

February 2019

# VOICES



The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project

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

## Destined for Positive Change

*Stefanie Takacs, Executive Director*

Since 2015, Touchstones staff have been running discussion programs within the school at the Maryland Correctional Institute for Women, MCI-W, which is located in Jessup, Maryland. The facility houses approximately 800 women, many of whom received continuing education in the prison school. Some are working toward their high school General Education Development certificate, GED, while others take office management classes to augment their employability when they are released.

As more women entering MCI-W already have a high school diploma or GED, the Department of Labor and Licensing, which oversees prison education in Maryland, has intensified its focus on workforce preparation. Touchstones programs are a natural fit, with our emphasis on developing every person's ability to articulate ideas and reasoning clearly and respectfully—to all people. And speaking is only part of the equation. Active listening is essential for communication that is appropriately responsive and rooted in understanding. This winter we are incorporating weekly Touchstones discussions into the new workforce preparation program at MCI-W.

Although women re-entering society and returning to the workforce must be able to communicate effectively, self-expression and self-regulation are among some of the greatest challenges they face. Without these socio-emotional skills, their return home—never mind employment—will likely be short-lived. While



incarcerated women learn and cultivate specific skills for particular types of employment in their other classes, it is only in Touchstones that the women practice vital communication and leadership tools they will use in all sorts of situations—before they leave prison and every day afterward. With these abilities, the women are more fully prepared to effect real and positive, continuous change in themselves and their families.

In their Touchstones classes the women connect prior experience to new situations and begin to recognize that they have the intellectual tools to solve problems constructively—and by working with others. Together with the Touchstones staff and their teacher, they apply cooperation, tolerance, respect, and reflective thinking to real-world situations to explore new outcomes. In the words of the school principal, Touchstones makes a real difference in these women's lives because it teaches them to “think differently.” It's when we begin to see the continuous positive change in themselves and their families.

*Listening = learning*

*Touchstones believes in a world where people of all backgrounds, beliefs, and ideologies engage in mindful and collaborative discussion to address complex local and global issues.*



## What do Polar Bears and Touchstones have in Common?

Howard Zeiderman, Co-founder & Director of Leadership Programs

When I was younger, I never expected to travel to the many places I have visited over the last three decades: Alabama; Jordan; Ontario; Qatar; Tanzania; and Zanzibar to name a few. The list is longer still when including places I've visited by phone and SKYPE. I was trained as a college teacher to be more sedentary. But once I started working on Touchstones, travel was imperative. We traveled to interest people in our work, to train teachers who were implementing our programs, to observe established Touchstones programs, and to present at educational conferences. It's true that every place has unique needs and purposes for bringing Touchstones into its educational practice. But here is one place that, though thousands of miles away from our home base in Maryland, demonstrates how universally well Touchstones cultivates authentic learning.

students to think critically, they found Touchstones. Our method and materials were their program of choice. Under a special partnership in 2012, seven Touchpebbles and Touchstones volumes (teacher's and student's editions) were translated into French—along with *Discussion Leadership, Getting Started*. Then we set off for Winnipeg.

Over the course of a week, we prepared a select group from within the bureau's curriculum and assessment team as Touchstones trainers. Since then, the team has trained hundreds of Manitoba teachers, and thousands of students report how their Touchstones discussions have helped them become more fluent speakers and thinkers—in French. Touchstones is even used in the northern-most schools in Manitoba—yes, where the polar bears live.

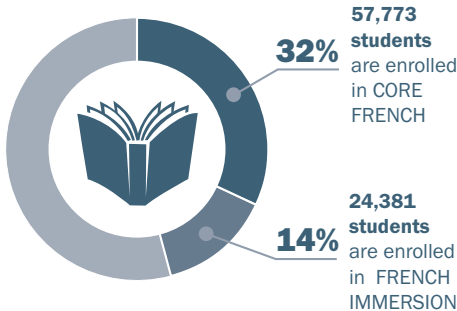
While this project's success has been great, it's even more impressive that Manitoba's outcomes are leading them to expand their Touchstones programming. This winter, the Province has purchased more than 850 additional books, which they'll provide to teachers being trained in Touchstones. Ultimately, of course, it's the students who benefit from an education that prepares them for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

judges were assigned seven student exhibits to evaluate independently, given a rubric for their evaluation, provided a tasty dinner, and sent on their way to the school gymnasium. After completing their assignment, Takacs and Cover would have to share their individual ratings and come to consensus on the top two projects to recommend for the state-wide competition. The final, national-level competition will be held June 9-13, 2019 at the University of Maryland, College Park.

Although both judges have significant experience with adolescents, neither were quite prepared for the very lively and exciting event awaiting them in the gym. Individually, the adults visited with each student or pairs of students to hear how students had selected their topics, what types of research and sources they had used, how they had evaluated the merits of those sources, and what conclusions they had drawn from their work on the project.

This year, the National History Day theme is Triumph & Tragedy and students are required to demonstrate in their final product—in this case, exhibits of poster boards and trifolds—how their subject conveys both triumph and tragedy. They are judged on the historical quality of the information they present, the clarity of their presentation, and the relation of their content to the overall theme. Both judges were expected to interview each student or pair of students and evaluate the information and organization of the students' physical exhibits. Each interaction included feedback from the judges to the students about strengths and weaknesses in their projects.

Our two impartial judges had their work cut out, but there were two pairs and one solo student whose work showed a thorough examination of information, use of



The Canadian Province of Manitoba has a deep commitment to bilingualism, and they educate more than 82,000 of their students in French. Some are Francophones, while most are Anglophones. And in 2010, when the bureau of French education in Manitoba searched the globe for a program to teach their

## Partners Beyond the Classroom

*Touchstones Roving Reporter*

On January 24, Touchstones' Executive Director, Stefanie Takacs, and Advisory Council member, Randy Cover, stepped temporarily into entirely new roles—as judges. The Mount Washington School, which has just started to implement Touchstones discussion programs, invited both Takacs and Cover to participate in the school's sixth annual History Night. The



primary sources, and passion for their subject matter. One of those projects explained the AMBER alert system and the tragedy underscoring its genesis, and one pair of seventh graders chose Bonnie and Clyde for their project. They relied heavily on FBI and court documents for their information and offered interesting analyses of why the nefarious duo stuck together to the bitter end. Another pair of students wowed our judges with their thoughtful examination of the 1986 Space Shuttle Challenger disaster. They focused on how that event led to massive changes in aerospace safety and how it still shapes that industry today. We're looking forward to hearing how the students do in the next round of the competition and wish them (and their teachers and parents) good luck!

## Growing Our Reach – We ♥ Teachers

*Lynn Cloutier, Operations & Office Manager*

**A**t Touchstones, our customers are at the heart of our operations and program development. Teachers, curriculum supervisors, librarians, and other educators have lots of choices in educational programs, so when they choose Touchstones, we want them

to know we're here to support them! Part of this support includes check-in calls and additional outreach. We ask how they're doing with their new materials and offer guidance as requested. Many teachers don't realize until we connect with them how much of our staff time is dedicated to provided training and coaching in schools.

We also reach out with promotional offers and when we have new program materials coming

*“As the world changes, so must the ways we teach and learn. Our world is becoming more interconnected, bridging together people with diverse backgrounds and different perspectives. The skills necessary to successfully navigate diversity and change begin with learning to listen actively, think critically, and share leadership.”*  
—Howard Zeiderman

## SUSTAINABILITY AND RIPPLES

*Jenn Macris, Advancement Coordinator*

We use a handful of words again and again when describing Touchstones: Discussion, Respect, Collaboration, Community, and Leadership. But one we don't talk about enough is Sustainability. Several years ago, the Nonprofit Quarterly Magazine reported that most nonprofit organizations will be around for between 6 to 15 years. Touchstones has been around for more than twice that—we've been working to build Discussion, Respect, Collaboration, Community, and Leadership for 35 years!


Our sustainability comes not only from educational programs that address very real, and constant, needs in our world, but also from our wonderful donors—many who support the organization year after year. And over the last decade, charitable giving to Touchstones has grown to include hundreds of individuals and families, corporate matches, and foundation support. Reliable income through philanthropic support is important to all nonprofit because it allows for long-term planning. This makes

our steadfast donors, and especially those who make monthly contributions, particularly important to our sustainability.

Did you know a simple way to support Touchstones consistently is to set up an automatic recurring monthly donation? With recurring donations, a monthly contribution of \$15 does great things over the course of a year. As an example, it allows us to train a new teacher, whose Touchstones approach to student-centered teaching and learning may reach more than a hundred students—just in the first year alone.

In this way, your recurring gifts help us to achieve our vision of a world where every student is engaged in education that builds critical thinkers and collaborative leaders. Such students will indeed change the world for the better with their new skills of respectful speaking and active listening and real-world practice in inclusive discussion that builds community.

You can start this incredible ripple effect today with your sustaining support. Contact me at [jm@touchstones.org](mailto:jm@touchstones.org) to learn more and to set up your recurring monthly gift.

 **15.00 A MONTH**



**TRAINS A  
NEW TEACHER**



**REACHING OVER  
100 STUDENTS**



onto the market. Personalized letters to principals and teachers invite them to learn about new additions to our existing series. For example, schools using *Touchpebbles Volumes A and B* may want to bring in our newest volume, *Touchpebbles C*, so they can expand their discussion programming to an additional grade of students. From the history of the Maya to folk tales from Iceland, Bhutan, Arabia, Japan and Tibet, to writings by Galileo and Euclid, the lessons contained in *Touchpebbles C* offer all students the chance to learn by exploring their own thinking and that of their peers. Through the discussion process, students learn to take initiative in the classroom that fosters a greater sense of responsibility and connection to others.

Every time we can share our work with teachers and hear directly from them, we learn more about how Touchstones is making a difference in the world. Of course, we love it when teachers share their Touchpebbles or Touchstones stories with each other and inspire new teachers to bring discussions into their classrooms.

For us, every teacher willing to create a student-centered classroom deserves as much love as we can give. We do our best to promote and share their work through social media, emails, and our newsletters.

*Touchstones is making a difference in the world.*

And we want all Touchpebbles and Touchstones teachers to think of themselves as possible Touchstones Teachers of the Year, which is why our annual award recognizes exceptional work by educators for whom Touchstones is an integral part of developing responsible and respectful citizens. If you have a Touchstones story you'd like to share, please send it to [schoolprograms@touchstones.org](mailto:schoolprograms@touchstones.org).

## Leadership Development on Deck

*Howard Zeiderman, Co-founder & Director of Leadership Programs*

As we look forward to spring of 2019, we're gearing up for some great Touchstones professional development activity this month and next. Next week, Touchstones staff will be working at Trinity College School in Port Hope, Ontario for two intensive days of classroom observations and coaching. Touchstones programs are integrated into the academic

Foodservice Education, was founded in 2002 by Mary Petersen from Annapolis, Maryland, to provide shared educational opportunities for professionals in the foodservice industry and the culinary/baking/pastry classroom. Mary has been widely recognized for her leadership and entrepreneurialism and received numerous awards for her exceptional work in education, including being inducted in 2005 into the Honorable Order of the Golden Toque as a lifetime honorary member (one of 15 honorary and only 100 members in the United States).



A group of Senior School administrators and faculty work together to refine their Touchstones discussion leadership skills.

curriculum throughout the Junior and Senior Schools, and this is our fifth consecutive year of continued professional development work with teachers and administrators.

Then, in March, Touchstones staff will have the pleasure of working for a second year in a row with participants of the annual CAFÉ Deans and Directors Retreat. This professional development opportunity is "for postsecondary program leaders who work in "the Hourglass" position; i.e., they have administration above them pushing down with the needs and requirements and they have to filter the information down to the faculty and students with whom they work."

CAFÉ, which stands for the Center for the Advancement of

This year, the two-day retreat will take place in Charleston, SC—home of exceptional, modern Southern cuisine—and Touchstones will focus on the role of collaboration in building a brand.

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