



Celebrating Our Teacher of the Year

Brittany Usiak, K-12 & Adult Programs Manager

Colin Hogan, the 2021 Geoffrey J. Comber Touchstones Teacher of the Year, serves as Head of School at the Learning Community Charter School (LCCS) in Jersey City, New Jersey. The school has the most diverse student population of all charter schools in the state. Colin was nominated by Maureen Rexer, Assistant Head of School at LCCS, who describes him as “a living embodiment of the values of Touchstones.”

Colin initially heard of Touchstones from a school parent in 2014 and was amazed at the first training he attended. “The level of discourse and the skills developed in the workshop were unlike anything I’d ever seen before,” he remembers. “I immediately started planning for fully integrating the program into grades 3-8 at Learning Community.” In the past seven years of the Touchstones implementation, Colin has found the Touchstones educational materials and outcomes a perfect alignment with the school’s mission. “It is almost as if Touchstones was the missing puzzle piece of the educational experience we sought for our students,” he shared.



Colin Hogan, 2021 Geoffrey J. Comber Touchstones Teacher of the Year, pictured with Debra Valentine, Board of Directors Vice Chair.

“Every week our students have the opportunity to engage in rich conversations about ideas and their own experiences, and they attempt to understand text and each other. I simply can’t think of anything better.”

In addition to his considerable responsibilities as Head of School, Colin is so passionate about the positive impact the program has on students that he leads model Touchstones sessions for teachers and regularly observes their Touchstones lessons to help deepen their skills as discussion leaders.

When the pandemic began, his commitment to Touchstones was only strengthened, as he recognized that his students would be in dire need of meaningful discussion

opportunities and positive interpersonal connections. During the 2020 lockdowns, both Colin and his Assistant Head of School, Maureen, led virtual Touchstones discussions for students to alleviate the additional burdens placed on teachers and to help students through the isolations of the pandemic. These discussions were such a success that nearly every student tuned in, along with their teachers, finding a vital way “to connect with and sustain each other during a challenging and uncertain time.”

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.



Our 2021 Teacher of the Year is not only grateful for the positive effects Touchstones has had on his students. Colin Hogan also acknowledges how Touchstones has shaped his own work. Because of Touchstones, he says, “I have personally become a better listener and been able to respond to challenges by thinking more deeply about multiple perspectives.”

The teachers who Colin supervises agree about the transformative power of Touchstones in their classrooms and beyond. Tatiana Antczak, a 3rd grade teacher at LCCS, reflects that, “Touchstones provides an opportunity for students to speak out organically. It makes the students’ voices heard, lets them know that what they say matters, and can help impact others around them.” She recalls a particular student who rarely spoke in class and credits work in Touchstones for helping him gain confidence in sharing ideas. After his first time speaking in Touchstones, his peers gave him a round of applause. It was “a turning point for this student in the classroom,” she says proudly.

A Shared Enterprise

Matteo Burrell, “Exploring American Perspectives” Co-Leader

Starting in the fall of 2020, I was very fortunate to begin participating in the *Exploring American Perspectives* (EAP) Leadership program led by Howard Zeiderman. As our group progressed, I began to see how the EAP program, implemented under Howard’s leadership, positioned us to think reflexively about ourselves, our experiences, and our own involvement with the group and with each other. I was intrigued to find that group introspection, growth, and awareness occurred through

and together with our collective consideration of the writings and voices that we read together.

Each week I gained a new appreciation for how a group can come to work together to shed light on inherited perspectives and beliefs from a variety of vantage points. Whereas my tendency had been, at the outset, to gravitate towards “just the text,” it became increasingly clear that text, process, and group experience—through their dynamic interplay—are mutually enriching and inseparable. This interplay, I think, creates a space where central issues can be made visible and animated precisely through the group interaction.

As I continued to be involved with Touchstones and EAP, this time as a co-leader with Stefanie Takacs, whose example, approach, and advice regarding leadership continue to be an invaluable source of understanding for me, I have become more sensitive to the group process. I more fully recognize how different ways of speaking, framing, and interacting operate to change how and what we consider, reflect upon, and engage with collectively.

The first lesson I ran as a co-leader was equal parts nerve-racking and exhilarating. I found myself on high alert, simultaneously tracking the time, the objectives for the lesson, the group history, how the group was reacting in the moment, and my responsibilities as a leader in light of all those variables. In the back of my mind was also the guiding voice of my own sensibility and instinct for what the next step should be, which came in to punctuate and synthesize my sprawling thoughts and direct a conclusive action.

Spending time considering how each component of the Touchstones lesson fits together and thinking about the needs of the group from week to week, I see connections

between the individual work, the small group work, the discussion and the evaluation that I was not fully aware of as a participant. These realizations inform my understanding of what factors change the shape of the group’s interaction towards new opportunities. I’m more sensitive to the kinds of listening that can be taking place in the group. And I’m more attuned to the fact that comments, reactions, even offhand remarks that seem to go in passing or are not met with immediate and direct reply, nonetheless create the background. They shape the conversational space that informs what is immediate and accessible to the group as the interaction unfolds. As we progress, it continues to be great to see the sense of shared leadership, trust, support, and capacity for mutual recognition present within the group, and I look forward to what is ahead on this shared enterprise together.

Give and Give Some More!

Alexandra Fotos, Office of Annual & Planned Giving

“Group discussions and being able to communicate face to face are beautiful things and a dying art that must be preserved.”

—Touchstones high-school student, Franklin, TN

Your gift is the gateway to infinite possibilities, including:

- expanding our services through workshops for educators and in-classroom coaching sessions—particularly in schools serving high-poverty students,
- summer enrichment programs for children,
- veteran’s discussion groups,
- training for volunteers working



with marginalized youth and adults,

- discussion programs in prisons, and
- development of and staffing for community discussions online.

Every charitable dollar received by Touchstones goes toward these and other direct program services, as our earned income covers all our administrative costs. Visit www.touchstones.org/donate to make your gift by credit card or Venmo. Or mail a check to Touchstones Discussion Project/143 Log Canoe Circle/Stevensville, MD 21666-2127.

To make gifts of stocks or securities, share your intentions for a planned gift, or inform us about an employer match for your contribution, please contact me at af@touchstones.org.

Touchstones thanks everyone who made a gift in 2021!

Listening to Women

Deborah Valentine, In-coming Chair of Touchstones Board of Directors

Howard Zeiderman, Co-founder of the Touchstones Discussion Project and Director of Leadership Programs, and I are starting a new series designed to help us reflect on ourselves. The readings are by women writers, and we will use them to probe issues of self-identity and historical and cultural differences and distances between ourselves—both between each other and the writers. While gender has become an increasingly fluid and plastic concept, it touches on every aspect of our individual and communal lives. So, much of our discussion should, we hope, improve our self-awareness and ideally, our understanding of others.

I am certainly aware that as a woman in the 1990s who was often the only woman in a conference



The first discussion of this new program will be on works by American author Kate Chopin, pictured here. Our syllabus includes works by Gertrude Stein, Sylvia Plath, Toni Morrison, and Margaret Atwood, among others.

room or meeting—whether at my old law firm or in businesses where I have worked—I was often not heard. It wasn't because my voice was too soft, although we know that men hear voices differently than women do. My voice was simply overlooked. Often, a man would later restate or paraphrase the idea I'd expressed earlier, and everyone would agree it was a good idea. The point is not whether the idea was good or bad but whether it was heard. I guess that is why Ruth Bader Ginsburg encouraged us to always speak our mind, even if our voices shake. We have to work harder to get our voices heard.

The gender environment has, thankfully, evolved a lot in the past 20 years, but there are still many ways in which various people's voices are not heard in the same way that male voices are heard. This is not to say that males' voices have lesser or no value—they have much to contribute. It is simply that other voices have equal value. Touchstones has always

been a wonderful process for getting all participants in a group to listen to each other, to respect each other, and to think before they speak. We thought bringing a bit more of the Touchstones method into an adult discussion program based on works by women would be a great way of opening ourselves up to the voices of others.

While the readings we'll be discussing are not necessarily the latest and most cutting edge on gender studies, we believe they are fertile touchstones for exploring gender. Indeed, many are ones I recall seeing on Justice Ginsburg's library shelves. And we know she thought long and hard about what it means to be a woman in what has remained a male-dominated world. We hope many of you will join us, either this time or in a subsequent group, as we look forward to learning more about ourselves and each other.

Interested in joining the next program on women writers or learning about our contemporary poetry group that starts in Jan 2022? Email olivia@touchstones.org

Face-to-Face

Stefanie Takacs, Executive Director

Managing challenges during COVID has been significant—in terms of time and resources. Striking a balance between safety and knowing that some forms of work are best accomplished in-person remains a daily focus. We're grateful we've had a few opportunities recently to work face-to-face with some groups, including in a two-day Touchstones workshop on collaborative leadership for Master's candidates in the Emergency & Crisis Managers program at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. That workshop engaged 31 students from two cohorts in an



extended examination of how and what we think and why, while also exploring how and what we *don't* think and why. The students, who range from young professionals just starting their careers to veterans from the armed forces and upper tier emergency managers from around the country, reported a deepened awareness of themselves and others coming out of their Touchstones workshop. "Communication," one student reflected afterward, "is a transactional process in which two or more parties must be fully involved."

Earlier that week, we visited Learning Community Charter School in New Jersey in person—to present Colin Hogan with the Touchstones Teacher of the Year Award. While there, Debra Valentine, Howard Zeiderman, and I participated in a Touchstones discussion led by Colin with Ms. Shalini Jasti's 8th graders. The students heard and read a short passage from the autobiography of Harriet Jacobs and considered what it means to live life on the run and with little or no protection from a threat of re-enslavement. Several students demonstrated great empathy for Harriet and said they would have offered her hugs and reassurance and told her not to give up, had they known her. In those moments, when youth show us what compassion looks like, the importance of the inclusive and open discussions framed in a Touchstones classroom once again hits squarely home. Being there, together in person with these students and learning together reminded us not to lose hope.

Closer to home base, we've run three in-person workshops and delivered classroom coaching—both at Washington Latin Public Charter School in Washington,

DC and at Elizabeth Seton High School in Bladensburg, MD. We delivered those group and individual professional development opportunities at no cost to more than 25 teachers, thanks to gifts received earlier this year in

we've suffered during the pandemic remain wounds to heal and gaps to close, the delight these students expressed at being together again in the classroom is an enormous indication of the good things to come—for them and all of us. Here's



Master's students in small groups in their recent Touchstones workshop at UNLV

memory of Kathleen Golden, a Washingtonian passionate about public-charter education, the Argentine tango, and Touchstones programs. We know Kathleen would have loved hearing 7th graders at Washington Latin explore a passage from *The Odyssey* when Odysseus has returned to his family after 20 years away. As they reflected on the text, students made connections to the changes they've recognized in their own lives—during a year of remote schooling and now being back in person. Though still young adults, these 7th grade students revealed a developing maturity in their recognizing parallels between themselves and others—even characters in a story more than two millennia old. And while losses

to a healthy close to 2021 and a New Year filled with many joyful hours spent in the company of others, face-to-face!

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