



2024 Teacher of the Year and Volunteer of the Year Celebration

by Sharon Thomas

Recently, on a blustery December Saturday afternoon, Touchstones school partners, volunteers, donors, and staff members gathered in Stevensville, Maryland, to celebrate our 2024 Volunteers of the Year and Teacher of the

and how it continues to play an important role in bringing people together from all walks of life and corners of the world. He cited Greg and Jess' leadership as crucial in the program's success and longevity and in the group's development as collaborators: "Most importantly, the members of the group have learned through Greg and Jess' leadership how to trust one another, and because of this trust, to discuss controversial topics without anger and division."

In accepting the honor for both herself and Greg (who was not able to join us but was there in spirit), Jess expressed her gratitude for the Touchstones process and its ability to transform interactions in a divided world: "All Touchstones activity is in service to the idea that community can



2024 Geoffrey J. Comber Teacher of the Year, Anaka Osborne, supported by her daughter

Year. Throughout the event, honorees and speakers voiced an unplanned refrain: the world needs community-building, and the Touchstones process is an important tool that makes that possible.

The event kicked off with a tribute to longtime Touchstones board member and volunteer, Ford Rowan. Ford's lifelong commitment to civil rights efforts involved working with Touchstones on many projects over the years. Touchstones co-founder Howard Zeiderman highlighted their successes and missteps on those projects and voiced the importance of Ford's calming influence in supporting group change: "Ford is a tireless crusader for equity and social justice who constantly models speaking truth to power." He has been "a healing ointment of optimism and good will" as a Touchstones volunteer, board member, and citizen. In recognition of Ford's service, Touchstones Week 2024 was

be taught by speaking with deliberation, listening actively, thinking reflectively, and sharing leadership. When you learn those skills, you will be able to create a community."

The program closed with naming Anaka Osborne at Washington Latin Public Charter School's Cooper Campus, in Washington DC, as the 2024 Geoffrey J. Comber Teacher of the Year. Anaka was accompanied by her family and her school leaders, including Bill Clausen, who nominated her for the award. Bill says that Anaka "knows exactly where every student is (emotionally, intellectually, physically) at all times. She knows how to ask just the right question and help students to learn how to know when to cede the floor to others."

Anaka's work at Washington Latin is not only as a leader of the school's Touchstones implementation in her role as Director of Literacy. She is also a sixth-



2024 Ford Rowan Volunteer of the Year, Jess Burgard, supported by her mother

grade teacher. She shared how her schoolwide implementation has expanded the school's understanding of Touchstones as both a support for its classical curriculum and an invaluable tool that helps students learn how to engage more meaningfully and collaboratively with each other. In accepting the award, Anaka emphasized that she now sees that "Community-building skills *can* be taught," that we can

sponsored by Ford and True Rowan's friends and family and the Touchstones Board of Directors.

In presenting Jess Burgard and Greg Hodges with the Ford Rowan Volunteer of the Year Award, Touchstones co-founder Nick Maistrellis described the work the two do as part of our Saturday Community Discussions program online. Nick explained the origin of that program during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020



Touchstones co-founder, Howard Zeiderman (l), and Touchstones board member and honoree, Ford Rowan (r)

move beyond our focusing only on our own ideas to learn how to also examine what a others need from us to build better relationships.

This annual event is always inspiring and reinforces the importance of providing children and adults with tools to help them navigate school, work, and personal relationships more kindly, more successfully, and with community and belonging at the forefront.

Touchstones Staff Reflections

Every year, our Teacher of the Year/Volunteer of the Year event inspires and energizes our staff members for the year ahead. After this year's celebration, we reflected on what this event means to us.

Westin Keiler, Operations Manager

What struck me at this year's event was the support that Anaka had from her coworkers at Washington Latin PCS and from her family, who all showed up to help celebrate her award and accomplishments. They reinforced to me that Touchstones lessons don't just have an impact on a teacher and the skills they try to cultivate in their students. This idea of collaborative discussion facilitates and inspires a sense of community that reaches far beyond the classroom.

Stefanie Takacs, Executive Director

I was particularly struck by how lively the event was, especially by the end. It felt like the room had transformed from a gathering of different groups of guests—our Volunteer of the Year and her friends and family, our Teacher of the Year and her family and colleagues, and our special honoree and his family—into a group of

Sharon Thomas, Director of K-12 and Family Engagement Programs

This year's honorees did not know what each other was going to say when they each spoke, and yet they all voiced the same message: we *can* heal division and rancor, and we *can* teach people how to engage with each other in a new way. As Touchstones staff members, we communicate that message every day, but hearing Ford, Jess, and Anaka attest to its truth in their work and communities reinforces that message in a powerful way.

Jenny Walton, Advancement and Volunteer Coordinator

The takeaway for me as we wrap up another year of volunteer and teacher appreciation is the strength of our Touchstones community. I don't think I have ever witnessed such a profound effect on groups of people as I do when I see people who choose to lift, listen, and engage in

friends. I loved how each speaker brought forth so much positive energy. Together, we generated a well-founded sense of hope and reaffirmed a shared commitment to education and social progress that values and advances every person. I think we captured and reflected the very spirit of Touchstones!

thoughtful discussion together. The most wonderful moments and experiences come from these moments, and we could not possibly have the reach we do without our volunteers and teachers. Coming together to celebrate that every year is my favorite event!



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