

November 2020

# VOICES



The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project

[www.touchstones.org](http://www.touchstones.org)

## Honoring those who bring the Touchstones Mission to Life

*Howard Zeiderman, Co-founder & Director of Leadership Programs*

Someone once said that the first time you do something, it's a revolution. The second time, it's a tradition. Here at Touchstones, it has become a great annual tradition to honor volunteers and teachers whose time and talents help bring Touchstones—the organization and programs—to life. Each fall, Touchstones staff, volunteers, Board members, donors, and friends convene to share holiday cheer and celebrate our collective efforts. It's a time to reflect on our progress in preparing all people—as critical thinkers and collaborative leaders—for success in school, work, and society.

At that event, we honor an educator who implements the project in exemplary ways as our “Teacher of the Year.” Last year, that award was renamed in memory of Geoff Comber, one of my fellow Touchstones co-founders. Geoff was a life-long crusader on behalf of teachers—particularly in public education. He spent his life working to support their continuing professional development and practice. During this year of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have watched many teachers courageously rise to the challenge of overwhelming and unanticipated changes in education. We've heard their concerns and struggles in meeting their students' needs—social and academic—and



their worries about their students' welfare. And we've been heartened by reports of how Touchpebbles and Touchstones discussions are invaluable tools for maintaining and rebuilding community at a time when our nation is increasingly separated—ideologically and physically. This year, the Board of Directors and staff find it only fitting to recognize *all* Touchstones teachers as exemplars of Geoff Comber's indomitable spirit and faith in education. Please join me in recognizing teachers everywhere and especially Touchstones teachers—who go above and beyond to ensure their students' voices are cultivated, heard, and valued—as our Geoffrey J. Comber Teachers of the Year.

To ensure teachers can accomplish this vital work and always have access to Touchstones programs, we rely on volunteers to help with outreach, advocacy, fundraising, and public programming. Our volunteers' efforts mean our fundraising dollars and earned income can reach and engage even more people of all ages and regardless of their economic circumstance or background. Touchstones volunteers provide the invisible support, encouragement, and assistance that empowers our small but mighty staff to create a vast footprint—year after year. And so, each year we honor someone who exemplifies dedication and passion for the Touchstones mission through volunteer service. It is my honor to announce John Christensen as our 2020 Volunteer of the Year. For more than a decade,

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



John has carefully stuffed thousands of envelopes to bring Touchstones news to the far reaches of the universe, encouraged and thanked donors, supported fundraising events with his brains and brawn, and been a constant friend. He represents the very best that volunteerism makes possible.

Please join us on Dec. 2 at 7 PM for a special celebration online of the 2020 Touchstones Teachers and Volunteer of the Year. It will be followed at 7:30 PM by a Touchstones discussion led by our staff and volunteers on a painting in our concurrent exhibition of works by Elliott Zuckerman. Please email [abraham@touchstones.org](mailto:abraham@touchstones.org) by Nov. 28 to register for this event.

## My (Re)Introduction to Touchstones

*Olivia Braley, Office Assistant*

Coming to Touchstones has been a fruitful experience, one of personal growth that I couldn't have anticipated prior to joining the staff. My first experience with Touchstones was almost ten years ago when I was at Annapolis High School. We had a day of English class where we put our desks in a circle and went through a Touchstones lesson. Years later, I don't remember the text discussed, but I do recall analyzing the group dynamics. The fact that this stands out to me even now is in itself significant. I've asked a few friends if they remember this day, and each one has a strong memory of some part of the Touchstones lesson—most have to do with the style of discussion or the discussion map. These are elements of the Touchstones programming that are distinct from a traditional classroom experience and certainly unlike any learning model I'd had at that point.

Touchstones discussions empower participants to be invested

leaders in the learning of their community. The promise of such a discussion is equally exciting and intimidating. How could I live up to these ideals? Since joining the Touchstones staff and participating in various workshops, I've found a welcoming environment in which progress is always strived towards, but each participant is met where they are. The group encourages continuous growth and improvement, without judgment. This philosophy noticeably carries to the office environment as well. I believe we are able to accomplish as much as we do as a staff precisely because we are trained in the Touchstones model to cultivate skills such as active listening and collaboration.

As I've become more familiar and comfortable with the Touchstones model, I've had the opportunity to assume more leadership in discussions. I did this gradually, and fortunately had our Executive Director to help guide me, as well as an extremely supportive group of participants: the women of the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women Touchstones Volunteer Corps. This culminated with my co-leading a Touchstones discussion on our last day of the workshop. Even with the skills and confidence I have gained, I was unsure what it would feel like to lead a discussion in practice. However, once I started the discussion, I felt immediately comfortable and that other participants in the group were eager to support me in my leadership role. Even small comments like "that was a good question" were significant in developing my confidence. At the end of the discussion, I had almost forgotten I was nervous in the first place. In just a few months, Touchstones has had a profound impact on me, and I look forward to further developing my skills through my work here.

## Growth in Time of Uncertainty

*Jennifer Macris, Advancement & Outreach Coordinator*

I think we're all done hearing about "these unprecedented times," but the truth is, few nonprofits know what to do in "these times" to continue to set and reach important goals. COVID has forced all of us to become even more flexible. Touchstones' flexibility actually allowed us to surpass our previous goals in establishing our Women's Prison Volunteer Corps. Thanks to our online format, we were able not only to establish a Volunteer Corps, but to double our initial goal of training five volunteers.

This six-week training program was funded by a generous grant from Anne Arundel Women Giving Together (AAWGT), as part of securing the future of the Touchstones program at the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women. Trained volunteers help run Touchstones programs even when there is little or no funding available to cover staff time. And these programs are invaluable to the women in the prison, as they contribute to improved decision-making and parenting skills and lead to reduced recidivism.

For the volunteer training program, 13 women total joined the 90-minute, weekly training meetings to learn more about the women's prison environment in general (from specifics on how to enter the prison building to the key predictors of recidivism) and learn and practice how to facilitate Touchstones discussions in this unique community. Two of the participants included teachers from the school at MCI-W, where they've had the opportunity to see Touchstones programs benefit their students since 2015.

This group of Touchstones volunteers, a mix of new and



seasoned participants, immediately took to the Touchstones discussion format. Using lessons from *Touchstones Volume B*, which is also used in the prison classes, our participation began the same way it does for the women in prison. Together, we reviewed the Touchstones Ground Rules. We then moved to individual and small group work and ended with a full group discussion and a closer look at our group interaction overall. We also each reflected on how we could improve our own interpersonal skills to help the group's outcomes.

The growth over the six-week training program was incredible! As one participant commented, "My biggest personal surprise is how I actually learned something about myself - that at my age, we can still learn to slow down and listen to others calmly. It's just a very different environment from what I've spent most of my life in... [it's] a calmer, quieter behavior when you're in a group."

Touchstones thanks AAWGT and all the women who participated in this training program to help ensure the long-term sustainability of our Women's Prison Program. We look forward to bringing our volunteers and their new discussion leadership skills into MCI-W when it's safe to do so.

## How We Might Help Others

*Abraham Zhao, Program Coordinator*

There is a growing sense in America that public education needs major reform. This notion does not stem solely or even primarily from falling test scores and global achievement comparisons. Rather it also comes from current political conditions that strike many as evidence that our citizenry has lost its ability to communicate effectively with one another.



## JOIN US FOR THESE 5 ONLINE EVENTS AND EXPLORE ART THROUGH DISCUSSION

This exhibition runs on the Touchstones website Nov. 28 through Dec. 9. Discussions will be online and led by guest panelists, co-founders Howard Zeiderman and Nick Maistrellis, and staff. All paintings are priced for sale, with all proceeds supporting free Touchstones public programs and teacher scholarships for training and materials. Each painting is sold with a custom Touchstones discussion lesson.

For more information, call 410-604-3309. Pre-registration for each event is required at: [www.touchstones.org/art](http://www.touchstones.org/art).

### ELEMENTS OF PERSPECTIVE: THE ART OF ELLIOTT ZUCKERMAN

**TUES. DEC. 1, 6:30-8:00 PM**

Panel discussion on The Art of Elliott Zuckerman

**WED. DEC. 2, 7:00-8:30 PM**

Touchstones Annual Volunteer of the Year and Teacher of the Year Celebration 7:00 PM, followed by a discussion on a painting. 7:30-8:30 PM

**THURS. DEC. 3, 6:30-7:30 PM**

Touchstones discussion on two works by Zuckerman: a painting and a poem

**SUN. DEC. 6, 4:00-5:00 PM**

Touchstones discussion on two portraits: Delacroix and Zuckerman

**TUES, DEC. 8, 6:30-7:30 PM**

Touchstones discussion on a Zuckerman self-portrait

U.S. funding for public education has yet to recover to its pre-2008 levels and recent shifts in funding priorities in education have left impoverished communities facing even deeper budgeting deficits. Lyndon B. Johnson, in a speech on the Civil Rights Act of 1964, described his experience teaching in a small Mexican-American community in Texas: "I often walked home... wishing there was more that I could do. But all I knew was to teach them the little that I knew, hoping that it might help them against the

And somehow you never forget what poverty and hatred can do when you see its scars on the hopeful face of a young child." Johnson's poignant statement is a stark reminder how much work still remains, over 50 years later. There are millions of youth we must uplift through education. But how, especially in such painful times?

The Touchstones mission includes instilling learners with a sense of independence and the ability to deal with uncertainty. I am certain everyone is now



familiar with the phrase ‘these uncertain times.’ I believe our programs give people the tools to better understand themselves, their communities, and how they might move forward in exactly such uncertain times. But in 2020, how is our team making a difference? Let me begin anecdotally by expressing appreciation for something in my work at Touchstones: our staff and surrounding networks deeply value helping others. This year alone, I have had countless office conversations where it is taken as axiomatic: ‘Of course we’re going to help them.’

In our work, we publish and market education programs (books), help develop systematic implementation of the pedagogy, and train others in discussion program facilitation. One great aspect of nonprofit work is that when revenue is made from our mission’s work, those funds can be channeled back into the mission to help those who cannot currently afford, but still need, our services. In 2020, providing free access is taking many forms: teacher training scholarships provided to those in underfunded communities, free digital access for educators and institutions struggling during the pandemic, free online programs for students across the U.S. who have been stuck at home, online weekend community discussions, and a free, new teacher training program focused on equity and inclusion using *Exploring American Perspectives*. Another great example of how Touchstones partners with teachers to meet their needs happened recently. A teacher in Twin Falls, Idaho had no funding for classroom materials. Our staff encouraged and supported her with guidance on a proposal to a local foundation. The gap between what

the full cost of the materials and what the foundation funded was covered by Touchstones.

There’s no doubt that our educational system needs serious attention and rethinking. But it’s also clear there are many creative and profound ways to make real change possible. Every teacher we can help is a big step in the right direction.

## Benefits of Planned Giving

*Alexandra Fotos, Office of Annual & Planned Giving*

**M**any people throughout their lives contribute to nonprofits by volunteering, and/or by supporting them through annual donations. If a cause is close to your heart, a planned gift is another excellent way you can help your favorite nonprofit in a lasting way as this gift enables you to support the nonprofit for years to come!

### **What is a Planned Gift?**

For many, making a large gift in their lifetime is not easy or possible. A Planned Gift is a way to make the largest gift you can possibly make after your lifetime. It is usually through a will or a trust. Including your favorite nonprofit in your estate planning helps advance that nonprofit’s mission and encourages others to do the same.

### **What are the benefits of having a planned gift?**

There are tax benefits (always consult a professional) but the greatest impact is that it allows you to make a difference for a cause about which you care deeply. When you choose a nonprofit, it is best to discuss with the organization if and how you want

to designate your gift. In many cases and depending on the size of the gift, you can name it after yourself, or a family member (parent, child, for example) and your gift will remain in perpetuity.

### **What kind of options do you have?**

Various options are available to you (and always seek professional advice) such as a specific bequest (a particular amount or an identifiable asset); a residual bequest (all or a percentage of the remainder of your estate after the payment of debts and specific bequests); a universal bequest (all of the assets in your estate, sometimes divided among many beneficiaries); or the designation of a nonprofit as the beneficiary of a retirement plan.

### **Do you have to be wealthy to be a planned gift donor and of a certain age?**

No and No! Many donors don’t have the capacity to make a large gift in their lifetime, and a planned gift allows them to make a larger gift after they have departed. This gift can be in any amount. You can begin at any stage of your life to make a planned gift. It is never too early to start planning for the future!

Howard Zeiderman and I recently talked about his planned gift to Touchstones. As one of the founders of the Touchstones Discussion Project, it had been on his mind for a long time to make a gift that would last indefinitely. Howard’s planned gift is unrestricted. He explained it’s important to him that his gift can flexibly support the mission of Touchstones in and for the future.

If you have any questions, please email me at [af@touchstones.org](mailto:af@touchstones.org).