



VOICES

The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project

TOUCHSTONES CELEBRATES HONOREES OF THE YEAR

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

December is a time of celebration for different reasons all over the world. At Touchstones, we are celebrating the recipients of our awards for outstanding educators and volunteers. Our event in Stevensville, MD on December 2 honored our 2023 Geoffrey J. Comber Teachers of the Year, Dr. Chelsie Hawkinson and Dr. Nathan Slife of the University of Nevada – Las Vegas (UNLV), and our 2023 Volunteer of the Year, Craven Engels of Annapolis, Maryland.

This annual event involved not only the award recipients and their family members but also our board members, donors, educators, advocates, friends, and Touchstones volunteers and staff members. This was our first large gathering in person since 2019—a tradition we were excited to relaunch because these events give us the chance to, in the words of Touchstones board member and past Volunteer of the Year Noelle Richmond, "hear how Touchstones directly affects the lives of students" and to be "inspired by the level of commitment of Touchstones teachers and volunteers."

The work that Chelsie and Nathan have done over the past two years at UNLV has made it one of our fastest-growing education sites. In that short time, the program has grown to involve 25+ instructors and more than 2,000 students in weekly undergraduate Touchstones seminar programs and non-traditional student pathway programs.

In accepting their awards, both Chelsie and Nathan cited several ways their students have benefitted from Touchstones. Nathan explained the "life-changing impact" on transfer and first-year students who are also veterans in a course that uses the Touchstones Completing the Odyssey: A Journey Home program. He shared how one veteran, who was initially reluctant to speak to anyone (veterans or non-veterans), learned new ways of listening that opened him up not only to speaking about his own experiences but to listening to others' experiences as well. Nathan says that, "The depth we can get into in Touchstones discussion better equips those veterans for the transition from the military to college and to the workplace."

Similarly, one of Chelsie's focus areas at UNLV is in educational psychology. In her "ed psych" classes, she noted her students' increased ability with Touchstones to "integrate their learning" in educational research and theory with enhanced approaches to teaching and learning. Touchstones has helped all her students to be "comfortable, vulnerable, and open with each other" and more intrinsically motivated. These abilities will help them navigate both the classroom and more "socially polarizing environments" in the world.

Our 2023 Volunteer of the Year, Craven Engels, has supported Touchstones for the past decade across all

(Continued on page 2)

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

CELEBRATES

(Continued from page 1)

programs and events. An enthusiastic discussion leader and participant in our school, executive, and prison programs, Craven is also a key player in our friend and fundraising events, including hosting an art fundraiser in her home. In accepting her award, Craven explained her ongoing commitment to Touchstones, commenting that the world needs to expand its "capacity for kindness, our capacity for recognizing each

other's strengths, and I'm glad we get to do that here."

We cannot express enough our gratitude for the hard work and commitment of people like Craven, Nathan, and Chelsie. The dedication of Touchstones teachers and volunteers like them is what drives the spread of collaborative dialogue and respect for the dignity of others around the world.



*Discussion Map cookies
were a tasty treat
at the
2023 Teachers and
Volunteer Awards,
thanks to Sharon Thomas'
baking skills!*



GIVING TUESDAY

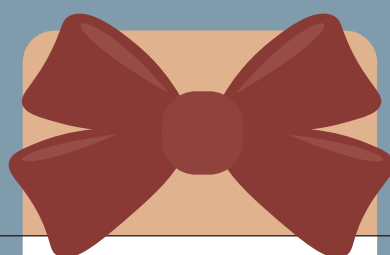
by: Jenny Walton, Advancement & Volunteer Coordinator

Giving Tuesday is a movement that aims to unleash the power of radical generosity around the world. This year, our call to action was to ask our Touchstones Advisory Committee, Board of Directors, and supporters to share our work and vision with their friends, family, and the people with whom they come into daily contact. We know that the way forward to a more peaceful and supportive world is through the power of collaborative discussion, critical thinking, and active listening. Touchstones invites and encourages all people to engage in those vital opportunities. Our programs also include those who are often marginalized by society because of race, ethnicity, gender, personal histories or socio-economic status.

Touchstones has a secret power. We recognize that every single person has wisdom to share and knowledge to bring forth. Our mission is to transform education. We give confidence to the

quiet student, and empower active speakers with better listening skills. We enable groups to share leadership, and participants to speak and listen with care. We want to thank all our Touchstones friends for reaching out, making gifts, and sharing our work with the world!

This Giving Tuesday, 13 new donors and 23 other returning donors contributed more than \$5,000 that we'll put to immediate use continuing the important work we do. That work includes training both teachers who use Touchstones programs with students of all ages and also the many volunteers who will bring Touchstones into new communities of adults outside school settings. With your contributions, we can make sure the people who need us most have the tools and know-how they need to succeed. Thank you for making this Giving Tuesday such a success!



**Some of the reasons
people decided
to give on
Giving Tuesday:**

*In honor of the service
members who crossed
before they could join a
Touchstones discussion.*

*In MEMORIAM of my father
Lawrence Ginsberg who
loved to learn.*

*I believe in the mission and I
love the people!*

*It is a wonderful organization
doing great works.*

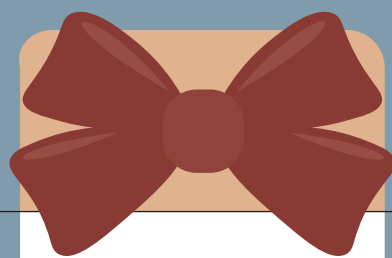
EACH A TOUCHSTONE

by: Alexandra Fotos, Annual & Planned Giving

More than a decade ago, Howard Zeiderman, one of Touchstones' three co-founders, invited me to volunteer at the Maryland Correctional Institution at Jessup (MCI-J) and participate in Touchstones weekly discussions held in the prison school. At the time, it didn't fit in with my schedule, so I declined. The real reason I said no was because I didn't feel comfortable going into a prison, particularly one for men. Fast forward to 2021 when I was again invited to volunteer as a participant in the Touchstones program—now at the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women (MCI-W)—but due to continuing public health concerns related to the pandemic, that program would not start again until 2022.

In the fall of 2022, and thinking this would be a one-time experience, I joined Touchstones' Executive Director, Stefanie Takacs, and Board member Noelle Richmond as a program participant at MCI-W. In that meeting, we read a short excerpt from the Qu'ran about forgiveness. I had no idea of what to expect, and my experience with the incarcerated women was transformative—for me as much as for them. I have returned several times to MCI-W to lead or co-lead discussions, with groups of women who always approach our shared task very seriously, openly expressing emotions tied to the ideas we explore together. In general, our co-participants are excellent listeners who are forthright and willing enough to offer a couple of pointers for me as a leader: allow for quiet moments and don't rush to continue the discussion. Lesson learned (thanks to the integrated self-assessments and group evaluations that follow every discussion)!

We've discussed pieces from Aristotle on love, Langston Hughes on lost friendship, William James on our blindness to other human beings, and Homer on the challenges of returning home after extended separations, among many others. With the Touchstones Ground Rules to guide us and the texts as a shared starting place, each participant represents the power we each have as touchstones for each other—our wisdom, talents, and lived experience. The hour flies by, and as we say goodbye we are already looking forward to the next exciting opportunity to teach and learn together.



***Touchstones thanks
our many donors in 2023
for their support and
the following foundations
for special project funding:***

Jack R. Anderson Foundation

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2023: A YEAR IN REVIEW

by: Stefanie Takacs, E.D., & Howard Zeiderman,
Co-founder & Dir. Leadership Programs

Stef: What are you most proud of accomplishing at Touchstones in 2023?

Howard: It's great that Touchstones finally has a programmatic approach to recruiting and training volunteers for community outreach and engagement. Volunteers make it possible for programs to run regularly without relying solely on Touchstone staff, which frees the staff to develop new relationships and provide more support for existing clients and implementations. With a small team, this enhanced role of volunteers is life-changing for Touchstones' reach—from our Saturday Community program online to the women's prison to older adults looking for meaningful connection with others.

Howard: What program news from 2023 do you think is most significant?

Stef: Wow, that's a tough question! There were so many important additions to Touchstones programs this year. The increased use of Touchstones in undergraduate courses in the College of Education at the University of Nevada – Las Vegas immediately comes to mind. They've gone from piloting one course mid-year in 2022 to engaging 800 students in seven courses this fall alone. Now, faculty and students are sharing what they've learned at conferences with other educators, veterans, and leaders. I'm also proud of delivering training and discussion curricula to dozens of teachers who didn't have funding



YEAR IN REVIEW

(Continued from page 3)

of their own, thanks to our generous donors and friends. We all heard how people aren't interacting well—from elementary school all the way through adulthood—with horrific consequences. More and more people are using Touchstones to build the communication and interpersonal skills that are fundamental to civil discourse and cooperative learning. It's so important to be addressing that need across our society. It's also great that we have a new pilot in Springfield, MA, in partnership with the Young Scholars Program. They identify academically inclined students who are unlikely to continue education past high school without substantial support. Our former staff member, Samantha Duckworth, runs that new Touchpebbles enrichment program once a week with Young Scholar students at an elementary as a volunteer. We hope to repeat that pilot with additional students next semester. How about for you?

Howard: While current programs in our leadership arena (drama and cybersecurity) are fascinating, I think news from Amman, Jordan is a highlight of 2023. In recent post-pandemic conversations with Abeer Ammouri, formerly with the Jordanian Ministry of Education, I asked her to recap what's happening with Touchstones in Jordan. She shared that



ماهاكات اتافكير
MAHAKKAT ATAFKIR

Touchstones in Jordan is known as Mahakkat AtTafkir, or
"The Touchstones® Way of Thinking."

all grade 7-10 students all teachers and administrators in the country had been involved in Touchstones training and regular classroom use prior to COVID. It was even more rewarding to hear those numbers equated to "no fewer than a million students!" That news confirmed there are few limits to implementing Touchstones when there is a will, a way, and no barrier to funding. I hope this encourages others in education and philanthropy to help us empower millions more students with essential thinking, communication, and leadership skills. To your earlier point, we know how much everyone needs these tools. We can work together to make that happen, and that gives me real hope for humanity in 2024.

"Touchstones® Week 2023, ran Dec 3-9 this year. Included in the more than 60 sites that dedicated time for a Touchstones discussion, our staff and Board of Directors meeting, women's prison program, and Saturday Online Community Discussion all featured the Touchstones Week text. Thanks to dozens of teachers, friends, and volunteers around the world, Touchstones Week engaged an estimated 1,500 people around the world!"



Touchstones Discussion Project



touchstonesdiscussions



Touchstones Discussion Project

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so please give generously today.*

*If you have already made a
contribution to Touchstones this
year, thank you!*

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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.