



# VOICES

*The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project*

## WE ARE DOING IT – THANKS TO YOU!

by: Jenny Walton

While the world was busy growing and blooming this past spring, so were we! Approaching our work with a growth mindset, we launched The Give to Grow Matching Challenge—a spring solicitation that became our most successful match to date.

Our goal was to support educators immediately with free Touchstones training, discussion leadership coaching, and program materials as they moved into summer school and enrichment activities. The skills of civil discourse and reflective and critical thinking (being able to hear or read something and evaluate that information for utility and accuracy) that Touchstones teaches help us all to navigate life more constructively and thoughtfully. The professional development and discussion curricula we offer work together to cultivate these essential skills in students of all ages.

In response to our appeal to you, we exceeded our goal and raised more than \$52,000, which included 11 new donors in our circle and several donors who now make monthly recurring gifts. This is just amazing!

We thank you and the Touchstones Board of Directors, who generously funded the challenge to match your contributions dollar-for-dollar and two-for-one for first-time donors and friends who hadn't given recently. In the end, we exceeded our goal because of your belief in our mission and the importance of making Touchstones available to everyone!

Then we immediately put your support into action. One school that benefited was Kesterson Elementary in Nevada. Dr. Nathan Slife, a professor at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas (UNLV)—teaches Touchstones courses at UNLV with freshmen, sophomores, and veterans. He offered to run Touchpebbles classes at Kesterson, where he volunteers regularly. He thought their summer program would be a perfect time to introduce the children and teachers there to the Touchstones discussion method. He ran five Touchpebbles classes three days a week for three weeks!

Your funding let us provide free training and support to Nathan, as well as all the program materials for the students. The teachers at Kesterson were so impressed with what they heard and saw that they've decided to implement the program this school year. We have now provided five teachers there with the Touchpebbles materials they need to engage all their students. Plus, we are continuing to coach Nathan, as he supports those teachers.

Thank you for participating in this challenge and supporting vital teacher training and educational programming that revolutionizes education! Stay tuned for another report soon about how your charitable giving to Touchstones is making real change happen in schools around the U.S.

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

## AN EXPRESSION OF HOPE

by: Jessica Burgard, Touchstones Board of Directors

I was delighted when the Touchstones Discussion Project invited me to join the Board of Directors in July. I have been involved in Touchstones community programs since 2007, when I first read the Touchstones volume, *Mapping the Future*, and was blown away by the intelligence and originality of the project. Touchstones is one of the few enterprises that I have ever encountered that is both robustly intellectual and universally accessible. As philosophy in action, it has a unique potential for transforming the way that all of us relate to one another.

My own journey with Touchstones has tracked with my personal growth. My participation in discussions has helped me notice the ways that my habits, my demeanor, and my conduct affect the people with whom I interact. I learned that I could temper my enthusiasm, and channel it to improve other people's enjoyment and growth. That skill has given me opportunities to expand in my relationships outside of Touchstones discussions and cultivate an awareness of my responsibilities to others. Over the years, I have thought a lot about leadership when participating in

discussions, especially about how it is distinct from dominance and how it can be used to support equality. I hope to learn from other board members who practice that form of leadership in their service to Touchstones. Joining the board is a tremendous opportunity for me to invest my effort where its impact will be multiplied. In a troubled time, it is an expression of hope, which I intend to nurture with help from the entire Touchstones community.



Sharon Thomas  
K-12 & Family Engagement Director

*"Beyond its student impact, Touchstones showed me new ways to foster student autonomy, to exert less control over classroom conversations, and thus to be a better teacher."*

## FULL CIRCLE

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

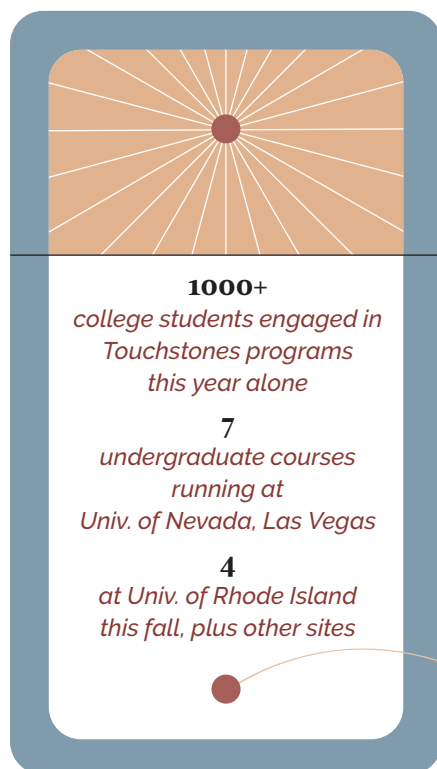
Working for Touchstones and working with educators worldwide who use or want to use Touchstones in their teaching is a dream come true. My new role as Director of K-12 & Family Engagement Programs has its roots in my own classroom—way back in 2011. Then, as a public school teacher in Maryland, I implemented Touchstones with all of my high school students, from the most advanced achievers to students who had struggled in English all their young lives. In each class, I saw how the Touchstones process and content helped students become more reflective and thoughtful participants in classroom discussion and more reflective and thoughtful human beings as well. Beyond its student impact, Touchstones showed me new ways to foster student autonomy, to exert less control over classroom conversations, and thus to be a better teacher.

My experience as a teacher, instructional coach, professional developer, and program developer and evaluator now comes full circle in supporting the Touchstones programs I love so much. I enter the role at a time when Touchstones looks to expand our reach in all types of K-12 school environments: public schools, independent schools, public charter schools, online schools, international schools, Montessori schools, alternative schools, International Baccalaureate programs, special education programs, Advanced Placement programs, and co-op and homeschool environments. Part of that expansion includes supporting educators not only with books and a proven pedagogy but also with high-quality professional learning and implementation support that is sensitive to each environment's context and challenges.

## FULL CIRCLE

*(Continued from page 2)*

Beyond student-focused programming, I am focusing on the use of Touchstones with educators themselves in their professional learning communities (PLC)—to foster individual growth and team development, as professionals and human beings. As with our student-focused programs, we're seeking school partners whose goals align to enhancements that Touchstones delivers: greater self-awareness, improved recognition of skills and talents in others, strengthened active listening, and collaborative leadership, to name a few. Our partner schools receive guidance from us, as we review engagement and outcomes with them to support their optimal goal-oriented growth. Touchstones is for all learners, both children and adults, and we want everyone in the circle to learn together.



## GAME-CHANGING IN HIGHER ED

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

For many people during the last three decades, some form of higher education has been prerequisite for successful entry into a modern and globalized workforce. Most often, that preparation provided technical or discipline-specific training that qualified a person in a particular way. In doing so, higher education has been and remains a valuable tool for billions of adults. However, it rarely focuses on a deliberate and continuous development of a person's ability to effectively think independently across all domains of activity—personal and professional. Nor does it emphasize the importance of each person's capacity to recognize and leverage their own strengths to assist others and their community while identifying personal weaknesses and taking steps to build greater competency. These so-called "soft" skills are the bedrock of high-functioning, adaptive, flexible, evolving, and creative problem-solvers and leaders. They are skills that can be taught, and this is the realm of Touchstones.

Instead of positioning the learner as a source of new ideas, invaluable life experience, and a built-in teacher of self and others, most models in higher education prioritize the role of an appointed content expert to extend knowledge to others, much as we see in K-12 education. Increasingly, however, educators are realizing the foundational role of these other skills in addressing gaps between expectation and reality in student capacity: to think about and produce original content that builds on existing knowledge. These educators are turning to us for effective training and resources that complement—or sometimes replace—traditional approaches to teaching and learning.

This summer, under my direction, Touchstones brought together a dozen educators working in higher education to share what they've learned from Touchstones. These are realizations they've made either by being participants in Touchstones programs, leading Touchstones programs with students or colleagues, or both. While I've worked with professors, instructors, and other educators in post-secondary environments for decades and trained hundreds of them in the Touchstones method, my greatest challenge has been in persuading many that lasting change—in themselves and others—requires dedicated and regular practice. Most are convinced that they aren't the problem; it's the students who need to change how they learn.

This summit in June, was therefore, an inspiring and affirming experience for me. I heard from every participant how Touchstones has effectively altered how they think about education. In learning to lead by example in Touchstones, they have invited all members of their classes into the practice of self-reflection, group evaluation, and collaborative leadership. The results they achieved included more inclusive student participation in dialog and an improved sense of shared purpose and community as experienced by students. These outcomes are strong motivators for them and for me, and they reinforce my conviction that Touchstones is a game-changer at all levels of education.



# LEADING BY EXAMPLE

by: Stef Takacs, Executive Director

Each year, I have the distinct honor of helping to recognize an educator (or two, as the case sometimes is) and a volunteer who are exemplary models of Touchstones. The criteria for recognition are many, including a commitment to empower all people with communication, thinking, and leadership skills that prepare them for success in work, school, and life. This year, our Geoffrey J. Comber Touchstones Teachers of the Year are two professors at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas (UNLV). We honor Dr. Chelsie Hawkinson and Dr. Nathan Slife, both in the College of Education, for introducing Touchstones to dozens of colleagues and over a thousand students just in the first 15 months of implementation at UNLV.

**Happy Hour  
for  
Friends & Donors**

49 West  
Coffeehouse  
Winebar  
Gallery

Annapolis



Our senior staff has provided instructional support to both professors during their initial pilots of several Touchstones curricula with different student populations. We are exceptionally grateful for their intellectual curiosity, trust, and commitment to improving educational opportunities for their students. This fall, seven undergraduate courses in the College of Education include Touchstones programs. You can learn more about their efforts to build a more inclusive and active-learning environment for students at UNLV—including transfer students and veterans—in our latest Circle Newsletter, which can be found on the Touchstones website.

We also celebrate our 2023 Volunteer of the Year, Craven Engels, for her on-going dedication to the Touchstones mission and her community engagement and discussion leadership. Most recently, Craven has led discussions in our program at the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women, has been trained in and then delivered a special Touchpebbles orientation program for new students at a public-charter school in Washington DC, and ran a Touchstones discussion in our series of special public programs this August that was tied to the In Character Productions show, *Grounded*, at the Maryland Hall for Performing Arts. I look forward to sharing more about our 2023 honorees, who will receive their awards in Stevensville, MD at our annual Friend & Volunteer Gathering in early December.

## 2023 BOARD of DIRECTORS

**Debra Valentine**  
Chair

**Gregg Steinberg**  
Vice Chair  
Treasurer

**Greg Hodges**  
Secretary

Jessica Burgard  
Cole Caudle  
Garreth Heidt  
Nicholas Maistrellis  
Noelle Richmond  
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 Discussion Project



[touchstonesdiscussions](https://www.instagram.com/touchstonesdiscussions)



Touchstones Discussion Project

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.