

# Arundel Report

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## Eastport newcomer Zeiderman brings change



By J. Henson — The Capital  
Howard Zeiderman recently moved his non-profit organization, the Touchstone Discussion Project, to Eastport.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** A chronicle of a unique place, "Our Eastport," appears on the Arundel Report page every other Sunday.

It isn't often I meet a newcomer to Eastport who has developed an innovative worldwide learning network.

Howard Zeiderman recently moved his non-profit organization, Touchstones Discussion Project, to 425 Sixth St. It's a change for Eastport because during the last half century, the corner building housed retail businesses.

But change is what the Touchstones Discussion Project is all about.

In 1985, Mr. Zeiderman and two of his St. John's College faculty colleagues, Nicholas Maistrellis and Geoffrey Comber, were invited to consult on curriculum programs in the Hartford, Conn., school system.

### OUR EASTPORT



By MIKE MIRON

"What struck us is the major problem in education — the passivity of students. They talked about it and we thought if we could introduce a discussion environment that it might enable students to overcome the passivity and develop skills," he said.

They began by training and re-

educating teachers and produced a series of guidebooks about how to conduct classes using a discussion-based format.

Teachers met weekly to share information on their students' progress and considered how to capitalize on the opportunities and deal with problems that arose as they used this format.

They realized over time that the process complemented the regular curriculum, with great results. One inner-city Hartford school that participated in the project sent 90 percent of its alumni to four-year colleges.

The use of discussion groups as a learning method is nothing new to Mr. Zeiderman and his associates. The approach is one of the curricula foundations of St. John's College.

"In discussions we saw students bring forward both strengths and weaknesses. They have to assume a

greater initiative, but also a greater responsibility," he said.

The Touchstones Discussion Project develops short unfamiliar texts taken from classic thinkers whose writings are found in the Great Books.

In a traditional class, students would explore this text. But here, the text becomes a tool for the students to explore their own thinking.

According to Mr. Zeiderman, a whole new mode of learning developed from this experience.

"Teachers were seeing new ideas come out of this. They were not the traditional authority on content in the classroom and could actually see their students learn from one another," he said.

In 1990, one of the Touchstones guidebooks found its way into the Maryland House of Corrections

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located in Jessup. An inmate who was serving a life sentence read it and wrote Mr. Zeiderman to suggest that the program might be of value to some of the prison population.

Mr. Zeiderman contacted prison officials and arranged a meeting with nine inmates, all serving life sentences. Weekly meetings followed and Touchstones was born into the Maryland prison system.

Mr. Zeiderman initially facilitated the discussions using text from Biblical stories and Plato's "Republic." The inmates took on such topics as anger, revenge and justice.

"The idea was that the men would become capable of leading discussions and take it out into the general prison population," he said, "and it worked."

Two years later, more than 300 inmates participated in discussion groups. The process brought out an enthusiasm and the men were able to engage each other in a non-violent and intellectually stimulating way.

Touchstones has moved into other learning areas as well. Currently, there are more than 200,000

participants in the United States, China, Haiti and Eastern Europe.

Locally, during the past four years the non-profit has facilitated discussion groups at the Arnold Senior Center. Within two weeks it will initiate a program at the Eastport Senior Center.

Much of the funding for the programs comes from private foundations, but Mr. Zeiderman indicated the group plans to seek grants from local and federal sources.

"There is a great deal happening in this country with education and we feel we can be part of it by contributing something of value," he said.

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