



# VOICES

*The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project*

## TIME TO JOIN THE CIRCLE

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

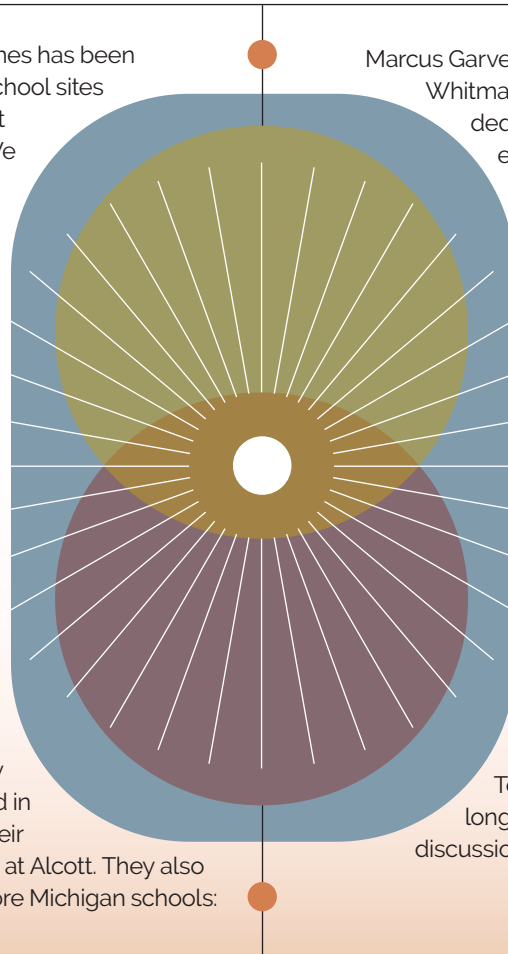
Back-to-school season at Touchstones has been in motion throughout August with school sites old and new and with many different grade levels and school contexts. We kicked off the month's professional learning with our online open enrollment workshop, which included many teachers and school leaders from our work with the Africa-America Institute (AAI). AAI supports schools across the African diaspora in several ways. They provide research and resources to schools to elevate student voices, help people to recognize assumptions and implicit bias, and improve school climate by ensuring students thrive with educationally enriching and transformative experiences.

Last year, Touchpebbles became part of that work at an AAI site in Pontiac, Michigan: Alcott Elementary School. The gains that AAI witnessed in Alcott's 4th and 5th graders led to their expanding Touchpebbles to grade 3 at Alcott. They also introduced Touchpebbles to two more Michigan schools:

Marcus Garvey Academy in Detroit and Walt Whitman Elementary School in Pontiac. The dedication of the advocates at AAI and educators at each of the three schools made our online workshop rich with deep questions and demonstrated love and care for their students.

Next up was the launch of our new partnership with Esperanza Academy Charter School (EACS) in North Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. EACS is implementing Touchpebbles and Touchstones with hundreds of students this year. Our curricula will be used in grades 3, 6, and 9 in social studies, in grade 9 in English language arts, and in a course on teacher education in its education career pathway with plans to expand to other grade levels and content areas over time.

Christopher Palladino, Director of Teacher Development at EACS, is a longtime proponent of collaborative discussion as a key tool to enhance learning



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

## JOIN THE CIRCLE

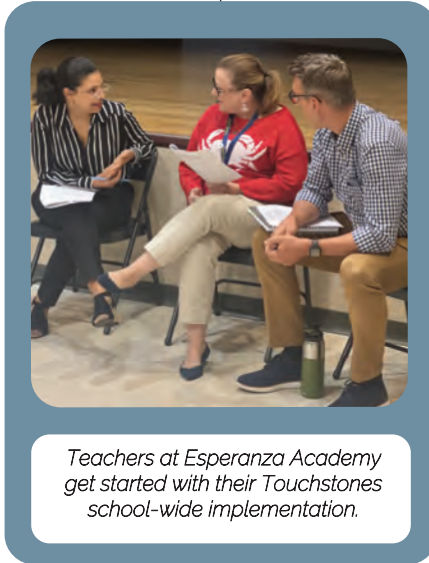
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and a huge fan of Touchstones to support educator and student development. He chose Touchstones programs as a vehicle to deepen learning and engagement in content while also creating more humanized and supportive classroom environments. In August, we delivered two workshops at EACS—one for leadership and one for teachers—to help get them started. The level of enthusiasm and interest in collaborative dialogue was phenomenal. We're excited to advance our work together this fall and next spring with classroom visits, personalized coaching, and additional workshops.

We also continued this August in supporting historic Touchstones sites, as they deepen their knowledge and fine-tune their use of Touchstones with students. We were delighted to extend and expand grant-funded work at Washington Latin Public Charter School's Julia Cooper Campus (Washington, DC) with a new grant from the Jack R. Anderson Foundation. This grant, our third from the foundation, enables Washington Latin to bring Touchstones to two more grade levels. In addition, the funding covers ongoing instructional coaching support from us to build internal capacity with well-trained teachers who will deliver Touchstones support for them in future years.

Only a few miles away from Washington Latin, St. Jerome Academy has used Touchstones for more than a dozen years. This Catholic school with a classical curriculum has strengthened its instructional program with a "reboot" Touchstones workshop for teachers who are new to the program. Their August workshop

included educators who will use Touchstones in the coming year and other teachers from around the school. They were so enthusiastic about the process and how it supports students that they ended the session by saying how much they hope their classrooms will be the next to include Touchstones!



*Teachers at Esperanza Academy get started with their Touchstones school-wide implementation.*

Fall is also when we announce our Teacher of the Year. We're thrilled to share that Anaka Osborne, the Director of the Middle School at Washington Latin's Cooper Campus and a sixth grade teacher, is this year's honoree! In nominating her for this recognition, Bill Clausen, the school's Assistant Principal wrote, "Anaka has been a champion of our work with Touchstones... She creates a wonderful environment and brings out the best in each student. At the end of each lesson, she is able to celebrate her successes while also always thinking through things she can do better next time... It is her support of Touchstones and her belief in the accompanying skills of listening and teamwork that has led to Touchstones' continued inclusion in the lives of all 380 of our MS students each week!"

We realize how fortunate we are at Touchstones that our work includes partners and educators who are committed to helping students learn and grow as healthy and empowered human beings. We wish all educators and students a wonderful start to school and look forward to growing the Touchstones circle throughout the 2024-2025 academic year. Every day is a good day to begin a Touchstones discussion!

## A NEW APPROACH

*by: Cole Caudle, USMC, Touchstones Board*

September 11-13, I will be in Siena, Italy attending the International Transformative Learning Conference where I will co-present "Completing the Odyssey: Exploring the Homecoming Journeys of Black and Latino Student Veterans" with my colleague and fellow veteran, Bryce Kyle. Our session's title features the Touchstones program developed specifically to support veterans in their transitions to civilian life. This program fosters a space in which veterans engage in discussions that bridge their service experiences into their lives as members of families, communities, and our society.

The voices of Black and Latino student veterans entering higher education are more likely to be ignored or discounted compared to their White peers, and there is a projected increase of student veterans of color from 21% to 34% by 2027. A sense of otherness and isolation is shared among student veterans, and it's more pronounced for student veterans of color. Post-secondary institutions often fail to empower these students' voices, which leads to lower graduation rates, low student morale, and an archipelago of individuals leaving messages in bottles with hopeful resignation. The pain of not being heard, of not sharing your

experience, of receiving little or no help, and of wanting to be acknowledged but remaining invisible is a pain I have not experienced. But it's one I will forever try to remedy.

The work that Bryce and I presented in Italy is a kind of search and rescue mission. The first step in our mission was to select the tools. We truncated the Touchstones program *Completing the Odyssey* for this mission from eight to four meetings to lessen the time commitment for participants. The second, and most important step, was to listen and learn from the student veterans of color who

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## NEW APPROACH

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participated in our study. In hearing their accounts, I learned of unique challenges each went through as they transitioned from active duty to student life.

*Completing the Odyssey* provided this group with a much-needed structure for reflecting on past experiences in a new light and empowering them to express themselves and listen actively to each

other. The service members were themselves surprised by what emerged in their group discussions, and they were shocked by their ability to engage with one another at this level. They expressed how this program differed from typical veteran "discussions" that are often one-dimensional and sound like an echo chamber. At the end of the last session, the group expressed that they wanted

more time and more Touchstones discussions. Their desire to keep going suggests that something significant happened in this program. That significance is what we shared in Siena, as we invited fellow researchers and educators to consider how this example of transformational learning addresses some of the most persistent and crucial issues for veterans.

## BUILDING COMMUNITY EVERYWHERE!

by: Jenny Walton, Advancement & Volunteer Coordinator

Community programs have always been an important cornerstone of Touchstones and a meaningful way to transform education by sharing leadership with practitioners and volunteers. As we celebrate four decades of programs this year and plan how to achieve optimal reach and outcomes, we underscore our continued commitment to provide free programs to marginalized groups. Populations historically served by Touchstones community programs include seniors, veterans, incarcerated youth and adults, and the general public. The volunteers who lead and have led those programs provide an invaluable service by creating a time and place where each person is a member of an open and welcoming community.

One of the longest-running Touchstones community programs brings discussion skill development to incarcerated adults. Since the late 1990s, we have worked with various incarcerated populations and engaged several thousands of adults from all ages and backgrounds during their prison sentences. From the program's inception to now, our staff has run programs based on the needs identified by prison officials, including volunteer activities coordinators and school administrators. Always, the core goals of the program remain the same: teach people to teach themselves and learn with others, work cooperatively with people they do and don't know, demonstrate respect for themselves and others, and share leadership so everyone has a voice.

We all need these skills—tools for success in life—to achieve our potential as life-long learners and fully contributing members of society. And this increased capacity in both participants and volunteers can be life-changing. As one participant said, "If more people were part of Touchstones groups, there's a possibility that a higher state of compassion and empathy could be reached,



*Volunteers in a recent workshop share Touchstones strategies that foster greater participation and build inclusive community.*

which could lead to a greater awareness for the collective good."

We also heard from a participant in our volunteer-led Saturday Community Discussion Program online, which brings people together from across the U.S. and Canada to explore the foundations of society. "Being a participant in the community discussion group," she said, "gives me the opportunity to be receptive of others, and sharpens my listening skills. It also allows me to apply what others say and incorporate my thoughts and ideas. That leads to new ideas and avenues of thoughts." In this testimonial, we hear so clearly how Touchstones opens the door to continuous personal growth.

To help counter the division and discord that increasingly threatens our national sense of community, Touchstones is training another new group of volunteers to co-lead discussion programs that serve the public. Over the last couple of months, we have trained more than 15 new volunteers and provided ongoing training for another dozen+ steadfast volunteers. Much of the funding for volunteer development and community programs comes from grants, including the \$10,000 Maryland Humanities SHINE grant Touchstones received at the end of 2023. This money has helped make it possible for us to train volunteers throughout the year. In turn, those volunteers ensure that our community programs run regularly, support expanded reach to meet growing interest and need, and help minimize additional program overhead.

Like the program participants who benefit so greatly from these programs, the Touchstones staff and Board are indebted to everyone who gives their time and talents as volunteers and applauds each person's commitment to Touchstones.

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## BUILDING COMMUNITY

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Please join us in acknowledging Jessica Burgard and Greg Hodges as our 2024 Touchstones Volunteers of the Year for their extraordinary service this year in co-leading our Saturday Community Program online. We will formally celebrate them on December 7, 2024, from 2 to 4:30 PM at our Annual Teacher & Volunteers of the Year event in Stevensville, Maryland. Please mark your calendars and join us!

## TOUCHSTONES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ENSURING STUDENT SUCCESS

*by: Stefanie Takacs, Executive Director*

This summer, Touchstones hosted an online workshop and discussion on the advantages of collaborative discussion in higher education. We engaged higher educators from colleges and universities large and small, public and independent, and from within the United States and abroad. Students in higher education have long used Touchstones as a part of regular academic coursework, but this workshop's goal was to share the University of Nevada at Las Vegas's (UNLV) experience in using Touchstones in multiple contexts to support students. Thousands of students each semester are now part of Touchstones programs at UNLV in multiple seminar courses in the College of Education, as well as courses for students in transition. Transition programs support all types of students who arrive to the university from both traditional and non-traditional academic backgrounds and include military veterans and their family members. Many such students are the first in their families to pursue a college degree. It's imperative that these students receive any additional support they may need, as they encounter environments and expectations entirely new to them and their families.

In recent years, leaders in higher education have become more knowledgeable about the skills students need for academic success. They've also learned that students who experience a sense of real belonging in the college environment are far more likely to remain enrolled and graduate. This has given rise to more first-year and second-year seminar programs specifically aimed at fostering a sense of community while introducing increasingly rigorous academic requirements. What better fit to achieve these goals than Touchstones? Touchstones supports students as learners and as human beings because the discussion process focuses not only on speaking and listening but also on teaching skills such as collaboration, analytical reasoning, and reflection.



*Check out what these  
UNLV students had to say about  
why they love Touchstones:  
<https://vimeo.com/99967713>.*

In the months ahead, we'll continue our outreach in higher education to spread word about the successes UNLV and others are seeing with student engagement in Touchstones courses. We want to ensure that learners of all ages and backgrounds receive the support they need, as they pursue their goals and dreams. If you'd like more information about Touchstones in higher education or perhaps would like to attend a future workshop, contact us at [highered@touchstones.org](mailto:highered@touchstones.org)!



Touchstones Discussion Project



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



Touchstones Discussion Project

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