2013

Annual Report

Starfish Connection™

Bright stars... Bright Futures

Why "Starfish"?

Once, a man was walking along a beach. The sun was shining and it was a beautiful day. Off in the distance he could see a person going back and forth between the surf's edge and the beach. Back and forth this person went. As the man approached, he could see that there were hundreds of starfish stranded on the sand as the result of the natural action of the tide.

The man was struck by the apparent futility of the task. There were far too many starfish. Many of them were sure to perish. But the person continued the task of picking up starfish one by one and placing them into the surf.

As he came up to the person the man said, "You must be crazy. There are thousands of miles of beach covered with starfish. You can't possibly make a difference." The person looked at the man. He then stooped down and picked up one more starfish and placed it back into the ocean. He turned back to the man and said, "It sure made a difference to that one!"

Our Mission

Starfish Connection supports promising students from low-income families in Stamford, Connecticut. By providing long-term mentorship, educational guidance, social support, and especially summer and after-school enrichment activities, we help students reach their potential and achieve the dream of attending competitive four-year colleges and universities.

Our goal is to change the lives of the children and families in our program – one child and one family at a time – through a very hands-on, individualized approach, breaking the cycle of poverty for themselves and future generations.

Cover Photo: *5th graders at their Moving Up barbecue demonstrating "S.L.A.N.T.," the mnemonic for how to be a successful middle school student. Sit in the front of each classroom; Lean forward in your seat, Ask questions; Nod your head; and Talk to your teachers.*

From the President

Dear Friends and Supporters:

In a recent article entitled "Equal Opportunity, Our National Myth," Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz states, "It's not that social mobility is impossible, but that the upwardly mobile American is becoming a statistical oddity. According to research from the Brookings Institution, only 58% of Americans born into the bottom fifth of income earners move out of that category." He goes on to say, "Probably the most important reason for lack of equality of opportunity is education: both its quantity and quality… Of course, there are other forces at play. Their families can't afford enriching experiences like music lessons and summer camp."

Starfish Connection's two-pronged program of mentoring to ensure the highest of educational expectations, and enrichment throughout their school years, addresses these factors head-on. And, while our Starfish children are still working their way through elementary and middle school, we see strong evidence that they will break out of poverty when their education is complete.

We have just completed our sixth year of operation, and, because of your ongoing support and generosity, we were able to enroll six new Starfish Connection children again this spring, bringing our total to 37 free-lunch children.

This year's annual report focuses on our teens. We now have 12 children in middle school, difficult years for any child, but particularly so for children of poverty. This is when a combination of difficult life circumstances and negative peer influences can derail children from an academic path – sometimes permanently. You will read what we at Starfish Connection are doing to counter these influences and to arm our children with the resiliency needed to combat them. We also highlight our first group of teens who are moving into high school, all of whom are doing well academically, socially, and in their extracurricular activities.

Thank you – our mentors, community partners and sponsors – for making it all possible. Thank you for your belief in our mission and your continued commitment to Stamford's youth.

Sincerely,

Judy Martin, President

Enrichment

From one 5th-grade boy to another – "Where would we be without Starfish?"

Our Starfish children participate in a variety of individually chosen after-school and summer enrichment programs. These activities are selected by the child and mentor together to develop the child's individual artistic, athletic, and cultural interests and talents. In addition to these weekly and summer programs, Starfish Connection provides group enrichment activities at nearby educational sites.

We started this school year with a joint program for our middle school students together with our 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders. Justin LaBaire of Stamford Youth Bureau led Starfish teams in an orienteering activity at the **Bartlett Arboretum & Gardens** in Stamford. Orienteering is a competitive form of land navigation that combines the suspense and excitement of a treasure hunt with challenges in map skills and compass reading. Our program ended with a picnic lunch for the group.

The second fall program for our younger Starfish was an after-school trip to the **Wolf Conservation Center** in South Salem, New York. This was a return visit for Starfish Connection to a favorite place we introduced to our older students last year. We had a chance to howl with the wolves while learning about their role in the environment and our need to protect them.

John the Baker in Stamford was the site of Starfish Connection's most delicious event this year! Our 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders learned to make personal pizzas, and each child then created an ice cream sundae for dessert.

In the spring, our younger and older Starfish students traveled a little farther afield for some exciting programs. The 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders visited the **Mashantucket Pequot Museum** to explore the history of Connecticut Native Americans. The students were fascinated with the museum's presentations on the rich history and culture of the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation along with the center's exhibits on the region's natural history.

In June, we celebrated the start of summer with a trip to cheer on the **Bridgeport Bluefish** in **The Ballpark at Harbor Yard**.

Our middle school students took the train to Manhattan in April to tour the **Intrepid Sea, Air, and Space Museum**. While there, we were excited to participate in the museum's Space Blast educational program.

In June we also faced a challenging ropes course at **Scalzi Park** in Stamford with support from the Stamford Youth Services Bureau. It was a beautiful day and a great deal of fun!

These enrichment activities introduce the students to new ideas and challenges, keeping them active both intellectually and physically. These programs also give our students an opportunity to share in the kind of broadening experiences that are so familiar to their more affluent peers. At the same time, they help our Starfish children form bonds with each other, which will provide support to meet the challenges ahead.

In addition to the many planned activities we have each year, sometimes a mentor will spontaneously decide to host an event. These often turn out to be some of our most memorable times together. In December, Ginny, one of our 5th-grade mentors, invited the 4th- and 5th-grade Starfish and their mentors to her home to bake and decorate holiday cookies. Here is her invitation to others and a note of appreciation she received from one of the mentors who attended.

"Hi Fellow Mentors,

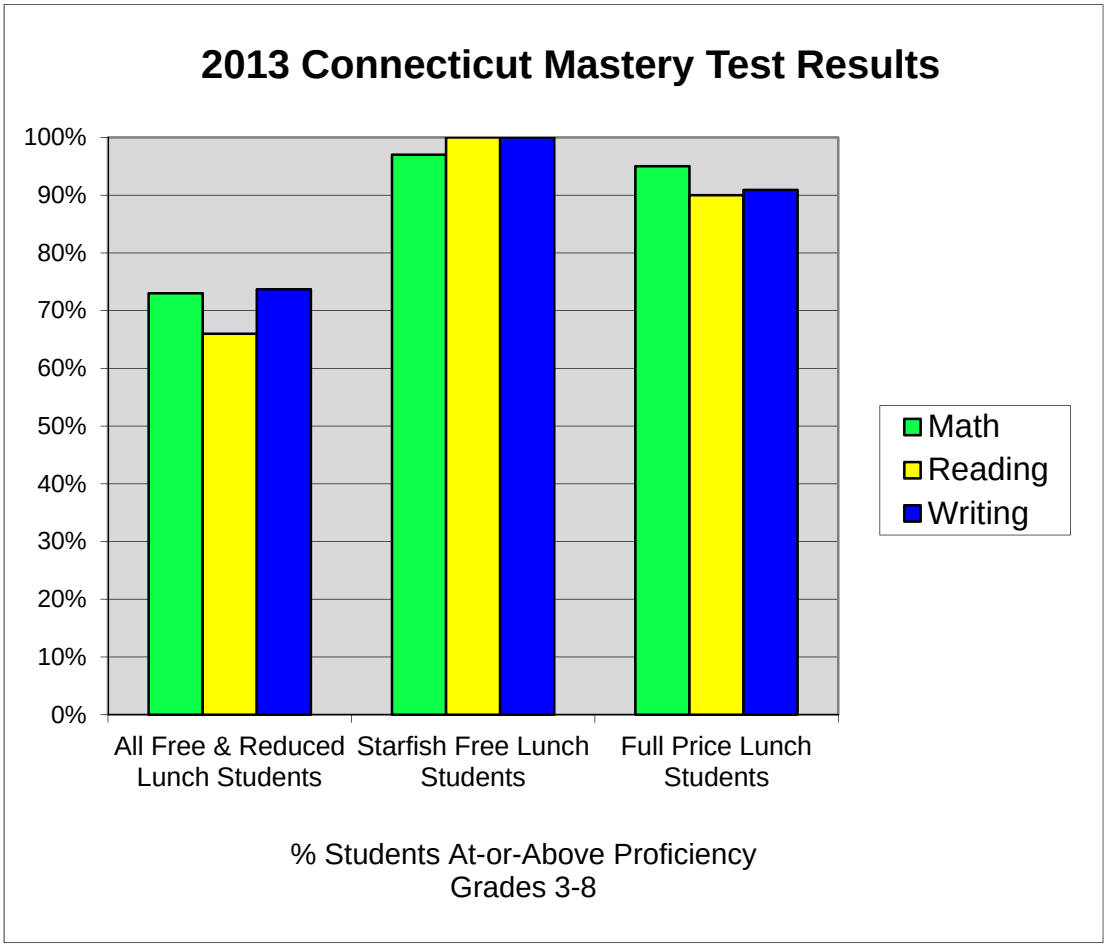
Gabby and I would like to invite all the 4th and 5th grade mentors and mentees to my house on Saturday afternoon for Christmas cookie making and decorating. Lest anyone think the boys may not like this, my own 3 sons (all now in their 20s) loved to do this as part of the holiday celebration. There will be enough cookies for all to take some home to their families. – Ginny"

"Pablo and I enjoyed ourselves tremendously yesterday. Thank you again, Ginny, for making our baking so much fun. That was quite an operation you had going with everyone rolling and shaping the cookies, sharing the ovens, and decorating at a special table, too. It was a wonderful way to start the holidays with the other Starfish. Best wishes to all for Happy, Joyous holidays!! – Marlyn"

Results

CMT Performance

Once again, our Starfish students did very, very well on the Connecticut Mastery Test. The results, which were released in July 2013, show that our students continue to outperform their demographic cohort in the city of Stamford. All of the children achieved grade level in Reading and Writing and only one student missed reaching grade level in Math.



School Performance

In addition to reviewing CMT scores for the group, Starfish mentors also monitor individual school academic progress.

All but one student this past year attained a B average or better on all report cards. Tutoring over the summer and a work-study internship have given this student more focus and helped him develop better study skills. We are expecting his grades this year to be more reflective of his ability.

Activities

Teen Programming

Starfish children begin their transition into our Teen Program in May of their 5th grade year with a Moving Up celebration and barbecue held in the backyard of one of our mentors, Kate Herman. Parents, mentors, and children hear from an adolescent psychologist about upcoming changes and how the students can manage the stresses these changes may bring.

Our facilitators, Irene Blum and Charlene Fuller

Kate, herself a middle school teacher, talks about what Starfish can do to ensure success in middle school, including the "S.L.A.N.T." advice illustrated on our cover this year. The mentors then speak to each child's individual qualities that will serve him or her well in the years ahead.

The children are given a few gifts, including locker organizers, to help them with the transition, and all leave feeling very positive about their next steps.

As our Starfish children advance through middle school and high school, we are aware that there are new challenges that *could* keep them from achieving success in school. So, during their teen years, we have special programming, including monthly Teen Circles led by Charlene Fuller and Irene Blum, facilitators from Stamford's Youth Services Bureau.

8th grade graduates receive their laptops from Starfish Connection co-founder, David Martin

During these Circles, the group discusses topics that teens face on a daily basis, such as friendships and peer group interactions, bullying, self-esteem, peer pressure, substance abuse, and risky behavior. The purpose of the Starfish Teen Circle is to provide a safe and supportive place for the students to discuss issues, and for the facilitators to promote resiliency among our youth. Each meeting ends with a pizza dinner.

Michou

Michou just graduated from Scofield Magnet Middle School with an A average. His 8th grade Exhibition project was on the UAV drone. He played trumpet in his elementary and middle school bands and jazz bands. He also plays classical and modern piano. In elementary school, Michou went to the World Odyssey of the Mind championship at Michigan State University where his team placed 4th among all finalists in their age group. Michou is interested in a career in structural engineering or architecture, and he will attend AITE this fall. He would also like to volunteer as a firefighter in the future. He and his mentor, Carol, like to do puzzles and go to the movies.

Our first cohort of Starfish children has just graduated from 8th grade. These exceptional students are highlighted in this report. To acknowledge their wonderful achievements in the Starfish program, all of our 8th-grade graduates were given new laptops to support their high school studies and their preparation for college. We celebrated this milestone in June with a party and a boat ride across Long Island Sound, compliments of Starfish supporters, Sue Taylor and Allen Brown.

Our Community Partners

Music

Starfish Connection now has three children who play in Stamford's Young Artists Philharmonic. Two girls play in the flute choir, one of whom also plays in the Young People's Symphony, and a boy plays piano in the jazz band. SYAP has been a wonderful partner to Starfish Connection by sponsoring an Instrument Show-and-Tell for our third-graders prior to their having to choose an instrument to play at school.

Giuliano's Music Center has also been an important partner, supporting our children who want to pursue music beyond our Stamford Public School programming. At the December Giuliano's Music Center recital, in which about 90 students participated, our Starfish children performed so beautifully.

It was wonderful to see our children, the only children of color, participate in a musical concert. Two of our performers brought the house down – a budding pianist and a wonderful vocalist who sang "Jingle Bell Rock." We have six students who study violin, saxophone, piano, and voice there. Giuliano's also tunes and repairs our students' instruments and finds equipment when we need to supplement donations.

New Partnerships

Women's Mentoring Network is a new Starfish partner this year. So many of our families are either headed by a single mother or have mothers who are in need of more education or higher-paying employment. With this partnership, our children's mothers can contact the agency and receive the extra help and support they need to improve their financial situation. In just the few short months we've partnered, two Starfish mothers have joined the WMN program.

Two new partners – The Bruce Museum and Stamford Twin Rinks – have opened their doors to Starfish mentors and children with free admission. Many of our mentors have taken advantage of these generous offers, broadening our children's experiences and knowledge.

Jonathan

Jonathan just graduated from Turn of River Middle School with an A- average. He is an avid soccer player, playing on both indoor and seasonal teams with Stamford Youth Soccer. Jonathan has also enjoyed various Lego building and engineering activities over the years. Because of this interest, he is looking forward to high school at AITE. He is excited about the computer and engineering classes, and is hoping to play soccer for his district school, Westhill. Jonathan enjoys playing board games and going to movies with his mentor Kate, and has enjoyed the many field trips and group meetings with his Starfish friends. He would like to work with young children at soccer camp next summer.

My student has told me that she plans to get all A's this year so that she will get into Honors classes in high school. And she wants to continue to achieve all A's there as well. The Starfish program has done wonders for her. While the goal was to enrich Manuela's life, she and her family have definitely made a difference in mine. – Meryl Allen, mentor

Beverly

Beverly just graduated from Dolan Middle School where she achieved straight A's in all honors classes. She plays flute at school and in the Stamford Young Artists Philharmonic flute choir and orchestra. She loves photography and has learned to sail at the Young Mariners Blue Water Bound program. This was Beverly's fourth summer sailing and she will be moving up to the Laser class of boats this year. She hopes to be a CIT in the Young Mariners program next summer. Her favorite things to do with her mentor, Maria, are making dinner and baking cookies. She and Maria do community service together each month, making and serving dinner at Stamford's soup kitchen.

We have begun partnerships with the Jewish Community Center and the YMCA to offer after-school activities at member rates for our children. They offer swimming lessons, which many of our children need for safety as well as skill building. They also offer dance, martial arts, and other activities. The YMCA has a wonderful summer camp program in which our children participated for the first time this past summer. They enjoyed it immensely.

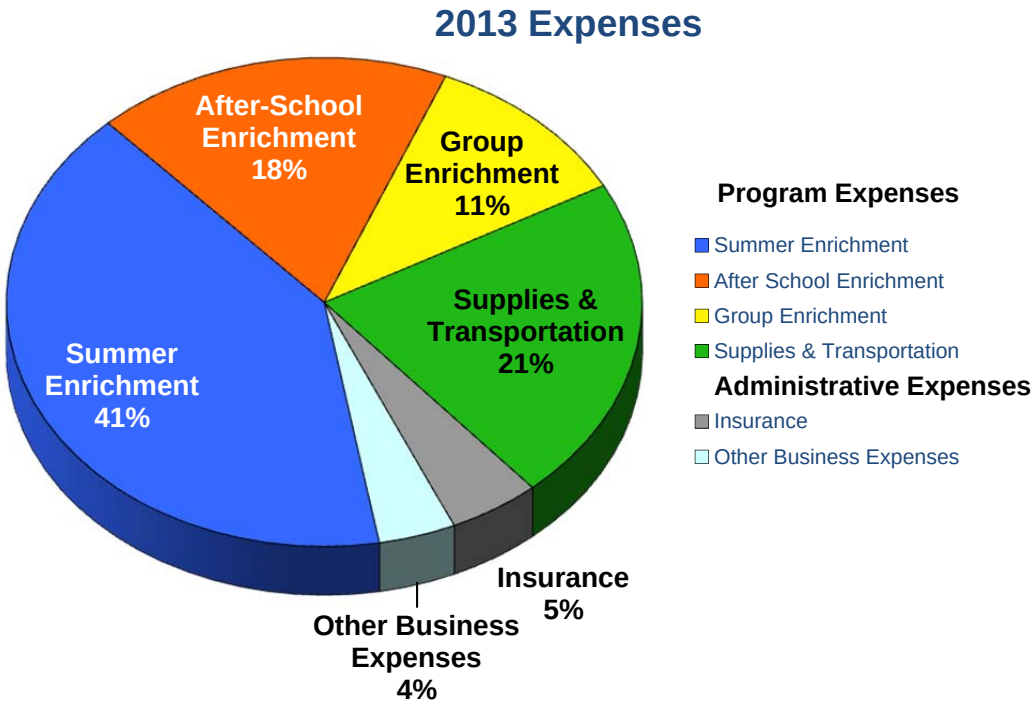
We also sent four children to LINKS summer programs at independent schools in Greenwich through the Arredondo Foundation for the first time this year. These programs combine academics with summer fun to ensure that children don't slide academically during the school vacation. The free bus transportation was critically important in allowing our Stamford-based children to attend.

Finances: Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2013

2013 Income

In addition to funds provided by the founders to cover all business expenses, Starfish Connection received program support during the 2012 fiscal year from local foundations, companies, and individuals:

Grants	$53,500
Founders' donation	$ 6,000
Individual gifts	$15,598



Expenditures for supplies covered the cost of musical instruments, camp supplies, student computers, materials needed for after-school programs, and some transportation expenses.

Contributions

Thank you to all of our generous donors for their gifts this past year!

Individual Gifts

Jon Bellis & Ginny Gwynn
Josh & Lynne Berrett
Ellen Bromley & Tom Gizicki
Allen Brown & Susan Taylor
Irene Bryan in memory of her daughter, Elia Bryan
Lynne Burgess
Michael & Maureen Cacace
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The Knobloch Fund at FCCF
Nellie Mae Education Foundation
Purdue Pharma L.P.
St. John's Community Foundation
Tools for Life Foundation
Young Women's League of New Canaan

I am very grateful for this country, for Starfish Connection, and for Mrs. Martin, Mrs. Agatstein, and Mrs. Trell. Thank you so mucho, for help us. Thank you for your time. We are very blessed to be in United States. Sincerely, Hilsa, mother of two Starfish children

Manuela

Manuela just graduated from Scofield Magnet Middle School with an A average. She lives for soccer, which she's played since she was six years old. She plays midfield on the Stamford Hurricanes, the Connecticut travel league. She enjoys baking and playing on the computer. Manuela will attend Stamford High in the fall, where she hopes to join the SHS soccer and lacrosse teams. Her long-term plans are to work in the criminal justice system. She says that her mentor, Meryl, and Starfish Connection help her do things she would not be able to do otherwise. Through Starfish Connection Manuela has been attending overnight camp for the past four years, where she hopes to be a CIT next summer.

Community Partners

Arredondo Foundation
Ballet School of Stamford
Bartlett Arboretum
Bernie Weiss, Photographer
Bruce Museum
Camp Hi Rock
Curtain Call
Ferguson Library
Girl Scouts of CT
Giuliano's Music Center
Jewish Community Center
Long Ridge Camp
Mead Creative Summer Program
Pathfinders Camp
Pro Bono Partnerships
REACH Prep
Robyn Goldman, Adolescent Psychologist
SCOPE (NYC)
SoundWaters
Stamford Center for the Arts
Stamford Museum & Nature Center
Stamford Public School System
Stamford Recreation Department
Stamford Symphony
Stamford Twin Rinks
Stamford Young Artists Philharmonic
Stamford Youth Foundation
Stamford Youth Services Bureau
Stamford Youth Soccer League
Dr. Steven Shaby
Terry Connors Skating Rink
Women's Mentoring Network
Yerwood Center
YMCA of Stamford
Young Mariners Foundation

I received one of the most meaningful thank you letters ever yesterday thanking me for my son's donated blue blazer. – Kate Urbank, mentor

"Dear Kate, Thank you for the jacket. I look handsome with it when I go to church. My mom would say 'that's a great vest.' I love the jacket. It looks creative. I hope you have a wonderful Christmas."

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Judith Singer, Ph.D.

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8th-grade graduates celebrate with Judy Martin, co-founder and president of the Starfish Board

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To find out more about Starfish Connection, visit our website, www.starfishconnection.org. We welcome contributions and support from the community. Please ask us how you can help!

Starfish Connection

Starfish Connection, Inc. is a 501c3 corporation whose mission is to help academically minded youths from low-income families.