



# VOICES

*The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project*

## TOUCHSTONES 40th ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

*by: Sharon Thomas, K-12 & Family Engagement Director (and many others)*

Forty years ago this year, Geoff Comber, Nick Maistrellis, and Howard Zeiderman envisioned a different kind of discussion than most of us experience in school or work—one that is inclusive, balanced, humanizing, rich, and energizing. At that time, they were each senior faculty members at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, where most teaching and learning is conducted through seminar and tutorial classes. As they considered their successes and failures in teaching, they began experimenting with different forms of discussion-based approaches in public schools and districts. In those school sites, they implemented various pilots that explored what supports dialog and what inhibits it, and why. Initially known as the Touchstones Project, their investigations became a laboratory for researching, developing, testing, and refining discussion-based instruction to

*As Touchstones' Executive Director, Stefanie Takacs explains, "They were looking for a way to build essential communication, cognitive, and interpersonal skills by placing students' thinking and voices at the heart of the classroom. This meant they also had to train people in new instructional modes that teach active learning and empower students with responsibility and leadership skills."*

engage all students—regardless of background or circumstance.

In celebration of 40 years, 85 volunteers, Board and staff members, program participants, donors, and friends from around the U.S. gathered at The Army & Navy Club in Washington DC on April 28th. The purpose of the event, in addition to recognizing Touchstones' exceptional contributions to the field of education, was to hear directly from people who have helped make this incredible impact possible. That includes K-12 students and educators, college and university students and faculty, executives and government leaders, military veterans, detained and incarcerated youth and adults, seniors, and members of the general public. Seven speakers represented these different groups and the positive changes they have achieved through Touchstones over the last four decades.



## GETTING STARTED:

The first programs the three co-founders developed in the 1980s were for students in grades 2-12. Those have since been used by millions of teachers and students around the world. When relaying my own experience as a new Touchstones teacher in a Maryland public high school, I described the significant shifts I saw not only in students but also in my teaching practices:

*“Touchstones helped me to learn one of the most important lessons of all about teaching: People who spend all day with roving hordes of other people’s children have a deep, understandable need for control. But the more I try to control students, the less they learn; the less they think for themselves. They need me to provide them with structure and process and strategies, but they also need me to give them space together, as Howard says, to learn to map the world for themselves.”*



*What do several Teachers of the Year have to say about what Touchstones means to them and their students? Scan this QR code to watch a short video and hear it straight from the source.*

## INTO THE 90s:

Anne Ferro, who spoke after me, highlighted similarly important changes in her experience in a program for department heads at the Maryland Motor Vehicle Administration in the 1990s—the first Touchstones program for executives. At first, her colleagues resisted the idea of working together through collaborative discussions. Over time and by participating in Touchstones on a weekly basis, everyone in the group reported significant growth.

*“After a time, we learned and practiced listening better, pulling a thread of insight that another had laid. We accepted each other as equals, overcame our fears, and relaxed into the discussions, mostly. Curiosity replaced skepticism. Interest in a colleague’s idea replaced discomfort with open-ended discussion. Being a learner among equals replaced being the expert in the room. We became better listeners. Touchstones enabled us to build a new dynamic on which to communicate and face challenging or uncomfortable situations together, as peers.”*



*Howard Zeiderman and Nick Maistrellis celebrate by cutting the cake!*

Howard Zeiderman, who is still part of the Touchstones staff today, shared how Touchstones evolved to support everyone across the continuum of life. He described his initial skepticism that Touchstones could be implemented successfully with seniors, thinking perhaps they were too set in their ways to work cooperatively and make room for each other in discussion. After seeing both residential and day programs for seniors in action, he recognized that Touchstones programs—and those participants—were highly adaptable and ageless.

*“Seniors are capable of the deepest thoughts and active exploration with one another in the present and not limited to merely recounting their own stories....We have had seniors’ programs in public centers, libraries, retirement homes, community colleges, assisted care sites, and recently in memory care facilities. In every case, we have learned to expect the unexpected. I’m reminded of what a student in a Pittsburgh high school said after a year of Touchstones in the late 1980s. ‘When you change someone else’s mind you feel powerful, but when someone or something changes your mind you begin to feel complete; you feel whole.’ I thank all of the elderly members who have participated in Touchstones discussions and emerged from the solitary confinement of their memories to help me—and us all—take a step toward feeling whole.”*



## THE NEW MILLENIUM:

After enjoying Howard's tribute to seniors, we were introduced to two newer Touchstones programs and their benefits. Cole Caudle, a USMC veteran and Touchstones Board member, movingly spoke of the programs' enormous impacts on veterans, including himself. The first was *Completing the Odyssey: A Journey Home*, which was designed with and for military veterans as they return to civilian life. The second, *Together*, brings civilians and veterans into dialog on issues of acceptance and community.



Then came the next innovation: the Touchstones Saturday Community Discussion program, which runs online every other weekend. Jessica Burgard is a long-time volunteer and now a member of the Touchstones Board of Directors. She leads that program with Touchstones fellow Board member Greg Hodges and co-founder and Board member Nick Maistrellis. Jess described why that program, which launched during the pandemic to keep people connected, is her favorite of all Touchstones programs.

While Touchstones staff and volunteers have run discussion programs in Maryland prisons for nearly three decades, it was only in 2020 that the organization trained volunteers to lead the current program at the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women (MCI-W). Touchstones was invited into MCI-W in 2015 by the school principal at the time. His aim: to help incarcerated women build vital skills necessary for successful and sustained employment and a sense of belonging and dignity following their return to society. Nearly 90% of the women incarcerated at MCI-W return to their communities. Kimberley Riley, one of our leading volunteers at MCI-W, took the podium to convey the particular benefits this Touchstones program offers.

*“Completing the Odyssey facilitates empowering conversations between veterans so that they can begin to take charge of their homecoming. This is good for the community and for the veterans. One common issue is that veterans feel the community does not understand them as an asset. Oftentimes, this leads veterans into a trap of thinking that their military experience does not translate to the home front. This program allows veterans to investigate and articulate their service with other veterans. Together goes a step further by bringing veterans and civilians into discourse on topics related to military service such as homecoming and belonging. Over time, the veteran-civilian dichotomy fades, and both groups begin to see themselves as fellow citizens who are ‘together,’ despite their differences.”*

*Cole Caudle, USMC veteran, shares how Touchstones programs successfully support veteran homecomings.*

*“As a process designed to guide people out of the echo chamber of their own minds, Touchstones can rebuild an environment where democracy can flourish... Touchstones discussions develop a space where seldom-heard voices blossom by creating a community of people who genuinely want to listen. For some participants that is the entire lift—finding in themselves the desire to hear others—both the mute and the strident—because each person matters. I truly believe that there is no person who is so insular or so complacent in their world view that Touchstones cannot help them.”*

*“The students in prison come to Touchstones with nothing but their minds. There is no prestige, no end goal, no grades, no game going on at all. Touchstones in prison is truly learning for learning's sake. These topics we discuss could be intimidating, but we use a method designed to erase power distinctions, designed to equalize in an environment that is all about power and unequal relations. Of course, the group struggles at times, like all groups, but I have seen in the best moments, and they are not infrequent, something deep and honorable called forth as these women, some incarcerated for violent crimes, most of whom have never had anyone ever ask their opinion on anything, engage intelligently with the biggest questions facing humanity.”*





Wrapping up the delightful and inspiring vignettes that took us across four decades of program growth and outreach, Touchstones Board Chair Debra Valentine offered this invitation:

Touchstones had its roots in a deli in Annapolis, where three educators puzzled over their challenges as teachers. Now, 40 years later, the achievements of those co-founders—with help from hundreds of volunteers and donors, dozens of staff members, and thousands of fellow leaders in schools, businesses, and organizations—are continuing to transform teaching and learning. Thank you to everyone who has played a role in growing the Touchstones circle.

*Happy Anniversary, Touchstones!*

*“I hope, after all you have heard, that you are awed by Touchstones’ ability to change lives. It does so simply by opening pathways for active listening, reflective speaking, and productive collaboration. It enables all of us to be members of a community that works for a common good—solving problems by using everyone’s contributions and having accounted for everyone’s views. It seems almost too ideal to be true, and yet we see this transformation happening again and again—schoolchildren, veterans, prisoners and executives. Touchstones is for everyone. I want to ask all of you to help us ensure that we can continue this transformative, educational work over at least the next four decades.”*

**TOUCHSTONES  
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**MEET THE CHALLENGE:**  
*Join us and launch Touchstones into the next 40!*

During their April Board meeting in advance of the 40th Anniversary Celebration, the Touchstones Board of Directors made a major commitment. They pledged \$40,000 for a fundraising challenge this spring. Every gift received between now and July 1 will be matched at least dollar for dollar. Repeat gifts will be matched 2 for 1, and donors making first-time gifts or returning after a hiatus will be matched 3 for 1!

You can make your secure one-time gift or set up a recurring monthly gift (the annual total of your recurring gift will be matched accordingly) online at [www.touchstones.org/donate](http://www.touchstones.org/donate).

*Touchstones accepts gifts of stocks and appreciated securities and has a brokerage account with Raymond James. Please call our offices for more information: 410-604-3309.*

You can also use these QR codes to make your gift now.



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If you prefer to make a gift by check, you may send it to Touchstones Discussion Project, 143 Log Canoe Circle, Stevensville, MD 21666-2127. In addition, gifts by Zelle are accepted through PNC and our phone number.

*You may also make a direct contribution to Touchstones from your IRA. (People aged 70½+ can contribute up to \$100,000 directly from their IRA to a charity and pay no income taxes on the distribution.)*



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