

September 2021

VOICES



The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project

www.touchstones.org

An Invitation to Veterans

Leith Daghistani (LTJG, USN ret), Touchstones Volunteer

Over the Summer, Touchstones revitalized its efforts to expand access to *Completing the Odyssey: A Journey Home*, a discussion program for veterans on the transition to civilian life.

Program development was funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and before the onset of the pandemic it had been piloted with several groups of veterans from the greater Baltimore-Annapolis-Washington area and implemented in Baltimore at the Maryland Center for Veterans Education and Training. The program stands to empower veterans from all service eras to navigate the transition to civilian life through explorations of selections from Homer's *Odyssey* and readings on the challenges of service and homecoming from modern conflicts.

Now, Touchstones is planning to broaden the impact of the program by introducing discussion groups into new communities. In August, Touchstones staff and volunteers, including myself, met with veterans who had previously completed the program and who now seek to lead new discussion groups with veterans in their own communities. The group discussed partnership opportunities with the Library of Congress Veterans History Project, the Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Service Organizations, nonprofits, and local

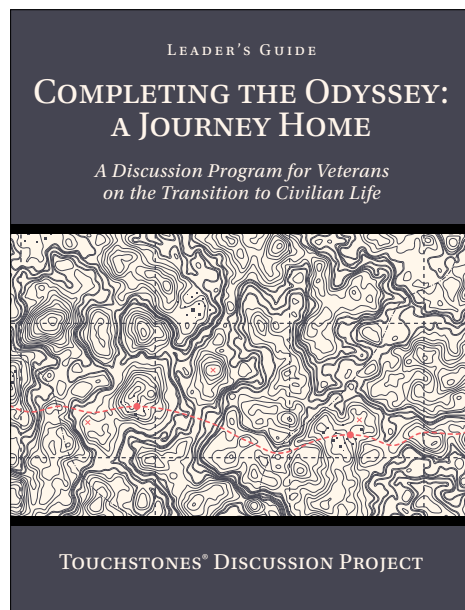
communities to find veterans struggling with the transition to civilian life or who feel disconnected from their community after service and invite them into the dialogue. The group also discussed additional opportunities to include active-duty service members in Touchstones discussions to help prepare them for combat

leadership and operating in uncertain environments. We also discussed the Touchstones program, *Together*, which brings civilians and veterans into dialogues about bridging the social divide between veterans and non-veterans.

The group then transitioned into a Touchstones discussion from *Completing the Odyssey* on a text from Carl von Clausewitz's *On War*. Our discussion focused on preparation for leadership roles and strategies for success, while exploring how we might carry combat experience, tactical uncertainty, and martial courage home with us in ways that affect our daily lives.

In that discussion, I saw how *Completing the Odyssey* provides a space for veterans to reflect collaboratively on their service to our nation, while supporting fundamental

skills necessary to deepen their understanding of themselves and how to speak, listen, and connect with others more authentically. These skills have always been crucial for a successful reintegration, and they are especially urgent for post 9/11 veterans who have often deployed and seen combat at higher rates over the past 20 years than those who served before them. As Touchstones



Touchstones develops highly effective communicators, active listeners, and reflective thinkers to build a collaborative and inclusive world. We achieve this by creating, offering, and supporting discussion-based educational programs for everyone.



expands this program and increases participation among newer veterans, it offers the chance for veterans across service eras to share their experiences with peers, so they can better navigate their own journeys while helping others to do the same.

If you are a veteran or active service member and would like to learn more about how to receive training and materials for this Touchstones program, please email Howard Zeiderman, Touchstones Co-founder & Director of Leadership Programs: hz@touchstones.org.

What Are We Serving Up this Fall?

Stefanie Takacs, Executive Director

It was a busy summer, between in-person programming for middle school students on Maryland's Eastern Shore and working with various school districts around the country to prepare for a return to in-person instruction. Now we're back in the swing of things and eager to report on existing initiatives and new endeavors this fall. You'll read in this newsletter about some of the exciting changes on the Touchstones staff; it's just great that we've been able to add serious and dedicated talent to the team this year. As Olivia Braley continues her work leading a Touchstones' executive program on poetry, she is joined by Samantha Duckworth, who had a great summer internship with Touchstones. Sam has a keen interest in education and she's bringing that enthusiasm to the Touchstones office to support all programming this fall. And, as Howard Zeiderman and I continue to lead the way on other executive initiatives and school programs, respectively, Brittany Usiak joins us to expand outreach, training, and partnerships with schools and organizations working

to serve K-12 and adult education markets. At the same time, our talented and established staff members continues their work on advancement and public relations.

In addition to these efforts so all people can access educational programming that empowers them with reflective thinking and skills of civil discourse and collaborative leadership, the Board of Directors and I are advancing a new four-year strategic plan for Touchstones. This new plan includes eight areas of focus: organizational capacity and sustainability, fundraising, governance and board development, school programs, teacher training, executive leadership programs, community programs, and digital plans. Over the last four months, we've been fortunate to have input from many members of the Touchstones Advisory Council, as well as additional experts who are already highly engaged in Touchstones planning and programming. Together, we're developing a roadmap that looks to anticipate and meet the needs in education—of all people and all ages and backgrounds—for the next four years and well beyond.



A sample page from Touchstones flipbook, *Touchpebbles A* in French.

Digital plans, which have been part of our strategic efforts for years, have now assumed a very different and prominent role. Throughout the pandemic, we've accelerated our ability to deliver training, materials, and programming through digital media. Today, nearly all of

Touchstones curricula are available in digital formats and all our professional services are deliverable entirely online—without losing any of the proven benefits Touchstones has always offered. While it's sometimes unsettling to see how technology is now a central agent in our school, work, and personal lives, we're committed to applying new tools and leveraging digital media in ways that enhance and support individual and group learning and development. It's hard to imagine exactly what the world will look like in 2025, but it's exciting to think about how much more proven programming we'll be able to deliver to teachers and students in four years!

Meanwhile, there's a lot of work to accomplish. The next group of 15 participants in our intensive teacher training program using *Touchstones Exploring American Perspectives, Vol. 1* begins in just over a month. That eight-meeting program features works by African-American and Black poets, writers, politicians, civil rights leaders, fine-artists, and philosophers. It focuses on themes of belonging, inclusion, voice, listening, and shared leadership. This free program is possible through your generous charitable support for Touchstones, and it highlights how every gift received contributes to the common good. I will be co-leading this segment with a participant from the first pilot, Matteo Burrell. Matteo graduated from St. John's College in 2019 and is currently in a Ph.D. program in philosophy at the New School in New York City.

Stay tuned throughout the fall for updates through e-newsletter articles and our social media posts. And, as always, if you would like to know more about these and other programs underway or planned for the future, just give us a call or send an email to schoolprograms@touchstones.org.



Exploring Identity & Belonging

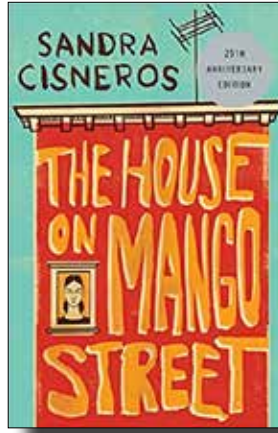
Olivia Braley, Operations & Executive Programs Manager

At Touchstones, we are always looking to expand awareness of and access to our programs, and we strive to engage students and teachers in inclusive and discussion-based education models they may not otherwise know about. In the past, some community initiatives we've launched to reach new audiences included Touchstones Week, Frankenreads, and partnering with the Anne Arundel County NAACP to celebrate their Founder's Day. Since the pandemic began, we've run an open discussion program every other Saturday to explore what it means to be part of a community. (All are welcome, so please ask us how to join!)

Community engagement is an important part of our mission at Touchstones, and it inspired us to develop and offer discussion lessons linked to Sandra Cisneros' anthology of short stories, *The House on Mango Street*. This collection of stories is told from the point of view of a young Latinx girl, Esperanza, who moves to a new neighborhood in New York City. Her narrations and vignettes of city life raise questions about identity, belonging, friendship, family, and culture. These lessons are offered for free to encourage inclusive discussions everywhere!

The House on Mango Street is a critically acclaimed book and was selected by the National Endowment for the Arts as one of the Big Read books for the 2021-2022 year. The NEA Big Read is a partnership with Arts Midwest, which seeks to "broaden our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book." The Big Read initiative provides funding opportunities

for libraries, schools, and other organizations to support community programs that "inspire conversation and discovery."



We elected to develop lessons to accompany one of the Big Read books to augment the positive impact that inclusive discussions on important themes can have—in all communities nationwide. These Touchstones lessons provide teachers, students, and other groups in afterschool and enrichment programs with structured discussion plans and worksheets that invite all participants to assume active roles in their own communities of learners. Each lesson is available in English and Spanish and provides an introduction, detailed lesson guide, questions for discussion, and a student worksheet. We want to introduce as many students as possible to the transformative nature of a Touchstones discussion, as well as to increase awareness and recognition of Touchstones programs by educators and others working with youth. We also hope to provide additional ways for teachers already using Touchstones to engage with their students. We know that when we support educators—especially when many are still dealing with COVID restrictions and related teaching challenges—that we support their students!

If you are interested in using these lessons in your own classroom or community, email schoolprograms@touchstones.org to be added to our email list. We'll notify you as soon as they're available. More information will also be available soon on the Touchstones website.

New Team Members

*Sam Duckworth,
Project & Office Coordinator*

In August, Touchstones welcomed two new members to its staff: Brittany Usiak and Samantha Duckworth, the second being myself. Brittany is a former teacher, and I am a rising junior at St. John's College. Brittany joins the staff as our K-12 & Adult Programs Manager. She has been teaching for the past eight years, where she has always tried to use a philosophy of student-based learning and democratic education in her classroom. She said this is one of the reasons she was drawn to Touchstones; its work combines many of her beliefs about teaching into a program where the students truly drive the learning.

Brittany is looking forward to seeing these principles implemented on a broader scale. Her vision is that teachers who don't know about Touchstones but want a proven discussion-based program can learn about Touchstones and implement it. She said a lot of teachers, including herself, feel strongly about empowering students by letting them direct their own education while supporting their social and emotional learning. Teachers, she says, that share these values would value Touchstones as a resource for developing essential skills—just as she would have.

While Brittany is well on her professional path, I am still discovering my own interests. I spent the summer as an intern for



Touchstones, and after completing that I joined the staff as the Project & Office Coordinator. I found my internship incredibly rewarding, and I'm looking forward to continuing my work here. In reflecting on the summer, I see that I learned some important things. Among them is my understanding of effective leadership—both in discussions and outside of them. This greater awareness also helped me learn about myself and what I can do to cultivate constructive environments.

This has been very empowering for me because it has helped me understand the effects that any person, including myself, can have over a group. I'm excited to further my development at Touchstones. My time here has already allowed me to see firsthand how Touchstones programs help people grow. I believe that I will keep growing while working at Touchstones, as I strengthen a wide variety of skills and abilities that will greatly help me personally and professionally.

A Culture of Learning

Brittany Usiak, K-12 & Adult Programs Manager

I chose to work in education because I am driven by a love of learning, and I believe in the power of schools as the foundation of thriving, democratic communities. When I first connected with Touchstones' Executive Director, Stef Takacs, about the possibility of joining the Touchstones team last spring, I knew intuitively that my philosophy of education aligned perfectly with Touchstones. Since beginning in August, I have been delighted to have this confirmed! Touchstones' work is truly changing the world by

fostering the active listening skills and power sharing that are essential for everyone, now more than ever.

As part of my training, I support workshops, both virtual and in-person, for teachers using Touchstones in a variety of contexts, and I have been inspired by the educators dedicating themselves to their students despite the pandemic's immense challenges. Teachers find themselves bearing the burden not only of teaching through COVID, but also through

"I am driven by a love of learning, and I believe in the power of schools as the foundation of thriving, democratic communities."

contemporary America's highly polarized climate of social discourse. In one recent workshop, I was impressed by a group of teachers who wrestled together beautifully with how they might navigate discussions of particularly challenging ideas raised in Audre Lorde's poem "Who Said It Was Simple." I have also had several conversations with individual teachers who shared vulnerably about their anxieties going into the school year but continue to pursue professional growth in order to provide their students with the education they deserve. I am proud of the ways that Touchstones works not only to support students but to build transformative skills and mindsets for teachers as well.

I am grateful, too, to be part of such a genuine, rigorous, and reflective culture of learning at Touchstones. Touchstones staff

and teachers are committed to lifelong learning, and to constant reflection about fundamental questions for all educators: what is the purpose of learning and teaching? How do—and how can—schools be living laboratories for collaborative problem-solving, for community-building across lines of difference? Touchstones staff and discussion leaders are concerned with these and other vital questions for a democratic society, but the Touchstones culture connects these big picture questions to the individual level of classrooms and students. It is wonderful to be part of an organization that works on both the large and small scales of educational theory and practice.

I am eager to continue my own journey with Touchstones, particularly now that the school year is beginning, and I will be able to spend time with students and teachers. Within a time of uncertainty and upheaval, I know that at Touchstones I can work towards building the empathetic, inclusive, collaborative, and creative world I want to see.

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