

VOICES

Twenty-Five Years of Excellence in Education

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From an Interview with Touchstones Founders

This year marks a milestone anniversary for the Touchstones Discussion Project—an occasion to celebrate accomplishments and set plans for the future. Twenty-five years after three faculty members from St. John's College founded the program, Touchstones has reached more than a million students around the globe, positively impacted thousands of lives in areas of conflict, and benefited the Annapolis community through local programs and initiatives. Founders Nick Maistrellis and Howard Zeiderman—the organization's President—recently shared their thoughts about Touchstones' beginnings, their ideas on recent developments, and their hopes for the years to come.

The Touchstones story starts in 1983, in Hartford, Connecticut. Zeiderman and Geoffrey Comber—the Project's third founder—were invited to lead seminar-style math classes at one of the city's public high schools. When they reviewed a videotape of the first class, says Zeiderman, it revealed something astounding. “[The video] showed that a group of kids in the inner city who were provided with a short text but were otherwise unprepared could, within an hour, take responsibility for what happened in the room and collaborate through a new format.”

Later, conducting similar sessions in other classrooms in Hartford, Comber and Maistrellis had nearly identical experiences. When the three compared their notes, Touchstones was born.

Since then, Touchstones has grown into an organization with international reach, fueled in large part by exceptional volunteers and alumni from St. John's. Thanks to volunteer efforts, more than 100,000 Jordanian middle school students participate annually in Touchstones discussions, and the government of Myanmar has approved and adopted Touchstones.



Touchstones founders, in 1991, seven years into the project, (clockwise from upper left) Nick Maistrellis, Howard Zeiderman (President) and Geoffrey Comber. In the lower left is former Marketing Director, Thomas Wilson.

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Another volunteer's advocacy and leadership have brought the program to Haiti, where several thousand adults and children have come together to change their lives and communities through participation in *Wonn Refleksyon* (Circles of Reflection), the Haitian and Creole version of Touchstones.

Another element of the Project's expansion is contract work. Last year, at the invitation of the Tanzania CEO Roundtable, the Tanzanian government, and the World Bank, Touchstones launched a three-year program for Tanzania's top government ministers and business leaders. The program aims to build relationships between the public and private sectors, a step that is crucial to progress on long-range national plans. The first phase, led by Zeiderman and co-moderator Ford Rowan, was so successful that the program has been extended to all civil servants. Closer to home, Touchstones has worked with the U.S. government, conducting projects at the National Security and Central Intelligence Agencies.

The organization remains committed to reaching even the most isolated parts of the community. Touchstones staff members run weekly programs for senior citizens, enabling participants to engage in intellectually stimulating discussions. In the Maryland Correctional Institute at Jessup, the Project's staff holds discussions that bring volunteers from inside and outside the prison together to share a common humanity. Unlike in other environments, participants'

histories and futures are not barriers; all work together to forge respect and understanding.

Even with these impressive accomplishments, the heart of Touchstones remains in the schools. "Students represent the potential to help shape a nation that thinks critically and understands the importance of collaboration," explains Zeiderman. In the US, at least 7,500 K-12 schools have included Touchstones in their curricula, and several colleges have expressed interest.

There are 27 Touchstones volumes in print in English, and volumes have been published in Spanish, Arabic, Burmese, and Creole.

Looking back, Maistrellis says he's pleased at what Touchstones has accomplished and how it has grown. "We thought we had the opportunity to do something really big and to make a difference," he says. "And we did."

Touchstones is still evolving today. This January, Stefanie Takacs, joined the team as Executive Director. She will oversee programs and operations while Zeiderman continues to bring Touchstones to new environments. When asked about his long-range plan for Touchstones, he says matter-of-factly, "I want every student in the world to do it."

Touchstones would like to recognize special assistance from Rosemary Harty in conducting the interview.

From Touchstones Discussion Project

Dear Touchstones Friends,

Twenty years into a career that has centered on education, fundraising, and psychological services, I continue to learn about the world and humanity's place in it. I expect that may be an experience we all share. And now, I'm certain that I've landed in a place where my learning will continue indefinitely. Late last year, after volunteering for Touchstones since 2004, I was asked to join the organization officially. For me, being a part of Touchstones melds my work experience and values. It's a place where I can contribute positively to the discussion of what we can each do, individually and collectively, to make the world more productive, peaceful, kinder, and compassionate.

Touchstones provides a means for everyone to have a voice—something that is greatly missing in our current world and desperately needed. The founders of Touchstones realized that only through collaborative effort, shared inquiry, and leadership in which every participant in a group is engaged can we truly come together as a community

empowered to change things.

Wherever Touchstones takes hold—in schools, in senior centers, in corporate board rooms, in prisons, in this land or another—there is real hope and activity centered on the knowledge that together we can make a difference. I believe in the Touchstones mission, and I am honored to be a part of the team that carries forth the vision for creating understanding, knowledge, and cooperation among and between all people.

I look forward to working with all who hold a similar vision, and I thank you in advance for your support for Touchstones' mission.

Sincerely,

Stefanie Takacs

Executive Director

Reflections

Reflections on Touchstones by Shirley H. Atwell, a member of the discussion group at the Annapolis Senior Activity Center:

About a decade ago, my husband Tilden and I stumbled upon a bulletin board flyer at the South County Senior Citizens' Center advertising a discussion group called "Touchstones."

We were no strangers to such groups, as we had held discussions of books, poetry and had read aloud dramas in our home and the homes of friends. Tilden had led the 'Junior Great Books' discussion groups at his school. We were both former teachers. We are both confirmed bibliomaniacs.

As a "Touchstoner," you will travel through

centuries of ideas of writers of prose and poetry whose words will still resonate with you today. You will discover 'still waters' that may shape your future thoughts and ideas. You will discover peace of mind and sparks of energy as your fellow Touchstoners discuss those ideas.

No, you don't have to live and breathe books to be a Touchstoner—you just have to want to discover that rich oasis that already exists in the desert of your mind. Its waters are waiting to be tapped through the exchange of ideas and opinions of your fellow nomads. Most important of all are the great friendships that you will form among other nomads.

Looking Forward

By Adam Meyers, Touchstones Prison and Transitional Programs Manager

Once a month, in a classroom at Chesapeake College in Wye Mills, Maryland, students gather to participate in an ongoing Touchstones discussion about science and mathematics. The dialogue does not focus on the questions of traditional math courses, where learning to perform particular operations is paramount. Instead, it focuses on questions surrounding the relationship of the sciences to our society, and to our individual lives: What does it mean to truly *observe* something? Is it ethical to conduct tests on animals if doing so can save human lives? Can 'scientific progress' ever lead us astray? What does motion mean in a place where there can be no measurement? The questions it considers affect not only our understanding of mathematics and science, but furthermore, our understanding of the world.

What is most surprising about this discussion group, though, is that its participants are not college students. Instead, they are high school students enrolled in the Youth Employability Program of the Upper Shore Workforce Investment Board. This program, which serves youths faced with limited economic means and other obstacles to success, begins working with students in their early high school years and continues to assist them until they move on to college or gainful employment. On one Saturday every month these

students come together for classes that give them the additional preparation they need to transition to successful careers. These Saturday programs have ranged in kind from general career skills workshops to cooking classes and introductions to the medical field, but for the last six months Touchstones has brought these young minds together in dialogue.



Chesapeake College

The program's curriculum is taken in large part from one of the Touchstones science and mathematics volumes, *Where'd They Get That Idea?*. Using texts written by Newton, Descartes, Richard Feynman and others, the program has many of the same goals as the traditional Touchstones class: participants gain self-confidence and sharpen their critical thinking, reading and communicative abilities. In addition to these goals, though, the program at Chesapeake College has the additional aim of revealing the human side of the sciences

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and dissolving the fear of mathematics that can be debilitating for many students. A comfort with science and mathematics not only improves per-

formance in school, but also, in this rapidly changing world, opens up a wide range of careers that would otherwise have been too daunting to pursue. Through Touchstones, these students are preparing themselves for the future.

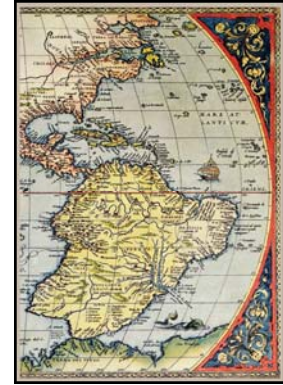
Volunteers and Support

Like all non-profits, Touchstones relies on energy and commitment from volunteers and other supporters. You can strengthen Touchstones' impact by volunteering to start a Touchstones group in your community or by supporting existing programs through a fully tax deductible contribution. For more information, please contact us at (410) 263-2121 or visit our website at www.touchstones.org.

Thank you in advance for your interest!



Howard Zeiderman, President



*Touchstones: Bringing the World
Together Through Dialogue*

TOUCHSTONES
DISCUSSION PROJECT

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