

Seniors

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Profound thinking

Touchstones Project expands with senior discussion group

By MARY P. FELTER
Community News Editor

Which is the moral act: doing good for someone out of kindness, or performing good out of a sense of duty? Who is the moral person?

Nineteen adults argued these points for an hour recently at the South County Senior Center. They are part of a new free program run since January by the Touchstones Discussion Project of Annapolis.

In this once-a-week class, the students listen to leader Howard Zeiderman read a passage or show a video before they launch into a discussion on a topic or a painting.

Last week, Mr. Zeiderman, a part-time tutor at St. John's College, read a passage by philosopher Immanuel Kant on moral acts. Each senior had a large-print copy of the reading.

"What do you think Kant said?" Mr. Zeiderman asked, and one group member volunteered a brief explanation of the passage.

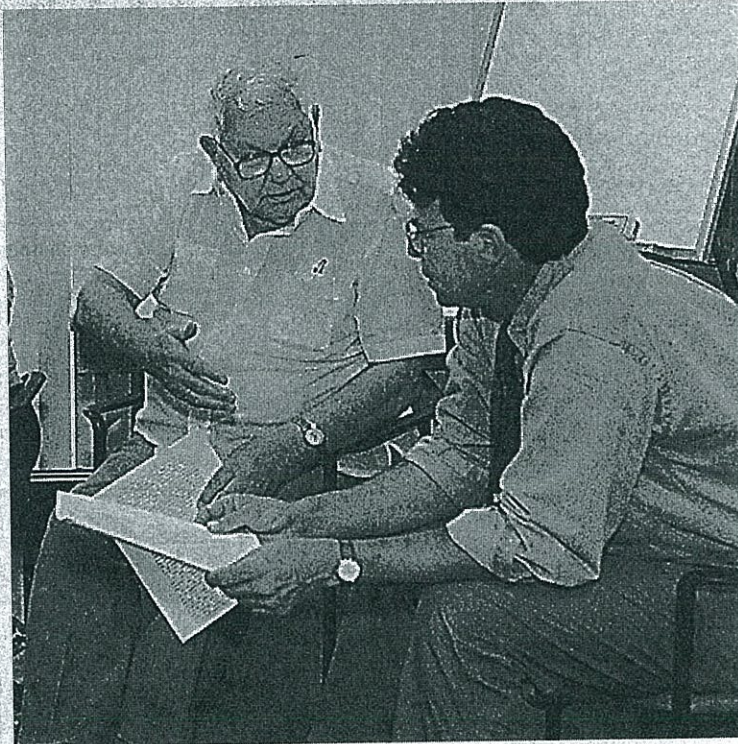
"And do you agree with what he had to say?" he asked.

"I don't think people give that way; out of obligation," one senior said. "Think of doctors, nurses, teachers, who are in their jobs because they want to be there and they give of themselves. Are they any less moral?"

"If you follow his argument, you could even say that the worst (person) . . . who gives out of duty is still a moral person," said Stanley Aleks of Riva. "But that is not so."

A third said there is no moral gain for someone who does something he likes to do. You get more value out of doing something out of duty, especially when you don't want to do it, he said.

In the midst of the questions, the flow of the discussion leaves the instructor and runs quickly among the participants. Opinions abound and are discussed with calmness and consideration. When the talk



By David W. Trozzo — The Capital
Weikko Lindquist, left, of Annapolis, discusses a reading in the Touchstones discussion group at South County Senior Center with instructor Howard Zeiderman.

tends to become tangential, Mr. Zeiderman poses a question, pulling the discussion back to the target.

"I like talking about issues," said George Shapiro of Annapolis, who attends the sessions with his wife, Grace. "I read a lot of Kant in college, and these classes give me a chance to think about subjects."

"I love the discussion," said Arlene Axelrod of Annapolis. "It really makes me think. Sometimes we carry over the topic to the next session. We all speak freely and there are no right answers in the discussion."

Natalie and Emanuel Simpson

come from their Heritage Harbour home for the mental stimulation and for the support group atmosphere, she said.

Mr. Zeiderman said the idea of extending the Touchstones Discussion Project to seniors has been on his mind for some time.

"The elderly have a great deal to say to each other and are very thoughtful. They don't get stimulated much, so it is good for them to be in an environment with others for even an hour to share ideas."

The Touchstones Project, which is more than seven years old, was established initially for students in

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grades three to 12. The project is designed to help students learn to work cooperatively, to listen with interest and respect, to make decisions based on evidence, to help others to learn and to be inspired to teach themselves.

A participant, Janice Cantwell of Edgewater, was impressed after seeing how the project has fared with prisoners at the Maryland House of Correction. A video of a discussion held at the jail was shown to the Edgewater group.

"We saw these lifers discuss a passage from Genesis about Abraham and Isaac, and they were articulate and bright," Mrs. Cantwell said. "They discussed the issues even better than we did."

Center director Mary Ann Cheers is pleased with the project, in which "people can really vent their opinions. Some are true intellectuals and others are very quiet people who never say very much. This affords them the chance to say their thing."

Ed Casey, assistant director of the Arnold Senior Center, has visited the program and is trying to find space at his center to start the project there.