

Sept 2018

VOICES



The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project

www.touchstones.org

It's Time to Celebrate!

**Celebrating the Art of Discussion
Touchstones Legacy Campaign
Kick-Off - October 27th**

Jenn Macris, Advancement Coordinator

The Touchstones Board of Directors is kicking off a special fundraising campaign in honor of Howard Zeiderman, Touchstones co-founder and president, with an event on Saturday, October 27th in Annapolis. Howard will step down from his current position as president at the end of 2018, after 18 years in that role. Our Executive Director, Stefanie Takacs, will continue managing the organization and overseeing its school and community programs, as Howard focuses on Touchstones executive programs and remains an active member of the Board of Directors.

Celebrating the Art of Discussion will include drinks, dinner, and a very special art auction featuring artists with connections to Touchstones and Howard. Participating artists include Jaq Belcher, Fern Beu, Amanda Engels, Dimitri Fotos, Neil Harpe, Sean Hutzell, Thackray Seznec, Kathy Bergren Smith, Sigrid Trumpy, and Elliott Zuckerman. A Touchstones discussion lesson plan will also be written especially for and included with each auction item. Although Touchstones discussions typically start with short texts, many of our volumes include works of fine art as the "text" for discussion.



Touchstones, by Elliott Zuckerman, painted 2001, oil on canvas, Giclée prints available for sale.

This Legacy Campaign is a fitting way to celebrate Howard's inspiring work since he co-founded Touchstones in 1984. It was his recognition of how power structures within our social fabric affect how we see and understand ourselves and others—as learners and members of society—that set the stage for the Touchstones model. This campaign honors Howard's legacy and the millions of people whose lives have been enriched through his work, by raising funds for operations, program expansion, and long-term sustainability.

In addition to the art, we will also be auctioning a special getaway on Martha's Vineyard and selling limited-edition giclée prints of a piece entitled *Touchstones*, by Elliott Zuckerman (see photo above). Information about event tickets (\$125/person or \$700/table of six), the artists and their auction pieces, and a link to purchase the limited-edition *Touchstones* prints will be available on our website soon. Feel free to contact me for more information at jm@touchstones.org or (410) 604 3309. We'll look forward to seeing you then!

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.



Veterans Helping Veterans

Joe Smith, USA, retired
Touchstones Volunteer



This new phase of Touchstones programs with veterans began in April when I attended our quarterly meeting of the Maryland Veterans Commission. Each such meeting is held at a Maryland venue offering services to veterans. The April meeting was at the Maryland Center for Veterans Education and Training (MCVET) in Baltimore, which provides comprehensive services to homeless and other veterans enabling them to rejoin their communities as productive citizens.

The backdrop to this April meeting is the development of the Touchstones Veterans Discussion Program under a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) through the NEH's "Dialogues on the Experience of War" Project. Having received the grant in March 2017, Touchstones set up an Advisory Board, developed an eight-session weekly program called *Completing the Odyssey: A Journey Home*, and recruited and trained several veterans to be discussion leaders for the program. This program chronicles the journey and progression from civilian to service member to civilian again, exploring the challenges and demands of service and the transition home. Short excerpts from *The Odyssey* and modern works by veterans about their experiences of war and service are starting points for these discussions.

The first pilot program launched in September 2017. After some refinements, a second group started in February 2018. Although both

programs were successful, it became clear that recruitment of veterans for future programming would be our biggest hurdle. Our core program team of Touchstones staff and trained veterans discussed "taking the show on the road" to overcome that barrier. Then, through my volunteerism on the Veterans Commission, I made the trip to MCVET.

As I listened to MCVET's Executive Director explain what they do, I realized this could resolve our recruiting issue. MCVET serves a sizable population of veterans, all who would gain from the essential skills developed through Touchstones. The foremost of these is critical thinking and active listening, which allows for growing collaboration in a group setting. For these veterans, this process represents and supports a return to community.

I pitched the program, and soon we had a test run underway. Touchstones at MCVET is designed for a group of 14-16 participants plus two leaders and meets weekly for 60-90 minutes. In mid-July, we started with 22 participants—a bit large but manageable. Due to internal scheduling conflicts at the Center, the next week we had 12 men. Seven were new and only five had participated in the first session. Concerns arose that our attendance was too much in flux for a program to work. In week three, we had 19 participants. Five were new and each session was now requiring a re-orientation to the process for the new members. We realized this trend wouldn't sustain a successful program and temporarily suspended our efforts—even though MCVET counseling staff and several "regular" participants recognized the value of what they had started.

Since then, we've met with the Training Coordinator and agreed to a restart the program with select members (those 15-20 who were the more regular participants in the first trial), with minimal scheduling conflicts,

and no new members coming in during the eight-session program.

Program refinement and adaptation to achieve optimal outcomes for specific populations of participants takes time and effort—both from Touchstones and the participating organizations and people. We know from first-hand experience how valuable this opportunity can be for veterans, and we're ready to get going again.

New Fiction on Tap

Toni Lambert, Program Coordinator

This fall marks the start of the new two-year Touchstones Executive Program on recent fiction. This program starts with our New York City and Washington D.C. groups, and we expect an Annapolis group will follow suit in January 2019 when they finish their "Three Revolutions" program.



Annapolis Executive Program participant, Melissa Curtin, shares her thoughts on the concept of inalienable rights.

Led by Howard Zeiderman, participants will meet 20 times over the next two years to discuss pieces of modern fiction. In the first ten sessions, the groups will discuss a variety of short stories and novellas from nine different countries. Examining their import, their meaning, and their structure offers each person the chance to consider their own



assumptions and explore tectonic social shifts we have experienced over the last three decades. Selected authors include Jorge Luis Borges, Peter Handke, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Flora Nwapa, among others.

These texts will also serve as the basis for a shared exploration of the emergence of new literary modes—some of the most fertile harbingers of shifting consciousness. There is still availability in both programs, so please contact us if you're interested in more information. Email Howard at hz@touchstones.org or call our offices at (410) 604 3309.

In with the New Year!

Stefanie Takacs, Executive Director

Late summer and early fall are always busy times at Touchstones. That's when teachers return to school and finalize preparations for the new academic year. Those activities include work in their classrooms, the ever-famous faculty meetings, and participation in professional development workshops. In recent weeks, we've had the pleasure of working with a wonderfully talented Maryland high school faculty as it geared up for school.

Baltimore City College High School, an International Baccalaureate World School, is situated on the highest point of what John Quincy Adams called, "The Monumental City." In many ways, it represents the pinnacle of what American public education can offer and deliver to students from all backgrounds. Although our curricula have been in the school for nearly two decades, this school year will see the most robust implementation of Touchstones discussion programs to date. This is thanks to leadership from Sarah Jeanblanc—the IB Coordinator, support from the Social Studies Department Head, and six exceptionally dedicated teachers.

City, as the high school is commonly referred to by locals, has a storied place in Baltimore public schools. It was authorized and then opened in 1839 by the City Council as one of Baltimore's first public schools. The third oldest active public high school in the United States, today it occupies a building known as "The Castle on the Hill," built in 1928 and set in the center of a 38-acre campus. City is a magnet school, and since the mid-1980s it has offered the International Baccalaureate Middle Years and Diploma Programmes.

This year, as part of a major Touchstones program expansion at City, about 830 students will engage in discussions using these materials: *Touchstones Volume I*; *Touchstones Volume II*; *Touchstones Exploring American Perspectives, Vol. I*; and *Courage to Care: Building Community through Service*. In addition to the initial training that five implementing teachers received this summer, Howard Zeiderman, Touchstones co-founder and president, and I will observe and coach all of City's Touchstones teachers over a two-week period in October.

Like many places around the U.S., funding for classroom materials and training is hard to come by in Baltimore. Following the recession of 2008, investment in public education across the country fell drastically and has only returned to pre-2008 levels (adjusted for inflation) in a fraction of states. This particular Touchstones project is possible only through the generous gift from a Touchstones donor committed to a more equitable, democratic, and effective education that prepares all students as citizens and leaders in the 21st Century. We'll look forward to sharing reports from this exciting project in our next newsletter, so stay tuned!



Baltimore City Public School teachers and a veteran work together during a recent Open-Enrollment Workshop.

The Timeless Themes of *Frankenstein*

Touchstones Roving Reporter

In our summer e-newsletter, which you can read on our website under Press, we introduced an upcoming fall project, Frankenreads. Frankenreads is an international celebration of the 200th anniversary of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* for Halloween 2018, organized by the Keats-Shelley Association of America.

Touchstones is inviting everyone to participate in this week-long event (Oct. 24-31, 2018) by running their own special Touchstones discussion



on Tues. Oct 30. What a wonderful option for a Halloween get-together!

We'll provide all registered participants with one of four versions of an excerpt from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, based on your group's needs. Three of the excerpts are edited and adapted for grade-level appropriateness. The fourth is the original text written by Shelley. In addition, we're including a fully developed lesson plan to use with your selected excerpt.

We encourage educators, community groups, families, and friends to join us in running a Touchstones discussion that explores themes of friendship, loneliness, difference, and community. Shelley's poignant recognition of the enduring nature of emotional struggle offers us a chance to re-examine what it means to have a place in any society and what it means to be human.

You can learn more about Frankenreads, and find other local events, at www.frankenreads.org. Please contact Jenn Macris at jm@touchstones.org to register your own group and receive the free discussion materials for an unique and timely celebration of this literacy classic.

Interest in Touchstones

Lynn Cloutier
Business and Operations Manager

Touchstones discussion programs take place in public schools, independent schools, international schools, afterschool programs, and in communities of adult learners. The following schools purchased Touchstones materials this summer:

USA:

Alaska: Kodiak Island Borough School District, Kodiak
California: Acton Academy, Pleasanton

Colorado: Rocky Mountain Montessori, Colorado Springs
Florida: St. Paul Catholic School, Pensacola
Maryland: Anne Arundel County Public School District, Annapolis (for use in 5 High Schools)
Missouri: Whitefield Academy, Kansas City
New Jersey: Haddon Township High School, Haddon Township
New Mexico: Santa Fe Public Schools, Santa Fe
New York: Achievement First University Prep, Brooklyn
Ohio: Xavier University, Montessori Lab School, Cincinnati
Texas: Herfurth Elementary School, Rowlett; Great Hearts Western Hills, San Antonio

International:

Canada: West Point Grey Academy and Eaton Arrowsmith School, Vancouver, BC
Thailand: Thai Chinese School, Samutprakarn

Adult and Enrichment Programs:

Maryland: Touchpoint, Baltimore
Montana: Liberty Place, Whitehall
New Brunswick, Canada: The YMCA of Greater St. John

Review copies:

When a school is considering Touchstones for its students, review copies of our curricula are often requested. Typically, this step leads to implementation within several months. This summer, we heard from folks at these schools that are interested in Touchstones for their students:

- Willow Creek Academy, Sausalito, CA
- Bonners Ferry Middle School Bonners Ferry, ID
- Mt. Washington School, Baltimore, MD
- Geneva School of Manhattan, New York, NY
- Cathedral School of St. Mary, Austin, TX



DID YOU KNOW? A single class set of 25 Student Editions used by three classes each year will teach 750 students in ten years. In Touchstones, they will learn the power of discussion as a tool for building critical thinking and collaborative leadership. The cost: about a dollar a book per student.



Through the purchase of these materials just this summer, we estimate that at least 2,600 new students will be engaged in Touchstones discussions this fall. Because our books are not consumable, it is common for one class set to be shared by three or more classes of students each year, year after year.

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