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VOICES



The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project

www.touchstones.org

Homecoming as a Journey A Reflection on the 2017 Touchstones- NEH Veterans Program

Stefanie Takacs - Executive Director, Howard Zeiderman - Program Director,
Sean Hutzell - Project Coordinator

On November 8, Touchstones' "Completing the Odyssey, A Journey Home" discussion program funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities Education Division concluded its first project phase. That evening, 12 veterans from all branches of service over the last 40 years held their seventh discussion in the project on *Dialogues on the Experience of War*.

The primary purpose of this program is to provide veterans with a dedicated forum in which they can explore and reflect on their own experiences in service. Touchstones specifically wanted to look at the progression from civilian life to the experiences of service back into civilian society. Using selections from Homer's, *The Odyssey*, and contemporary selections written by U.S. veterans, the program presented themes of service and homecoming. Touchstones wanted to

discover how meaningful connections among veterans is supported specifically through discussion and better understand how the lifelong skills gained in service are essential in the civilian world. We also asked the question, with mixed responses, whether a

*"This group is perhaps THE key for returning veterans to reintegrate into society. All veterans would benefit, as well as the country, community and families."
—Marine veteran and Touchstones-NEH Discussion Leader*

similar program between veterans and civilians, would be beneficial to bridge the gaps in experience and understanding.

Participants overwhelmingly expressed a strengthened commitment to the self sacrifice and understanding that the whole, or group, conscience is more important than the individual. This sentiment they ascribed to their experiences in the military. In addition, one

participant reported, "I'm getting better at absorbing different and contrasting viewpoints." The discussions "are helping me to question some of my own perspectives." Another offered, "The personal benefit for me is that this has improved my existence

as a node in a network. As such, I am a citizen improved." A JAG lawyer said he'd learned that "listening is part of building empathy with others" and the

program "greatly helped me place my service as an ongoing part of myself." And a retired JAG lawyer shared, "This program was a critical prompt for me to reflect on and write my own story, which was useful to me, and hopefully will also be useful to the Library of Congress."

In evaluating the success of this first phase, we asked the veterans to share what they had learned or gained from this program and what they

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.



would want others to know about it. One Army veteran with service in Iraq wrote, “Touchstones is unprecedented in what it is doing combining pragmatism with intellectual pursuit. It needs as much support as is available to it.”

The growth this group reported was universal. Each individual found her or his voice and felt the confidence gained by each person contributed to the progress and collaboration of the whole group. And did the participants feel this program could help other veterans? “Yes, they need to understand they are not alone and that they belong in their communities,” responded a woman marine veteran. She further advocated for groups in which “civilians can offer unique perspectives and validate the experiences and emotions of the veterans. Veterans need to know their experiences aren’t solely theirs.”

Touchstones thanks the following sponsors for donations to this program: D’Alessio’s: Wood-Fired Pizza, Giolitti’s Deli, It’s the Pits Barbeque, KRM-BRC Management Corporation, Love Point Deli, Mills: Fine Wine and Spirits, St. John’s College, and the Whole Foods Market of Annapolis. Touchstones was proud to support the program with additional receptions and services.

Defining the Present – Sketching the Future

Howard Zeiderman

Each month, two groups of executives with diverse professional and experiential backgrounds in corporate development and management, finance, law, and medicine, meet respectively in NYC and DC to participate in the newest Touchstones discussion program: *Three Revolutions*. In conference rooms at Fried, Frank, Harris in Manhattan and Finnegan & Henderson in DC, the respective groups explore decisive moments and consequences of the American, French, and Russian Revolutions.

These unique Touchstones discussion programs, which have been running for more than 25 years, attract people for a range of reasons. Some enjoy the opportunity to step outside their professional roles to think about things different from their current projects. Others find the sense of community that comes from discussion refreshing and reassuring and welcome healthy and productive disagreement that challenge and broaden their own perspectives. Many find immediate connection and application of their discussions to their lives—personal and

professional—because they discuss texts that are sources and mirrors of our own world.

Unlike in other more structured programs for executives, our programs foster exchanges in which participants themselves engage directly with each other to enliven and enrich each other—to learn from and teach each other—in the act of building new understanding. These discussion meetings are a chance to break from the hectic pace of everyday lives for fun but serious thinking in a more relaxed setting—without intrusions from work, before a concert or a dinner or heading home to continue unwinding from the day. While most members participate in person, the program has flexibility for people to call or remote in when travels take them out of town or life intervenes unexpectedly. Regardless of how they participate, all work seriously to reflect on their own and each others’ ideological frameworks in collaborative inquiry.

As in all Touchstones programs, the texts for discussions are tools we use to clarify our own assumptions and suggest creative transformations. They are not great works to be mastered and understood within someone else’s field of historical or academic expertise. In Touchstones, each participant is herself or himself an expert in many dimensions of life; making ourselves, our experiences, and our thinking accessible to others allow for a new approach to learning and community.

For winter 2018, Touchstones is exploring the addition of two new groups—one in Wilmington, DE and the other in Annapolis, MD.

Howard Zeiderman has more than three decades of experience designing custom seminars for groups, organizations, and government agencies. He is a co-founder of Touchstones and serves as its President. He is also a senior faculty member at St. John’s College, Annapolis, MD. and directed the Aspen Institute’s Executive Leadership Seminar Program from 2004-2008.



Kevin Cheney (r.) accepts his Touchstones certificate from Howard Zeiderman (m.) as Sean Hutzell (l.) hands out *Standing Down* to the veterans in parting thanks for their military service and program participation.



Make a Circle, Add Teachers and Students, Add Touchstones, and Voila! Let the Discussions Begin!

Stefanie Takacs, Executive Director

Last December, we received an award from the Chichester duPont Foundation to introduce Touchstones discussions to several schools and K-12 programs in Wilmington, DE. Since our last report on our work funded by this grant, we've had a chance to see students in action in Wilmington.

Touchstones staff, a member of our Board of Directors, and a staff member from the Boys and Girls Club of Wilmington observed several classes at Kuumba Academy Charter School during the week of

November 6. The teachers, Mrs. Harris and Ms. Hercules, graciously invited us to experience the work they and their students are doing to build listening, speaking, reading, writing,

and collaboration skills. Every week, each teacher runs five Touchstones classes. In total, more than 240 students are in inclusive and cooperative discussions this year!



A fifth-grade Touchstones student explores a dilemma in medical ethics at Kuumba Academy Charter School in Wilmington, DE.

ALL DONATIONS TO TOUCHSTONES WILL BE DOUBLED!



#GivingTuesday = Double Your Gift!

In thanks for your support for Touchstones' vital work in education, on Nov. 28, the Touchstones Board of Directors will match every gift—dollar for dollar—up to \$10,000!

Jenn Macris, Advancement Coordinator

This year, Giving Tuesday, a national fundraising day that advances essential non-profit work, falls on November 28th. For Touchstones, #GivingTuesday harnesses the power of social media and collaboration to generate crucial philanthropic support for projects with immediate impact. Because Touchstones covers all administrative costs through earned income, 100% of your charitable gift goes entirely to programming.

We'll apply all gifts received on #GivingTuesday to bring Touchstones training and materials at no cost to educators or students in K-12 schools and organizations where there is limited funding.

In addition to our online fundraising campaign (check our facebook page, twitter account (@Touchpebbles) and our website donation page), Touchstones will host our third Happy Tuesday Happy Hour at 49 West Coffee House in Annapolis to add a bit of "personal" to this otherwise virtual event. If you're in the area, please come join us. Bring a friend and make this a real two-for-Tuesday and a two-for-Touchstones!

#GivingTuesday is an effective and meaningful way for your charitable support to double Touchstones' proven work that builds communication, critical thinking, and collaboration through discussion. We look forward to your participation!



The three discussions we watched could not have been more different. The eighth-graders worked through Lesson Four in *Touchstones Volume C*, which centers on a discussion text from Aquinas' *On Human Cures for Sadness*. The text investigates what activities are best for assuaging grief, loneliness, or anger. Between awkward laughter and typical adolescent antics, the students revealed a deep need for connection to others and moments of real gravity. The students opened up about their own feelings and shared advice with each other, as the teacher encouraged them to listen

openly and carefully to each other. The seventh-grade students read and discussed a tale from Madagascar about how children came to be in the world. They talked about decision-making and the important roles family plays in their lives. And the fifth-grade students considered a situation in medical ethics from *Touchpebbles B*. Those students grappled with the gray areas of complex decision-making and investigated the role of honesty and integrity in different types of relationships. More than 65 students participated in these discussions.

Each child expressed her or his ideas and applied valuable world experience to the class's discussion.

Next up: the Boys and Girls Club will start their Touchstones program this fall. Together with our cohort of educators and program providers from across Wilmington, we'll make plans for another workshop. As we set shared goals for expanded impact and outreach in Wilmington in 2018 and beyond, we plan to bring teachers and students from participating organizations together for mini-Touchstones summits. The sky is the limit.

Cultivating Civility and Connection in the Classroom and Beyond

Here's an update on the schools and districts that are bringing Touchstones to their students this autumn.

Lynn Cloutier, Business Operations Manager

- District of Columbia: Washington Latin Charter
- Georgia: Holy Innocents Episcopal School, Atlanta
Episcopal Day School, Augusta
- Maine: Noble High School, North Berwick
- Maryland: Margaret Brent Middle, Leonardtown
Anne Arundel County Schools, Annapolis
- New Jersey: Waterfront Montessori, Jersey City
- New York: Columbia Secondary School, Manhattan
- Ohio: Montessori Academy of Cincinnati, Mason
- Pennsylvania: Seneca Valley School District, Harmony
Warwick High School, Lititz
- South Carolina: Brockman Montessori, Columbia
- Virginia: James River Day School, Lynchburg
Stratford Landing Elementary, Alexandria
- Canada: Ecole Riverside, Thompson, Manitoba
West Point Grey Academy, Vancouver, BC

Educators and Touchstones Program Volunteers and Leaders from these organizations and schools participated in Touchstones Workshops this fall:

Boys and Girls Club of Wilmington, DE; Dumbarton Middle School, Baltimore County Public Schools, MD; Columbia Secondary School, Manhattan, NY; Comprehensive Housing Assoc. Inc. (CHAI), Baltimore, MD; Kuumba Academy Charter School, Wilmington, DE; Episcopal Day School of Augusta, GA; Learning Community Charter School, Jersey City, NJ; Library of Congress; Ridley College School, St. Catherine's, Ontario, Canada; Trinity College School, Port Hope, Ontario, Canada; Wilmington Montessori School, Wilmington, DE; Touchstones Board of Directors; Touchstones-NEH Veterans Program; Washington Latin Charter School, Washington D.C.

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