ray Foley, and Sound master Charles Cann for their excellent work in making this filming possible.
[Check out other work by Wagner and Babchak.](#)

Touchstones at MTSU - Ed. Leadership

In 2013, Dr. Rick Vanosdall, Interim Director for the doctoral program in education for assessment, learning and school Improvement at [Middle Tennessee State University](#), discovered Touchstones. Rick walked into our exhibitor booth at the ASCD conference and a beautiful partnership was born.



The Touchstones method and the many educational settings in which it has been applied and succeeded made it an attractive tool for Dr. Vanosdall in his work at MTSU to prepare educators as leaders.

Later that year, Touchstones staff ran a workshop with teachers in MTSU's National Science Foundation

funded Master Teachers program, which led to numerous implementations in TN public high schools. This fall, Rick invited us back to MTSU to work with a diverse group of 22, including associate deans, doctoral candidates, recent doctoral graduates, research assistants, and MTSU faculty from within the School of Education. Within the workshop were three educators who had been part of Vanosdall's first graduate cohort to use Touchstones' *Mapping the Future*. Isra Brifkani, a member of that course, offered this about her experience with Touchstones.

"As I reflect on my experience with Touchstones, I would say that these discussions can be transformational circles of hope! My experience with Touchstones is one of a minority immigrant student in an educational doctorate program.

My classmates and I had a journey with Touchstones that spanned over a year and half. It brought us much closer together as a cohort and broadened our horizons, as each of us felt safe in the circle to share our insights and experiences. As a minority immigrant student, the Touchstones discussions provided me with the space to want to share about my experiences as discussions happened naturally, and broadened my understanding of the world as I listened to and learned from the insights and experiences of my peers.

Facilitated by our professor Dr. Rick Vanosdall, Touchstones allowed for the voices of the introverts and extroverts in the cohort to be heard, as authentic discussions took place. When the norm in a discussion is to listen attentively and respect others' viewpoints, transformations do happen!"

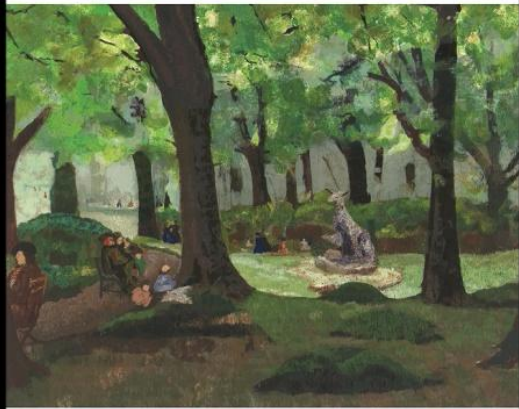
- Isra Brifkani, Ed.D. candidate: Assessment, Learning, and School Improvement - MTSU School of Ed.

Voices are Powerful Tools of Change

Our newest book, [*Touchstones: Exploring American Perspectives, Volume I*](#), addresses the ever-increasing need for educational platforms that help overcome cultural and institutional barriers to a fully integrated and civil society. This volume features the experiences of Black and African American writers, poets, philosophers, and visual artists, whose voices are powerful tools in students' shared exploration of uniquely American perspectives.

TOUCHSTONES:
EXPLORING AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES
VOLUME 1

TEACHER'S GUIDE



TOUCHSTONES® DISCUSSION PROJECT

Here is an excerpt from an interview with artist [Loïs Mailou Jones](#), which appears in this volume. The excerpt, along with Ms Jones' painting, *A Shady Nook* (1991) that graces the book's cover, present two different avenues through which we can explore the artist's perspectives. Through them, we reflect on the types of struggles that Jones faced, while considering the contemporary challenges we confront as a nation.

An excerpt from an interview with Loïs Mailou Jones, by Charles H. Rowell

JONES: Both Harry Burleigh and Meta Fuller told me this on the beach one day: "Loïs, you know, if you want to be successful in your career you're going to have to go abroad." (We had been talking about

my career because I was just about to graduate from the Museum School.) Meta related that she had gone to Paris. She had even studied with Rodin. You see, the establishment in this country was not ready to accept us. It's the case in the history of our art. Look what happened to Henry O. Tanner. He couldn't make it in this country; he had to go abroad. The same thing happened to Hale Woodruff. He went to France. And there were many others. This country wasn't interested in exhibiting our work or allowing us any of the opportunities that the white artists enjoyed. I made up my mind at that moment that I would go to Paris.

ROWELL: What did Paris offer other than exhibitions or stipends? How would the African-American painter profit by going to France?

JONES: Freedom. To be shackled free. That's the thing that released you from all of the pressure and stagnation which we suffered in this country. When I graduated from the Boston Museum School, I went to the director of the school and asked if there was any opportunity for me, perhaps, to be an assistant or something at the school. He very kindly looked at me and said, "Loïs, we don't have any opportunities here, but have you ever thought to go South to help your people?" That was a shock to me, because here I was a young Boston lady exposed to Radcliffe and Simmons and Harvard and Tufts and all of the big schools. And here I was being told to go down South and help my people.

Announcing the 2016 Touchstones Teacher of the Year!

Since 2011, Touchstones has honored an educator in the U.S. or Canada for her or his work in the classroom. Thanks to Cynthia M. Barry, who first sponsored this award and who is herself a long-time Touchstones teacher, we are celebrating our sixth [Touchstones Teacher of the Year](#) this December.

We are thrilled to announce that Larry Harris of Cecil County Public Schools has been selected by the nomination committee to receive this award in 2016.

In 2013, Larry was one of more than a dozen teachers and trainers who participated in an intensive week-long Touchstones training initiative in CCPS. That effort—to create a core group with the capacity to deliver internal professional development within the district—was part of the district-wide implementation of Touchstones in grades 3-12

English/Language Arts classes.

Larry trained dozens of CCPS middle school teachers in Touchstones before returning to the classroom two years ago. He now teaches 10th and 11th grade English, English Honors, English as a Second Language, and Arts of Expression. In the nomination for this award, submitted by one of his colleagues, the description of Larry's dedication to Touchstones is compelling: "He has worked through Volumes A,B,C, and I and II and led hundreds of teachers in Touchstones groups. His impact on the number of students is in the thousands and its implementation in our county is incredible and far-reaching. [Larry's] belief is obvious in how he speaks about Touchstones and trains others in it. Every breath exudes positivity and commitment to the power it brings to student voice, power of collaboration, and increasing the rigor of discussion.

Touchstones looks forward to honoring Larry's work and to saluting all Touchstones teachers around the world on Dec. 10, 2016. Larry joins a distinguished list of celebrants, including another Maryland teacher, Debbie Wilkins from Wicomico County. Debbie was Touchstones first Touchstones Teacher of the Year in 2011.

-by Stefanie Takacs, Touchstones Executive Director



Debbie Wilkins (l), our first Touchstones Teacher of the Year, also from Maryland (Wicomico County) with some of her family in 2011.



Teachers at the recent MEGS Conference get a brief preview of a Touchstones workshop.

The Touchstones Discussion Project holds [Open Enrollment Workshops](#) at our offices about four times a year. So, who comes to these workshops? If you guessed that the majority of participants are educators, you are correct. But Touchstones workshops are also open to advocates and community activists, social service providers, prospective and active volunteers, and anyone who appreciates the importance of discussion and collaboration. You may be surprised at the diverse group of backgrounds and professions of many of our attendees: veterans, executives, retirees, Board members, researchers, friends, and donors. Among the participants in our most recent workshop, we had a retired electrical engineer, a community housing advocate from DC, two women running separate Touchstones groups with seniors, a home-school mom, a foreign language specialist, a Head of an independent high school, two gifted education teachers, and a veteran who formerly served in advisory roles in Iraq and Afghanistan and for strategic think tanks. Because Touchstones programs are beneficial in so many different environments, many different types of people are drawn to our workshops.

Of course, there is also great diversity in our teachers, who join us from independent and public schools. Many teachers are from local public school districts, but it is not uncommon for teachers to travel from other states. This is also true for homeschooling parents and college and graduate students who are interested in Touchstones' student-centered approach. A number of participants over the years have come from correctional education, organizations that serve the homeless, and senior citizen centers.

Touchstones truly is about listening to one another and learning how to foster collaborative leadership-skills that are necessary in all levels of society. Beyond the traditional classroom, there's a place for Touchstones in scouting troops, Veteran's organizations, corporate board rooms, community centers, after school programs, and in professional development workshops.

If you'd like to [learn more](#) about the innovative and transformative educational tool that is the Touchstones Discussion Project, you can register for a workshop. Call us in the office at 410-604-3309 or email schoolprograms@touchstones.org. The next two workshop dates are March 25 and May 6, 2017. We look forward to seeing you then!

Partnerships that Empower

Earlier this year, we announced that Touchstones would become part of educational programming offered at [the Light House in Annapolis](#), thanks to a local generous donor who supports both organizations. Next month, Touchstones will run a workshop for staff and clients as part of fulfilling the shelter's mission "to break the cycle of homelessness by providing a place of belonging, life-changing programs, and a broad continuum of support to people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless."

Touchstones programs with all populations provide participants with a powerful and effective educational tool through which they learn about themselves and each other. In inclusive discussions, their voices are welcomed, valued, and respected. And through their engagement, participants gain self-efficacy and community—two important factors in the successful transition out of homelessness.

Touchstones always appreciates when our friends introduce us to other organizations—schools, community organizations, and businesses—because our proven programs deliver vital change for individuals and groups. And word-of-mouth has always been the most trusted mode of expansion for us. Please forward this newsletter to someone you know who would enjoy learning more about Touchstones.

Keep up to date on all Touchstones news and activities. Follow us on [facebook \(Touchstones Discussion Project\)](#) and [Twitter \(@Touchpebbles\)](#).

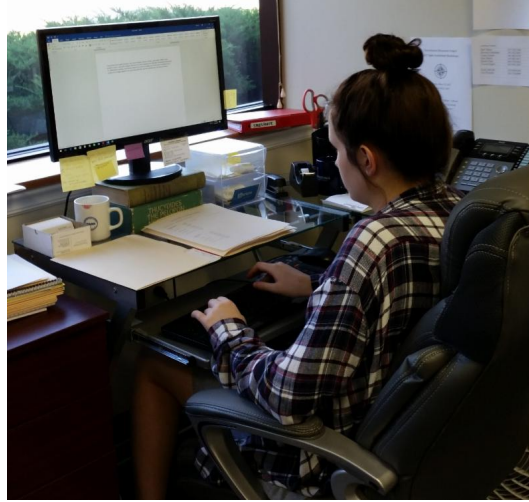
-By Jenn Macris, Touchstones Advancement Coordinator

Learning by Doing

Whenever possible, Touchstones hires summer interns. We believe that providing young people with experience working in a dynamic office can play an important role in their development and educational trajectory. This summer, we had two students—one finishing her freshman year of college and one entering her junior year in high school—working at Touchstones.

We asked Jolie, our high school staff member, if she'd be interested in sharing what her experience at Touchstones has been so far.

"Touchstones has taught me how to be a better thinker, learner, listener, and worker. Within every project or task, a new expertise is taught. Whether it be time management, data based skills, or collaborative working, Touchstones always has a way of bringing its mission into its madness. As co-workers, we struggle together to overcome obstacles daily. A new day always brings an exciting adventure to our office. Whether we're celebrating a birthday, trying to decide what brand of potato chips are best, or debating about what colleges I should be applying to, the ideas of discussion and listening to one another always come into play. From working with Touchstones, I have become a better student, a better writer, and a better editor. I've learned how to challenge ideas taught in the classroom and how to make my own opinions heard while listening to the views of others."



Jolie editing an article for the newsletter

Board Perspectives

A few years ago I was asked to serve on the Touchstones Board of Directors, after many years absence from formal involvement with the Project. My absence during those years was never complete. Many lunches with Howard Zeiderman, always at 49 West, kept me involved with the latest doings at Touchstones, and made me feel part of what I continue to believe is the most exciting and valuable educational project I have ever heard of. For this I will always be grateful to Howard.



Geoff Comber (l) and Nick Maistrellis (r) at a recent Founder's Lunch

I stopped being formally involved with Touchstones because I wanted to return to full-time teaching. But I never lost my conviction that it is the only way of revolutionizing teaching and learning that treats teachers and students as active, cooperating learners rather than as dispensers and receivers of "information," which usually means unexamined opinions. My return to Touchstones as a Board member was an eye-opener. When we began we were a rather amateurish operation. We formulated the fundamental principles of the project very early, but had little idea of how to manage the project, or to market it.

From this point of view Touchstones now is very different from what it was. The management of the project is now professional, and thus capable of actually delivering the revolution in education that was only a promise thirty years ago. Again, I am grateful for having been allowed to be a part of this. Finally, I am also grateful to Jenn Macris for having instituted a few years ago the "Founders Lunch." Fellow co-founders Howard, Geoff Comber, and I get together, now in an Indian restaurant, to chat about both the past, the present, and future of

Touchstones. It is good to remember and value the past but better to work toward a future in which Touchstones will become more and more available to students and others who want to experience the value and the pleasure of active, cooperative learning.

-From Nick Maistrellis, Member of the Touchstones Board of Directors, Co-founder of Touchstones

Mark your Calendars for Nov. 29!

Following successful fundraising events in 2014 and 2015, this June Touchstones again hosted a 24-hour fundraising event that generated enthusiastic support—this time for our program in Maryland's Correctional Institute for Women. Next month, on November 29, after celebrating Thanksgiving and the great bounty so many of us enjoy, Touchstones will host a 12-hour fundraiser for programs in under-served public schools.



Rachael Langston (l) and Kelli Zinn (r) at Giving Tuesday in 2015

Each year, we receive requests from teachers for Touchstones class sets where there is no school funding. Since 2008, school budgets nationally have shrunk or stagnated. "Most states provide less support per student for elementary and secondary schools - in some cases, much less - than before the Great Recession," reports the [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#). Simply put, there is not enough funding to bring Touchstones into every class where it is wanted. We need your help to meet Touchstones' commitment to provide program

materials to all teachers who have no funding but who wish to bring collaborative discussions to their classrooms. **Stay tuned for more information and join us on November 29 with a gift of support. Be part in building inclusive dialogue and critical thinking in classrooms around the country!**

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