



# VOICES

*The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project*

## FROM THE FIELD

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

The upheaval caused by the pandemic over the past few years has prompted schools and educators to rethink how they support and build community among students. Many are experimenting with new approaches that emphasize empathy, collaboration, communication, and problem-solving more than subject area content.

We've been working to respond to these shifts by reconnecting with past Touchstones educators and seeking out new conferences and partnerships to share the power of Touchstones for building communities rooted in trust and understanding. In May, we presented at the South Florida Gifted and Talented conference hosted by Broward County, one of the largest school districts in the nation. The conference theme this year was science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education. Our workshop highlighted how the Touchstones method helps students become mathematical and scientific thinkers rather than simply passive recipients of textbook information. It

was wonderful connecting with over 25 teachers, parents, and administrators—all of whom were previously unfamiliar with Touchstones and eager to build their students' inquiry skills. In our workshop, we

engaged first in a simple observation of leaves. This led to a lively exploration of the value we often place on speaking over listening and how pausing to notice the world around us, particularly through careful observation and listening, can shift our perspectives and activate further inquiry. These are essential skills in our constantly changing world and particularly in professional STEM fields.

And this month, with funding from the Chichester duPont Foundation, we began a partnership with First State Montessori Academy (FSMA)—a public-charter Montessori K-8 school in Wilmington Delaware—with an introductory workshop for their middle school teachers. The school staff are eager to build a stronger community among their students and to investigate complex ideas through discussion. In our time

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

## FROM THE FIELD

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together, the teachers were immersed in the same discussion roles their students will assume when school starts again this fall. They experienced how Touchstones lessons move from individual work to a small group activity and then into a full group discussion and considered and practiced strategies to



build more inclusive classroom communities. Our work with FSMA will include class modeling and coaching come September, as well. We are grateful to have a strong network of partners who help us make our programs accessible to all.

*In early May, after more than two years without programming due to the pandemic, we resumed Touchstones discussions at the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women (MCIW). This summer, Touchstones staff and volunteer corps are entering MCIW to lead and participate in discussions. Our volunteer corps was recruited and trained with a generous funding grant from Anne Arundel Women Giving Together.*

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS

*by: Charlotte Murphy, Touchstones Volunteer*

My first volunteer experience in a Touchstones discussion at the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women (MCIW) went smoothly and was a wonderful introduction to the place, routine, and overall shape and feel of being a volunteer. We didn't have many participants in either class,

**What do we reveal about ourselves, and how do first impressions shape how others respond to us?**



*Rembrandt van Rijn  
Self-portrait, 1659  
Andrew W. Mellon Collection &  
The National Gallery of Art*

but the discussions in both were full and allowed us to create connections and meaning with each other. Our texts were two Rembrandt self-portraits and accompanying questions. My impression was that though his work was not known well or at all by the participants, they were still engaged in looking and thinking about his work, portraiture in general, comparing painting and photography, and sharing personal opinions and experiences on both.

Our discussion for a time centered on the creation of first impressions. It was so informative that for the rest of my life I will think about the importance of teeth as strong signifiers of mental and bodily health. For me, it was refreshing to hear a conversation free of intellectual or aesthetic competitiveness, and it was deeply meaningful to hear two participants' full belief that paintings genuinely capture and reveal human experience and emotion. I enjoyed meeting everyone yesterday and felt welcomed. It was an extraordinary experience and I look forward to next week.

## GOING IN

by: Lysithia Page, Summer Intern

As I awaited the arrival of the women to the classroom at MCIW, my legs tensed and fingers tightened anxiously. I was nervous but trying to hide it. Be casual and approachable, I told myself, but not too casual.

A few women came in and the Touchstones volunteers welcomed them warmly. One woman who entered wore white sneakers covered with artful handwriting. A volunteer complimented her footwear and asked, "Are those the names of your children?"

"Oh no," the woman said with a smile, "They're the names of prophets." As she spoke, I noticed "Harun" ("Warrior Lion") and "Hud" ("Those Who Ask for Forgiveness"). Before going in, I hadn't thought about those women's spiritual lives—how they might long for religious communities as well as their friends and family.

In our discussion class, we read a Persian tale about a father who tricked his sons into becoming diligent farmers. The story ended with a comparison between parents and teachers; both may use deceptive practices for instructional purposes.

During the discussion, someone asked at what age people should begin taking responsibility for their actions. Another participant responded it was only a year ago when she finally assumed responsibility for her prior choices. I was awed by her humility.

In my first visit to MCIW, I heard people raise questions about universal experiences and open up to each other. Even—especially—in a prison, our discussion illuminated how Touchstones programs recognize and value the fundamental human dignity of each voice.

## JOYFUL LEARNING

by: Samantha Duckworth, Program Coordinator

This summer, thanks to support from readers and donors like you, Touchstones is running two weeks of free enrichment programs for local elementary and middle school students in Queenstown and Annapolis, Maryland. Through inclusive discussions and creative projects, these week-long workshops encourage new ways of thinking about the world, collaboration, and shared leadership. They also foster active learning and critical thinking—all while having fun!

We're very excited to partner with Seeds4Success for our first week of programming in Annapolis. Seeds4Success is a non-profit organization that provides enrichment and after-school tutoring services for children living in low-income communities. This summer, we'll engage our participants in group discussions that delve into how and what they think, and why. They'll read and explore folk tales, mathematics, and ethics using lessons from Touchstones volumes.

The following week, we'll offer two Touchstones programs in Queenstown. The first is "Exploring Mathematics," where students will explore ideas in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). I'm looking forward to helping participants become more comfortable with collaborative thinking while I lead our math program. As they learn to think beyond "correct" and "incorrect" answers, I'm hopeful our students will gain a new appreciation for their STEM skills and talents.

Afterward, in "Discovering Art & Poetry," we'll discuss poetry and fine art in discussions led by Lysithia Page, our summer intern through the Hodson Internship program at St. John's College. Students will consider the arts as expressions of human understanding. Lysithia is especially keen to introduce students to art because she remembers when, as an elementary-school student, she carried out her first artistic experiments. In her words, "It was a complete blast!"

"It was fun because we all shared our thoughts and I learned about Persian traditions in one discussion, which I thought was really cool."

*-Middle School Participant,  
Summer 2021*

While running these discussions, Lysithia and I will be learning with our students and gaining invaluable insights that will shape our professional lives. Thanks to all who are making it possible for us to offer these free workshops so students can practice active listening while cultivating self-knowledge and appreciation for others. What could be better than learning together in respectful, thoughtful, and joyful ways?



# SUPPORTING STRATEGIC GROWTH

by: Alexandra Fotos, Office of Annual & Planned Giving

This May, the Touchstones Board of Directors, Advisory Council, and staff met to finalize a new strategic plan that charts our course through 2025. After greetings from Board Chair Debra Valentine and a Touchstones discussion, we broke into small groups to focus on specific program areas and fundraising.

Here are some of the goals that the fundraising group set forth:

- secure 10+% new annual donors to Touchstones each year (this year, for example, we aim to have 30 new donors)
- steward current donors to increase charitable giving by 10+% annually overall
- continue reporting on how every gift makes it possible to introduce new educators—and students of all ages—to Touchstones skills through civil and inclusive discussion

Annual giving is essential in achieving Touchstones' mission. Gifts received from donors empower us to engage a wide range of participants in Touchstones trainings and programs every year. This support allows us to run community programs with veterans, incarcerated adults, disadvantaged youth, and senior citizens. Annual giving also funds workshop seats should be for new Touchstones teachers who do not have funding. Whether you are an annual or first-time donor, your gift will make it possible for more people to access Touchstones programs.

## SOMETHING TO CONSIDER

If you are an annual gift donor to Touchstones and would like to increase your giving, consider making a monthly recurring gift. For example, if you give \$25 or \$50 a year, you can increase your support by making a \$10 or \$25 monthly gift to Touchstones, which will help bring more youth and adults into transformative discussion programs. Visit [touchstones.org/donate](https://touchstones.org/donate) to set up a recurring gift.

## PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

As a Touchstones friend and donor, you may be thinking of including Touchstones in your estate plans. Gifts from estates help Touchstones plan for the future and ensure philanthropy is part of your legacy. You may designate your planned gift for any number of programs or purposes—from community engagement to teacher preparation and program development to general operating. Of course, always consult your estate attorney and let us know what information would be helpful.

## GIFTS OF STOCK & SECURITIES & IRA QCDs

Touchstones accepts gifts of appreciated stocks and other securities through our Raymond James investment account. If you are 70 ½ or older, you may wish to make a gift to Touchstones from your IRA as a Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD). Check with your tax advisor to make sure you're taking full advantage of those charitable gift opportunities.

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