

VOICES

The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project

BIG NEWS = BIG CELEBRATION

by: The Touchstones Roving Reporter

It's time to mark your calendar! We've got some big news and great celebratory events coming up this year, and we want you to join us!

This fall, we're hosting a lively and fun event in honor of Howard Zeiderman's retirement from the Touchstones staff after more than 41 years of visionary leadership. On November 15, the Touchstones Board of Directors will host an evening with special guest speakers to mark this momentous occasion and Howard's extraordinary contributions to Touchstones as a co-founder and the longest-running staff member. As part of the festivities, we're including a fundraising auction with tantalizing prizes, an art raffle, and recognizing our Teacher of the Year and Volunteer of the Year for their exceptional work in advancing Touchstones in the world.

Howard is retiring this summer to focus full-time on several writing projects, with a goal for one of his books to be published this fall. Although he's stepping

out of the daily activities of the organization, he will remain on the Board of Directors. Along with co-founder and fellow Board member Nick Maistrellis, Howard helps preserve essential institutional history while fulfilling vital roles as fiduciaries and ambassadors for the organization.

We're thrilled that Howard's friends Didrik (Didi) Schanche, the Chief International Editor for NPR and Ambassador Roger Carstens, former Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs, will lead the toasts to Howard as our special speakers. More information about this festive and memorable occasion is coming soon, so check your mailboxes and save that date.

As a warm-up to this gala, Touchstones volunteers Craven and JD Engels will host a Touchstones art exhibition at their home in Annapolis on Sunday, October 5. This event features works from our collection of original paintings by Elliott Zuckerman. All works in the exhibition are for sale, with the exception of our featured painting,

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

BIG NEWS

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which will be raffled off at the event on November 15. Tickets for the raffle will go on sale in early September. All proceeds support Touchstones discussion programs and ensure we can always say yes to those who wish to bring Touchstones discussions into their schools, organizations, or communities. Come join us, enjoy some beautiful art (and take some home), and help us kickstart a fall season of festivity!

SAVE THESE DATES

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 5TH

ART SHOW: FRAMING THE FUTURE (RESCHEDULED)

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 15TH

MAPPING THE FUTURE EVENT



Howard Zeiderman, Nick Maistrellis, and Geoff Comber at the beginning of the Touchstones Project, which would become known as the Touchstones Discussion Project.

EVOLVING LEADERSHIP

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

Esperanza Academy Charter School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is the site of an ambitious and large-scale Touchstones implementation this academic year. The school, which includes elementary, middle, and high schools from the northern part of the city, adopted Touchstones to support students' academic growth and to nurture the school's collaborative culture for both students and faculty. In the high school, a teacher education program received a gracious grant from the Yazz Foundation, which funded most of this initiative.

Dr. Christopher Palladino, the school's Director of Teacher Development, helped Esperanza launch this implementation from a seed planted at his own first Touchstones experience nearly a decade ago. "I was invited to a Touchstones Seminar in Princeton, NJ, by a friend who was aware that I held dialogical learning in high regard and had approached my classroom whether in high school or at a university classroom in that manner. I walked away from this experience with a much deeper understanding and appreciation for the many layers of possibilities of classroom conversations. My classes changed. Ever since, I have wanted to bring Touchstones to the classroom to contribute to transformational learning.... It seemed like a natural fit with Esperanza Academy's mission and values."

Last fall, the school introduced Touchstones programs into grade 3, social studies courses in grades 6 and 9, and elective courses for students interested in careers as educators. By the 2026-2027 school year, students will have Touchstones instruction across grades 3-12 in social studies and teacher education courses.

Allyssa Hampson, Esperanza's Coordinator of the Teacher Education Major, has been both a Touchstones teacher and an instructional coach for her colleagues who use the program. She

described some of the effects of Touchstones at the school: "Walking around the high school and seeing classrooms converted from rows to circles has been exciting. Witnessing firsthand the evolution of student ownership of classroom discussion and the development of interpersonal skills has been really fulfilling and validating to the process."

From the start, Esperanza's thoughtful approach has been exemplary. In the earliest planning stages, Dr. Palladino reached out to leaders at several Touchstones sites to gain real-world perspectives based on their experiences. In addition, the school ensured that all teachers and administrators had access to Touchstones professional development before implementation began. They also began collecting data on student and teacher growth immediately, using our data toolkit.

Esperanza staff maintains regular contact with Touchstones for questions and troubleshooting during the year. Dr. Palladino, Ms. Hampson, and the middle school instructional coach, Elizabeth Burns, even joined the Touchstones Fellows cohort last fall, to ensure they were learning as much as possible to best support their teachers. Their shared commitment to students, colleagues, and a high-quality implementation has given them an incredibly strong start and a terrific set of baseline data for tracking progress in the years ahead.

As the leaders at Esperanza continue their rollout next year and in successive years, with their eyes on continuous improvement, we are here as their partners. The school is proof that, despite the many pressures and emergencies of day-to-day school life, focused attention on growth and goals that support its mission are well worth the time and energy.

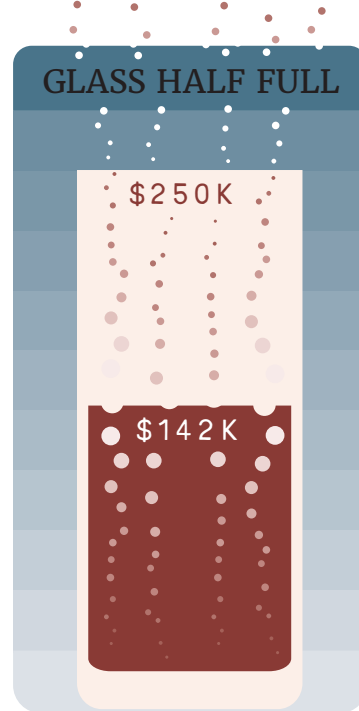
LET'S MAKE THIS HAPPEN

by: Noelle Richmond, Touchstones Board of Directors, Vice-Chair

We're more than half the way there! Over the last five months, the Touchstones Board of Directors has diligently been working to secure donations to reach our fundraising goal of \$250,000 to receive a match of equivalent funds from the Still Water Foundation of Austin, TX. Now in our 41st year, Touchstones proudly provides many thousands of individuals each year with discussion-based educational programs that help them succeed in school and life. These programs build essential skills that empower all participants to improve themselves as individuals—thereby helping to create a better world for everyone. Our 2025 campaign, *Touchstones: Transforming People, One Discussion at a Time*, offers an exciting opportunity for each of us to make a meaningful difference in our future.

As we reported in our recent Annual Report, Touchstones continues to extend our proven and unique programming to a growing number of K-12 and higher education students and teachers, veterans, incarcerated adults, seniors, and community members. With the development of an ambitious multi-year business plan in 2024, we identified key opportunities for strategic

growth, leadership plans, and long-term sustainability. And, we can't stop now. The cacophony of disagreement and argument we're experiencing in our lives today shows us that the need for Touchstones is greater



than ever. While it may be tempting to simply "hide our heads in the sand," doing so won't make our problems disappear. In order to create a better world, we must first work to better ourselves as individuals. I don't know of a more effective tool for reaching that goal than Touchstones.

Imagine a world where all people are able to engage in complex problem-solving, listen respectfully and strive earnestly to understand other people's perspectives, more fully and unflinchingly examine and reconsider their own biases, assume leadership appropriately, and cultivate leadership skills in others.

Is it challenging to achieve this courageous vision? You bet! But each of us at Touchstones is committed to making this worthy goal a reality—for everyone. Join me in actively driving this positive change by donating generously to Touchstones today. Every dollar you contribute counts toward the \$250,000 challenge from the Still Water Foundation and we won't get the match if we don't reach the goal. Together, let's each transform ourselves and our world, one discussion at a time.

BORN IN HIGHER ED

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

Touchstones was born in higher education as the brainchild of founders Geoff Comber, Nick Maistrellis, and Howard Zeiderman, during their tenure as faculty members at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland. Although Touchstones is mostly known by educators for its discussion programs in K-12 and locally for its community programs with seniors and incarcerated adults, we have also long been a part of college and university curricula around the world. Today, as colleges and universities reprioritize student intellectual and social emotional development for successful transitions into higher ed, the Touchstones approach to teaching and learning is really coming full circle.

In recent years, colleges and universities have focused increasingly on providing extra support to help students navigate the collegiate environment and stay in school until they receive their degrees. The old "You either have what it takes to make it in college, or you don't" mindset of the past has changed in large measure because of research on the different needs of

non-traditional students and on the effectiveness of transition programs for them (and for traditional students as well).

Touchstones has become a key element of transition programs at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). Since 2021, the College of Education has used Touchstones with first-year and second-year students, as well as nontraditional students (including veterans, transfer students, and students who have historically struggled in math classes). Those courses incorporate Touchstones to foster student voice, collaboration, and a greater sense of community. UNLV emphasizes "thriving" in their approach to students in transition, as described in the book *Thriving in Transition* by Schreiner et al. (2020). This holistic approach to student needs goes well beyond the academic and it dovetails with the Touchstones method, which not only builds academic skills but also cultivates community and improves collaboration and leadership skills.

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HIGHER ED

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Touchstones programs in the College of Education at UNLV are under the direction of Dr. Chelsie Hawkinson, who was introduced to Touchstones by Dr. Nathan Slife. Dr. Slife describes Touchstones as the "highest quality way to facilitate discussions and achieve [essential] learning outcomes for our students." Dr. Hawkinson, who has run qualitative studies on Touchstones for the last two years, writes, "With an established protocol and instructional tools, such as structured discussion guides and activity prompts, Touchstones fosters open dialogue and active participation, helping students feel valued and connected to their peers, thereby enriching their sense of belonging and engagement in their educational experience." Additionally, quantitative findings in a recent study of second-year seminar students at UNLV suggest that students in Touchstones classes experience greater levels of autonomy, self-efficacy, and connection to others than they do in their non-Touchstones seminar classes. The lead researcher, Dr. Sarah Wolff, explains,

"In the absence of active collaboration or inclusive discussions, students' psychological needs are less likely to be simultaneously satisfied... On the other hand, Touchstones activities, which naturally emphasize collaboration and social connection, seem to play a protective role in reducing disengagement for students with higher levels of relatedness."

These studies reaffirm what we at Touchstones have long known: when students engage in Touchstones as part of their learning, they grow across psychosocial and cognitive domains. In other words, they learn and practice important social skills while cultivating new approaches to thinking and problem-solving—and by sharing responsibility with each other for their overall progress. Touchstones was born in higher education, and we're thrilled to have such an important part in UNLV's on-going initiatives that promote student success and inclusive communities of learners.

What's on Tap in Higher Ed?

We're expanding our outreach to ensure students in higher ed have the collaboration and leadership skills they need to succeed! On May 28, 2025, we hosted an online gathering of educators from colleges, universities and organizations around the country. We heard from UNLV education researchers and also explored what it means—experientially and practically—to integrate Touchstones programs into courses for students in transition. We're scheduling a similar meeting for this fall and welcome all interested educators. If you'd like more information or to add your name to the participant list, please contact Sharon@touchstones.org. Join us to see how Touchstones transforms teaching and learning!



A military veteran in small group work at UNLV.

*Photo Credit:
Becca Schwartz, UNLV.*



Touchstones Discussion Project



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



Touchstones Discussion Project

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