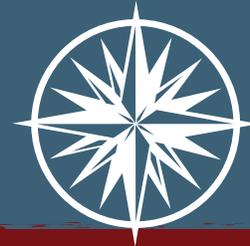


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VOICES



The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project

www.touchstones.org

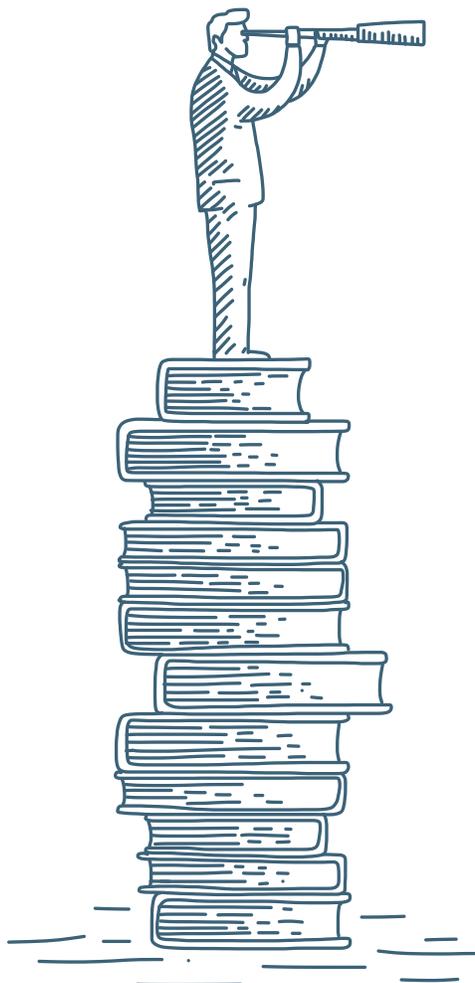
Looking Forward, Looking Back An Interview with Howard Zeiderman by Touchstones' Roving Reporter

Howard Zeiderman, co-founder and President of the Touchstones® Discussion Project, sat down with me to talk about 35 years with Touchstones and provide a look at the future.

Reporter: What led you, Geoff Comber, and Nick Maistrellis to start work on the Touchstones Project, as it was initially known in the 1980's?

Zeiderman: Geoff was invited to model seminars at a high school in Hartford and asked if I'd go with him. I'd taught in the Graduate Institute at St. John's College and had met Geoff there. We assumed we'd run our classes in Hartford like we did at St. John's. He was going to run an English class and I was going to run a Math class. Unfortunately, what we saw was typical in a lower-performing school: students hadn't prepared. I had to create the class on the spot. I ended up reading the texts aloud to the students, and there was a lot of initial confusion. By the end of class, though, students were at the board working together. When we looked at video afterward, we saw a Touchstones class starting to take shape. In one period, something extraordinary had happened. Many students participated, listened to one

another, and by the end, students were starting to assume leadership in their discussion. We knew we were on to something.



Reporter: Did you expect Touchstones' work in schools to also appeal to adults?

Zeiderman: I did, in fact. The Project was created for all people. It became a school project because all people go to school. We wanted to reach everyone as early as possible. I think people of all ages, backgrounds, and cultures face the same problems, as we've moved into a world that's very different from what we inherited. We all need to learn to collaborate with each other and share leadership—whether we're talking about a classroom of young students or a corporate team. Touchstones gives everyone a voice, which enables people to be recognized as individuals as well as to be part of a group.

Reporter: What are some highlights of your work with Touchstones?

Zeiderman: I think the most important part of this has been to see how similar people are from different cultures and work environments and that everybody has talents. I was struck in our work in Jordan by how a group that initially seemed so different was immediately able to apply their strengths in a new environment. They began sharing responsibility for the success of their discussions and

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.



started practicing self-governance, which meant they were less dependent on particular leaders for finding answers to hard questions.



Howard Zeiderman (right), leads a Touchstones workshop in Amman, Jordan in 2010 with Abeer Ammouri from the Ministry of Education and teachers from the Arabic curriculum.

Reporter: You’ve served as Touchstones’ President since the mid-2000’s and are moving into a new role at the end of this year. What do you expect that change will be like?

Zeiderman: I won’t be involved in the day-to-day management and schools. My focus will shift to organizations and institutions—work I’ve done for decades but haven’t done exclusively. I’ll be designing programs for groups of executives in organizations to address specific problems —things like leadership development, communication, and overcoming barriers to inclusive collaboration. I’m putting together a team of executives and leaders to implement these projects with me and looking forward to working with them.

Reporter: What’s your greatest hope for Touchstones in the future?

Zeiderman: My hope is that the Project becomes the central piece of our national approach to education. Our country needs students whose attitudes and skills are developed in ways that support all aspects of life. Touchstones makes this possible.

Celebrating a Legacy: Mark Your Calendars

Jenn Macris, Advancement Coordinator

From co-founder to many years as president, Howard Zeiderman’s initial role with Touchstones has grown and progressed over the last 35 years. Since the organization’s inception in 1984, Howard has been building community through discussion, teaching critical thinking skills, and encouraging collaborative leadership through his work at Touchstones. Those efforts in elementary through secondary and post-secondary schools as well as through his unique custom program development for executives and organizations have helped bring Touchstones to more than 43 countries and millions of people.

At the end of this year, as set forth in the Touchstones Strategic Plan for 2014-2018, Howard will step down as President and that position will be retired. Stefanie Takacs, who has served as Touchstones’ Executive Director since 2009, will assume all management oversight for the organization.

In celebration of Howard’s work, the Touchstones’ Board of Directors invites friends to a special evening of celebration on Saturday, October 27th at the Fleet Reserve Club in Annapolis. The event, *Honoring a Legacy: Celebrating the Art of Discussion*, kicks-off a fundraising campaign to secure Touchstones future and ensure that Zeiderman’s innovative work continues to transform education in the decades to come.

The evening includes dinner and an art auction featuring works by artists and Touchstones friends. Among them are Elliott Zuckerman, Neil Harpe, Thackray Sez nec, and Dmitri Fotos (all from Annapolis), and NY-based Australian artist Jaq Belcher. Several additional exciting items, including a week’s stay on Martha’s

Vineyard, will be on the auction block. Mark your calendar now, as seating will be limited. Tickets will be available at \$200 per person or \$1,100 for a table of six starting mid-July. Stay tuned for more information soon!

Veterans: Moving Forward

Sean Hutzell, Project Coordinator

After a successful second round of the Touchstones *Completing the Odyssey* program with veterans, Touchstones looks forward to future work with the veteran community. In support of those new endeavors and expansion of our existing program, Touchstones held a well-received “Happy Hour” to raise funds for several projects. One is to refine the *Leader’s Guide* and *Participant Workbook* and to create print-on-demand editions to ensure interested veterans groups have ready access to the program. Like all Touchstones works, the *Guide* and *Workbook* are designed to provide instructional materials, texts for discussion, and evaluation tools for the discussion leader while offering the participants access to the texts and



Veteran and Discussion Leader Stephanie Morgan (USM) talks about the importance of reflecting on her return to civilian life after military service.



related worksheets that tie personal experience to the themes of service, war, and homecoming found in the *Odyssey* and the contemporary selections with which those texts are paired.

The second project seeks revenue to support implementation of the *Completing the Odyssey: A Journey Home* program at the Maryland Center for Veterans Education and Training (www.MCVET.org) in Baltimore. One of the trained discussion group leaders, Joe Smith, a Vietnam veteran, has been instrumental in exploring a partnership between Touchstones and MCVET. Based on his own experience becoming a trained Touchstones discussion leader and running two segments of the program, Joe strongly believes the program offers veterans valuable interpersonal and critical thinking skills. Those skills complement the education and workforce readiness training taking place at MCVET, whose mission is to provide homeless veterans with the tools and capacity they need “to rejoin their communities as productive citizens.”

With more veterans participating in the Touchstones program this spring and a growing interest in combined veteran-civilian groups, Touchstones anticipates that *Completing the Odyssey* will engage many new groups in the months and years ahead. Meanwhile, our relationships with the veterans who already completed the program will continue, as we seek new opportunities for those participants to remain involved with Touchstones. We are encouraging graduates from the program to consider starting other Touchstones programs that help to build community and understanding through civic engagement and civil discourse. If you or someone you know is interested in bringing Touchstones discussions—with veterans and/or civilians—to your neighborhood, town, or city, please contact us at touchstonesdp@gmail.com.

Touchstones from Coast to Coast

*Lynn Cloutier,
Touchstones Operation Manager*

Touchstones continues to offer professional development workshops for schools, districts, and organizations around the country this spring. In-service professional development workshops were held for 47 teachers and staff at Sacred Heart Cathedral School and St. Paul Catholic School—both in Pensacola, FL—through the Escambia School District’s Title 2 funding. Executive Director, Stefanie Takacs, also traveled to Kodiak, Alaska to run two days of training and observations with 14 teachers and administrators and 18 high school students from the Kodiak Island Borough School District and St. Mary’s Catholic School, in Kodiak City. An Open-Enrollment Workshop at our offices in Stevensville, MD provided an additional 17 educators and Touchstones volunteers from as far away as New York City with introductory workshop experience in early May.

Touchstones also ran a custom professional development workshop as part of the Center for the Advancement of Foodservice Education’s (CAFÉ) Deans and Directors’ Annual Retreat. This educational leadership opportunity brings together 40 administrators, professors,

and instructors from culinary arts and related programs in the U.S., Canada, and the Bahamas to share new research, innovations, and outcomes from the field.



During the workshops on Kodiak Island, teachers from four villages joined those in Kodiak City via video conference. Contributions to Touchstones during the 2017 Great Give helped to fund these workshops.

The following schools recently purchased Touchstones materials:

- Canada:** Manitoba Bureau of French Education, Winnipeg
 - Connecticut:** Beacon Self-Directed Learning, New Haven
 - Florida:** Pine Jog Elementary, West Palm Beach
 - New Jersey:** Haddon Township High School, Haddon Township
 - New York:** Secondary School for Journalism, Brooklyn; Herbert H. Lehman High School, Bronx
 - Pennsylvania:** Northley Middle School, Aston
 - Washington:** Kingston Middle School, Kingston
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Teachers observe as a high school student and teacher Geoff Bechtol (left) participate in a Touchstones discussion over video-teleconference with students in seven locations on Kodiak Island.



Happy Tuesday and a Big Thanks

Jenn Macris, *Advancement Coordinator*

On May 1st, Touchstones hosted its annual spring happy hour fundraiser at Galway Bay in Annapolis. This year, we raised money for expansion of our veterans' programs, as detailed in Sean Hutzell's article in this edition of *Voices*. Touchstones-trained Discussion Leaders Joe Smith (USA) and Stephanie Morgan (USM) were joined by program participant Paul Rhynard (USCG) in sharing their experiences with about 40 other guests. Following their testimonials and comments, they graciously answered questions before the crowd returned to mingling and conversation. We're thrilled to report that Touchstones raised nearly \$5,000 for veterans programming this year, thanks to 33 donors, including nine first-time contributors.



Touchstones friends catch up during the recent Happy Tuesday gathering in Annapolis.

These "Happy Tuesday" events—as we have dubbed them—have become wonderful and fun ways for Touchstones friends to support a specific project or program. These gatherings also bring Touchstones staff and Board together with local friends and donors, whose annual support is essential to the health of the organization. It's also a wonderful

opportunity for us to reach out into the community and introduce new people to Touchstones' mission and work. Thank you to all!

Touchstones on Kodiak Island, Alaska

Stefanie Takacs, *Executive Director*

While a surprisingly large number of Touchstones programs have been in place in Alaska for many years, we've recently had the opportunity to work directly with administrators and teachers at a new implementation site: Kodiak Island. In late March, Touchstones staff ran two days of workshops with educators from around the island. In addition to our standard introductory workshop, part of that training included observing a Touchstones discussion among high school students whose Touchstones classes began in late 2017. Uniquely, this group of students has been holding their Touchstones classes over video-teleconferencing (VTC). The students are located at seven sites on the island, some in rural villages including Ahkiok, Old Harbor, Kaluk, and Ouzinkie. The students at the different sites have assumed greater responsibility for their discussion classes as leadership rotates from site to site, under the guidance of teacher Geoff Bechtol. In support of this ambitious and unusual implementation scenario, Touchstones staff ran the orientation class with all of the students and observed and participated in two additional classes—all through VTC.

Challenges associated with the VTC environment are significant; delays caused by limited bandwidth, differences in camera and microphone placement, less access to non-verbal cues, and anxiety about speaking over and being seen through a digital medium are among the greatest issues.

Although the VTC environment isn't ideal for promoting deep interpersonal connection within an entire class, nonetheless the growth shown by the students over the last year of Touchstones is remarkably like what one would see elsewhere. Overall, the students are more comfortable speaking with each other directly, they have learned to listen more carefully to one another, and they have assumed greater responsibility for their own and their peers' engagement in the discussions. In their evaluations, both of themselves and the class overall, they have recognized where they've improved and where they need to work harder. And the teachers and administrators closest to the implementation are very pleased with the students' progress. This fall, the school district is expanding their Touchstones programming to elementary and middle grades. As those classes enjoy the added benefits that in-person discussions offer, the high school students and teachers will continue their own significant efforts charting new Touchstones territory. We can't wait!

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