



Screened-in Summer Programs

Abraham Zhao, Program Coordinator

Has everyone started using “Zoom,” “Google Meet,” or “Microsoft Teams” in their daily vocabulary yet? Zoom became a part of my daily vernacular when I ran two Touchstones Discussion Programs for middle schoolers this summer. During those sessions, I spent every weekday excitedly logging into Zoom meetings with groups of 5th-8th graders from around the country. In my first program, I used lessons from the Touchstones Math and Science volume: *Where’d They Get that Idea?* For the second program, I switched to *Touchstones Volume B*, to build on and broaden our initial examinations. Our journey took us from wondering how our perception of the world affects our scientific methods to asking if speeches can be as true as mathematical equations. And we talked about how life in isolation changes people. Importantly, the group learned to be open and honest about their own attitudes in the discussions. It was incredible to see students make real efforts to listen to one another and change their own behavior to benefit their peers.

Running two different summer programs showed

me firsthand how much work it takes to run an effective Touchstones group. Readers may already know how our phenomenal facilitators make running a good discussion look as easy as breathing. But in facilitating these groups myself, I gained a newfound level of respect for these incredible individuals. Intimate and thorough lesson planning is critical for new Touchstones teachers. So are the social skills required to navigate human dynamics. One must be prepared for the frustrations that arise during hectic debates. And patience and self-restraint are key, so students arrive at their own conclusions. Throughout the programs, I was deeply impacted by my experience with the Teacher’s Guides and their role in my own development. Every minute I spent reading the thoughtfully crafted lesson plans was immeasurably helpful. Questions suggested in the lessons genuinely interested students. Even in these shortened programs, I could see the positive change for which Touchstones is so well known.

My students had a great experience with the program, too. In the post-program survey, one wrote, “This was



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



an experience that helped me grow in terms of how I think and how I work together with other people in a group.” A participant from Maryland’s Prince George’s County said, “We often take a person or textbook’s point of view and never explore the why. After completing this program, I started to ask more questions to gain a better understanding.” Even our younger participants found their voices in the program—something that doesn’t always happen in groups with multiple grade levels. One of those students shared, “Touchstones is a great way to learn how to listen to and hear other people. It has helped me feel more comfortable speaking up in public.”

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The Touchstones 2020 Summer Programs were a great way to test our school programs in digital classrooms. We saw opportunities to adapt our materials for greater inclusivity. And we were able to see what teachers need to anticipate as they provide their own students with opportunities for active learning. This project gave us an architecture for future online programs—ones where students maintain a collaborative spirit while powering through what’s surely to be a crazy year. I look forward to all the ways that Touchstones and other educational program entrepreneurs will produce dynamic, resilient learning models in the face of this crisis.

Hard Work and Bittersweet Fruit

Stefanie Takacs, Executive Director

In our April and July newsletters, we wrote about our Saturday community discussions—one of our early responses to being physically isolated from others. Six months into that program, which runs online every other weekend, it remains a serious commitment yielding bittersweet fruit. We’re committed to addressing the difficult issues each of us faces in our own communities. And there is significant preparation needed to lead discussions on emotionally charged and challenging topics. As we say to those whom we train, a Touchstones discussion leader is both the bridge and the conscience for a group. My responsibilities are to all participants and the group overall. I can’t ask others to delve into issues of rights, bias, and prejudice if I’m not also doing that work.

Each meeting, we raise a question about how we’re thinking and why—as individuals in a complex society. Before sharing the text this past weekend, I asked, “How do we assess what we see?” Like everyone else in the discussion, I am trying to recognize the underlying structures that shape my own perceptions and thinking. It’s not easy, but it is necessary. In our discussions, we are actively working to build a community that overcomes centuries of exclusionary habits tied to power.

The group has read and discussed many excerpts, including ones from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and MLK’s Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech. We’ve used those texts and our own experiences to examine who does and doesn’t have a voice and why. This week we explored a painting by Lois Mailou Jones, who left the U.S. to work in Paris because there was no recognition or place here for Black artists.



A Shady Nook, by Lois Mailou Jones, was the text for our most recent community discussion. It graces the cover of the Touchstones Volume, *Exploring American Perspectives*.



What is it about this program that brings others together, discussion after discussion, in courageous vulnerability? The reasons are as diverse as the participants themselves:

“First of all, I enjoy the intellectual stimulation. Living (with two master’s degrees) in a very small rural island community of fishermen, and having three people ages 5, 10, and 13 years old as my colleagues, I sometimes feel I am not meeting my full potential. [These] discussions help me feel connected to a larger community of people seeking understanding. Secondly, I like the practice I am getting. Soon I will be leading a group of students in Touchstones discussions.

Engaging in discourse does not come naturally to me. Our Saturday group makes me feel like I am being heard and what I say matters, which makes me feel valued. As a first-generation Hispanic woman, I have been marginalized in many ways. I hide behind my taken surname, keeping it even after a divorce, to mask my origins.... This last meeting, I felt like I had more ownership. Thank you for inviting me in.”

— Laura

“The opportunity to reach outside my own thoughts and let the thoughts and ideas of others resonate, echo, amplify, or challenge my own provides perspective and community that reaffirms my belief in discourse as central to our educations, no matter how old we are.”

— Gary

“Touchstones community discussions by Zoom achieve what radio, television, and internet apps have long dreamed of—building true communities and expanding human horizons. They tune the soul, transforming dissonance through simple ground rules into beautiful music, grounding and inspiring one to see the world and its possibilities anew. No small feat.”

— Tom

The challenge of striving to improve ourselves and our community continues, and we invite you to join us. For more information, please email schoolprograms@touchstones.org.

Announcing a New Legacy Gift

Alexandra Fotos, Office of Annual & Planned Giving

Linnea and George Takacs have been involved with Touchstones for many years and recently decided to seal their commitment by including Touchstones Discussion Project in their estate plans. On September 8, I interviewed Linnea Takacs to learn what brought her and George to Touchstones and ultimately to make a gift for the future to ensure Touchstones continues its work.

First, tell me a little about yourselves.

Our careers have been in education. George received his Ph.D. in Educational Administration at the University of Connecticut in 1971. I was a stay-at-home mother and completed my own education in 1988, culminating with a Ph.D. in English from Fordham. I also taught there, including in a summer bridge program called Higher Education Opportunity Programs, for incoming freshmen. For most of George’s career, he was running International Schools in South and Central America. Our longest stint was 11 years in Chile. When we were in Quito, Ecuador, I chaired the English department at a university and developed the libraries in his schools in Chile and Brazil.

How and when did you learn about Touchstones?

Our daughter, Stef, was a student at St. John’s College in Annapolis from the mid to the late 1980’s. One of her tutors and a co-founder, Geoffrey Comber, told her about Touchstones.

We were living in Venezuela and Geoff had some correspondence with George, but it didn’t lead to anything then. A number of years later, when George was running the American school in Recife, Brazil, he was finally able to bring Touchstones into the curriculum. That’s when we really started to learn about Touchstones.

What was your first impression?

We were excited from the beginning to know the founders created Touchstones from nothing and we’re still amazed at its evolution into so many different programs and areas and its potential for growth.

Is there a particular program you are drawn to?

The programs designed for schoolchildren of all grades, especially Touchpebbles. It’s exciting to see young children’s thinking stimulated. We also like the Veterans Program because of what could be possible for veterans using Touchstones—what it really means for them to come home. And I know that teachers, donors, and volunteers in the current Saturday discussions online find that program very beneficial and supportive.

What inspired you and George to leave a planned gift to Touchstones?

Educators. They are the people who want to be involved in Touchstones and this gift will support their access to the programs—even when there’s no public funding for education. Making Touchstones accessible to educators helps ensure its implementation and success in the future. We decided to designate our gift to teacher scholarships for workshops and free Touchstones materials for their classes after they complete the workshops. This gift is specifically to benefit and empower teachers who want to use Touchstones and Touchpebbles in their teaching but have limited funding.



What words would you share with our readers about making a planned gift to Touchstones?

If one has any resources, there can't be a better cause that reaches so many different areas of daily life. Touchstones educates in so many ways that go beyond traditional academic boundaries. It provides a framework where one can develop their interpersonal skills and better understand how best to communicate and listen.

Commitment to Civics

Howard Zeiderman, Co-founder & Director of Leadership Programs

Early this year, the Mt. Desert Island Regional School System (MDIRSS) contacted Touchstones. They wanted to take a great step forward for their students and community by implementing a district-wide civics program. And they wanted Touchstones to be a core part of their new curriculum. When the pandemic struck, even the best laid plans of in-person workshops evaporated. However, persistence from the dedicated leaders at MDIRSS ensured their evolving civics program moved forward. They are launching it even as they begin this school year remotely. By the time you read this, many of their middle and high school students will already have started exploring the central role of civil discourse in American civics.

As part of the district's preparation, Touchstones engaged more than 20 MDIRSS educators in two days of online professional development in mid-June. As Julie Melzer, Director of Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction and Title IX Coordinator, wrote afterward, "[The] facilitation was excellent.



[Their] calm demeanor and articulate responses to all questions was impressive. I'm looking forward to working with them throughout the coming year." To ensure teachers were fully ready to implement online, the same group then spent a day in August participating in model classes. The middle school teachers participated first in Lesson 1, as high school teachers observed. Then the teachers swapped virtual seats and roles, to experience both the Touchstones discussion class and role of observer. In the afternoon, we used the same format as both groups participated in Lesson 2 of their respective volumes. After each session, the teachers—participants and observers alike—discussed and evaluated the modeling. Because most virtual classes in the district will include 12-15 students, the teachers will use a similar approach within their own classes of students.

The teachers' feedback afterward made clear how valuable the observer and participant structure can be to seeing how Touchstones works—how it deliberately addresses student interaction and outcomes. As one teacher reported, "It was wonderful to investigate and try out a genuine cooperative learning approach, which really does help eliminate anxiety, fear of speaking, or fears of not being heard. I've never experienced a workshop like this, and I can't wait to

begin with students in the fall."

The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed the world into unpredictable and unexpected situations. Months into this crisis, it is still unclear what a return to "normal" will entail. Though many professional exchanges previously straddled the physical and digital worlds, it's clear now that education must prepare students with highly effective communication, collaboration, and leadership skills in both environments. MDIRSS's choice of Touchstones for their teachers and students promotes the longstanding value of civics-centered education while reinforcing the centrality of civil and inclusive discourse in our democracy.

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