

March 2022

VOICES



The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project

www.touchstones.org

Fresh from the Classroom

By Brittany Usiak, K-12 & Adult Program Manager

As COVID rates continue to decline across the country, we are thrilled to be able to return to working in person with our school partners. At the heart of Touchstones are our relationships with classroom teachers and students, and although we found creative ways throughout the pandemic to engage with educators, facilitate workshops, and provide one-on-one coaching online, nothing compares to the in-person experience of a Touchstones discussion.

In October 2021, we reported how we had begun year-long work, supported by the Jack R. Anderson Foundation, to train and coach teachers at the Washington Latin Public Charter School in DC. We provided coaching in a couple of classes, including the classroom of Joe Starnes, a 5th grade teacher in his first year implementing Touchstones. Amidst the challenges of returning to in-person learning, Joe has continued to find that Touchstones helps students reconnect with each other: “I think my students are better able to share ideas in classes where Touchpebbles is present. They are better able to listen and

connect ideas without my direction.” This spring we are supporting more middle school teachers at Washington Latin as they move forward with Touchstones.

Just last month, we spent several days with the faculty at a long-time school partner, Learning Community Charter School in New Jersey. During that visit, we ran workshops with elementary and middle school teachers in addition to observing and coaching seven teachers during the Touchstones classes. We also modeled a Touchstones class so teachers could see how we transition through the different student-centered activities to emphasize diverse discussion skill building and foster connection and community. LCCS uses our Touchpebbles series in grades 3-5 and various Touchstones volumes for grades 6-8, and the empathy students are cultivating through their discussions is

evident—even in the youngest students. In one third grade classroom, a student took it upon himself to save a seat and a Touchpebbles book for a classmate who had stepped out for routine COVID testing; he even opened the book to the



Touchpebbles class at Learning Community Charter School

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



Fresh from the Classroom

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right page, so the student would be able to join right in when he returned.

This winter and spring, we've been meeting with educators in Wilmington, Delaware and nearby districts as part of renewed Touchstones outreach and programming funded by the Chichester duPont Foundation.

A grant from the foundation enables multiple Touchstones implementations this year in public and charter schools in Wilmington to support student reconnection and enhance school community through inclusive discussions. We're excited that two schools have already indicated a keen interest in participating in this opportunity.

The best parts of all school visits are always meeting enthusiastic students and teachers. Students are curious to know more about the program they use each week while teachers strive to improve their own leadership practice. Students and teachers alike are grateful for the ways Touchstones builds community in their classrooms. As pandemic restrictions continue to abate, we cannot wait to visit more schools to develop and deepen our in-person relationships with students and educators.

Accomplishing Our Mission

By Noelle Richmond

Today's headlines in both our own country and from around the world make it easy to lose hope for the future. A world where people from different backgrounds and perspectives can come together and grapple with thorny issues through respectful dialogue and listening may seem naive and impossible to many. However, envisioning such a world seems, to me, to be essential for our very survival on this planet we call home. On my best days, I hold out hope for such a future. However, envisioning a more positive future is only the first step toward achieving it. In order for this vision to become a reality, it must be shared by many people. Because I believe Touchstones offers a process to bring us closer to this future, I want to ensure that more people have the opportunity to engage in its programs.

With Touchstones programs, participants have the chance to practice genuine communication. They come to understand that communication is not just effectively expressing one's own ideas, but also actively listening to the ideas of others. The building of the collaborative spirit that develops in a Touchstones discussion group is key to also building a stronger sense of community. My experience with both the *Revolutions* and the *Listening to the Voices of Women Thinkers* Executive Programs has shown me how challenging and rewarding Touchstones programs can be. Engaging with other learners in these groups affords each of us a chance to expand our own understanding of issues and perhaps, if we are lucky, to let go of or at

least modify our entrenched beliefs through listening to others.

In joining the Touchstones Board, I look forward to working with my fellow members to create and implement plans to strengthen this thriving organization. I hope to bring the fundraising, marketing and administrative skills developed in my 22-year career in educational and environmental nonprofit organizations, as well my current experience as a small business owner, to assist Touchstones in accomplishing its mission. I hope to help broaden and expand its base of support and ensure it has the resources to pursue its goals for the future. As I told both Debra and Stefanie when accepting this offer of Board Membership, I can't think of another organization with which I am prouder or more enthusiastic to be affiliated.

Spreading the Word

By Sam Duckworth, Data & Summer Program Coordinator

Recently, I spoke to a friend of mine about my summer experience at Touchstones, as she wanted to find an internship for this upcoming summer. When I recommended Touchstones, she

became very interested. I told her about all the different projects I worked on and the organization's mission to build communication and thinking skills that enable all

people to fulfill their potential. My friend is especially interested in discussion-based education: education that empowers students the way Touchstones does.

She is passionate about education and learning and interested in pursuing teaching after she



Spreading the Word

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graduates college. I told her about an experience I had last summer when I was co-leading a summer Touchstones enrichment program for local middle schoolers. Guiding and watching their progress over the week, I was amazed. In their discussions, they learned how to communicate with and actively listen to each other much more effectively.

For a closer look at the structure of a Touchstones discussion, I recommended to my friend that she attend one of our Saturday community discussions. The meeting she participated in included a selection from Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. in which he advocates for a bus boycott. What struck her most about the discussion was how everyone put effort into understanding what

others were saying and making room for people who were more hesitant to speak. Seeing this in the community discussion made her realize how she wanted to work on her own capacity for listening and incorporating others into a discussion.

Following a meeting about summer internship possibilities, she shared with me how the variety of experience-based learning captured her imagination. While education is her main passion, she is also excited to learn how a non-profit organization operates. I told her how through my internship, I learned how Touchstones achieves its mission, why a social-venture nonprofit uses marketing tools to reach a broader audience, what it means to use customer relationship management tools, and how to support prospective

and current clients by phone and email. I had myself found it all extremely helpful, as I learned about professional interests I may not have considered previously. She understands the importance of the operational side of our work and she is looking forward to growing these personal and professional skills while contributing to work about which she is passionate. We're all looking forward to reporting on what comes next!

BTW, our 75-minute-long Saturday Community discussions every other week are open to everyone, and you can attend whenever it's convenient for your schedule. We run a similar program every third Thursday evening of each month.

Contact Olivia@touchstones.org for more information.

Listening Differently

By Touchstones Roving Reporter

Recently I had a chance to catch up with Loretta Hohmann, a participant in the new Touchstones virtual executive program that is discussing works by 20th Century women writers. It's called *Listening to the Voices of Women Thinkers*. There are seven women and five men in the program, including the co-leaders.

I first wanted to know why Loretta had joined this discussion program. I wondered what she was hoping to gain from engaging with other executives on the subject of listening, and listening to women's voices in particular. She explained she found the topic intriguing and, prior to this, had not read many of these authors. Loretta wondered how these women, published under their own names—unlike most women predecessors—became success stories at a time when women, she said, “weren’t fully respected for their knowledge, creativity, and related abilities.”

So far, the experience has been very rewarding for Loretta, who is surprised by how much she’s enjoying works she wouldn’t usually be drawn to or have read on her own. The group’s discussions, which delve deeply into questions of identity, voice, and belonging, have opened up a whole new world for her. “I didn’t realize how comfortable I was within myself before this,” she said, even as she acknowledges it’s not easy to listen actively to others while also recognizing the difficult feelings that arise as one looks inward. This program is such an opportunity, “to learn about other people and where they’re coming from” she continued, because it “stretches you and there are no boundaries of individual discovery, if you are open.”



*Sylvia Plath, author of *The Bell Jar* in April 1954 while she was a student at Smith College (Judy Snow Denison).*

Listening to Loretta talk about these outward and inward tensions, I wondered what Howard Zeiderman, Director of Leadership Programs at Touchstones and one of its co-founders, had in mind with this program. Howard co-leads the monthly discussions with Debra Valentine, Touchstones Board Chair, and it’s the first time they’ve worked



Listening Differently

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together in this capacity. “I wanted to look at a group of people who have been marginalized because of gender,” Howard explained. “I was thinking about how, as women have historically been marginalized, they have been socialized to be active listeners.” He continued, “In reading and discussing these works, we are considering how the authors’ voices—their ideas and craft as women—helps us listen differently to ourselves and others in the group.” These authors, he said, and the Touchstones discussion format



Betty Friedan, c. 1987
Author of *Feminine Mystique*
Bernard Gotfryd Photograph Collection
Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
(reproduction no. LC-DIG-gtfy-01223)

“offer models for exploring things most haven’t explored before.” And as each member in the group is asked to reflect on how they hear or don’t hear others, they are engaged in the difficult process of “figuring out what listening is for themselves.”

Howard and Debra are already in the process of designing the next program on the topic of listening, which features contemporary women writers. They expect to open registration for that new discussion group this summer. And based on the successes of the current program, they may offer this one again!

3 Cheers for Volunteers

By Stefanie Takacs, Executive Director

Sunday afternoon on Feb 23 was an eventful one. It was the first-ever online training specifically for Touchstones volunteers. Some participants are already actively volunteering for Touchstones, and others are just starting out. Whether they were joining in from Michigan, New Jersey, Maryland, DC, or Florida, all have one thing in common: they recognize the growing need for civil discourse and community engagement—everywhere. Among those in attendance were artists, veterans, retired educators, ministry and social workers, and program staff who serve high-need youth in their transition to adulthood. The four members of the Touchstones team who facilitated the workshop included highly trained leaders, as well as newer leaders for whom these trainings are invaluable for gaining direct experience.

What did people gain from their four hours together? One young veteran who is already volunteering for Touchstones shared, “I feel more comfortable with leading a discussion group now and am more confident in my ability to tailor a question to suit a specific group.” And an artist in the group wrote, “I loved the idea of being a bridge for participants to be part of the discussion. I also liked the way the conversation was allowed to go to the personal.” She hopes in the future to bring Touchstones programming to incarcerated women in Michigan. Another participant, a long-time volunteer who advocates for Touchstones in her community’s schools and organizations, discovered

how smaller group dialog opens new opportunities for leadership. “Three small group sessions with the same team members transformed me in my role as a large group participant,” she said afterward, referring to how those interactions gave her tools to bring members from her small group into the larger discussion.

Each testimonial highlights a different facet of Touchstones leadership, and all reflect explicit strategies that were modeled, reviewed, and practiced throughout the workshop. This is one of the many ways we continue delivering on our mission: building inclusive and collaborative discussions that advance all people. By building greater capacity in our volunteers, we empower them to engage others in transformative discussions.

Thank you to the hundreds of people who have advanced Touchstones through volunteerism over the last 38 years. And here’s a special thanks to those who are more recently joining those ranks!

If you’d like to learn more about volunteering with Touchstones, email us at schoolprograms@touchstones.org.

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