

VOICES

Building Critical Thinkers and Collaborative Leaders

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The Third Annual WISE Conference

by Howard Zeiderman, Touchstones President

The third annual WISE (the World Innovation Summit of Education) conference in Doha, convened by the Qatar Foundation, was billed as a summit of education. That label indicates the ambition of the organizers to place education at the center of world concern. Like all others who were invited to attend, and whose travel and accommodations were arranged and covered entirely by the Foundation, I was present to share my thoughts on how to chart a path for future generations.

Over three days, projects from more than 100 countries were represented and speakers ranged from Sheikha Mosa bin Nassar, Chair of the Qatar Foundation and leader of UNESCO's Millennium Development Goals, to former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown. All explored the political, social, and economic problems to be confronted and the necessity of action.



Educators from organizations of every size and shape—from NGOs, corporations, and education Ministers from twenty countries—swapped ideas and encouraged peers as they met and sipped coffee and lunched in the inaugurated Qatar National Conference center, which looks out toward Education City and the five universities that have found additional homes in this ancient region. The most innovative and far reaching radical proposals were voiced and articulated as the need to confront unparalleled global circumstances was a spur to move beyond

the traditional models of education and explore new terrain and place guideposts in the unfamiliar landscapes of the 21st century.

The conference made ever more clear the necessity of the very skills and attitudes that Touchstones promulgates: the need to teach oneself and others new knowledges, the ability to collaborate with others of the most diverse backgrounds, the willingness to explore and build on each other's perspectives, and the responsibility to share leadership and power to achieve a transnational equilibrium and unified direction. These were made vivid in a special closed session hosted by the Sheikha to discuss the means of financing the Millennium global initiative. During the session, I sat next to the education minister of a sub-Saharan country. When the session took a break, he and I began talking about what that education of the future should be. We agreed that, much as technology has leapfrogged in many places where there was no existing hardwired infrastructure standing in its way, education must transport students from all backgrounds to a new mode of thinking and a revitalized understanding of engagement and citizenship.

Midway through the conference, we were invited to a gala dinner for more than a thousand guests. There, with expert musicians of the Qatar Philharmonic playing instruments from many different traditions, we were acutely aware of the potential resting among all of us and all others who strive to reform education—to make it alive and practical and important for everyone on our planet. Like the adept musicians who melded their otherwise individual parts into a cohesive and sensible form, we must continue to practice bringing our respective talents and experiences to the table where we will share and build educational programs that work for all people.



From Idea to Reality or One Leader's Dream

by Stefanie Takacs, Executive Director

Having trained thousands of teachers across the United States over the last twenty-seven years, the idea of recognizing a Touchstones Teacher of the Year has surfaced many times among Touchstones' staff. But it wasn't until Cindy Barry, the Librarian at St. Martin's-in-the-Field Day School in Annapolis and a Touchstones teacher, approached the organization last year that the idea took root. Cindy, who herself was awarded the Christine Sarbanes *Letters about Literature Teacher of the Year Award* by the Maryland Humanities Council in 2011, has been passionate about Touchstones for a long time. She has used Touchstones programming with her middle school students for eight years and has been a volunteer in the Touchstones prison program at the Maryland Correctional Institute-Jessup. Cindy has written articles for national publications detailing the specific gains and growth that she sees in students in her Touchstones classes.

Cindy's personal philosophy about education and the recognition she received in 2011 led her to fund the Cynthia M. Barry Touchstones Teacher of the Year Award, which will be awarded each academic year to a U.S. teacher. As she told *Capital* reporter Sophie Petit for an October 18 story about the award, Cindy hopes that this not only recognizes teachers who use Touchstones but allows those teachers' stories to inspire others. In support of Cindy and her husband Oliver's generosity, the Touchstones Board has also contributed to the award fund.

In early September, nomination forms for the award were mailed to more than 3,000 teachers across the country. Two weeks ago, the Award Committee—comprised of several Touchstones Board members, executive staff, and Cindy herself—chose their winner. It was a difficult decision, as each candidate demonstrated exceptional dedication to their students' full social and cognitive development. The candidates ranged from New York to New Mexico, but it was Debra Wilkins from Wicomico County, Maryland, whom the committee selected as the finalist.

Debra, or Debbie as she is more often called, has been a Maryland teacher for thirty years. In 2008, she was the Wicomico Teacher of the Year and a finalist for Maryland Teacher of the Year. A graduate of Salisbury University, she is a stellar example of a teacher whose joy and enthusiasm spreads to her students. She says that Touchstones has helped her develop her own leadership skills, as she learns along with each class how to listen better and to engage more effectively in authentic shared exploration and dialogue. Debbie also feels that Touchstones has made her a more effective teacher who can reach out to colleagues and invite them to be a part of her work. She admits that when she was first trained in the Touchstones method, she was nervous about sharing power and control with her students. It was not something for which her own education had prepared her. What she discovered, however, is what often surprises teachers. They find that students are eager to work collaboratively to earn greater responsibility, that students relish opportunities to delve more deeply into their own thinking, and that students value the knowledge they discover and build actively through discussion.

Award founder Cynthia Barry did not only want to hear what teachers were doing with Touchstones in the classroom. She also wanted to see how the ideals promoted through Touch-

stones were being put into play on a larger scale. For Debbie Wilkins, Touchstones is only one part of her educational programming with students that promotes civic responsibility, patriotism, and cultural diversity. She extends herself to her community through programming that brings veterans into the school to spend time with students, is a part of the district's week-long American Education Week that invites parents and members of the community to visit the school and to be a part of the students' education, and helps to organize multicultural days where students and their parents share their traditions and heritage with others. Debbie's principal at North Salisbury School, Mrs. Ruby Brown, offered this insight, "Debbie is an outstanding educator who espouses the core beliefs promoted in the Touchstones Program and infuses many of the components into her daily instruction. As one of her school administrators, I am very proud of her accomplishments, and the entire school is honored at having one of our teachers chosen to receive this award."



Debra Wilkins (left) pictured with her students during a Touchstones class.

Debbie's own words, written several years ago when applying for the Maryland Teacher of the Year award, echo her principal's. They convey how Touchstones is an integral part of her educational philosophy, and they reflect the very best that Touchstones could ever hope that teachers and students would achieve together.

"The classroom as we see it today will eventually be part of the past. Our world is becoming more interrelated because of technology. Technology is a bridge between those with different backgrounds and ideas. *Touchstones* is a discussion project that was implemented in the Magnet curriculum. It has been invaluable to my success as a teacher in preparing students to be future leaders. Through discussion, students learn strategies to help them navigate their way through school as well as through life. Students must listen, explore, cooperate, and solve problems. They become true collaborators in their learning. As a teacher I have learned a great deal from this program about my students and how they perceive themselves and the world. By the end of the year students lead the discussion group and I am an observer who will occasionally intervene."

Please join Cindy Barry and the Touchstones Board of Directors and Staff in congratulating Debra Wilkins as the Touchstones Teacher of the Year and in acknowledging all of the wonderful contributions made by the teachers who were nominated in 2011. We look forward to presenting this year's award to Debbie on the evening of Friday, December 2, 2011 at the annual Touchstones Friends & Volunteer Gathering in Annapolis, Maryland.

Three Stories from Prison

On October 18, 2011 Touchstones Discussion Project facilitated a uniquely powerful and candid conversation. MCI-J adult male inmates who regularly participate in the program visited with an Anne Arundel Community College class of criminal justice students. The visit naturally coincided with the normal Touchstones meeting at the prison and the scheduled Tuesday night class, so it worked well for both groups.

According to Leslie Blyther, the class professor who coordinates programs for the Homeland Security and Criminal Justice Institute, the open dialogue greatly affirmed her students' ambitions to work with a special population. She remarked that the inmates "generously opened up to a strange group" and enabled her class to "realize the human potential that rests within all of us."

For her students, the meeting led by Jeremy Jokell and Elliot Abhau made a critical difference. Student Susanne Gardner said, "It gave inmates a chance to share parts of their stories --both life histories and lessons learned--with outside visitors, who are few and far between. It was therapeutic for and enjoyable to the inmates. It also gave the visitors -- our classmates -- a chance to see what therapeutic counseling -- the subject matter of our class -- might be like."

Student Anthony Banks complimented the inmates' demonstrated experience with discussion. According to him, "Touchstones has the ability to rehabilitate, educate, create, and improve interpersonal skills that may have been lacking in the inmate. [The skills are] needed for transitioning back into our communities and hear perspectives outside the institute. [This] keeps them connected to the world, and there is no better treatment than surrounding them with their natural environment."

As a result, the discussion equally helped inmates. One resident observed that the serious, unscripted interchange enabled him to address the public's ignorance of institutional life, which he characterized is often misled by the media. Another resident said that counselors must establish open communication lines that include listening, so Touchstones provides chances for both sides to practice that skill. Inmates expressed their appreciation to Jeremy, Elliot, and the visiting class. Several residents sent thank-you letters to Professor Blyther, and they invited the criminal justice students to donate their time to Touchstones. This same invitation to volunteer was echoed by Touchstones Executive Director Stefanie Takacs. Anthony Banks accepted her offer and scheduled his first visit in December. He joins the ranks of people who donate their time to valuable programs like Touchstones.

Tracy Tischer, Reading Specialist, MCI-J

Each week, groups of volunteer inmates and guests who participate regularly with Touchstones' staff meet to discuss issues prompted by short texts. The discussions are wide-ranging and can be either focused on the text itself or more generally on the concerns that emerge from the text and that we all feel arise in our lives. No issue is more deeply considered by all participants than whether it is possible for a person to change.

Can a man change? Last week Voltaire told a group of prisoners that character is what nature has carved in us. He said that we can improve or hide what nature has placed in us, but that "we put nothing there ourselves." Thoughts like these can evoke shame, or pride, or resignation or even relief—depending upon how and when we hear them. But it cannot go unchallenged, at least not among a group of men who have sincerely and vocally committed the rest of their lives to change. So the prisoners, we visitors, and Voltaire spent the next hour hashing it out.

Many of the prisoners spoke up for Voltaire. Some of their arguments were observational; they lived in communities where people came and went from lives of crime and prison. Some were philosophical; they said that a man's desires remain constant, while his actions or addictions shift and change. A potent counter-argument came from a young man who kept telling us "I can change, my heart has changed," until he was sure that we had heard him. The prisoners discussed practical strategies for changing behavior (feed the good urges and starve the bad ones) as well as for searching out the spiritual underpinnings of addiction. Together, they looked to the future, both the positive and the negative.

It's natural that when we are asked to think about changes our mind goes straight to the ones we hope to make or the ones we fear we will never make. It is easy to overlook what we have already achieved. The best arguments I know for change were sitting in that room. Many of them are serving life sentences without parole, so they are not watching the clock, nor are they looking for chips to bargain with a judge. They are, however, tutoring in the prison G.E.D. program, planting community gardens, hosting programs for inmates' children, writing plays and books, and running meditation classes. After the discussion, I confronted one such confirmed skeptic, an older prisoner I have long admired, with his own accomplishments. He just looked past me and said, "I don't know, maybe you see something in me that I don't see in myself."

Jessica Burgard, Touchstones Prison Program Volunteer

I have been attending Touchstones sessions at MCI-J for almost four years, and still the men who participate in the program are somewhat distant from me. Though we spend intense and meaningful time together during the discussions, I have never seen them outside of a session, never chatted with them for more than 15 or 30 seconds at a time. So, I was very interested to get an opportunity to be with them in a different setting.

On Wednesday, November 9, I attended a Veteran's Day celebration run by the Veteran's Group at MCI-J. The President, Vice-President, and Secretary of the group are all regular Touchstones participants. All-in-all, seven of the more than 20 inmates who attended that evening have been a part of Touchstones programming in recent years.

It was a fairly large event with more than 50 attendees including inmates, prison staff, volunteers from veteran's organizations, and a few friends and family of the incarcerated men. Several veterans—residents and volunteers—got up to speak. They addressed many things, ranging from the plight of the incarcerated veteran to the brotherhood that all veterans share. No matter which topic, it was always fundamentally about the humanity of veterans. A number of men in the room were tearful as they remembered their experiences fighting for their country. I, too, was moved. And I am honored to have been included that evening and having been offered the chance to better understand the complex issues that our veterans face as they struggle to reenter civilian life.

Jeremy Jokell, Touchstones Staff

Dear Touchstones Friend

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It is a challenge to encapsulate the tremendous volume of work accomplished during the months between newsletter editions. Whether we are working on fledgling partnerships for new projects, training and supporting teachers, or implementing programs for those in need close to home, there is a lot happening! At this time of thanksgiving, we wish to thank all who help to realize Touchstones' vision of a respectful, inclusive, and collaborative world. Without the support from our friends and volunteers, none of this incredible work would be possible!

On December 2, Touchstones will recognize John Andrews as the 2011 Volunteer of the Year. More than a decade ago, John used Touchstones in his work teaching English to students in China. And until recently, he ran a weekly program for seniors in northern California. People like John are rare gifts, and Touchstones is blessed to count many such treasures among our friends and volunteers.

In closing, several of the Touchstones' Board of Directors had this to say about why Touchstones is a part of their lives.

Touchstones is unique in its ability to bring smiles, intellectual awareness and a deepened sense of self in today's global youth—building critical thinkers for the future by connecting them with the greats of the past. —G. Steinberg

Touchstones takes seriously the point of view of the learner. The materials and the open discussion elicit reflections about life's deepest concerns and makes these concerns a public matter. —N. Maistrellis

In a world where education is falling and failing, Touchstones improves the ability to think, to communicate and collaborate—exactly what is needed to create the future. —A. Ericsson

The Touchstones Discussion Project is a vital pathway that allows all of us - whether in an educational, business or penal environment - to find our way collaboratively toward a clearer understanding of how our world should work. —R. Stengren

Best wishes to you and yours for a happy Thanksgiving!



Stefanie Takacs
Executive Director

VOICES: The Newsletter of the Touchstones Discussion Project