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VOICES



The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project

www.touchstones.org

My Valentine's Day with 15 Women

*Howard Zeiderman,
Co-founder & President*

On Valentine's Day, our Executive Director, who spearheads Touchstones at the Maryland Correctional Institute for Women (MCIW) was out of town. I was the substitute leader for the day, and I've often been into MCIW and worked with both Touchstones classes since 2015. And I've run Touchstones programs in men's prisons since the 1990s. No matter how often one goes in, each visit has its own poignancy.

leader—was released after 37 years only to die suddenly a week later. But where does one find more absence and longing and sadness than in a women's prison on Valentine's Day?

Our classes at MCIW begin after lunch, so the women don't always arrive on time. Ms. Powell's GED class typically starts with four or five participants and reaches its

Our Touchstones text for discussion that day was a few short sentences from the ancient thinker Heraclitus. While these remnants can be illuminating, Heraclitus himself was known as dark, gloomy, and obscure. Each of his sentences were about knowledge, understanding, and listening. I read the fragments aloud in our well-formed circle and then heard the women's questions. In these groups, we share our ideas from the beginning. "Why is it hard to listen?" came up many times. So that's where I started. About 10 minutes into the discussion, a woman who had deliberately seated herself

In prison, one confronts wasted lives and people filled with remorse. Holidays are especially difficult for prisoners, many of whom rarely or never have visitors. I remember going in for Christmas one year at the House of Corrections, where I hung coats as men lucky enough to have guests squeezed a year of parenting into four hours with their sons and daughters. At the men's medium security facility years later, I shared in the grief felt by our group when one of their most revered fellow-prisoners—a long-time Touchstones participant and

typical size of eight or nine after 10 minutes. But on Valentine's Day, there were 15 women prisoners waiting for me.

Most women in prison have suffered abuse from the men in their lives: fathers, uncles, lovers, husbands, pimps, and others they trusted or needed. The abuse starts early and tends to continue into their adult lives, as the women make unhealthy choices in intimate relations. The abuse destroys their sense of self-worth and their ability to trust.

slightly back from the circle spoke. I had expected her not to participate because she had chosen to sit as she had; one learns to give people time and space to become comfortable. She brought us back to the question, saying it is hard to listen because you need first to trust. When I and others agreed that trusting one another was hard, she corrected us. "Trusting someone else is only possible," she said, "if you trust yourself." That insight cut through our otherwise conventional answers and resonated with the group. Now everyone was engaged in the discussion,

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.



and trust was possible. The women discussed difficult moments of distrust in oneself, without judgment—of themselves or others. And we helped each other remember times when trust in ourselves made real change possible. In reflecting on who we have been and can be, we gave ourselves and one another a valentine of hope.

Models of Change

Stefanie Takacs, Executive Director

Transforming any class of students or set of discussion participants into a collaborative group requires serious and consistent effort. This is particularly true in school settings where students aren't accustomed to expressing their thinking and the reasoning behind those thoughts. But we can't expect our students to change unless we are willing to be models of change ourselves.

As Montessori educators, these teachers strive to support and enrich each student in their classrooms—attending vigilantly to the specific interests demonstrated or intimated by those in their charge. They believe fully in the role of teacher as cultivator of latent abilities and talents and the role of self-discovery and self-teaching in healthy human development. As teachers in a public education system, however, they must find the balance between Dr. Montessori's educational philosophy and methodology and the demands of accountability that often takes the form of standardized or state test scores. Reconciling these potentially conflicting approaches to education and measurement of growth requires skill, patience, and faith in both worlds. Emphasizing and evaluating socio-emotional learning within this blended structure is not a simple task. Maturation from childhood into adulthood is slow and rarely

already know. However, the difference in Touchstones is that the discussion process supports student expression and the analysis of opinions and feelings and *how* one interacts with others. It is not enough to be a skillful speaker; one must also be an excellent listener and leader. These competencies are only acquired with consistent attention and practice.

In these ways, Touchstones reaches far beyond the textual to weave participant experience, emotion, and conceptual understanding into a new fabric shaped by all members of a group. In the construction of this fabric, all members of a class—teachers included—examine what they think and why. They find the freedom to augment and exchange inherited assumptions and presuppositions for thinking that is informed by multiple perspectives, more accurate self-perception, and deeper self-knowledge.

Touchstones thanks the leadership of the Charleston Public School District Montessori program for the invitation to work with their teachers. The district offers a model worth considering, as we look for educational approaches that nurture the whole child and prepare all youth for successful and healthy lives.



At a Montessori mini-conference at James Simons Elementary School in Charleston, SC, teachers and teaching assistants consider which fragment from Heraclitus offers the best wisdom about trust.

Last week, 16 teachers from Charleston, S.C.'s five public-Montessori schools participated in a Touchstones workshop during a full day of professional development. The group works with students in grades 5-8 and our focus was on socio-emotional learning and adolescence. Together, we looked at a few models of socio-emotional learning and then we engaged in a Touchstones lesson. We put theory into practice, as the teachers focused on their own learning.

captured in a single snapshot of time or data. How then, does one bridge the divide between the most important goals of education—healthy growth across all dimensions of human development—and the desire for content mastery?

In Touchstones, students of all ages learn through regular practice. This practice is not entirely unlike the ways in which students convert factual information into knowledge by connecting new ideas to what they

Continuing the Journey: Veterans Share Their Stories

Sean Hutzell, Project Coordinator

In mid-January, the Library of Congress's Veterans History Project (VHP) Director, Karen Lloyd, took some of us from the Touchstones-National Endowment for the Humanities veterans pilot program on a private tour. We were treated to visits in rooms not typically open to the public.

Our group submitted five projects to the VHP: a diary, an oral interview, two collections of photographs, and a memoir. These individual stories



Evolving Revolutions Coming to Annapolis

A custom Touchstones program, *Evolving Revolutions*, is about to begin in Annapolis, Maryland. Already underway with groups of professionals in both NYC and DC, it will be offered in Annapolis starting this spring.

Nationally, we are in a period of great change. But in what ways is our society evolving? This program helps us to explore our own situation by looking at three political, economic, and social revolutions. What can we learn from those historic periods? We'll examine documents written by persons experiencing change during the American Revolution, the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution. And we'll look at current social issues: who has a legitimate voice in society, who is a full person, and what the optimal relation is between the individual and the community. We'll also consider pressing issues of the franchise, of rights, and of the nature of society—not as matters of historical fact but as contemporary concerns. Through inclusive discussions, we'll leverage documents from the three revolutions and our experiences and perspectives as lenses to sharpen our vision and deepen our understanding.

The program syllabus covers the following topics over eight sessions:

- Session 1: Prologue to the American Revolution – Perspectives and Debates on Representation
- Session 2: In the Midst of the Struggle – Loyalists versus Revolutionaries
- Session 3: Who Gained? – Federalists and Anti-Federalists
- Session 4: The Bastille and The Terror – Civic Virtue and the Guillotine
- Session 5: Seeking Acquiescence – Napoleon's Ascendance and Great Men as Leaders
- Session 6: Perspectives on Marx – Capitalism, Socialism, and Communism
- Session 7: The Unexpected Revolution – Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin
- Session 8: Where are We Now? – Evolution or Revolution?

“ This program is for adults who want to reflect on history, examine similarities and differences across cultures, countries, and economies, and gain insight into the dynamics of today's challenges and tensions—whether class, religious or ethnicity—this is an enriching experience. It also helps one appreciate group dynamics and reflect on how to respect and treat all participants and voices fairly. — Debra Valentine, a member of the NYC group ”

For more information, please call the Touchstones offices at (410) 604-3309.

reflect the journeys of three service members from the army and two from the navy and they record more than a century of conflicts—from World War I to current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. We're grateful to each who made the extra effort—a significant one—of time, focus, and a willingness to reflect back on and chronicle elements of their unique journeys. The veterans and staff entered their work into the Veterans History Project in an intimate and moving ceremony. We each then received reading cards for the Library, ensuring a continuing relationship with one of the world's greatest libraries.

For more information about the Veterans History Project and to find out how you can participate visit their website at: www.loc.gov/vets.

Touchstones is now moving forward with our second program group under our grant from the NEH. On February 7, 15 veterans launched round two of *Completing the Odyssey: A Journey Home*. Based on feedback

from the first program group, we added two meetings: an initial Touchstones orientation and a final session to identify next steps to make the program available to more veterans around the country. As part of

that outreach, our three Touchstones veterans leaders and program staff will present our work to the Veterans Administration in Orlando, Florida this week.



Veteran Tyler Mazur looks at a collection of President Jefferson's books on a private tour hosted by the Veterans' History Project Director.



Touchstones in Kodiak, Alaska

Jennifer Macris, Advancement Director

Thank you to everyone who participated in our GivingTuesday fundraising campaign last November. Because of our generous, faithful donors and many enthusiastic, new donors, Touchstones raised enough money to kick off 2018 with some exciting new projects.

One such project is almost 5,000 miles away but has become very near and dear to our hearts. Geoff Bechtol, a teacher at Old Harbor School (K-12), in the Kodiak Island Borough School District in Alaska, reached out to us last fall to start a Touchstones pilot in some of Alaska's most rural schools, in six Alutiiq villages around Kodiak Island. Thanks to a \$5,000 grant that

Geoff received for the school district and matching funds raised through our GivingTuesday campaign, Touchstones discussion programs are starting in Geoff's blended-model virtual/online US History class for secondary students. Some of the village elementary schools will use Touchpebbles in physical classrooms.

My hopes are that the program will help my students become more active listeners, speakers, and thinkers.

In late March, Touchstones Executive Director, Stef Takacs, will fly to Kodiak to run two workshops with teachers, administrators, and support and counseling staff for grades 2-12.

Geoff was introduced to Touchstones via a mentor teacher, Elaine Griffin, who was the 1995 National Teacher of the Year recipient.

"She spoke highly of Touchstones, and her opinion carried weight with me," shared Geoff. "My hopes are that the program will help my students become more active listeners, speakers, and thinkers. I want them to be full participants in all aspects of their lives. On a very practical level, being able to speak and present is a necessary skill in our online courses especially."

This is just one exciting example of what you, our donors, are making possible, in all corners of the globe, in-person and online.

Touchstones is truly committed to "Building Community Through Discussion EVERYWHERE!" and you help us do this. Every donation makes an immediate difference and, because Touchstones covers its overhead through earned income, 100% of your contributions go directly to programming where it is needed and wanted most.

Here, There, and Everywhere

Literally coast to coast, from Alaska to Florida, Touchstones is being implemented across the U.S. and we added a new country to our list for International sites just last week: Guadeloupe!

The following international schools have recently purchased Touchstones volumes:

Canada: Maria Montessori Education Center, Calgary, Alberta; Ecole Lacerte, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Thailand: Thai-Chinese International School, Bangkok

United Kingdom: The Montessori Place, Hove, England

The following schools and organizations within the United States have recently purchased Touchstones discussion programs:

Alaska: Kodiak Island School District, Kodiak

Arizona: Pomeroy Elementary, Chandler

California: SLO Classical Academy, San Luis Obispo

Colorado: Montessori School of Denver

Florida: Escambia County School District, Pensacola

Maryland: Langton Green, Annapolis; Anne Arundel County Public Schools, Glen Burnie; St. Mary's County Public Schools, Leonardtown; Mt. Hope/Nanjemoy Elementary, Nanjemoy

North Carolina: Washington Montessori Public Charter, Washington

South Carolina: Murray Lasaine Elementary School, Charleston

New Jersey: Haddon Township High School, Haddon Township

New York: Herbert H. Lehman High School, Bronx

Virginia: Medina Montessori, Falls Church

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