



# VOICES

*The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project*

## HOLD ON TO YOUR HATS! TOUCHSTONES KICKS OFF OUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE YET!

In 2023, the Still Water Foundation of Austin, TX awarded Touchstones a grant to work with TDC Consulting to develop a multi-year business plan for leadership succession and strategic growth. Upon completing that project, the Touchstones board and staff are thrilled to announce that the Still Water Foundation recently awarded Touchstones a \$250,000, 1 to 1 challenge grant to kick-start initiatives tied to the plan.

Between now and Dec. 19, 2025, the Touchstones board must raise \$250,000 to meet this challenge and secure the matching \$250,000 from the Still Water Foundation. For each gift to qualify, it must be tied to a board solicitation or ask. That means our board members are reaching out personally to all donors—and inviting new people to join our cause—to secure funds that will be a game-changer.

Here's why the Touchstones board thinks this challenge is so important to Touchstones—and the world—especially right now.

*(Continued on page 2)*

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

***Touchstones discussions systematically build authentic connections, leadership, and community. These are things we all need in society, now more than ever. This extraordinary challenge increases our reach and impact...***

**... IN EDUCATION ACROSS ALL AGES AND PURPOSES.**

**Debra Valentine, Board Chair:** The challenge is a great opportunity for us to show there is broad-based support for a learning process that recognizes that everyone has a voice, trains every participant to listen respectfully, and enables all voices to be heard. Meeting the challenge means that we can then reach many more students and adults at all levels of learning and collaborating.

**... WITH EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS IN HIGHER ED.**

**Nicholas Maistrellis, Touchstones Co-Founder and Board Member:** I am excited because with the combined total \$500,000, Touchstones staff will be able to significantly increase our presence in colleges and universities, especially community colleges, where so many students are educated today.

**... THROUGH COMMUNITY PROGRAMS.**

**Greg Hodges, Board Member:** Challenges are opportunities for us to consider those things that we hold most dear and then to consider pathways by which we can realize aspirational ends. A fundraising challenge of this sort reminds me, too, of the collaborative nature of the entire Touchstones community. In our discussions, we join together in a circle to share the gift of discourse. Through this fundraising challenge, we will have a similar opportunity to learn from and leverage the various talents, people, and communities that Touchstones enriches every day.

**... WITH CIVIC LEADERSHIP.**

**Jess Burgard, Board Secretary:** I look out at the world around us and see places where community is missing, places where people are reluctant to share leadership—where they speak in ways that are neither thoughtful nor deliberate and are not listening actively. This special funding allows Touchstones to expand programs to more people who are eager to build community and develop themselves as civic leaders.

**... WITH VETERANS TRANSITIONING TO CIVILIAN LIFE.**

**Cole Caudle, Board Member:** A challenge fundraiser helps us expand the network to more people than we would have previously reached because it requires a unique strategy. With the funds, I look forward to carrying out our strategic plan to bring others into the circle so they can experience the magic of a Touchstones discussion in their community.

I also look forward to expanding programs for veterans and service members. The veteran community has the power to self-organize and begin discussion programs in their communities but needs discussion leaders to get those projects started. Training discussion leaders takes time and funding. This challenge will yield more leaders and more groups of veterans who will have the chance to engage with their community in vital ways that were previously beyond their horizon.

**... FOR EVERYONE.**

**Noelle Richmond, Board Vice Chair:** This challenge both encourages historic Touchstones donors to maximize their giving to help us reach an ambitious goal, and it is an exciting way to share the value and impact of our programs with potential new donors.

**Melissa Curtin, Board Member:** I'm excited about the challenge fundraiser because it indicates that the Still Water Foundation sees the value in Touchstones and is challenging the board and other donors to step up so that Touchstones can reach more people worldwide. With these funds, the organization can also hire more staff, with the priorities of hiring a senior-level fund development professional and a deputy director. These are critical positions that will ensure continued growth and reach for the organization.

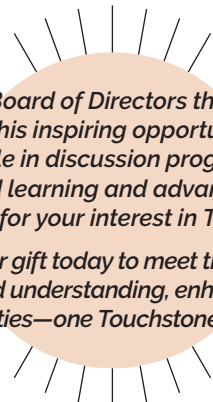
**THIS CHALLENGE ALSO INCREASES ACCESS, AMPLIFIES VOICE, AND HEALS DIVISIONS.**

**Howard Zeiderman, Touchstones Co-Founder and Board Member:** I view Touchstones as a natural resource that, like fresh air and clean water, should be available to everyone. Such grants help us advance our goal that all people, regardless of background or circumstance, will benefit from being in Touchstones educational programs.

**Gregg Steinberg, Board Treasurer:** This challenge will help to set a foundation for the ongoing support and delivery of many brilliant and desperately needed Touchstones programs. There has never been a time more in need of collaborative discourse than now.

**Greg Hodges, Board Member:** These efforts will help us to expand the circle all the more, by having citizens understand that there is room for their voices within this ongoing project.

**Noelle Richmond, Board Vice Chair:** Expanding access to Touchstones programs for K-12 and higher education students, in our workplaces, and in our communities provides the road map for helping all of us refocus our attention away from our differences. In Touchstones, we all develop skills to effectively express ourselves, meaningfully understand others, and collectively work together to create a better world for everyone.



***The Touchstones Board of Directors thanks the Still Water Foundation for this inspiring opportunity to reach and engage more people in discussion programs that transform teaching and learning and advance all people. Thank you for your interest in Touchstones.***

***Please make your gift today to meet this unprecedented challenge to build understanding, enhance learning, and strengthen communities—one Touchstones discussion at a time.***

Our data tools use student and teacher surveys to measure a range of student development. That includes changes in participation, increased focus on listening, and enhanced sense of connection and belonging in the classroom over time. Students also report their progress in specific discussion skill areas. For example, in baseline data collected in September, one high school teacher in Philadelphia expressed the hope that her students “will learn to listen to each other and find value in learning from each other. We want them to be able to admit when they have been wrong and resolve conflict in

**Touchstones Data Collection**

Our partner schools receive periodic data collection tools and reports so that they can analyze student and teacher progress. Mid-year data are rolling in now!

- 3 times**  
Data are collected 3 times each school year (pre, mid, and post).
- 2 sets**  
Both teacher and student data are collected each time.
- 3 kinds**  
Schools receive whole-school, classroom, and student-by-student reports.
- \$0**  
Data tools and reports are free to schools to support quality implementation.

the face of disagreement. We also hope that they will come to appreciate conversation as a method of learning.” Her students’ baseline data revealed that a common barrier to these goals was students’ confidence levels, as articulated by this student: “I want to improve feeling more confident when sharing my ideas because I feel like someone would want to hear my ideas.” That teacher can now track progress in students’ perceptions of their growth in confidence, along with the teacher’s goals for them, by comparing the baseline data to mid-year and end-of-year data.

## LEADING THE WAY IN 2025!

by: Jenny Walton, Advancement & Volunteer Coordinator

One of the longest running and most popular Touchstones community programs led entirely by volunteers brings discussion skill development and personal growth to incarcerated adults. For thirty years we have led discussions with various incarcerated populations and engaged several thousand adults of all ages and backgrounds during their prison sentence. This year marks our 10th anniversary volunteering within the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women (MCIW) in Jessup, MD.

Ninety percent of the women incarcerated at MCIW will be released to return to their families and communities. It is essential that when they go home, they are prepared with life and work skills that they can rely on to bring stability and security to themselves and their children. In Touchstones, they acquire and refine skills as part of a group that learns better to express themselves productively and think more reflectively.

This population has been marginalized and left behind many times over in their lives, without their voices or opinions being appreciated. The volunteers who lead and have led the Touchstones programs provide an invaluable service by creating a time and place where each person is a member of an open and welcoming community.

We asked our volunteers who lead Touchstones at MCIW how they see this educational opportunity making an immediate difference in the lives of incarcerated women and to share a highlight from their volunteer experience. Here are their thoughts and reflections.

**Melissa Curtin, who is also a Touchstones Board Member, said,**

“One experience that stands out for me is when we discussed a painting rather than a text in the group. One woman, who was usually quiet, lit up in the discussion! I looked at her worksheet, covered in her beautiful drawings, and she was glowing.

I was reminded that we all learn and engage differently and how important it is to provide a variety of content that supports everyone in the discussion. Using art as our discussion text opened her up, and she became more engaged in our weekly discussions.

I know Touchstones is making a difference in the world! Humans crave to be seen and heard. The Touchstones model provides the “framework” for people to engage in respectful discussions while learning to think, listen better, and learn about themselves and others. I wish Touchstones were a “requirement” for all humans. The world would be a much better place.”

**One of our newly trained volunteers, Samantha Meklikr, offered the following reflection after her first participation in the program,**

“I truly did not feel as though I was giving or doing anything as a volunteer but rather was receiving and growing so much myself—it was incredible! Touchstones provides a method for people to connect and listen with empathy and to hear different perspectives while sharing a space with civility, honor, and grace. Its collective impact is foundational for enabling broader, equitable change at all distinct levels. It was such an honor to step on to the MCIW grounds and to share space and perspectives with a group of women bringing rich insights, humor, and vulnerability to the Touchstone discussions.”

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## LEADING THE WAY

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**Richard Schmechel, who is also a new volunteer this year, expressed similar sentiments.** "During my first visit I was struck by the ease with which the participants were able to speak their minds. They seemed to have already developed trust in the Touchstones process. I was grateful to be included in this ongoing conversation. I think the impact of changing how one listens, thinks, and speaks is more often hidden than not. We often do not see such change in ourselves, let alone others. But I must believe that if positive change is to happen, it has to be through growth in listening, thinking, and speaking together."

**Kim Riley is now in her second year as a Touchstones volunteer leader. She is a retired educator who sees firsthand how transformative an experience our specific approach to teaching and learning is for the women.** "Touchstones creates connections even with the most isolated and alienated participants. I have worked with a woman in prison who began each session communicating mistrust, refusal to comply, and dislike—a whole series of negative emotions—and by the middle of each meeting you can just see her softening, her absorption into the group, and into wider consciousness. The Touchstones method doesn't challenge isolation with force or demands; instead, it invites each individual to let down their own guard, to reach out to others voluntarily, to join a group on their own terms and pace. That's magic! Touchstones transforms by quietly allowing a different experience of group dynamics to emerge.

In my professional experience as a teacher, students would often say they hate group work because they have had very negative experiences working with other people. In contrast, Touchstones allows participants to experience greater trust, empathy, and the power of cooperative exchange. Person by person, Touchstones opens a world in which group discussion and group work are experienced as valuable and creative. Changing experience changes the world."

Thank you to everyone who contributed to this article, and more importantly, thank you for making time in your busy lives to help support more incarcerated women reimagine and shape a life where their voices are heard and appreciated. Our volunteers' experiences, joy, and personal growth and understanding of Touchstones as an invaluable component of any education is equally important, as we recognize how volunteerism brings benefits inward and outward.

If you are interested in volunteering with Touchstones—either as a volunteer program leader, on our Advisory Council, or on our Board of Directors, please contact Jenny Walton: [Jenny@touchstones.org](mailto:Jenny@touchstones.org).



On March 22, 2025, Touchstones is hosting a workshop in Annapolis from 10 AM to 1:00 PM for current and prospective volunteers. This three-hour training introduces you to the Touchstones discussion method, highlights the benefits and outcomes our programs deliver, and features some of our volunteer-led community programs. If you'd like to learn more about this workshop, please email Jenny Walton at [jenny@touchstones.org](mailto:jenny@touchstones.org).

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