



VOICES

The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project

SHAPING A BETTER WORLD

by: Alexandra Fotos, Annual and Planned Giving

On Friday, October 28, the Touchstones Board presented the Geoffrey J. Comber Teacher of the Year Award to Keith Eaton. Keith runs Touchstones discussions in social studies classes at Mount Desert Island HS in Bar Harbor, Maine. He was nominated by his supervisor for his exemplary leadership using Touchstones to cultivate skills of civil discourse throughout the school community. An avid outdoorsman who values experience-based learning, Keith sees how Touchstones provides his students with authentic opportunities to learn together. In practicing active listening, asking questions to clarify, and considering new perspectives, Keith's students teach themselves and each other the value of self-examination. Through respectful discussions, they look

beyond their own experiences to a world with infinite possibilities—a world they are shaping for the better.

Keith has also run peer-led discussion workshops with teachers and administrators this year, further demonstrating his commitment to building constructive connections through dialog. We offer our deepest thanks and celebrate Keith, along with all teachers who transform education through collaborative discussion.

While teachers everywhere advance Touchstones programs in the classroom, nearly 60 volunteers also pitched in behind the scenes to promote

Touchstones this year! These volunteers give their time and/or expertise—whether in discussion programs, events, mailings, fundraising, or advocacy.

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Board members, Garreth Heidt (L) and Dr. Gregory Hodges (r.) present the 2022 Geoffrey J. Comber Touchstones Teacher of the Year Award to Keith Eaton (m.) from Mount Desert Island HS in Bar Harbor, Maine.

Through inclusive discussion-based programming, Touchstones develops highly effective speakers, listeners, critical thinkers, and collaborative leaders.

SHAPING A BETTER WORLD

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This year, we are thrilled to celebrate Noelle and Philip Richmond as our Volunteers of the Year. Noelle and Phil are long-time advocates for Touchstones who have given countless hours of encouragement and expertise in many forms. As a member of the Board, Noelle worked closely this year with staff and the Advisory Council, volunteered in the women's prison program, and introduced new people to Touchstones through her welcoming outreach. At the same time, Phil helped the Board better understand planned giving and best practices in establishing an endowment. In addition, he offered exciting new ideas for executive program expansion. We are indebted to both Noelle and Phil for their exceptional gifts of time and dedication to Touchstones.

The Touchstones staff and Board also wishes to recognize Brett Heavner, a trademark and copyright partner at Finnegan in Washington, DC, for his and the firm's phenomenal services provided pro bono related to trademark and copyright protections.

To all who volunteer for Touchstones, whether this year or before, thank you for being part of the Touchstones family. We truly appreciate your contributions and wish you and yours the happiest of holiday seasons!

TOUCHSTONES WEEK 2022 IMPACT

949

*Our communications
reached 949
people*

1215+

*Engaging 1215+
people in Touchstones
discussions*

37+

*At 37+ different
sites*

14+3

*Hosted in 14 US states
and 3 countries*

"I find the Touchstones project eye-opening and a very democratic way of implementing literacy in governance and education towards peace. Bravo!"

*-Dr. Ana Maria Klein, Emeritus Professor,
SUNY Fredonia*

TOUCHSTONES FELLOWS: BUILDING TRUST

by: Brittany Usiak, K-12 & Adult Programs Manager

Our 2022 Touchstones Fellows program is in full swing! This fall's cohort brings together educators from New York, Nevada, and Maryland for weekly, hands-on practice in discussion leadership using our *Exploring American Perspectives* volume. Funded by your contributions to Touchstones in support of teacher professional development, this program is free of charge to educators. Now in its fourth round, the Fellows program helps participants consider the challenges and rewards of building trust in a group through collaboration. Along with honing discussion leadership skills they will model for their students in class, several Fellows have also expressed a desire to learn how their actions are perceived by others: their peers in this group and the students they teach.

During the first four weeks, we examined themes of power, accountability, voice, and community, as each Fellow assumed leadership for one of the discussion meetings. The lessons learned are already being applied to their work and sparking deeper thought between sessions. After we had explored a piece by Olaudah Equiano about how wielding power over others shifts our identities, one teacher reported she had brought what she learned to her students. She shared she was able to engage and guide them in discussing similar themes for nearly an entire sociology class period. Another week, while discussing Frederick Douglass' letter, "To My Old Master, Thomas Auld," we connected ideas of holding powerful people publicly accountable to contemporary questions about "call out" and "call in" tactics on social media.

In each meeting, instead of focusing on making our own points we've continually returned to the practices of asking ourselves, "What does the group need from me now?" This shift in mindset helps us grapple with the habits and roles we as educators have adopted in our teaching. It also allows us to recognize how the texts, the discussion process, and our own perspectives are tools in Touchstones—tools we are using to advance a better understanding of ourselves and each other.

*In these articles, you can learn more about
the social media tactics referenced above.*

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/nov/01/call-out-culture-obama-social-media>

https://edib.harvard.edu/files/dib/files/calling_in_and_calling_out_guide_v4.pdf?m=1625683246

ARTFUL ENGAGEMENT

by :Stefanie Takacs, Executive Director

This spring, the Touchstones Board of Directors completed a new Strategic Plan for 2022-2025. A primary goal, as reported in our October newsletter, is establishing a \$5,000,000 endowment fund to support the organization in perpetuity. We have secured more than \$1,825,000 for "The Founders' Fund," named in honor of those who established and developed Touchstones as a leader in transformative education. We're looking forward to engaging many supporters in this vital campaign.

This endowment allows us to plan for and achieve strategic priorities. Among the most pressing is growing our staff to meet the increasing demand for programs that teach skills of civil



A guest admires Zuckerman's luminous "Potted Plant" during the exhibition.

discourse and critical thinking. Recognizing this important goal, Touchstones volunteers Craven and JD Engels hosted a special fundraising art exhibition on October 30 at their home in Annapolis.

"Artful Engagement for Real Change" drew more than 60 guests to enjoy lively conversation and 18 paintings from the Touchstones collection of

works by Elliott Zuckerman. These paintings are part of a larger collection of his works bequeathed to Touchstones in 2019.

We are exceptionally grateful to have had the chance to bring this new exhibition to the public, thanks to Craven and JD. All paintings in the show—and all works in the collection—are available for purchase. Every painting comes with a custom Touchstones discussion plan for personal use. Proceeds from the sales of these paintings and contributions received during or related to this event are marked for the Touchstones endowment fund.

During the event, we asked guests why they are so committed to the organization's future. Sean Hutzell, a teacher at Elizabeth Seton High School in Maryland and a Touchstones volunteer, offered, "Touchstones exemplifies inclusion and diversity. The circle is ever-growing—bringing people into the discussion, welcoming new members, and ensuring those already there maintain a welcome feeling and are always part of something bigger than themselves." Another guest, Camilo Arbelaez, who is a long-standing participant in our executive programs, said he believes Touchstones "is the best method of learning and for people to get to know each other in a collaborative way... I love that Touchstones has brought discussion programs to many different populations. It's not just reserved for people who can join an executive group. So, I am really supportive of their mission."

The event has raised more than \$13,000 so far, with more sales to come. If you're interested, we have special purchasing options available. Call or email us for more information: programs@touchstones.org

stones.org. Thanks again to the Engels and all our guests and generous supporters for making "Artful Engagement for Real Change" a resounding success!

FROM THE SOUNDBOOTH

by: Samantha Duckworth,
Data and Program Manager &
Soundbooth Engineer

Something I discovered during this event is how Touchstones means something a bit different to everyone. In my interviews in the Touchstones Soundbooth, I enjoyed being able to capture distinct perspectives of why Touchstones is special to each person. To some, it is the community of learners who come together in a Touchstones discussion. To others, it is the space and process that allows participants to find their own voices. Others credit Touchstones for introducing new works to participants and using a method that fosters both closer reading and active listening.



Camilo Arbelaez shares why he's a big fan of Touchstones.



THE POWER OF DISCUSSION

by: *The Touchstones Roving Reporter*

Coming into the last two months of the year, we wanted to share one more story about how Touchstones is changing the world for the better. In the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women in Jessup, Maryland, our staff and trained volunteers have delivered more than 22 hours of programming since the prison re-opened to outside visitors in May. (We had an unplanned summer hiatus, when the prison experienced another COVID surge in July.) These discussions take place in the prison school each Tuesday with students from a graduate equivalency program class and an office management class. The five volunteers and Touchstones staff who take turns leading the discussion program have already awarded certificates to three of the 26 participants for completing ten classes. This formally recognizes their commitment to building essential communication and thinking skills that will serve them well when they eventually return to their families. Documented participation in Touchstones is something the state parole board takes into account on a case-by-case basis.

In our last meeting, we held a Touchstones Week discussion on a selection by Alexis de Tocqueville about freedom, equality, justice, trust, and respect. Afterward, we each reflected on what we had learned. Among the many responses that spoke about individual change, this one particularly stood out, "The power of discussion is vital amongst humans. I have grown so much in becoming more social (without anxiety) since beginning Touchstones."

This transformative Touchstones program has been funded in part this year through a grant from Anne Arundel Women Giving Together, by contributions from donors like you, and through many hours of thoughtful time and leadership given by our amazing volunteers and staff. Collectively we are building a more inclusive world.

THE POWER OF MANY!

If you're an annual donor to Touchstones, please consider making a modest monthly recurring gift to significantly boost the impact of your contribution. For example, if you currently make a \$50 or \$100 annual gift and opt to make a monthly gift of \$10 or \$25, your many gifts work to double or triple your current level of support. Your increased annual contribution means we can offer more free discussion programs for more youth and adults.

You can do this anytime or on Giving Tuesday, November 29. Visit the Touchstones website, click on donate, and look for the option to set up a recurring gift. Or email Alexandra Fotos at af@touchstones.org. Thank you in advance for giving more so we can do more!

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Every gift makes a difference, please give generously today. If you have already made a contribution to Touchstones this year, thank you!



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