

September 2019

# VOICES



The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project

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

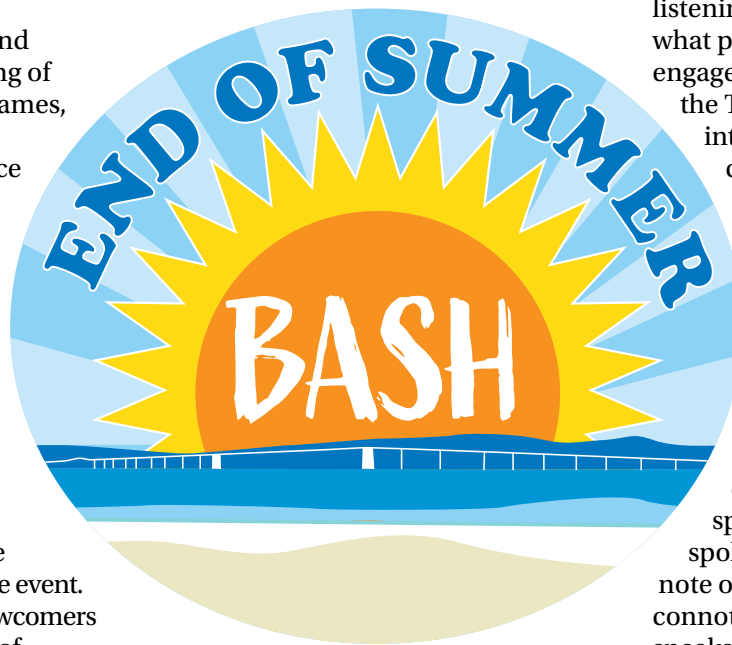
## Summer in the Park

*Sean Hutzell, Project Coordinator*

**T**ouchstones kicked off the school year with one last day of fun in the sun at Sandy Point Park in Annapolis, MD. Our dedicated team of staff and volunteers ensured an evening of excellent food, competitive games, and words from dedicated teachers about the importance of Touchstones programs in their classrooms. Funds raised during that event will provide 15 teachers with free access to Touchstones workshops this year!

Among those who attended were local Touchstones friends already active as advocates for Touchstones programs in the community, and some of those friends brought new folks to the event. It was great to welcome the newcomers into our ever-expanding circle of friends throughout the evening. Events on tap included an animated cornhole tournament. With some exceptionally skilled players scoring to the dismay of their opponents, and some also exceptionally wild throws offering amusement, the evening was quickly filled with sounds of laughter and camaraderie. After hard fought games, winners of the tournament walked away showcasing their victory with

prizes of beach umbrellas. Guests also enjoyed other games, including bocce ball, before devouring delicious food catered by Loretta Hohmann, one of Touchstones' fabulous Eastern Shore volunteers.



During the short program portion of the event, guests heard from two dedicated teachers: Suzan Powell, who uses Touchstones in her Employment Readiness Workshop at the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women, and Liam Dempsey, who teaches middle school English/ Language Arts at Phoenix Academy in Anne Arundel County Public Schools.

Suzan offered her experience with Touchstones in the prison system—how she first saw it in action late in 2015 and thought it was magical to see incarcerated women sitting in a circle collaborating and listening to each other. She wondered what program could make such engagement possible and asked the Touchstones staff to come into her classroom. Now she co-participates in weekly Touchstones discussions and helps model positive and constructive forms of thinking and interaction for women who will be released back into society. Liam, who works exclusively with students with learning and emotional disabilities requiring specialized educational support, spoke about privilege. He made note of the positive and negative connotations of a word that now speaks to advantages associated with race, gender, socio-economics, and educational attainment. Liam said it had been a privilege for him to work at Touchstones as our Summer Teaching Fellow and to have used Touchstones with his students last academic year—sharing with them the benefit of finding their voices. “My students,” he explained, “rarely feel as if their voices are of any value. Touchstones helps them to express

*Through inclusive discussion-based programming, we develop highly effective speakers, listeners, critical thinkers, and collaborative leaders.*



themselves and be heard.” Liam is looking forward to returning to the classroom this week and continuing his work with his students in the Touchstones circle.

We at Touchstones are honored to have had so many friends join us in the park for our end of summer fundraiser and look forward to seeing you at our next event! Thank you again for helping to bring Touchstones to new educators and students this school year!



Charlie Green tosses a winning a bean bag in the corn hole tournament.



Liam Dempsey, a Phoenix Academy teacher in Anne Arundel County Public Schools. “My students rarely feel as if their voices are of any value. Touchstones helps them to express themselves and be heard.”

## Learning & Teaching with Veterans

*Howard Zeiderman, Touchstones Co-founder & Director of Leadership Programs*

Sometimes a name is uncanny. Such is the case with the Touchstones-National Endowment for Humanities (NEH) veterans’ program: *Completing the Odyssey: A Journey Home*. As Odysseus himself discovered, homecoming is not merely finding a geographical place but is a creative act of building a new emotional place for himself with those whom he loves. It is not a static situation but a fluid and evolving reality. Likewise, our work developing this program has been a journey. As experts in discussion programs, our path in program development has entailed learning from veterans who are expert with knowledge of barriers to homecoming. They know first-hand the trials associated with a return to civilian roles after life in the service. In true Touchstones fashion, this program has been as much a reciprocal learning process as it has been a reciprocal teaching one.

Three veterans, Joe Smith, Stephanie Morgan, and Cole Caudle broke a cardinal military rule never to volunteer. They volunteered first. In 2017, when Touchstones first received a grant from the NEH to develop this program, Joe, Stephanie, and Cole started the process of preparing to lead other veterans because they know the importance and difficulties of reintegration after separation from service. Equally valuable to the program’s success, they knew that skills veterans acquire in service must be available to civilian society. Along the way, they discovered how Touchstones offers a rare and unique chance for them to explore ideas and experiences with peers on the road to forming a new understanding of community.

Joe, an Army veteran who served in the Vietnam War, helped us understand that too often vets keep their experiences to themselves. He clarified ways in which full participation in discussion is essential, which helped us understand better the need for accessible texts from *The Odyssey* and specific accounts by more contemporary veterans. While one offers historical distance from personal experience, the others help veterans connect more deeply and explore their own perspectives.

Cole, a Marine Corps veteran with two tours in Afghanistan, knew the importance of collaboration and thinking outside the box. He never lets us forget how small group work in Touchstones is invaluable in building trust and instilling listening skills and sharing power. Cole brought our attention to the risk, and therefore courage, required to listen to another person. This type of listening is the most important precondition for collaboration.

Stephanie, also a Marine Corps veteran, focused us on always attending to and assessing the present situation one faces. Her military training alerted her to the vital role that precise and explicit assessment of successes and problems in discussion dynamics play in group formation and increasingly collaborative leadership. She helped us recognize more fully how integral the self and group evaluation are to our processes at Touchstones. And she sensitized us through her own actions to see how one learns to tailor one’s evaluations to what others can absorb and understand.

As we start a new round of *Completing the Odyssey* on Sept. 11, we are thankful that these veterans took and continue taking the risk to share their thoughts and offer input that enables us to create a program that is a living, joint effort. Stay tuned for more updates from the field.



This nine-week program is open to all veterans at no cost. For more information, please email Howard at [hz@touchstones.org](mailto:hz@touchstones.org).

*Any views, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this notice do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.*

## Marriage of True Minds

*Liam Dempsey, Touchstones Summer Teaching Fellow and AACPS middle school teacher*

Sonnet 116 by William Shakespeare begins with the famous line, “Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments.” I have had the agonizing pleasure of reading that sonnet almost a hundred times, never entirely sure what exactly constitutes the marriage of true minds, or how to prevent impediments to such a thing. The former is not easily answered while the latter seems readily apparent. Impediments abound. Barriers like privilege, prejudice, and the inability to find common ground from trying to understand another’s perspective are all too common. Other impediments include lacking crucial skills like active listening, asking clarifying questions, and the ability to be fully present in a conversation. All these things get in the way of the marriage of true minds. But what exactly is the marriage of true minds?

The Touchstones Discussion Project provides an answer. I have had the wonderful opportunity in my role as a Summer Teaching Fellow at Touchstones to take part in several exciting initiatives. These include being able take part in the daily operations of Touchstones, assisting with a workshop for BASIS educators from around the world, and finally the chance to participate in the

Executive Leadership Workshop this July. The incredible work that the Touchstones Discussion Project does every day has clarified the meaning of that opaque line of Shakespeare. Touchstones believes that every person has a voice. A mind with an equal claim to truth as any other. The work of the Touchstones Discussion Project is to help obliterate impediments to collaborative leadership, to develop critical thinking skills, all in order to meet the needs of a ceaselessly mutable 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Supporting Anne Arundel County’s Women and Families

*Jenn Macris, Advancement Coordinator*

Touchstones is honored to receive a 2019 grant from the local Annapolis-area giving circle, Anne Arundel Women Giving Together, a “philanthropic giving circle with more than 200 members who annually pool their funds and award grants to nonprofit organizations seeking to improve the lives of women and families in Anne Arundel County.” This generous \$20,000 grant allows Touchstones to achieve two important goals at the

Maryland Correctional Institution for Women (MCI-W) in Jessup, MD. The first is the continuation of a weekly program with women in a General Education Development (GED) class that prepares them for a high school equivalency diploma. Their work in Touchstones builds essential self-expression, literacy, and interpersonal skills. The second is to expand and sustain programming in an Employment Readiness Workshop—an eight-week course that helps women develop and practice skills essential for gainful employment post-release.

With this funding, an estimated 200 women incarcerated at MCI-W will participate in Touchstones programs over the next year. This unique and transformational program develops life, work and parenting skills, and promotes healthy decision-making, all which directly reduce recidivism. Touchstones has been invited to participate in the AAWGT Grants Showcase on Sept. 11, to highlight the vital work we do in support of those most in need in our communities. Local partnerships like this one with AAWGT allow Touchstones to develop a “boots-on-the-ground” core of friends, donors, and volunteers—an essential complement to our growing network of charitable support from around the world.

### Touchstones on WNAV Radio 1430



In early August, WNAV’s Donna Cole interviewed Touchstones Executive Director Stefanie Takacs. Their 20-minute interview covered many topics—from Touchstones’ beginnings and evolution to its important impact in education in 47 countries today. This interview is part of WNAV’s commitment to feature community organizations making a difference every day in the lives of Marylanders and the station’s listeners around the world. To listen to this exciting interview, go to Touchstones facebook page (Touchstones Discussion Project) or tune in at [www.facebook.com/1430WNAV/videos/2315858272062091/](https://www.facebook.com/1430WNAV/videos/2315858272062091/)

You can also hear the interview at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NB1vXe8whSw>



Teachers reflect on active learning as they begin a Touchstones workshop at a Montessori conference in Charleston, SC.

## Educational Outreach and Teacher Development

Lynn Cloutier, Office & Operations Manager

One way the Touchstones Discussion Project reaches new teachers and school administrators is by attending and presenting at educational conferences. To showcase how Touchstones uses student-centered discussion to build engagement, critical thinking, and leadership, our trainers attend conferences around the country and in Canada and provide interactive, hands-on practice while modeling an actual Touchstones lesson. It's a fun and effective means for immersing educators in an instructional approach that uniquely fosters student participation, cooperation, critical thinking, active listening and collaboration—all through discussion.

Touchstones attends many different types of conferences for educators, including those for

teachers at independent schools in the US and Canada, American and International Montessori schools, International Baccalaureate schools, colleges and universities, public and public-charter schools, and conferences focused on students identified with advanced learning abilities or talents. While teachers have the opportunity to explore how Touchstones programs support positive socio-behavioral and academic growth, we get the chance to meet and cultivate new relationships.

*I am so grateful to Touchstones for this knowledge, this experience, and these materials.*

What do teachers who attend our conference sessions have to say? One attendee at an AMS conference wrote after her Touchstones workshop that it was “inspiring,” while an eighth-grade teacher at another conference said, “I found the application and learning of Touchstones principles thoroughly

engaging and useful.” Following a workshop this summer for charter school educators, an administrator from Arizona shared, “I found this workshop extraordinarily valuable.... I am so grateful to Touchstones for this knowledge, this experience, and these materials.” This is what introducing Touchstones to new teachers and students is all about!

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