

October 2017

VOICES



The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project

www.touchstones.org

The Importance and Difficulty of Collaborative Leadership

The best introduction for potential discussion leaders is our six-hour introductory workshop that orients the participant to the Touchstones methodology through actual practice.

For the new Touchstones discussion program for veterans, *Completing the Odyssey: A Journey Home*, that launches this week, the discussions will be run by veterans with veterans. Part of this project funded by the National

Endowment for the Humanities is an intensive leader training. The training not only follows the Touchstones workshop format but also takes the new leaders through all of the content in the program, which includes selections from *The Odyssey* and contemporary works that echo similar themes related to homecoming.

The leaders for this program spent three days mid-month learning the Touchstones methodology. In that training, they practiced leading discussions using lesson plans and also conducted discussion evaluations.

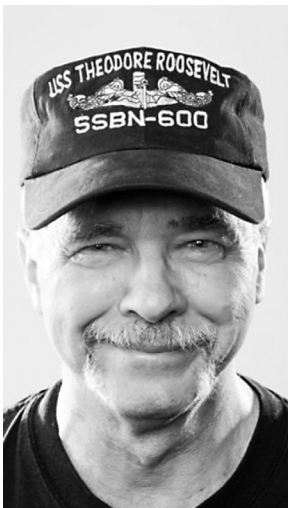
At the start of every training we are careful to manage expectation. Participants will not end the workshop as masters. Instead, they will start their Touchstones implemen-

and thinking, the discussion process, and the texts themselves interpenetrate to revolutionize the group's ability to explore ideas collaboratively. The prescriptive guides provide all the instructional support that a fledgling Touchstones leader needs.

Implementing Touchstones involves patience as a group traverses through four stages of development: participation, cooperation, active

listening, and collaborative leadership. For a leader to accomplish the goals of an entirely active and student-centered learning set forth in the guide, he or she must take steps often counter-intuitive to one's cultural and professional experience and previous education.

With each successive lesson, the leader understands better how to be the bridge to assist each participant in generalizing personal experience so the central point is accessible to others. As the group progresses, so must the leader, who also serves as the conscience of the group. As the conscience, the Touchstones leader raises the stakes



tation knowing roughly what issues in dynamics to anticipate and how to address them. Each Touchstones Leader's Guide is designed to deliver continuing professional development through their Touchstones program. It takes a good deal of experience in and practice with Touchstones to understand how the participants' experience

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.



so the group assumes increasing responsibility for self-governance. When the group demonstrates the ability to speak responsibly and in ways that allow them to move forward in their exploration and also actively monitor and adjust their dynamics, they are ready to do much harder work. They are ready to examine themselves and their presuppositions. At this stage, the Leader's Guide helps the leader model the use of texts as tools for all members of the group, themselves included, that can increase awareness of specific assumptions underlying one's thinking and attitudes. The group is then ready to share leadership.

This fall as we implement this new veterans program, we will continue to refine our understanding. We'll learn what is required to support new discussion leaders who may have little or no background in education. And we'll discover what collaborative discussion affords groups of veterans in their examination of homecoming and a return to civilian life.

Looking Homeward

By Joe Smith, Touchstones – NEH Veterans Program Discussion Leader

I returned from Vietnam but served two more years before separating from active duty, so my transition was not one of walking directly from a war zone into the civilian world. I continued participation in the Reserves for another 7-8 years before dropping out completely from association with other reservists on a formal basis. I played down my military service—especially my time in Vietnam—and really didn't talk much about it as I pursued other careers. Given the climate of the country during and following Vietnam, it seemed that no one really wanted to face those years. I had a few veteran friends and family who knew what war experiences were

all about, but it seemed that we just wanted to move on from all that.

I have since become attracted to the opportunity to participate in a program involving veterans; it is now important to me to explore the topic of the discussion groups in terms of my



Joe Smith listens carefully as a retired Marine explores ideas about homecoming.

own past of transition. As I look back over the 46 years since returning from Vietnam, I have been “thanked for my service” more in the past two years than in all of the 44 years before that, but I must question what that means and how much that matters for other veterans in all stages of transition.

The topic of returning home is meaningful to a significant segment of our population, including both the veteran and the veteran's family. If we are unable to make this program work for our veterans, we are acknowledging an inability to deal with a substantial veterans' issue. I don't think we are unable to deal with the issues, but I do think it will take work. To measure the success of this program specifically, I think veterans should finish with a sense of direction and comfort that they can reach out to interact with their own families and communities. I want to see the program expanded to as wide a group as possible as a means of assistance to veterans in all stages of transition. I hope our work

with veterans receives the widespread publicity it deserves and needs.

I know settling into the program will be a transition in itself. I think that interacting with Vietnam veterans is easier for me, because of a sense of experiencing the same war with the same political outlook in the US at the time and similar circumstances in the civilian population. The attitude toward Vietnam era veterans was generally not positive and veterans uniformly felt that animosity. On the other hand, the Iraq/Afghan veterans are of a different generation and the conditions of war they have experienced are different—from the multi-national involvement of forces (not all of them allied with the US) to the terrain to the rules of engagement. While I respect their service, I approach their experiences with a large amount of curiosity rather than a sense of shared experience and am looking to learn about their experiences instead of talking of our similar experiences.

I believe in turn I can bring my own experience in transitioning from a brief military life into a fully civilian life and search for community and family. Perhaps I am not home yet; I never before thought about whether I was home, but I think this program will help me figure out what home means to me. Then I too can decide if I'm home.

Building on a Legacy

By Sean Hutzell

Since 1776 my family has served in almost every conflict America has fought. I believe I have a duty at my own generational stage to carry on that long tradition. However, rather than choosing military service, I wished to pursue a different path. Touchstones Discussion Project gave me that opportunity.

This Fall, Touchstones is running a discussion-based program entitled



“Completing the Odyssey: A Journey Home.” I have joined the Touchstones staff to support that program as the Project Coordinator. Supported by a

be very important for the veterans participating in the program itself. For some, the program will offer new or more useful definitions of home—

Veterans will explore parallels between modern service and ancient conflicts, cultivating a greater self-awareness and engaging in meaningful discussion through dialogue.

grant from the National Endowment of the Humanities, we are privileged to be designing and implementing this program with our veteran community here in Maryland.

Over the course of this eight-session program, veterans will explore parallels between modern service and ancient conflicts, cultivating a greater self-awareness and engaging in meaningful discussion through dialogue. What I anticipated being the most rewarding part of the process for me as Project Coordinator was overseeing the implementation and completion of personal narratives by the veterans. At the veterans’ prerogative, those narratives will be donated to the Library of Congress as part of the Library’s Veterans’ History Project. Whether an oral interview, a written memoir or journal, or a compilation of photographs, these testimonials will become part of a growing collection of veterans’ stories.

However, after a long and intensive weekend of discussion leader training for veterans who will lead the seminars, I found a more immediate reward: the experience and transformation of the individuals as we worked together through the program. It was incredible to see trust built upon the foundation of stories of homecoming—among the different branches of service represented, between civilians and veterans, and within each individual.

After the success of the weekend, I find “Completing the Odyssey” to

definitions presented and shaped by the veterans themselves. It may even offer participants a way to truly come home.

Touchstones Gears up for Local and National Charity Campaigns

By Jenn Macris, Advancement Coordinator, Touchstones

Touchstones is excited to announce participation in two different charity campaigns now through mid-December, the 2017 Maryland Charity Campaign and GivingTuesday 2017. Both opportunities allow us to connect with current and new donors locally in Maryland, as well as around the country and the world. Charitable support makes it possible for Touchstones to provide training and discussion materials to more students and life-long learners every month of the year!

On November 28th, the Tuesday after Thanksgiving, Touchstones will participate in the national, one-day online giving event called “GivingTuesday.” GivingTuesday is a global day of giving fueled by the power of social media and collaboration. Obviously Touchstones knows collaboration so this fundraising event is perfect for us! Last year Touchstones raised more than \$11,000 during GivingTuesday for our work with incarcerated women. Through

the partnership and support of our donors, this event is one of the best ways for Touchstones to be introduced to and engage new people in vital work in education.

“Pledge to Make a Difference” is the theme of this year’s Maryland Charity Campaign (MCC). Gov. Larry Hogan has challenged Maryland state employees and retirees to make a difference in the lives of families by donating to an approved list of nonprofits, with Touchstones among them. Last year more than 12,000 people gave over \$2.9 million through MCC! Participation in workplace giving is a great way for Marylanders to learn more about Touchstones and our work for more than 30 years in Maryland schools, community centers, and prisons. The MCC ends on December 15th. Please spread the word to Maryland state employees and retirees!

So, keep your eyes on your social media accounts and get ready to support Touchstones with your online donation and by sharing posts/emails about these campaigns with friends. You can help us Touchstones to flourish and grow so that together we are building community through discussion everywhere!

Building Connections in Wilmington

By Stefanie Takacs, Executive Director

In late August, Touchstones ran an introductory workshop for educators from a variety of non-profit organizations in the greater Wilmington, DE area. A generous grant from The Chichester duPont Foundation is allowing Touchstones to introduce discussion-based programs to at least three schools in Wilmington this year. We are also approaching non-profit organizations that provide after school and workforce readiness



Educators and social-service providers connect at a recent workshop hosted at the Wilmington Montessori School.

programs within the Wilmington community. As part of their engagement in this project, Wilmington Montessori School hosted the workshop.

Among the participants were staff from the Boys and Girls Club of Wilmington, Connecting Generations and their Seasons of Respect program, Light up the Queen Foundation, Kuumba Academy Charter School, Wilmington Montessori School, and The Challenge Program. Each program represented at the workshop serves youth across a spectrum of

services and educational capacities but most have never had the chance to work together. In bringing such diverse interests and educational approaches together in this workshop, Touchstones aspires to help educators in Wilmington build new and productive connections with each other.

Following the workshop, two new sites including Kuumba Academy Charter School and Wilmington Montessori School are implementing Touchstones this year. Sadly, Wilmington's Prestige Academy

for boys, which had implemented Touchstones in the 2016-2017 school year, closed its doors at the end of May due to falling enrollment.

We're excited to support the new teachers who are implementing Touchstones through this opportunity and look forward to sharing more details as we visit and observe their classrooms this fall and next spring. And, we're still looking to bring more schools into this project. If you know a teacher in Wilmington who would be interested in learning more, please ask her or him to email Touchstones at schoolprograms@touchstones.org.

Touchstones acknowledges and thanks the following donors and organizations for special support for programming this year:

- National Endowment for the Humanities
- The Chichester duPont Foundation
- The Pettus Crowe Foundation
- Beth Stewart
- Alice Ericsson
- Credit Suisse Foundation
- Arthur and Susan Fleischer
- Laurie Michaels Advised Fund at the Aspen Community Foundation (CHECK)
- John and Valerie Rowe

With Labor Day comes the start of the fall school semester. Since our last report to you in June, the following schools have placed re-orders, first time orders (in August and September), or will be implementing our materials in their schools this year.

Arkansas: Likewise College, Searcy

Delaware: Kuumba Academy Charter School, Wilmington

Georgia: Episcopal Day School of Augusta; Holy Innocents Episcopal School, Atlanta

Illinois: Quincy Public School District, Woodridge

Maryland: Anne Arundel County Public Schools, Annapolis; St. Mary's Public School District, Leonardtown

New Jersey: Waterfront Montessori, Jersey City

New Mexico: Santa Fe Public Schools

New York: Columbia Secondary School for Math, Science & Engineering, Manhattan

North Carolina: Willow Oak Montessori, Chapel Hill

Ohio: Montessori Academy of Cincinnati

Pennsylvania: Seneca Valley School District, Harmony; Warwick High School, Lititz

Tennessee: Currey Ingram Academy, Brentwood; Granbery Elementary, Brentwood

Virginia: St. Anne's Belfield, Charlottesville; Berthold Academy, Reston; James River Day School, Lynchburg

Canada: Ecole Riverside School, Thompson, Manitoba

In addition, Touchstones donated a set of *Touchstones Volume I* books for a new community group of older adults in Fayetteville, AR; a set of *Where'd They Get that Idea: Issues in Math and Science* to Bates Middle School in Annapolis, MD; and a set of *Touchstones Volume A* to Liberty Place in Whitehall, MT, a non-profit residential facility for adults with traumatic brain injury.

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