

2024

Annual Report



*Our
Starfish
Graduates*



Starfish ConnectionTM
Bright stars... Bright Futures



From the President of the Board

Dear Friends and Starfish Supporters,

It has been sixteen years since Judy, my late wife and I founded Starfish in the spring of 2008, with big hopes and dreams to address generational poverty and prepare under-resourced young people to enroll and graduate from four-year competitive colleges. In the first year, Starfish included four third graders and four mentors. This first cohort graduated from college in 2022.

In the current 2023-2024 year, Starfish has grown to include 48 mentees and 50 mentors, and graduated five more high school seniors who are moving forward to college. Starfish now boasts 26 proud *college* students attending schools such as Tufts, Simmons, Skidmore and UCONN. Several of our Starfish graduates have gone on to graduate school, while others have returned to Stamford to work in professional jobs. In our Annual Report, you will read stories told by their mentors of our most recent Starfish high school graduates, all of whom will be beginning their college journey in the fall.

Starfish Connection is proud to continue enrichment activities for its students including art, music instruction, sports, SAT tutoring, camping experiences, trips to museums, the theater, sports events and college visits. At the same time, Starfish also seeks to expand opportunities. Three new activities were added to Starfish this year. A large and highly successful Holiday Party was enjoyed by students, parents and mentors, with food representing many different cultures from around the world. Middle school students and 5th graders engaged in a new swimming program at the Italian Center. Lastly, Starfish worked with the Stamford Strategy Group to develop a "roadmap" to guide us over the next few years.

As our present Executive Director Regan Allan steps down, after a very successful term and joins our Board of Directors, it is my pleasure to welcome Lorely Peche as the new Starfish Executive Director. Her background includes working at the United Nations, teaching Spanish to Kindergarten through 8th grade students, and most recently, as the Director of Family and Individual Services at Building One Community. With Lorely at the helm, we are looking forward to another great year for our Starfish students.

Starfish is successful because of the generous commitment of time and dollars by its Executive Director, mentors, mentor leaders, parents, donors and grant providers. Thank you all. You are making a remarkable difference "*one Starfish student at a time.*"

Best wishes,

David Martin



Cover Photo: Dania Pinto, James Quispe, Esther Jean Charles, Emmi Herrera, Keyli Maldonado



From the Executive Director

Dear Starfish Connection Friends, Supporters, and Volunteers,

It is with mixed feelings that I pass the baton as Starfish Executive Director to Lorely Peche, who will take over beginning September 2024. Lorely comes to Starfish from Building One Community where she served as Director of Family and Individual Services.

It has been an honor and a joy to work with Starfish Connection over the last eighteen months. Memories of the enthusiasm of the mentors, energy of the mentees and the trust parents place in Starfish will always remain with me. When I began with Starfish, I had the remarkable assistance of previous Starfish Executive Directors- Janet Schneider, Donna Wolff and of course, David Martin. I will provide similar support to Lorely as she transitions into her new position.

Many events and activities were initiated this past year. I am perhaps most proud to have introduced the Stamford Strategy Group to Starfish. After meeting with Starfish focus groups that included mentees, mentors, parents and Board members, the Strategy Group offered detailed guidance with recommendations for growth. We have already worked on a Starfish Handbook which formalizes policies and procedures to standardize Starfish goals and activities.

I understand that clear policies and procedures are important for the integrity of an organization, but I believe that it is human interactions and relationships that make an organization "tick." To that end, we held our first ever Holiday Party attended by mentors, mentees, parents and Board members. Food was overflowing, conversations were lively, and participants mingled and lingered well after the party formally concluded. The Holiday Party will most certainly become an annual event.

In the coming year, I am so pleased that Starfish will implement a grant from the Governor's Mentoring Partnership to assist with the recruitment, training and evaluation of mentors. As a bonus, Starfish will benefit from interacting with leaders of mentoring programs across our state.

With best wishes to all my friends at Starfish, I look forward to following Starfish's successes.

Sincerely

Regan Allan



Congratulations, 2024 Starfish Graduates!

Esther Jean Charles, Margaret Gray, Jami Lo, Mentors



Esther became a Starfish as a smart and quiet third grader. Her brother, Judeley graduated from Starfish and is a graduate of Tufts University. As a high school student, Esther had two mentors, Margaret Gray and Jami Lo. Esther worried "How would I manage with two sets of eyes, ears and strong, unflappable and determined women in my life?" But manage Esther did!

At a music recital in June, 2024, Esther sang a medley of Broadway tunes in the home of her voice teacher. With incredible poise and a sweet voice, Esther's execution was pure joy. Her last song, "I Want to be Me" says it all.

In addition to music, Esther loves to write. In the words of one of her mentors, "I wouldn't be surprised if one day a best-selling book appears on our bookshelves, written by our own Esther Jean Charles." Esther's strong work ethic, honesty and commitment to her life goals will lead her to a successful future.

Esther will be attending Southern Connecticut State University.

Emmi Herrera, Sarah Arnold, Mentor

Emmi met her Starfish mentor, Sarah Arnold, in third grade. Emmi was a sweet, shy little girl who soon blossomed into a determined teenager who faces life's challenges with optimism and ultimately success.

At her first swimming outing with her mentor, Emmi had to be coaxed to put her head in the water. Less than a few hours later, while driving home, she announced she wanted to take swimming lessons. By the next summer, Emmi was swimming laps. Emmi took seven straight years of ballet lessons, taught herself how to play soccer by watching YouTube and then made the Westhill High School soccer team.

Emmi balanced a demanding academic schedule, achieved excellent grades and still made time to help her family with their decoration business, started her own flower business called Reyde Flores and held down a part-time job.

Emmi's choosing Sarah as her Padrina or godmother at her Communion demonstrates their strong bond to each other.

Emmi will be attending the University of Connecticut.



Dania Pinto, Lisa Musilli, Mentor

Dania is an exceptional student, consistently demonstrating outstanding dedication and excellence along the way. As part of the Academy of Finance at Westhill High School, Dania participated in many Advanced Placement Classes and the Future Business Leaders of America. In FBLA competitions, Dania placed first in the state in Business Ethics and fourth in Accounting, thus qualifying her for Nationals in Chicago in 2022 and again in Atlanta in 2023.

Participating in many Starfish activities, such as ice skating, swimming, SoundWaters, Curtain Call and summer experiences at the Greenwich Academy Talent Enrichment Program and the Summer Outreach Program at Sacred Heart Academy, Dania's musical journey was her most outstanding. She joined the Stamford Young Artists Philharmonic, playing her violin in many concerts, including a performance at Carnegie Hall.

Lisa shares, "Dania demonstrates outstanding resilience. Any time she faces a setback, she picks herself up and perseveres."

Dania will be attending the University of Connecticut.



Keyli Maldonado, Diane Green, Mentor



From the beginning, Keyli participated in all Starfish activities with enthusiasm, whether it was the ropes course, baking at Wright Tech, swim lessons at Chelsea Piers or SoundWaters, day camp and overnight camp at Hi-Rock. Keyli was such a highly regarded camper at Hi-Rock, she was invited to be the guest speaker at the 2023 Hi-Rock Annual Meeting. Keyli has returned as an experienced and valued camp counselor.

Keyli is an exemplary, all-around student. She was a member of the Mayor's Youth Leadership Council and the Stamford High School Drama Club, participating in many of the Strawberry Hill Players' Productions.

As Diane shares, "I have watched that little third grader open her world to so many new experiences, take every opportunity given to her and run with it!"

Keyli will be attending Wesleyan University.



James Samuel Quispe, Donna Wolff, Mentor

Donna Wolff, James' mentor feels very fortunate to have shared a long and meaningful journey with him and his family.

In middle school, James enjoyed playing travel soccer and was a volleyball setter in high school. However, James was most passionate about music. In his middle school and high school years, James participated in a string quartet playing the cello. His musical talent took him on a trip to Guatemala with *Intempo*, a local music instructional group. In the summer of 2024, James traveled to Germany with the Connecticut Youth Orchestra.

Donna says, "Being a mentor is about being present, developing trust and opening one's mentee's eyes to new experiences."

James will be attending Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, majoring in mechanical engineering. His dream is to design cars for an automobile manufacturer.



Thank you, Jami Lo!



As she steps down from her role as High School Team leader, we are grateful to Jami Lo for guiding Starfish students through the sometimes difficult college selection and application process. Her tireless efforts helped our students achieve their dreams of going to college.

Our 2024 Starfish Graduates!

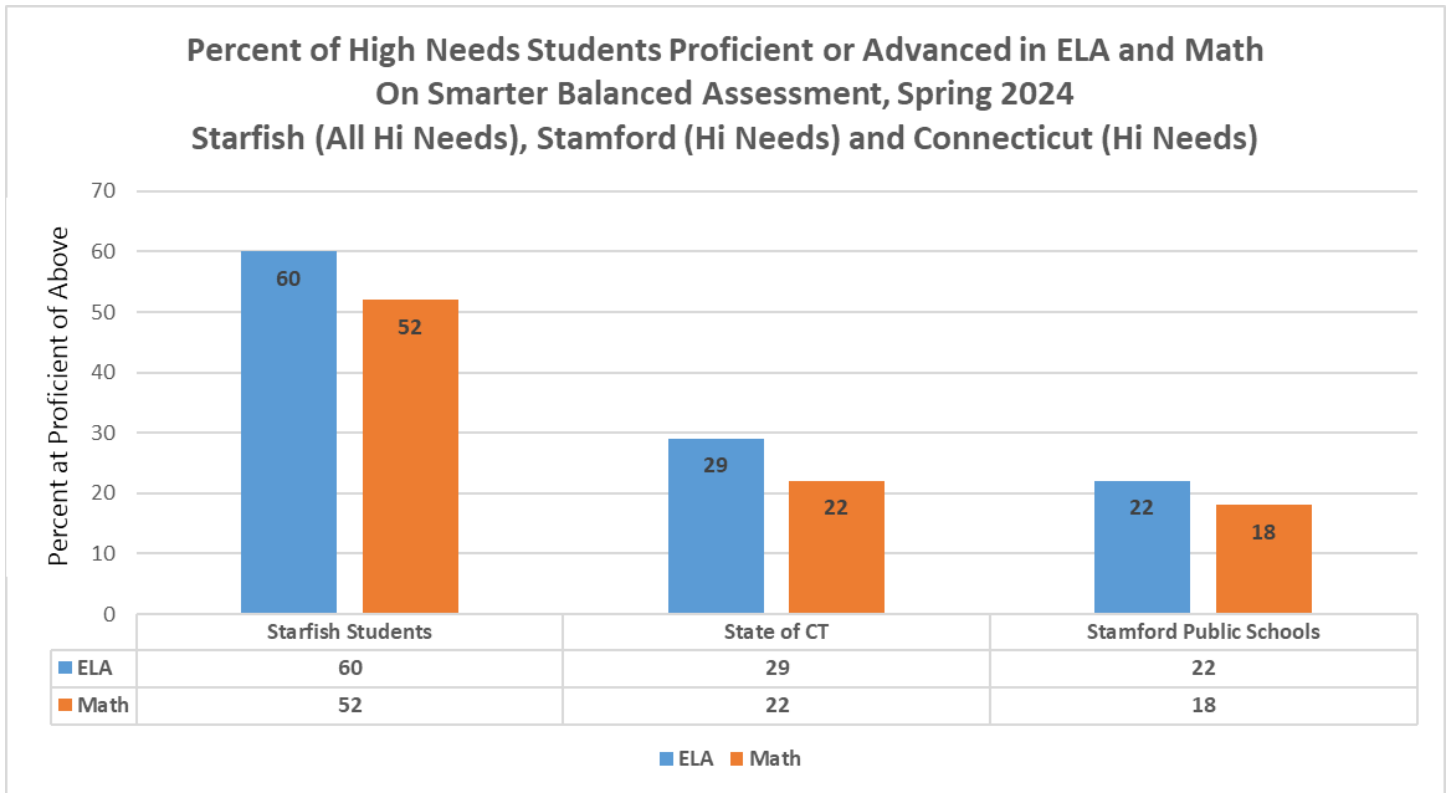


Enriching Experiences for Starfish Students



Activities: SoundWaters, YMCA Hi-Rock Camp, Bowling, Police Station visit, Book Club, College Visits, SHS event, Teen Circle Meetings and Eden Farms. Other enrichment events were Game Day, Nutcracker Ballet, Bubble Mania, Alumni Panel, College Prep Activities, All School Musical and Curtain Call.

Academic Results



The Connecticut State Department of Education uses the Smarter Balanced Assessment to measure the mastery of Common Core Standards in English/Language Arts and Math of students in Grades 3-8.

In Spring 2024, all 25 students in Starfish in grades 3-8 participated in this assessment. The figure above compares the proficiency of Starfish students in English/Language Arts (ELA) and Math to the proficiency of High Needs students in Stamford Public Schools and High Needs students in the State of Connecticut. Starfish students clearly outperformed their Stamford peers as well as their statewide peers.

While the number of students participating in the Smarter Balanced Assessment is small in any one year, Starfish students over many years have consistently surpassed their peers both in the State and Stamford. The pattern of Starfish success on the Smarter Balanced Assessment is clear and notable.

Our Starfish Community



- * *50 Mentor Volunteers*
- * *48 Starfish Students in Grades 3-12*
- * *1 Executive Director*
- * *5 Volunteer Team Leaders*
- * *12 Starfish Board Members*
- * *Numerous Enrichment Opportunities for Children*
- * *4 Volunteer Support Staff*
- * *26 Starfish graduates who have enrolled in college since 2017!*

Thank you to all for making a difference in the lives of our Starfish families.

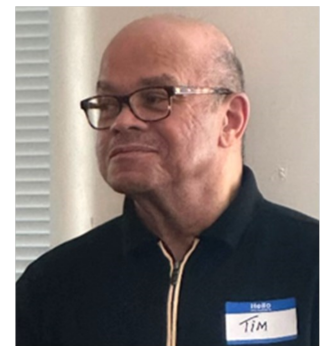
Celebrating Our Starfish Milestones



Our graduating seniors and mentors shared their memories and achievements as their parents beamed with pride. Each mentor received a sweatshirt from the college their mentee will attend and students were gifted a laptop, money for college expenses, and a gift card for furnishing their dorm rooms!

Our Starfish Rising Ninth Graders

Our Starfish 8th graders recalled their favorite memories in Starfish. David, a Starfish high school student shared strategies on how to succeed in high school.



Barbecue for Our Starfish Rising Sixth Graders



What's New at Starfish?

Swimming Lessons

Is swimming safely an important skill for children? Peter Lasalandra, a Starfish mentor and member of the Italian Center of Stamford thought it was. He arranged for free swimming lessons for our middle school and 5th grade students every Saturday from January through March. Eleven brave students gained confidence in learning to swim, especially important for those who planned to attend YMCA Camp Hi-Rock in the summer.



Our Starfish Community Holiday Celebration

In December, Starfish students and their families celebrated the holidays with cheer and laughter. Joined by their mentors and Board members, all enjoyed lively conversations while relishing food from the potluck dinner. Many countries were represented. Our Holiday Party will become an annual event!



What's New at Starfish? (continued)

Governor's Mentoring Partnership Grant



In June, 2024, the Connecticut Governor's Mentoring Partnership awarded Starfish a grant of \$6,000. Starfish will work with state coaches to recruit, train and support our mentors. As part of the grant, Starfish Board Members attended several state workshops. Discussion topics will help Starfish to formalize procedures for monitoring the effectiveness of our program.

Our Strategic Plan

Starfish engaged with the Stamford Strategy Group to help Starfish renew its mission for children. The Stamford Strategy Group met with groups of students, parents, mentors, team leaders and Board members. We identified three recommendations to implement:

- Develop a formalized handbook of policies and regulations for all Starfish participants to follow. This will be reviewed and finalized by the Starfish Board in September 2024.
- Improve policies and procedures to recruit, train and support mentors.
- Review and update Bylaws.

Starfish Board Member Honored

The First County Bank Foundation announced Rosalea Fisher, Starfish Board Member and Mentor, as the recipient of the Reyno Giallongo Community Legacy Award on December 28, 2023. The award was given to both Rosalea and Richard Fisher for their tireless efforts to help our community and improve the quality of life for families and children. Starfish received a donation in honor of the Fishers.



From Left to Right: Regan Allan, Rosalea Fisher, Richard Fisher, Robert Granata, Chairman & CEO of First County Bank.

Community Partners

Balancing Act Financials
 Ballet School of Stamford
 Bartlett Arboretum
 Beyond Limits
 Bruce Museum
 Thomas Cassone, Esq.
 Chelsea Piers
 Child Guidance Center
 Columbus Park Trattoria
 Crescendo Music
 Curtain Call
 Regina Elliott
 Family Centers
 Ferguson Library
 Girl Scouts of CT

Greenwich Music
 Michael Hyman
 Intempo
 The Italian Center
 Jewish Community Center
 Lt. Jerry Junes
 Kids in Crisis
 LiveGirl
 Sgt. Adriana Molina
 Mill River Collaborative
 All School Musical
 Orchestra Lumos
 J.D. Ospina
 PathFinders Adventure Camp
 John Regan, Esq.

The Residence on Summer Street
 SoundWaters
 Stamford Museum & Nature Center
 Stamford Music & Arts Academy
 Stamford Peace
 Stamford Prevention Council
 Stamford Public Education Foundation
 Stamford Twin Rinks
 Stamford Youth Services Bureau
 Stamford Youth Soccer League
 Terry Connors Skating Rink
 Sara Walker Nursery School
 Westover Pizza
 Cynthia Wicker-Williams
 YMCA Camp Hi-Rock



Since 2018, the Residence at Summer Street has generously donated backpacks full of school supplies to groups of our students. Thank you!

Starfish Students Support Each Other

Older Starfish students spoke to their younger peers about the journey ahead to high school and college.



- Judeley Jean Charles spoke at the Starfish graduation ceremony;
- David Dominguez offered strategies to succeed in high school;
- Starfish alumni, Jairon Herrera, Sherley Renodo, Judeley Jean Charles and Yasmin Reyes offered advice to our high school students;
- Emmi Herrera tutored a younger Starfish student in math.



Contributions

Thank you to all of our donors for their generosity this past year.

Corporate and Foundation Grants

Cornelia T. Bailey Foundation
Louis Casale Jr. Charitable Fund
Grace Flipping Foundation
First County Bank Foundation
Tom Gizicki/Ellen Bromley Charitable Gift Fund
Governor's Mentoring Partnership Grant
Claire Helsing Foundation, David Cohen Co-Trustee
Hill Family Fund
William R Knobloch Foundation
St. Francis Episcopal Church
State Street Foundation

Individual Gifts

Jacob Alexander & Kate Jeon
Kenneth & Gwenda Asher
Guy Bailey & Kathy King
Edmund Barker
Wendy Baskin
Joshua & Lynne Berrett
Marlen Bodden
Joe Bryan
Lynne Burgess
Joan Byrne
Trish Carroll & Richard Strahota
Christina Cerasale
Jeff Cohen
Barry Dick
Elaine & Robert Erichson
Heidi Fieldston & Howard Ostroff
Rosalea Fisher
Letitia Ford
Judge Forest & Janet Hanna
Richard & Nancy Freedman
Diane & Henry Green
Lise Gordon
Barbara & Ed Guttman
Ginny Gwynn & John Bellis
Jevera Hennessey
Zeena Hine
Stephen Hoffman
Suzanne Horn
Karen Kelly
Joan & Jerry Kranz
Gary & Kathy Larkins
Carol & Peter Lilienthal
Steve & Jami Lo
Judith & Mark Lowenstein
David Martin
Gene Martin
Corine & Ernie Matarasso
Danette Melchionne
Maria Millan
Milagros Millan-Garcia & Francisco Manuel Sieira
Natalia Millan
Mario & Lisa Musilli
Pamela Nadler
Merritt & Roslyn Nesin
Joan Burgess Polulech & Joe Polulech
Arthur & Betsey Selkowitz
Diane & Dr. Steven Shaby
Pam & Brian Sweeney
Kathryn Walsh & Wes Romansky
Clifford Wells

Our Volunteers

Donna Hughes, Administration
Gail G. Trell, Marc D. Schneider, Music Program Administrators
Bernie Weiss, Photographer
Jeanie Melfi-Smith, Education Advisor
Judy Singer, Grant Writer
Maria Millan, Parent Facilitator
Amariz Videz, Teen Circle Facilitator



Our Mentors

Jack Alexander
Sarah Arnold
Sharon Beadle
Paul Bingaman
Rebecca Bleiman
Marlen Bodden
Jim Bradley
Lynne Burgess-Camp Coordinator
Jenny Canepa
Missy Cole
Susan Conner
Nicky DeRosa
Jackie Dixon
Linda Feld
Jean Gray
Margi Gray
Diane Green
Evan Guttman

Kathy Heslin
Deb Hirsch
Dee Hoo
Susan Horstman
Kathy Joyce
Kathy King -E.S. Team Leader
Alice Knapp
Peter Lasalandra
Peter Lilienthal
Jami Lo- H.S. Team Leader
Mike Magarian
Danette Melchionne
Judy Meyers
Tammi Montier
Theresa Moriarty
Lisa Musilli
Betsy Nagurney

Midge Pappas
Timothy Rogers- M.S. Team Leader
Caroline Romans
Liz Rosano
Fred Rosetti
Sarah Santasiero
Marilyn Schlosser -M.S. Team Leader
Nancy Schulkind
Dianna Shattuck
Mary Smith
Caroline Spooner
Susan Toliver
Cliff Wells
Lori Wentworth
Ken Wentworth
Donna Wolff
Walter Young



Board of Directors

David R. Martin, President

Regan Allan

Jeff Cohen

Anne Downey

Rosalea Fisher

Barbara Guttman

Michael Hyman

Jeanie Melfi-Smith

Maria Millan, Parent Facilitator

Timothy Rogers

Janet Schneider, Secretary

Judith Singer, Ph.D

Lorely Peche, Executive Director (ex-officio)



Above from left first row: Janet Schneider, Lorely Peche, Maria Millan and David Martin; second row: Rosalea Fisher, Judy Singer and Regan Allan; third row: Michael Hyman, Anne Downey and Timothy Rogers. Not pictured: Barbara Guttman, Jeff Cohen, Jeanie Melfi-Smith.

Welcome to our new Executive Director

Lorely Peche





Why Starfish?

Once, as a man was walking along a beach, he noticed a boy off in the distance going back and forth between the surf's edge and the beach. As the man approached, he saw that hundreds of starfish had been stranded on the sand as the tide retreated.

The man was struck by the apparent futility of the task. With so many starfish, many were sure to perish. But the boy continued to pick up the starfish one by one and place them back in the surf.

As he came up to the boy, the man said, "There are miles of beach covered with starfish. You can't possibly make a difference." The boy stooped down, picked up one more starfish, and carefully placed it back in the ocean. Then he turned to the man and said, **"It Sure Made a Difference to That One!"**



Become a Mentor

www.starfishconnection.org

Starfish Connection, Inc. is a 501c3, mentor volunteer organization, whose mission is to address Stamford's opportunity gap by providing long-term mentoring, after-school and summer enrichment programs, and educational support to promising students from the city's underserved families. We pair a mentor with a student, one-on-one to provide these resources from 3rd grade through 12th grade.

Starfish Connection, Inc.

1127 High Ridge Rd., #255

Stamford, CT 06905

Photo credits: A special thank you to Bernie Weiss of Bernie Weiss Photography who attended numerous Starfish functions and provided so many of the photographs in this Annual Report.

Thank you to Janet & Marc Schneider, Judy Singer and Regan Allan for preparing this Annual Report.

