

## ANNIVERSARY ISSUE



## VOICES

*The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project*

## AND THEN THERE WAS LIGHT: Celebrating 40 Years of Touchstones

*by: Sharon Thomas, K-12 & Family Engagement Director*

In the beginning, there was darkness. And then three professors from St. John's College turned on the video camera.

Forty years ago, Geoff Comber and Howard Zeiderman traveled to Hartford, Connecticut, to introduce discussion-based learning to students. Even with years of experience in classroom discussion, they thought it would help to videotape themselves so they, and other teachers, could learn from their modeling. The trouble was, the lesson didn't go as planned. The students hadn't done the advanced preparation they'd been assigned, so Howard had to completely revise the lesson—in this case, a math class—on the spot.

Returning to Annapolis, the two reviewed the video recording with their colleague, Nick Maistrellis. They saw what Howard says he and Geoff had not seen during the lesson itself: "In the vaguest form, a group of otherwise disaffected students worked together to offer some real opinions." Removing the need for student preparation before class had changed the playing field, and using discussion as the medium for exploring content brought



about a change in the students' interactions. That different way of interacting enabled the students to start thinking about math in new ways—together.

That revised lesson was the start of Touchstones.

Over the decades, Touchstones has grown from a lesson in a high school math class to collaborative discussion programs for every stage of life to support learners of all ages in becoming active listeners, skilled collaborators, and more effective leaders.

First, Howard, Geoff, and Nick developed *Touchstones I* and *II* in 1989—high school volumes that teach students how to "map the world" for themselves. They learn not just to turn to text and history for answers but also to examine their own thinking and that of their peers for new perspectives and understanding.

Next came *Touchstones A, B, and C*—volumes that teach middle school students to apply their valuable thinking as artists, mathematicians, scientists, philosophers, and

*(Continued on page 2)*

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

## CELEBRATING 40

*(Continued from page 1)*

creative problem solvers, as they prepare to navigate the world more independently.

Then came the cutest curricular series ever, *Touchpebbles A, B, and C*—discussion programs that teaches elementary students how and why their thinking is as valuable and necessary as any adult's thinking is.

Today, Touchstones programs are used in schools all over the world and in every type of school context. But that's not all. Touchstones has become a vital part of an array of community programs, often in settings where members of our community may feel undervalued or voiceless.

Our programs with incarcerated people (children and adults) have been in place for decades, encouraging reflective thinking, self-respect, and dignity among people who often feel erased by society.

Various other programs engage seniors in active learning that connects their extraordinary range of experience and knowledge to topics that affect them today.

Our *Completing the Odyssey* program helps military veterans understand how skills gained in service are invaluable tools for navigating into and through civilian life. And our online community programs bring people from diverse ages, regions, and backgrounds to explore and establish common ground.

In 1984, Howard, Geoff, and Nick could never have foreseen all



the ways that Touchstones would grow to reach more than 6 million people worldwide.

As Howard says, "Who could have imagined that prisoners hearing about Priam and Achilles mourning together would find useful parallels for themselves in those classical figures and a new way of understanding their own battlefields? Or who would have thought

that executives discussing an Iroquois tale would see themselves more clearly because of the story's uniqueness? And who would have foreseen that brain-injured adults would, remarkably, come out of themselves because the shared activities and medium of Touchstones are more accessible to them? Or that indentured children in Haiti would build the courage to ask a question? Or educators in Jordan would collaborate across hierarchical and social boundaries? Or mathematicians and psychologists at NSA would listen intently to one another across their compartmentalized methodologies and languages? We could not have imagined it."

Four decades later, our mission remains the same: to support people in learning and growing through collaborative discussion that enhances their ability to see themselves and each other more clearly, compassionately, and

equitably. At Touchstones, we are those learners, too. Howard marvels that, "We emerge surprised at what we see in ourselves, as well as what the participants recognize in themselves and their peers—each of us serving as necessary bridges for each other."

### ***Come celebrate Touchstones!***

*Our first anniversary  
celebration will be on April 28,  
2024 from 11:30 AM to 2:30 PM  
at The Army & Navy Club in  
Washington, DC. For more  
information or to purchase  
tickets, please email  
jenny@touchstones.org or call  
our offices at (410) 604 3309.*

*We invite you to join us as we begin celebrating this 40-year milestone!*

## **NCCSS CONFERENCE 2024: SUPPORTING SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATORS IN GATE CITY**

*by: Sharon Thomas, K-12 & Family Engagement Director*

North Carolina's "Gate City," Greensboro, was the setting for this year's North Carolina Council for the Social Studies Conference. The conference, whose theme was "Hidden Stories of North Carolina," brought educators from around the state together in February to examine a wide-range of topics in social studies fields, including history, civics, economics, and geography. I'm happy to report that Touchstones was also there.

During the conference, I ran a breakout session titled "Student Voice and Autonomy in Shared Leadership Discussions." It served as an introduction to the Touchstones process for more than 25 conference attendees. In this mini-workshop, I was fortunate enough to work with Anton Wesley. Anton is a North Vance County (NC) public school teacher who is in his first year of Touchstones

implementation in an online high school. He co-facilitated the session with me so participants could ask a colleague real-world questions about what it's like to use Touchstones with students. Our Touchstones circle was filled with teachers and administrators who are passionate about discussion-based learning. Many

*(Continued on page 3)*

## NCCSS

(Continued from page 2)

expressed concerns about how their students interact with adults and peers. They see first-hand the crucial need for civil discourse in their communities.

Our Touchstones text for discussion was a passage from William James ("On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings") in which he describes differences between his initial perceptions as a visitor to North Carolina long ago and the perceptions of the people who lived in the places he was visiting. He did not realize at first that his perceptions were colored entirely by his assumptions—ideas and judgments vastly different from those of the local people.



*Teachers explore the importance of sharing perspectives in a recent Touchstones conference presentation.*

In our discussion at the conference, the educators considered their own experiences: the times when they had failed to see or understand someone else's—often their students'—circumstances. More than one teacher reflected on the depth of understanding they have gained about poverty from being in the classroom. They see more fully how it affects students in school. Joe, who will be a history

teacher soon, described what he learned after a few weeks in an internship. "I just had no idea what they were dealing with," he said about his students, as others nodded in agreement. The group demonstrated a deep caring and sensitivity to their students' needs, as novices and seasoned educators alike discussed the importance of supporting students as learners who are *human beings*.

It was exciting to bring Touchstones to this event, because it not only engaged social studies educators from different parts of NC with each other but also with staff from museums, non-profit organizations, government agencies, and businesses. We were all there with a single goal in mind: to support teachers in doing the best job they can to educate students in North Carolina.

As we continue to spread the word about collaborative discussion and the unique role Touchstones plays in education, we marvel at the ongoing commitment of educators in all settings—even in the face of so many pressures.

Our crowded session and our busy exhibit hall table were inspiring examples of the teachers' desire for collaborative dialog and more civil discourse and their understanding of the crucial role they play in shaping their students' and our nation's future.

## SHINE ON!

by: Jenny Walton, Advancement & Volunteer Coordinator

Touchstones is thrilled to have been awarded the 2024 Hatza Memorial SHINE Grant through the Maryland Humanities Council this year after being chosen from a highly competitive field of applicants. The SHINE Grant Program honors the legacy of Marilyn Hatza, Maryland Humanities' late director of grants and community engagement. It is funded by the State of Maryland via the Maryland Historical Trust.

This \$10,000 grant supports our work to develop critical thinkers and collaborative leaders for a more inclusive world. We have always endeavored tirelessly and with enthusiasm to promote Touchstones and share what we know is an effective and proven way to cultivate these desperately-needed skills. As a non-profit that relies on volunteers to increase reach and impact, grant funding is a critical part of our ability to provide training, education, and support to the people we help daily. Support like this grant helps sustain vital initiatives such as training more volunteers to lead Touchstones discussions in Maryland's correctional institutions. These and our other volunteer-led community programs promote a sense of belonging, shared responsibility, connection, and dignity among all program participants.

Thank you to Maryland Humanities for recognizing the crucial value of Touchstones programs in teaching collaborative discussion and critical thinking skills to learners of all ages and backgrounds.



*This project has been financed in part with State Funds from the Maryland Historical Trust, an agency of the Maryland Department of Planning, which is an instrumentality of the State of Maryland. However, project contents or opinions do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Maryland Historical Trust or the Maryland Department of Planning.*



### TOUCHSTONES®

*Building a more inclusive and collaborative world.*

#### Our 8 Essential Skills: (clockwise from the top)

- Confidence
- Speaking
- Cooperative Learning
- Analytical Reasoning
- Leadership
- Active Listening
- Reflective Thinking
- Collaboration



# WHAT'S HAPPENING IN HIGHER ED?

by: Stefanie Takacs, Executive Director

For decades, educators in higher education have brought the benefits of Touchstones discussion skills to their students. Like their counterparts in the K-12 grades, they recognize the increasing need for competencies that teacher-directed instruction and rote learning do not develop. Those include effective and respectful communication, self-awareness and flexibility, responsibility for one's own learning, analytical reasoning, and collaboration as key goals. Touchstones programs cultivate these capacities by engaging every participant in a process that includes both individual reflection and practice plus group effort and evaluation. These intentional shifts in Touchstones move from the "me" to the "we," and it's a game-changer.

Over the last two years, we've reported on new developments in the College of Education at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). There, more than 35 instructors have used Touchstones in their coursework with 1000+ first-year, second-year, transfer students, and veterans. Most recently, Touchstones discussions are part of a focused effort to support students with math anxiety.

At the popular First-Year Experience (FYE) Conference in Seattle, Washington last month, Touchstones in higher ed was on full display in two UNLV-led presentations. The first session introduced a group of 50 participants to Touchstones with a hands-on experience of a discussion lesson. Carefully crafted to engage the whole audience, this mini-workshop included a live discussion modeled with 15 people. Everyone else sat outside the circle, using two different Touchstones observation tools to note behaviors and interactions during the discussion. In 60 minutes, Dr. Chelsie Hawkinson and Dr. Nathan Slife took everyone through a complete Touchstones lesson, including a discussion evaluation with feedback from everyone in the circle and also from members of the audience.

It was a lively and successful demonstration of how quickly strangers can form connections to explore issues of trust, listening, and cooperation, when guided by the Touchstones method and curricula. Several people stopped by our exhibit table afterward to say how much they learned during the presentation, sharing that it was "amazing," "fascinating," and "great." All were eager to hear how to get started with Touchstones.

UNLV's second presentation had an added sense of urgency in leveraging Touchstones in higher ed. Its message was clear: military veterans entering college need and deserve wrap-around services to help them achieve their educational goals. The presenters were Dr. Slife, Ross Bryant who is the Director of UNLV's Military & Veteran Services Center, and two students who recently completed a new course for veterans that uses Touchstones *Completing the Odyssey: A Journey Home* as its textbook.

Driven by data, best practices, and a commitment to service members, the presenters shared a comprehensive blueprint brought to life with moving, personal testimonials. As Slife and Bryant shared their own gains from leading and participating in this course, both veteran-students credited their Touchstones discussions with empowering them with greater self-confidence and a much-needed sense of belonging and place in higher ed.



Touchstones Discussion Project



touchstonesdiscussions



Touchstones Discussion Project

## 2024 BOARD of DIRECTORS

*Debra Valentine*  
Chair

*Noelle Richmond*  
Vice Chair

*Gregg Steinberg*  
Treasurer

*Jessica Burgard*  
Secretary

Cole Caudle  
Melissa Curtin  
Garreth Heidt  
Greg Hodges  
Nicholas Maistrellis  
Ford Rowan  
Howard Zeiderman

**For questions or  
if you want to make a gift:**

call us at 410-604-3309,  
visit [touchstones.org/donate](https://touchstones.org/donate),  
or email [info@touchstones.org](mailto:info@touchstones.org)



scan to donate  
through our site  
**touchstones.org**



scan to donate  
through **venmo**  
[@touchstonesdiscussions](https://www.venmo.com/touchstonesdiscussions)

*Every gift makes a difference,  
so please give generously today.  
If you have already made a  
contribution to Touchstones this  
year, thank you!*

Touchstones® is a registered 501(c)3 nonprofit organization and donations are tax-deductible to the fullest extent of the law.

For a copy of our financial statements, contact us at 143 Log Canoe Circle, Stevensville, MD 21666.

Information submitted under the Maryland Charitable Solicitations Act is also available from the Office of the Secretary of the State.