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VOICES



The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project

www.touchstones.org

Above and Beyond

Stefanie Takacs, Executive Director

As the official start of summer approaches, many schools are preparing to close what's been the most unusual year ever. While many in the U.S. have returned mostly to in-person instruction, almost every teacher with whom we work still has some students attending remotely. The ever-challenging hybrid mode of teaching students who are physically present and those appearing on screen—often in the form of an avatar only—continues.

Among the enormous difficulties in teaching students who are physically present while simultaneously teaching those who aren't has been in achieving desired levels of student engagement while adhering to laws protecting student privacy. In most places, teachers do not have the authority or right to require students to appear on screen. Consequently, students who do not wish to be seen or heard have had control over how and when they engage with their teachers and classmates.

In our work with educators this year, we've had the opportunity to see first-hand how these different modalities of engagement affect classroom community and student learning. Clearly, this has not been an ideal arrangement—for anyone. Remarkably, though, even during this period a number of schools and districts have launched Touchstones programs for the first time. And they've gone far above and beyond anything I would have

expected in such a challenging climate.

In the Mount Desert Island Regional School System (Maine), for example, more than 15 social studies and history teachers in the middle and high school grades, introduced hundreds of students to Touchstones

discussions this school year. Some teachers will even complete an entire Touchstones volume before vacation starts. In my monthly meetings with 12 teachers in the district's Civil Discourse Collaboratory, I've heard directly how students are translating the skills acquired in Touchstones to other classes (math, English/language arts, science) and other settings. Teachers have also shared how their students are connecting experiences outside school to their small group work and full class discussions. These are the

real-world connections we all want students to make, so their formal education and their learning outside school are relevant to and reinforcing each other. When we apply what we learn, we test the limits of our understanding and recognize how much more, and where, we need to grow.

I've been fortunate this year during my classroom observations (remotely, of course) to hear students in that district speak in earnest about the importance of listening to ideas different from their own. I've heard a class discuss what makes a law just or unjust, as they examined how a society determines who makes those laws. I listened to

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Touchstones develops highly effective communicators, active listeners, and reflective thinkers to build a collaborative and inclusive world. We achieve this by creating, offering, and supporting discussion-based educational programs for everyone.



another class tackle social constructs that stop people from achieving dreams and aspirations in a country where all people are created equal by law. In their comments and questions, I heard viewpoints that span a vast political spectrum. But not once did I hear a student respond disrespectfully to another, even in moments of disagreement. As the teachers modeled active listening and inclusive leadership, I witnessed a responsive maturity, self-control, and regard from their students that was inspiring. The hard work of listening to understand and learning to withhold judgment is something the students are practicing in earnest. They are experiencing the invaluable freedom to change one's mind—to shift one's position—when faced with something that sounds truer or more aligned to one's world vision. And the skills they have started gaining through their Touchstones practice—forged in some of the hardest of modern times—will serve them and all of us well, far into the future.

Confronting the Unfamiliar

*Olivia Braley,
Office & Program Coordinator*

Before working at Touchstones, I taught and took many creative writing classes and wrote plenty of poems. Now, as I have become more comfortable with the Touchstones method, the idea of an executive poetry group has felt like the perfect way to bring my passions and experience together. In constructing the syllabus for this new program, I collaborated with Howard Zeiderman to create a list of eight contemporary collections spanning from 1999 through today. I wanted this list to be representative of some of the more notable books from these decades while reflecting

our contemporary American society. That meant pulling from writers of all races, genders, sexualities, and ages and complementing that diversity with writing styles that would similarly add variety to our readings.

I felt good about our syllabus and was eager to begin this group, but I was unsure of exactly what to expect. How would people respond to the poetry? I had attended more than a few Touchstones discussions, but I had never led one. Luckily, these worries were unfounded. Instead, I have found a considerate group of people trying to better understand a range of topics and their relations to them. And I've begun to trust myself and build an understanding of the group dynamics, as we move through these works together.

We've now had three meetings, and I've had the opportunity to watch our group develop. Each time we meet, members arrive online prepared with interesting questions—many of which I've never considered before. These perspectives freshen the works and remind me there is always more to learn. The dynamics in a Touchstones group offer the perfect place to do so. The discussions are engaging and balanced, and participants are not afraid to speak honestly or offer dissenting opinions. This is a real strength in approaching genuine understanding.

I spoke with a few members of the group about their own impressions and was glad to hear that in many ways they echoed my own sentiments. One member highlighted how the group expands his knowledge of a topic with which he has limited experience. Another agreed, adding that that the group forces them all to read things they wouldn't otherwise. Perhaps this is where real education happens: when we engage with things that are unfamiliar and challenging—things which, in some cases, we don't even

like at first. This particular member then continued to explain that, even if after our discussions these poems still aren't a favorite, they leave with a deeper understanding and appreciation of the poet's work. Confronting the unfamiliar, and at times opaque, forces the group to wonder about poetry itself; what is a poem, what is its purpose, what is its role in our lives?

I've answered these questions for myself in ways that put poetry at the center. But in this group, I get to speak with diverse, analytic people whose answers to these same questions are likely quite different from my own. So, the perspectives that arise in our discussions allow me to see the poems—even ones I've read dozens of times before—in a new light. Leading and being part of this group is a rare opportunity and one for which I'm grateful. I hope it's offering something similar to the other members of our group.

Getting Back to Business

*Jennifer Macris,
Outreach & Advancement*

As restrictions ease locally around the COVID pandemic, Touchstones is back to doing one of the things we do best: making connections. While Touchstones was able to continue discussions online during the pandemic, and even discovered that true, meaningful discussions can indeed happen virtually, many of our in-person connections with community partners and grant-making institutions were put on hold. We're happy to report we're getting back to the business of renewing past partnerships and exploring new ones.

Touchstones is looking forward to working again with the Girl Scouts of Central Maryland on



a special program at the Waxter Children's Center in Laurel, MD. This program incorporates Touchstones discussions into a weekly Girl Scout troop meeting, so girls in the juvenile detention facility get to know each other by learning together. Perhaps more importantly, they get to know themselves better as they learn to reflect on their thinking, behaviors, and choices—not as things set in stone but as tools to build more constructive futures.

Touchstones also recently re-established our connection with Seeds 4 Success, a tutoring and mentoring program for children in grades 3-8 living in low-income or public housing communities in Annapolis, MD. We hope to add Touchstones discussions as a regular feature of summer and school-year enrichment programs these local children so much need and enjoy.

Touchstones is also excited to explore new potential funders. Our staff is working hard to find grant-making institutions with priorities that are a good match with our mission to develop essential communication, thinking and leadership skills—all of which are crucial in today's world. The pandemic has obviously been a very difficult time for many organizations. Many funding options have been drastically cut or stopped completely, as people try to figure out what comes next. Nevertheless, we know that the programs Touchstones offers are just as needed as before—if not more—as life begins to return to normal, and we are excited to form new relationships with funders to bring people of all ages and backgrounds together to build a stronger and more inclusive society. As always, if you know of a foundation that would be a good fit for Touchstones, please let us know! Our connections with you, our friends and supporters, have always been our greatest resource!

Going Digital in Manitoba!

*Howard Zeiderman,
Director of Leadership Programs*

In 2012-13, the Bureau of French Education of Manitoba wanted to expand its already successful French immersion and French Language instruction in their public schools. They researched programs to increase student critical thinking and communication skills and landed on Touchstones. A partnership was forged that included Manitoba's team translating seven of our program volumes into French, as we trained a dozen members of that team to deliver workshops for their teachers province-wide. Since then, thousands of students in Manitoba have participated in Touchpebbles and Touchstones discussions.

Like many organizations during the recent pandemic, the Bureau needed additional tools to overcome challenges with remote teaching and learning. Florence Girouard, who was instrumental in laying the initial groundwork and implementation of Touchstones in Manitoba, and Carole Michalik, interim director of Manitoba's French educational resources division, approached us to see about getting our printed French materials into digital formats.

With work from the Touchstones staff and our fearless webmaster, Brian Duncan, the conversion process moved quickly over the past several months. And last week, we signed an annual contract providing Manitoba with digital access for more than 19,000 students. Teachers and students will easily access complete digital program content through links to the Touchstones website, enabling them to engage in weekly discussions regardless of location or situation.

While using printed materials already in the schools will likely be a mode of choice when in-person

instruction returns full time, digital access opens ways for school-wide implementations where there aren't enough physical books on hand. Now every school using Touchpebbles and Touchstones can have each student engaged in Touchstones discussions at the same time, if desired. The benefits of such simultaneous school-wide implementations include an enhanced sense of community. The discussions experienced by one class can flow over to and include students and teachers in other classrooms.

An additional and invaluable teacher and student skill developed through this mode of engagement is facility using virtual formats routinely for authentic communication and learning. While many reports and research indicate that such interaction was absent in much of the remote schooling during COVID 19, we heard report after report from schools that Touchstones provided students and teachers meaningfully contact and active learning. Yes, it was different than in-person Touchstones programs, but it was no less effective in bringing student thinking and voices into the "room" to explore and expand understanding.

All Touchstones programs prepare participants by developing competencies and attitudes essential in the emerging technological and globalized world. But digitalizing our curricula now makes it available in modes we know will remain major tools for teaching and learning—in school, work, and life. Through this newest partnership with Touchstones, the Bureau of French Education is expanding how it equips their students with essential skills for successful entry and leadership into a multilingual, intercontinental workforce and citizenry.



Spotlight on Consecutive Giving

Alexandra Fotos, Office of Annual and Planned Giving

If all donors supporting Touchstones gave consistently each year, those gifts would significantly advance Touchstones financially. That funding would both support operations and allow for planned growth, including programs for students, teachers, veterans, older adults, and the incarcerated. I decided to meet with some of our donors who give consecutively, to understand what motivates them to do so.

Noelle and Philip Richmond of Annapolis first learned about Touchstones when Phil was attending St. John’s College Graduate Institute several years ago. In the spirit of community and friendship, Phil invited his classmates and tutor Howard Zeiderman (also one of Touchstones’ co-founders and its Director of Leadership Programs) to a dinner at his and Noelle’s home. That evening led to many more meals with Howard, and over time Noelle and Phil came to learn about Touchstones.

A couple years later, Phil, a retired wealth management consultant, and Noelle who runs her own Pilates studio, joined a Touchstones discussion program and started attending our events. They were compelled by the Touchstones mission; civil discourse, active listening, and inclusive community are issues they feel are paramount. Then they made their first gift, followed by two gifts the second year. Since then, they have not missed a year. When I spoke

with them, Noelle emphasized that, “annual giving is really the lifeblood of any nonprofit institution. It’s often sexier to contribute restricted money to specific projects and, while that giving is also important, it is regular contributions of unrestricted money that keep an organization’s doors open and allow it to grow its operations.” Phil feels it’s equally important for people to know that charitable giving doesn’t always have to come out of cash flow. “Vehicles such as charitable remainder trusts or making contributions directly from the required minimum

“Annual giving is really the lifeblood of any nonprofit institution.”

distributions of your IRA do not have to reduce your cash flow.” In some cases, such distributions may actually increase it.

In my quest to learn more, I also met with Anne and Harry Zolkower of Shady Side, Maryland. They have been giving to Touchstones annually for nearly 12 years. Harry graduated from St. John’s College and is a project manager at Salesforce.com. Anne worked for many years in the development office of St. John’s College and has a degree from the Graduate Institute. Anne and Harry learned about Touchstones more than 20 years ago through work and social occasions. They became involved when Touchstones’ E.D. Stefanie Takacs invited them to our annual celebration honoring a teacher and a volunteer of the year. Since then, they’ve attended many Touchstones events. Recently,

Harry joined Touchstones’ newest program, *Exploring American Perspectives*, which he has found very gratifying, and Anne has participated in several Saturday community discussions online.

I asked them why they give to Touchstones and more importantly why every year. Like Phil and Noelle, Anne and Harry know that for a nonprofit to thrive, it needs a regular stream of income. “Consecutive gifts,” Anne said, “whether the donor gives one gift per year or monthly, makes a big difference to the nonprofit.” Skipping a year or two means less money for the nonprofit’s steady stream of income tied to operations and program planning and delivery.

What I heard from both couples is a shared understanding of how consecutive annual giving is vital because those regular contributions of unrestricted money sustain organizations like Touchstones and allow for planned growth. Please consider supporting Touchstones today, knowing that your contribution this year—and every year—makes an immediate and lasting difference.

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