



# VOICES

*The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project*

## JOIN THE VOLUNTEER BRIGADE!

*by: Touchstones Roving Reporter*

For decades, Touchstones has used a train-the-trainer approach to build discussion leadership skills around the globe. We are truly expert in training others to build participation, cooperation, active listening, and shared leadership. The proof exists in the exchanges among participants in Touchstones discussions in classrooms and organizations around the US and in 47+ other countries. It's also seen in the program at the Maryland Correctional Institute for Women and in our Saturday Community Discussions online, where trained volunteers lead discussions. We asked Jess Burgard, a seasoned volunteer, to share her story. We hope she inspires you to become a Touchstones volunteer, too!

"Touchstones community discussions have been a surprise gift from the pandemic. When I heard, in the thick of isolation, that there was an opportunity to make interpersonal connections outside my bubble—and with Touchstones—I leapt at it. A few years on, it's become a fantastic example of how practicing Touchstones can create a community from nowhere.

The Saturday discussions are led by members who have been doing it long enough to build confidence. We all have lives and not everybody

comes every week, but there is a core group of 10-15 who have fallen into harmony. So, it has become automatic to act as member-leaders when we participate. That ripened core makes for strong discussions. Visitors who are rusty or trying out Touchstones for the first time get folded in and learn on their feet. Part of what makes this work so well is that we are scrupulous in following all the steps in every discussion. New members learn a lot from the group self-evaluation that follows each discussion, while the experience is fresh.

I've recently occupied the role of 'discussion leader' more often. People ask me if it's different than participating as a member. Months ago I would have said

yes, because it forces me to assume responsibility for the group rather than chase after any idea I like. But now, even when I'm not the leader, I notice who is not speaking and think about how to bridge them in. I follow my own thoughts less now and others' thoughts more, because I will look for ways to connect their contributions later. I've started to treat the discussion group like my home, rather than a playground. As a result, I am relating to other people for the first time as collaborators. It is new to me to give and receive respect this way, and it's an experience I want to build upon.

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

## NEW SUMMER OFFERINGS

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

One of our big goals for 2023 is to continue finding new and effective offerings that support K-12 educators. Many teachers have shared their desire for more networking opportunities and ways to connect and learn from each other. In addition to pilot programs we launched earlier this year, we have several exciting training and workshop opportunities lined up for this summer.

First, we're excited to announce our first-ever Touchstones Educator Summit, which is scheduled for July 18-20 for new and veteran Touchstones educators from the US and Canada. "Building Trust, Equity, and Belonging: The Power of Discussion" are the themes of the summit, which will be at the Schoodic Institute in Winter Harbor, Maine. Over three days, educators will connect on a deeper level, share strategies and ideas, and celebrate their dedication to discussion-based learning. We're grateful to those whose contributions are making the registration fees extremely affordable and for our partner educators who are bringing exceptional experience and expertise to the summit workshops and panels.

In addition to our flagship two-day "Back to School" workshop in August we're offering two new virtual programs tailored for

different professional development needs. The first, our "Taste of Touchstones" mini-workshop in June, focuses on supporting educators new to Touchstones. We'll provide guidance for best practices in school-wide implementation, including how to support teachers in a pilot phase. The second program, "Diving into Touchpebbles," is specifically for elementary teachers. Over four days, we'll practice strategies that address barriers to participation with younger learners, learn to support elementary student observers, and discuss how student portfolios help assess student progress in honing essential discussion skills.

We're confident these programs will powerfully support the work of Touchstones educators while building community and reigniting a passion and joy for teaching. We invite you to share this opportunity with teachers you know.

You can learn more on our website:

[touchstones.org/workshops-training/  
upcoming-events](https://touchstones.org/workshops-training/upcoming-events)

## NEXT STEP ON THE JOURNEY

by: Cole Caudle, Touchstones Board

My first contact with Touchstones was in the Spring of 2017. Howard [Zeiderman] reached out through faculty at St. John's College in Annapolis looking for student veterans to be part of a new Veterans Discussion Project. I was a freshman and didn't think that I had much to offer, but I am always ready to help other veterans. I participated in a three-day Touchstones workshop where we went through the new program, *Completing the Odyssey: A Journey Home*, and my life changed. I realized I not only could help veterans, but that I also had something to offer the larger community. This recognition was a vital part of my coming home from service.

As a co-leader during the *Completing the Odyssey* pilot series I adopted new ways of seeing what was going on and grew comfortable with group dynamics.



Dr. Nathan Slife at Univ of Nevada, Las Vegas, leads a *Completing the Odyssey* class with veterans this semester.

Photo by: Becca Schwartz/UNLV

At the end of the pilot, we asked participants whether they thought veterans and civilians could come together in similar fashion to discuss issues of homecoming and belonging. Half the group thought it was a terrible idea, but I wanted to see this through. I knew that if veterans were to integrate successfully into their communities, they needed to have discussions with everyone.

I worked as part of the Touchstones staff over a summer on another program, *Together*. It applied what we had learned previously to now bring veterans and civilians together in a series of collaborative discussions on the book *Tribe*, by Sebastian Junger.

About midway through this program's pilot, the topic of un-homed people

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## NEXT STEP

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arose. The group brainstormed solutions to this issue and how to form an inclusive community. At the end of the discussion, a participant remarked, "I feel like we got sidetracked and didn't talk much about veterans' issues." Someone else then pointed out that, for the first time, the group was not divided by veteran status but had come together as one group rather than two. We had become a unified whole.

I have since participated in other Touchstones workshops and many Saturday online discussions not just because I enjoy them, but because they have changed me. My soul has been tempered as a result. Each meeting reminds me of the incredible depth of

being that is another person, and the course of my life has been greatly altered because of my experiences as a Touchstones participant, leader, and advisor. My ability to serve now on the Touchstones Board is a great honor and I am extremely excited to be an integral part of this organization. I want to see Touchstones in places like where I grew up—in rural Oklahoma where community discussions are, frankly, lacking and in the separations course that service members must take as they finish service. As society recovers from screen-time and isolation, Touchstones is even more relevant, and I'm eager to help it grow.

## JOINING THE TEAM

*by: Jenny Walton, Advancement & Volunteer Coordinator*

I am delighted and looking forward to taking on the Advancement and Volunteer Coordinator position with Touchstones. Meeting and working with volunteers who help grow this organization by giving their time and energy is a cause I am excited to support. While the job is new to me, the philosophy and fundamental ideas Touchstones delivers is something I believe in wholeheartedly. To be a critical thinker—to listen and respect another person even when their point of view is different than my own—is how I have lived and taught my family. In this new role, I feel I have found a perfect fit and look forward to learning all I can as I continue to expand my views and grow!

The best way to learn is through experience, in my opinion. During week one on the job, I was able to attend the first Touchstones in-person workshop in two years. Honestly, I was not sure what to expect, which made the experience that much more profound. We sat in a circle and discussed a short text, but it was what happened in that space between the participants that moved me to understand what Touchstones has to offer. I gained a new understanding of interactions, and it left me wanting more!

The common thread through my life—whether as employee, friend, or mom—has been to be a compassionate person to all and to champion everyone's uniqueness

and encourage confidence. I find differences beautiful, and I love diversity. It is exciting to have found a position that is working towards these very same ideals on

a much larger scale. As my life changed and allowed more free time and independence, I realized I needed a new place to give back and grow. I am so excited to be here at Touchstones, to stretch my mind and learn, and to add my own unique lens as part of an already amazing team.

## GROWING THE CIRCLE

*by: Stefanie Takacs, Executive Director*

We're thrilled to announce that the Jack R. Anderson (JRA) Foundation has renewed its support for Touchstones this coming academic year. The foundation's new grant allows for Touchstones program expansion at two sites in Washington, DC: Washington Latin Public Charter School's Anna Julia Cooper Campus and Girls Global Academy Charter School (GGA).

At Washington Latin, we'll partner with faculty and staff to implement Touchpebbles and Touchstones across multiple grades at their new campus, which is entering its second year. (Our partnership at the school's campus on 2nd Street last year was funded in part by the JRA Foundation.) We're excited to work now with Principal Kashiffa Roberts, Anaka Osborne, who is the Director of Literacy, and teachers at the Cooper Campus who will implement Touchstones in their classrooms.

Touchstones staff will also team up with faculty and staff at GGA. GGA's co-founders, Shayne Swift and Karen Venable-Croft, know the benefits of Touchstones well from their many prior years teaching in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program in Prince George's County's public schools. This fall, Touchstones will be introduced into GGA's International Baccalaureate Career Pathways program in grade 10. While some Touchstones programs are already in place at the school, funding from this grant provides for training, coaching, and more programming.

In addition to back-to-school workshops with teachers and staff at both sites, the grant provides for a mid-year training that brings educators from both schools together. We are

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## GROWING

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excited to encourage and foster professional sharing and collaboration between these schools, as their respective programs attract and serve diverse student populations from across DC. We're looking forward to sharing updates on how Touchstones is supporting communities of authentic learners at both Washington Latin and GGA. Thank you again to the JRA Foundation for their continued commitment to K-12 education!

## ONWARD

*by: Sam Duckworth*

After spending almost two years as part of the Touchstones team—first as an intern and then as a staff member—my time at Touchstones is coming to a close. As I approach graduation from St. John's College, I've reflected on how working at Touchstones helped me grow. Learning to run Touchstones discussions by practicing with various groups (staff members, incarcerated women, and local students from the Eastern Shore), encouraged me to develop my own communication and leadership skills in ways that would not have been possible otherwise. I've been able to experience the power of active listening by attending to others so they know they are heard and their perspectives are valued.

Things I learned while running these discussions were further reinforced by my interactions with Touchstones staff members. I always felt my perspectives were valued, my input was important, and that I was capable of doing the projects I was assigned, even though I did not have much experience. Those exchanges empowered me to take on responsibilities I may not have felt capable of assuming before. I'm grateful for this trust that Touchstones leadership and others had in me.

Touchstones has also been instrumental in my thinking about life after college and figuring out a career path. After graduation, I plan to pursue a career in data and business analytics—a field I discovered an interest in while working on a data analysis project in my Touchstones internship. I feel my experiences at Touchstones and its methodology will benefit me greatly when analyzing and presenting data. I've learned so much about effective communication and thinking from others' perspectives—crucial parts of data analysis and presentation. I also believe the general skills I've developed at Touchstones—collaboration, problem solving, and leadership skills—are important for success in any industry. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to grow in these ways and am so thankful for the time I've spent at Touchstones. This truly is a special place, and I will never forget it.

*(Don't worry, Sam, there's no escape velocity once you're in the circle! – ST, E.D.)*

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