

TOUCHSTONES AT 25

After tutor Nick Maistrellis asked the opening question, there was dead silence—for 90 uncomfortable seconds. Maistrellis waited as the middle school students in Hartford, Connecticut, stared at each other, at the floor, or at their Xeroxed copies of the reading, the Cain and Abel story from the book of Genesis. In the back of the classroom, tutors Howard Zeiderman (class of 1967) and Geoff Comber were observing, along with some of the school's teachers and administrators. "It was terrifying," says Maistrellis, recalling the details with clarity 26 years later.

Finally, one student spoke up. A seminar happened. Though there were moments of chaos as students embraced their new freedom, they responded to the text and to each other.

Maistrellis realized later that if he had broken the silence and prodded the students, the experiment would have been a failure. "The students never would have taken control of the discussion," Maistrellis says. "That was the beginning of making them responsible for the class."

From its debut in the Hartford Public Schools in 1983, the Touchstones Discussion Project—started by tutors and fueled in part over the years by St. John's graduates, current students, and alumni volunteers—has grown into an organization with international reach. More than 100,000 students in Jordan have read Touchstones texts in their middle schools. Last year, at the invitation of the government of Tanzania, Zeiderman led seminars for business and government leaders with the goal of forming coalitions to work on long-range plans for the country's development. Prisoners in Maryland have been reading Touchstones texts with volunteer tutors (alumni and current students

among them), and Zeiderman has even led seminars for personnel of the National Security Agency and Central Intelligence Agency.

In the United States, at least 7,500 schools have included Touchstones in their curricula, from elementary grades through high school. The organization has 27 Touchstones volumes in print, plus three volumes in Spanish, a volume in Arabic for Jordan, and a volume in Burmese, used in Myanmar.

Although it takes many of its approaches from St. John's, Touchstones differs in what it hopes to achieve in participants, says Zeiderman. "Touchstones is a four-stage process to develop in students the skills of exploring and thinking both collaboratively and individually. In Touchstones, all—and I mean all—students learn to participate. It is also a program in how students can govern themselves as a seminar group and learn to lead the groups themselves."

The idea developed over long mid-morning breakfasts that Zeiderman and Maistrellis enjoyed every day at an Annapolis restaurant. Tutors at the college were often getting requests to share the St. John's "method" by schools with ambitious and innovative programs. (Hartford, for example, was a magnet school with aspirations to send more students to college.) Comber (H95), now tutor emeritus, was also involved from the beginning, using contacts across the country to bring Touchstones to schools in places such as

rural Alabama, Pittsburgh, and Chicago. The effort was shaped into a nonprofit organization and incorporated in 1985 as a 501(c)3.

Today, Touchstones is headquartered in a building in historic Annapolis and has a staff of eight, most of them Johnnies with a missionary zeal for education. Adam Meyers (A08) began working for Touchstones right after he graduated last year. He runs the Touchstones program at the Maryland State Correctional Institution in Jessup. He coordinates volunteers and works through the bureaucratic red tape, but he also gets to choose the readings and lead seminars. Sitting down to discuss a text in a correctional facility "was so far from anything I'd ever experienced before," says Meyers. "Now that I've done it a while, what keeps me interested is the humanity of these men. It's so easy when you go through your normal life to pigeonhole them as hardened criminals who have no place in regular society. You can't help but notice that they're exactly

the same as you are. It leads you to learn something about yourself."

For years, Maistrellis took time away from St. John's to help run Touchstones, but by the early 1990s, he had to leave the organization and return to full-time teaching. Looking back, he's pleased at what Touchstones has accomplished and how it has evolved. "We thought we had the opportunity to do something really big," that would make a difference, he says. "We did."

Zeiderman has turned the day-to-day management over to Stefanie Takacs (A89), Touchstones' new educational director, but he's still involved in leading Touchstones seminars and training for a diverse group of people and organizations. His long-range plan for Touchstones? "I want every student in the world to do it," he says. Short of that, he'd be happy if "every student in the United States did it." ❀

—ROSEMARY HARTY