

# VOICES



The Newsletter of the Touchstones' Discussion Project

[www.touchstones.org](http://www.touchstones.org)

**We build critical thinking, communication, leadership, and community through respectful, engaging discussion-based programs for all people.**

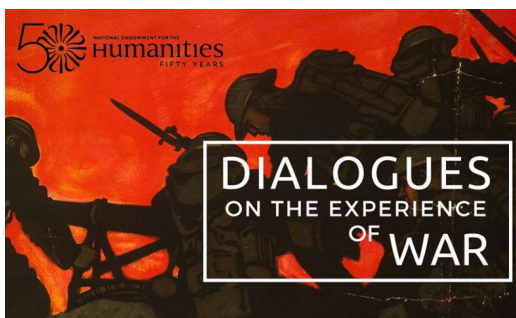
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## **A New Odyssey: Starting the Touchstones Veterans Program**

A new Touchstones program for veterans entitled *Completing the Odyssey: A Journey Home* will begin Sept. 27 in Annapolis, Maryland. Like any journey, much preparation for this venture is necessary. This past April, shortly after the NEH announced it had selected Touchstones to receive a grant to make this program possible, we began finalizing text selections from *The Odyssey* and more recent works. Those include poetry, oral histories, personal correspondence, and fiction written by veterans from Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

In addition to the Touchstones staff who are working on this project, our proposal included five additional crew members—veterans who will be trained this fall as Touchstones discussion leaders. They will co-run the program meetings in pairs and bring their unique perspectives of their own journeys back to civilian life after service.



Along with their training, the Touchstones Leader's Guide for this program will support the leaders' work with specific suggestions for developing an inclusive and collaborative seminar with up to 15 additional veterans in each of the three groups. This Guide offers best-considered routes with known landmarks and flagged cautionary spots for effective navigation in otherwise uncharted—at least through these means—journey.

The team of discussion leaders represent all branches of service. Joe C. is a 40-year Merchant Marine and Navy veteran with vast experience in different theaters of conflict and teaching rising officers. Joe S., a graduate from VMI and an Army veteran, served in Vietnam. He has been separated from service the longest and brings decades of civilian expertise as an engineer. He is now very active volunteering in the office of the Maryland Secretary of Veterans Affairs. Erinn W. is an Air Force Academy alumna who deployed twice to Afghanistan and Iraq and then again with UN Peacekeepers in Africa. Erinn worked with Touchstones staff on the crafting of the proposal to NEH for this project and continues to lend support across many areas of the project. Stephanie M., who graduated from St. John's College after completing her tour as an enlisted Marine, has been talking with Touchstones for several years to try to initiate a program specifically for veterans and on the topic of homecoming. And Jeff M., who entered the Navy decades ago after completing his undergraduate degree, is a former pilot and Naval Academy faculty member who is retiring from service this year. In 2016, Jeff was recognized as the Academy's teacher of the year for his work in Arab studies and leadership within the Academy community.

There will only be one leader with no military experience: me. Though I am highly trained in discussion leadership from my countless Touchstones journeys and decades of teaching at St. John's College, this journey will be on unknown seas and over hidden landscapes.

During the next several months, I'll visit ports of call that all of my work in schools, prisons, community centers, and executive programs could not have revealed, and I will learn with my co-leaders what it means to make a journey home.

**Touchstones is pleased to announce that registration for this program is now open!** Visit our website [here](#) to register, see the program schedule, and learn more, call the Touchstones offices at (410) 604 3309, or email Howard Zeiderman at [hz@touchstones.org](mailto:hz@touchstones.org). Registration and participation in the program is free and open to all veterans.

Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this article do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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## **Where is Touchstones going now? Growing and Building a World-wide Network of Active Learners**

Touchstones educational materials are used all over the globe, and I very much enjoy responding to inquiries from new schools and established customers. I especially love calls and emails from teachers who are taking



Touchstones to new schools, when they move. Recently, we received an email from a teacher in New South Wales, Australia. He previously taught in Cecil County, Maryland, where he was passionate about the Touchstones program in his English class. Now he's hoping his new school, which supports students with learning challenges, will implement Touchstones.

I am also working with a Montessori school that will be opening in Hove, England. They hope to incorporate Touchstones materials into their curriculum this coming academic year.

July and August are also busy times for scheduling professional development and classroom coaching. So far this school year, Touchstones will work with faculty at these schools: Two Roads Charter School in Arvada, Colorado; Wilmington Montessori School in Wilmington, DE; Columbia Secondary School and Fredrick Douglas Academy 1 in New York City; Learning Community Charter School in Jersey City, NJ; and Trinity College School in Port Hope, Ontario.

Even before school is in session, however, we'll have hosted another open-enrollment workshop our offices in Stevensville, MD on August 23rd. We're looking forward to welcoming participants from Ridley College and Trinity College School (both in Ontario, Canada), Baltimore County PS, Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre, CHAI (Comprehensive Housing Association, Inc. in Baltimore, MD), NEH-Touchstones Veterans Program leaders, NEH Education Division staff, members of the Touchstones Board of Directors, and participants from our Annapolis seniors group.

Each summer, schools that already have Touchstones programs replenish, replace, or expand their existing program materials, while new schools make their first Touchstones purchases. As you'll see below in this list of customers in June and July, there are many familiar names to Touchstones. I've marked established Touchstones schools and districts with an asterisk.

California: Tulare Joint Union High School District, Tulare\*

Colorado: Two Roads Charter, Arvada

Florida: Cypress Junction Montessori, Winter Haven

Georgia: Episcopal Day School of Augusta\*

Maryland: Anne Arundel County School District\*

Minnesota: Bright Water Elementary, St. Paul

Nevada: Adelson Educational Campus, Las Vegas

New Hampshire: New London Elementary

New Mexico: B.F. Young Professional Center School, SantaFe\*

Ohio: McGuffey Montessori, Oxford

South Carolina: Montessori Community School of Charleston

Tennessee: Currey Ingram Academy, Brentwood; Knoxville Jewish Day School

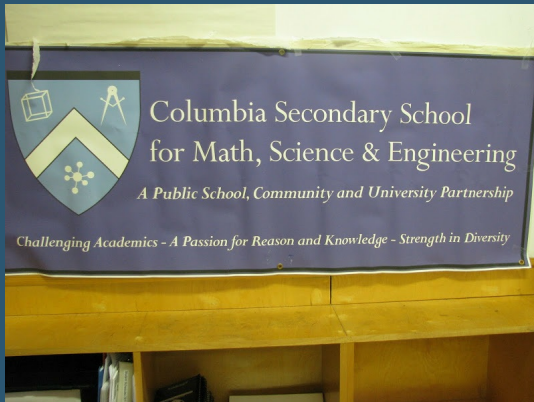
Utah: Maria Montessori Academy, North Ogden

Austria: International Christian School of Vienna\*

Canada: Trinity College School, PortHope, Ontario\*

And a homeschooling mom in Edmonton is starting Touchpebbles with her children.

## Cultivating Discussion Leadership!



Over the last 32 years, Touchstones has trained tens of thousands of educators to implement learner-centered discussion programs. Most of those people work in K-12 public school classrooms, but their endeavors with Touchpebbles and Touchstones are shared by thousands of educators from independent schools, colleges and universities, and senior centers. In addition, volunteers working in prisons

and community centers and hosting discussion groups in their offices or homes are also striving to build understanding, critical thinking, and collaboration with Touchstones as their vehicle.

The process of becoming a Touchstones discussion leader is not a quick or easy one. It requires an ability to see one's self more accurately and more objectively—to spy on oneself and catch those subtle behaviors or habits that affect personal interaction almost without notice. It is in those barely perceptible moments when we reveal the hidden assumptions, presuppositions, attitudes, and biases that shape what we perceive and how we are perceived. In Touchstones, the discussion leader learns to study herself or himself in new ways while modeling this behavior for others in the form of questioning, active listening, cooperation, and self-reflection. It is no wonder that educators who delve deeply into Touchstones find it transformative not only for their students but also for themselves as teachers and learners. This lasting and significant shift in which one recognizes latent talents and abilities in oneself and others may explain why Touchstones educators remain connected to the program throughout their lives. Just recently, we heard from a tired teacher in Arkansas who is starting a Touchstones group with members of her community. And a teacher from Cecil County, MD, (whom Lynn referred to in her article) is working to bring Touchstones to his new students because of his own experience enhanced his ability to foster active learning.

The acquisition and refinement of skills associated with discussion leadership require consistent practice and self-assessment. Consequently, we work in partnership with a number of schools each year that are committed to the long-term professional development of their faculty. This year, Touchstones is pleased to be working again with teachers and administrators at Columbia Secondary School in New York City; Learning Community Charter School in Jersey City, NJ; and Trinity College School in Port Hope, Ontario, among others.

We will be running an Open-Enrollment Workshop at our offices on August 23rd in Stevensville, MD. Develop your discussion leadership skills and learn more about Touchstones methodology. There are seats available in both workshops, so please

## Building on Success at Maryland Correctional Institution-Women

This fall, thanks to two years of successful programming at the Maryland Correctional Institute for Women (MCI-W), Touchstones is expanding to include two classes in the prison school. We will continue in the office management course, where we have been a weekly component of instruction since Sept. 2015. And we begin weekly discussion programming within the Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED) class, which enrolls primarily 17-21 year-old women.

With this step, we also aim to launch an evening program for women not eligible for the school courses. Former participants who aren't able to make daytime discussion meetings because of work schedules have expressed a keen desire for an evening Touchstones group. If we are successful in offering all three discussion groups within MCI-W this fall, the programs will reach more than 40 women weekly. We'll provide updates as we move forward with this additional outreach.



## National Charter School Conference & School Choice



This June 11th through the 14th, the Touchstones Discussion Project exhibited at the National Charter School Conference in Washington, D.C, which was sponsored by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

Charter schools are publicly funded but managed independently from the public school district in which they are situated. From state to state, county to county, how charters schools are funded and operated varies greatly. Some are funded entirely with public monies while others must raise significant portions of their budget on their own. Some charters are managed by educators who worked previously in district-managed or independent schools. Others are managed by for-profit companies. What is allowable depends on local and state law.

For more than 25 years, the charter school movement has been growing in the U.S. As much as 6% percent of America's schoolchildren around the country are currently enrolled in charter schools in 43 states and the District of Columbia. Data about charter schools' academic performance is conflicting. Advocates for charter schools and those who are opposed have not been able to win their own arguments definitively, and so the debate about their role in public education continues.

Since the appointment of Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education earlier this year, the

charter school movement has received tremendous attention. Her nomination and confirmation put expanded school choice at the center of discussions about national education. While supporters of charter schools say they give parents an alternative to failing traditional public schools, critics argue that charter schools take vital resources away from traditional public schools, among other allegations. Regardless of which position one assumes, the reality is that charter schools are now a significant part of public education and a growing part of Touchstones' programs in schools.

The theme at this year's National Charter School conference was "*Educate. Innovate. Engage*"—three words that resonate deeply with Touchstones. Thousands of teachers, school leaders, and other types of educators, as well as charter school board members, charter school advocates, and business solution providers were expected at the conference. Daily keynote speakers, workshops, breakout sessions, and an exhibit area were major features touted by the conference organizers.

Touchstones was one of the more than 250 exhibitors on site to showcase goods and services. We highlighted our curricula and training and coaching services, as other exhibitors offered instructional materials, administrative and business services, student services, athletic/playground equipment, building services, career/technical education, financial services, and education policy and advocacy. The variety was impressive.

We had been looking forward to this opportunity; in the past this conference led to new implementation sites. This year, however, was disappointing and surprising. The exhibit hall was poorly attended with minimal foot traffic. The location of the exhibit area—far from the workshop areas—likely contributed to this. In addition, we found most attendees were trying to launch a charter school or were board members seeking funding and business consulting. Over three days, we met only a handful of classroom educators and curriculum coordinators. The experience left us wondering why those central figures were so greatly underrepresented at a national conference of a major educational movement.

While the discussion of the benefits and drawbacks of charter schools goes on, Touchstones remains focused. We strive to ensure that all students learn the essential communication, collaboration, and higher level thinking skills needed for life-long success. And we'll continue seeking new avenues into all educational markets. If you have suggestions or recommendations, please share them with us. Email your ideas to [schoolprograms@touchstones.org](mailto:schoolprograms@touchstones.org)

**Touchstones is a registered 501 (c) 3 organization that relies on your support and partnership to ensure our proven educational programs are accessible to all people. Touchstones gratefully acknowledges charitable contributions from all of its donors and special support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Pettus Crowe Foundation, the Chichester duPont Foundation, the Howard Rossman Family Foundation, the Laurie Michaels Fund at the Aspen Community Foundation, and St. Margaret's Episcopal Church of Annapolis.**



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*Touchstones: Building critical thinking & collaborative leadership*

