

November 2019

# VOICES



The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project

www.touchstones.org

## Veterans and Civilians, Together

Sean Hutzell: Project Coordinator

This fall, we launched a new seven-session Touchstones program, *Together*, which met weekly starting in September. Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, this group of 12 veterans and civilians from military families (unrelated to the veterans), set about exploring barriers to reintegration faced by veterans. Our approach was to see these concerns as shared by veterans and civilians alike, assuming a common vision for successful homecoming

processes and experiences. Such discussions across veteran-civilian lines are, understandably, complex and challenging. Issues of trust and respect are major obstacles for any group but especially where each group has significantly different viewpoints and experiential backgrounds. We learned through three years of the Touchstones-NEH program, *Completing the Odyssey: A Journey Home*, which

is exclusively for veterans, that homecoming requires meaningful and active support from civilian society. *Together* offers both veterans and civilians an opportunity to begin the process of building trust and community across the military service divide. As a group, we read



In their first meeting, pairs consider different points of view while refining questions about trust and community.

Sebastian Junger's book, *Tribes*, *On Homecoming and Belonging*, and thematically linked selections from Homer's *Odyssey*. We tackled questions of cooperation and individualism, bonds of family and community, empathy, solidarity, and issues of trust.

As the NEH project coordinator for Touchstones, I have participated in two of the veterans-only *Odyssey* programs. Participating in this

pilot was an altogether different experience. While the *Odyssey* program focuses primarily on military service and specific experiences of homecoming, the *Together* program looks at what veterans and military family members need for successful reintegration and how our majority

civilian society can support those needs. Each week, we delved more deeply into what is required, and from whom, to form an inclusive society where veterans experience less isolation and disconnection. These discussions, though demanding, cultivated an extraordinary level of trust. Participants—veteran and civilian—assumed

risks in sharing experiences, offering different perspectives, and learning to listen thoughtfully and openly to what others said.

One veteran participant, Josh, commented, "The discussions of Homer's *Odyssey* and Junger's *Tribes* have greatly aided me in thinking through the problems veterans and society must solve for a successful reintegration. By reading and discussing these works, I feel we

*Through inclusive discussion-based programming, we develop highly effective speakers, listeners, critical thinkers, and collaborative leaders.*



are coming closer to recognizing the nature of our own society.” Our veteran co-leader, Cole, added, “When I left the Marine Corps, I saw myself as nothing but a machine gunner that was once a good shot. I was a painter without a brush—or canvas. In this Touchstones-NEH Discussion Program I found a new art. I did not see how I could be decisive in conversation without being dominant. However, through my work with Touchstones I have come to see how one can be both decisive and tactful while keeping the conversation flowing.”

Now, after the pilot is over, there is considerable interest in continuing our meetings to build on what we’ve begun. This, I think, reflects beautifully on how honesty, trust, and hard work are cornerstones of community. We remain excited for what will happen next and look forward to future implementations of *Together*.

Touchstones would like to offer special thanks to the West Annapolis Vet Center and KRM BRC, our landlords, for providing program space at no charge.

## Odysseus’ Fourth Voyage

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

**A**s a fourth group of veterans completes the Touchstones-NEH *Completing the Odyssey: A Journey Home* discussion program, in nine meetings they surpassed what it took Odysseus 10 years to achieve. They forged new personal narratives as foundations for successful homecoming—for some, decades after separating from service. Most remarkably, they did this vital work collaboratively.

In this group of 10 veterans with service from the Vietnam War to recent conflicts, two are experienced discussion leaders, others participated

in an intensive Touchstones-NEH training early this fall, and several are entirely new to Touchstones. Of the 10, eight assumed leadership roles in our weekly discussions, helping the group to analyze their progress and reflect on diverse paths from civilian life to military service and back again. How do veterans bring skills and experience from service to bear on the common good? This is a question we asked and answered in many different ways over the last nine weeks.

What has this program meant to the participants? B., an Army

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*“Each class is my idea of a perfect Thanksgiving.”*

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veteran wrote, “each class is my idea of a perfect Thanksgiving.” John, also retired Army, added that this program enabled him “to find the words which [he] had not sought in the past.” Mark, a retired clinical social worker from the Army, said, “it was a joy to share stories in a mode that was not clinical but conversational.” The program offered dedicated time to consider and articulate what his own journey home has been. Dan, an Air Force veteran, was delighted to see trust evolve in the group so all could benefit from the sharing of ideas. Echoing that sentiment, Kevin, a Marine veteran, added the program helped overcome insularity because the participants genuinely wanted to know what others in the group thought.

With the end of this program, we will now convert the Leader’s Guide and Participant Workbook into print-on-demand books for wide-scale replication. This program has offered veterans and Touchstones staff alike a chance to be part of a shared journey, and we hope it will serve many thousands more veterans around the country well.

## Our Model Teacher of the Year

*Touchstones Roving Reporter*

**W**e are thrilled to announce that Suzan Powell, a teacher at the Maryland Correctional Institution for women (MCI-W), has been selected as the Touchstones



At our Summer Bash, Suzan Powell shared how she connects differently with her students through Touchstones discussions in the women’s prison.

Teacher of the Year for 2019. Suzan’s nomination arose from her exemplary role as teacher and Touchstones student in her classroom in the prison school.

Each week, Suzan helps students in her

Employment Readiness Workshop strengthen their work and life skills through a variety of educational activities and exercises. Touchstones is a central part of those efforts, and it’s one in which Suzan participates fully. She joins the women in the Touchstones circle, follows the Ground Rules, offers her ideas in small group work, and engages helpfully in the full class discussions and evaluations.

Since 2016, Suzan’s engagement with Touchstones has grown to include activities and outreach well beyond her classroom. Among her many interests, she is committed to veterans’ causes and has connected Touchstones with contacts at the VA in Washington, DC. As a guest speaker at our 2019 Summer Bash, Suzan emphasized the important role Touchstones plays in building a stronger community—not only for women in prison but for people everywhere.

*Touchstones is grateful to Anne Arundel Women Giving Together, “a philanthropic giving circle with more than 200 members who annually pool their funds and award grants to nonprofit*



organizations seeking to improve the lives of women and families in Anne Arundel County” for a grant in support of Touchstones discussion programs at MCI-W.

## Volunteering from the Heart

*Touchstones Roving Reporter*

**W**ith our mighty staff of five, Touchstones manages an enormous educational reach around the globe. How is that possible? Volunteers! We rely on volunteers to support all of our



Loretta Hohmann listens to a panel discussion at the recent Touchstones art exhibition featuring the works of Elliott Zuckerman.

Loretta Hohmann from Maryland’s Eastern Shore.

Loretta—an accomplished cook, organizer, and volunteer for several other organizations—first learned about Touchstones in 2016. She was immediately intrigued and taken by the breadth of the organization’s work in schools and executive leadership, with veterans and elderly people, and with incarcerated adults. Loretta first offered to help us reach a broader audience with our fundraising events and has now supported numerous events with her enthusiasm, thoughtful ideas, and rolled-up sleeves (not to mention her excellent cooking!) She has participated in several workshops, including an intensive leadership development training, and also in the new Touchstones program, *Together*. As an employee of

SAP Concur®, Loretta has been named a volunteer ambassador whose volunteerism for Touchstones brings corporate support as an additional important benefit to our programs.

Pascal, the great French thinker and leader in the Scientific Revolution said, “Don’t put a sign out that you’re a mathematician or poet. But when that is what’s needed, be sure you are asked.” This very well describes Loretta’s ability as a volunteer and a leader. She is a shining example of how volunteering from the heart makes the world a better place. Thank you and congratulations to Loretta Hohmann!

## Girl Power

*Jenn Macris, Outreach and Advancement Coordinator*

**P**artnerships between two or more non-profit organizations can be a powerful way to bring the respective organizations’ expertise together to serve people in new and effective ways. This is the case for our newest partnership. In 2018, the then-director of the Girl Scouts of Central Maryland (GSCM) was on a panel with Touchstones Executive Director that discussed barriers to re-entry post-incarceration. On learning about Touchstones programs at MCI-W, the Girls Scout leadership asked if our two approaches to building responsibility and leadership could be blended in a program for older teens in detention. Several meetings and many months later, this new program is finishing its first pilot phase at the Waxter Center for Children in Anne Arundel County, MD. The ultimate goal is to craft a program that is nationally replicable.

At the core of this partnership, there is a shared commitment to serving all young women, regardless of background or circumstance. The Girl Scouts recognized that a

program specifically for high-risk teens must directly address reflective and critical thinking, as well as self-regulation and self-awareness. The result is a program called G.I.F.T.ed (Girls In Fearless Transition), which is funded by a grant to GSCM from the national Girls Scouts of America. It weaves Touchstones lessons from our middle school community service volume, *Courage to Care: Building Community through Service*, with thematically aligned Girl Scout lessons and badge work. Led by Girl Scout Program Specialist Domonique Jenkins, the first pilot program is finishing soon.

I recently participated in one of the meetings at Waxter and spoke with Domonique afterward. “There are fewer options in programming for girls,” she said, “even though they are more likely to have come from fractured families, experienced abuse or neglect, or been victims of sex trafficking.” G.I.F.T.ed offers a safe space where girls develop crucial life skills and a sense of self-determination vital for healthy futures. It provides participants new problem-solving skills and helps mitigate adverse realities of life in detention, including exposure to other young women with more extreme socio-emotional and behavioral issues, separation from family and loved ones, and missing regular schooling.

## A Legacy of Art

*Stefanie Takacs, Executive Director*

**O**ur dear friend and stalwart Touchstones supporter, Elliott Zuckerman, passed away unexpectedly this last June. Elliott was a person of extraordinary talents—both as a tutor at St. John’s College in Annapolis for more than four decades and as a poet, musician, and painter. In October 2018, at our Legacy Campaign kick-off, our Board of Directors announced that Elliott





“Elliott was a multi-faceted artist—poet, musician and painter—whose strong belief in Touchstones reflected his own belief in art’s ability to engage us all.” - Debra Valentine, Touchstones Board of Directors

had made special provisions for Touchstones in his estate: the gift of all his paintings still in his possession at his passing.

We are so glad that Elliott was there to receive due recognition and thanks for this exceptional gift. He wanted it to be able to support Touchstones in its steadfast endeavoring to build connection, respect, and community through inclusive discussion programs with people of all backgrounds. Touchstones Board of Director Chairman, Kurt Redfield, captures the significance of this bequest in saying, “Elliott Zuckerman’s gift



Panel moderator, Lisa Simeone (l), and Touchstones Executive Director, Stefanie Takacs (r) listen as Jamie Zuckerman Young speaks about Elliott’s bequest to Touchstones.

to Touchstones is a remarkable testament to his belief in the work Touchstones has done over the years. We are honored to be a steward and curator of such a remarkable legacy.”

Elliott knew well where Touchstones programs are at work, as his mother was one of the first to introduce Touchstones into a residential facility for elderly adults. She and her co-participants, a long-running “seniors” group in New York, were even filmed in their discussions—back in the early 1990s. He knew, too, of our decades of work in Maryland’s schools, senior centers, and prisons and the rippling of those programs in educational settings around the world.

We at Touchstones thought there could be no better way to honor Elliott and his generosity than to organize and host a retrospective of his works. Timed to coincide with the memorial service for Elliott at St. John’s College in Annapolis the weekend of Oct. 25, the exhibition, “Elliott Zuckerman: A Retrospective,” featured 24 of Elliott’s works.

In opening remarks to an audience of more than 100, Jamie Zuckerman Young, Elliott’s niece and executrix of his estate, spoke of Elliott’s decision to make this gift. She said he had been “extremely enthusiastic, delighted, and almost peaceful even that he had found the perfect thing to do with his artwork.” As Elliott told her about Touchstones’ mission and work in education, Jamie said, she too, immediately felt this was a truly fitting choice.

The special opening event also included remarks from St. John’s College President Pano Kanelos and featured a panel discussion on modern art, Elliott’s work, and the role of art in Touchstones programs.

Touchstones thanks curator Sigrid Trumpy; panel moderator Lisa Simeone; and panelists Lucinda

Edinberg, Art Educator at the Mitchell Gallery; and Wilford Scott, Ph.D., former head of adult programs at the National Gallery in Washington, DC. We also acknowledge Art Fleischer for special support for this event and



Lucinda Edinberg, Art Educator at the Mitchell Gallery in Annapolis, and Wilford Scott, Ph.D., former head of adult programs at the National Gallery, spoke at the exhibition about Elliott’s work as an accomplished mid-Century painter.

St. John’s College for the use of the Hodson Boathouse. We look forward to making this collection available to the public in the months ahead. For more information about the collection and availability of works for future acquisition, please email Jennifer Macris at [jm@touchstones.org](mailto:jm@touchstones.org).

### 2019 Board of Directors

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