

2015

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 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 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.

From the President

Dear Friends and Supporters:

With your generosity and backing, we have just completed our eighth year as a preeminent mentoring program in Fairfield County. With the addition of six rising 3rd-graders, Starfish Connection now provides services to 49 Stamford Public School students.

This year the Starfish family met with unexpected tragedy. One of our boys lost his mother last fall, when a vehicle struck her. There is no way to make this boy's life whole again, but I shudder to think of what would be if he were not a Starfish child. His mentor took his older sister and him under her wing, first giving them the love and sympathy they needed during those very difficult first months and setting up an emergency fund for them. She then made sure they received all the services available in the community, including school counseling and bereavement-group participation. She made sure they had outlets for their stress and grief, including pottery and chess classes, organized a summer full of activity, and much more.

In another case, Starfish siblings were being evicted from the home their parents had rented for 10 years, as the bank foreclosed on the owner. With ostensibly no affordable housing option for a family of seven in Stamford, they felt their only option was to move to Bridgeport. This would have been terribly disruptive for these wonderful scholars. The older sibling's mentor stepped in, arranged a short-term extension of their lease to get them through the summer, researched and located a permanent housing option for the fall, and helped with the application and lease signing processes.

These are just some examples of how our mentors do whatever it takes to help their Starfish Connection children and families in times of need. Poverty adds a layer of complexity to families trying to make it, particularly when a major crisis arises. The longitudinal nature of our mentoring program, the quality of our mentors, and the close bonds our mentors form with their families make this program so much more than "just a mentoring program." We are there for the children every step of the way, helping them overcome obstacles and identify opportunities to grow and prosper.

Thank you for making it all possible. Thank you for your continued commitment to Stamford's youth.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Judy Martin". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first name "Judy" and last name "Martin" clearly distinguishable.

Judy Martin, President

Who We Are

Starfish Connection supports promising students from low-income families in the city of Stamford. Our approach is longitudinal, comprehensive, and individual – it's about transforming lives, one at a time.

Most mentoring programs for inner-city youth are short-term interventions. They may, therefore, have more moderate, even temporary, outcomes. Starfish Connection begins to work with students at the start of 3rd grade. Each year, we enroll five or more children from Stamford's high-risk socioeconomic groups and provide mentoring, advocacy, educational support, and enrichment activities.

As the students move into high school, we help them find volunteer opportunities, internships, and jobs, as well as providing specialized college preparation support. These initiatives help our children become well-rounded, accomplished students who will compete effectively for places in select institutions of higher learning.

We are proactive in setting the highest of expectations, exposing children to the world around them, enriching their lives, and monitoring their progress at every step. We offer interventions when needed, and we seek out growth opportunities to ensure that each child will become a successful young adult.

Stamford is fortunate to have a number of outstanding youth organizations. Starfish Connection has developed partnerships with several of these programs to provide exciting opportunities for our students. One of our most enduring relationships has been with the Young Mariners Foundation. The YMF helps build leadership and life skills in young students by combining the sport of sailing with

academic enrichment in science, technology, and math. The values and goals of our two programs are aligned and complementary in supporting Stamford students.

In April this year, Mayor David Martin and Judy Martin, Starfish Connection founders, were honored by the Young Mariners Foundation at YMF's annual Keeping Kids on Course gala.

The Martins were recognized for their passionate commitment to Stamford's youth and to the partnership between our organizations.



Starfish Founders Mayor David Martin and Judy Martin with Young Mariners Foundation Chairman, Tom O'Connell

Group Enrichment Activities

Elementary School

This year's elementary school children enjoyed a variety of activities including nature, history, art, engineering, and science. All activities were enthusiastically enjoyed by our 21 youngest Starfish children.

We began in the fall with a walk at Stamford's Nature Center, led by naturalist Chris Evers, who showed the children the flora and fauna in the forest and riverbeds. Chris followed up with a hands-on presentation of exotic animals at his Animal Embassy. Children had a chance to hold a python, feed the giant tortoise, and pet the chinchilla.



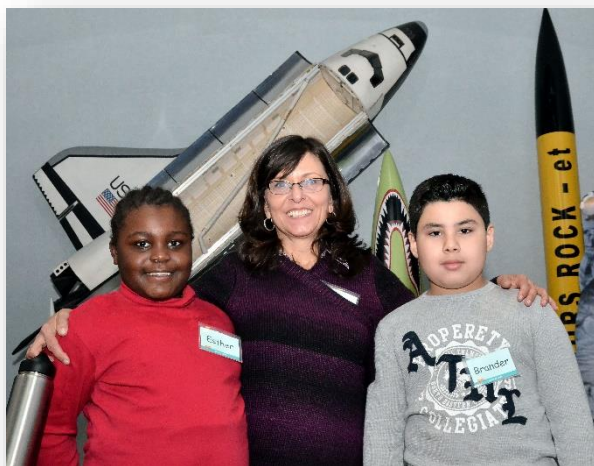
In October we visited the Historic Hudson Valley, touring Washington Irving's Sunnyside Manor homestead and hearing about his books and life on the Hudson. Children had an opportunity to play some of the outdoor games popular in Irving's time.

That evening, we attended the Great Jack O'Lantern Blaze where more than 5,000 individually hand-carved, illuminated jack-o'-lanterns were ablaze in an elaborate walkthrough experience.

The Eli Whitney Museum staff came to Stamford and taught our children how to make their own pinball machines one November afternoon – an engineering project that resulted in a homemade game for the children to enjoy.

On a cold day in February we returned to one of our favorite spots, the Challenger Learning Center in Ramapo, New York. The children participated in a few science experiments and demonstrations, and then they entered the Center's space shuttle for a mission to Mars.

They ended their day by making personalized model rockets that each child will have an opportunity to launch at a follow-up visit later in the year. It was a special opportunity for students to participate in an exciting, scientific program, and the experience was a huge hit.



Starfish Connection took our first group trip to Norwalk's Silvermine Arts Center in April. The children were invited to tour the center with a docent and then worked on their own art projects under the direction of one of Silvermine's educators.



Finally, in June, we returned to a favorite haunt of Starfish Connection, the Ropes Course at Scalzi Park. Justin LaBaire and his wonderful staff at the Mayor's Youth Services Bureau guided our children as they tested their strength, courage, and teamwork on the various structures.

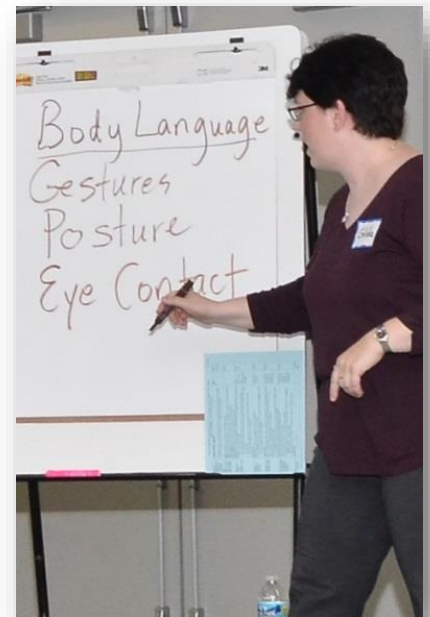
These group events are so much more than "field trips." When mentors accompany their children, they ensure that the children get the most out of their

experiences. It's often the one-to-one interaction that makes the difference. These are experiences our students may not normally have, and they are remembered and talked about for years to come.

Middle and High School

Our middle school "tweens" continued their monthly Teen Circles, Sunday afternoons of talk and food guided by our facilitator, Harriette Ketover. They touched on subjects as varied as friendships, resiliency, trust, bullying, and communications. Our older teens focused on financial and job interviewing skills that will be so important as they move toward young adulthood.

But, it wasn't all "business" for our teens. They also enjoyed a trip to Caramoor to explore an exhibition of eight specially commissioned sound artworks. Visiting *In the Garden of Sonic Delights* in Caramoor's beautiful surroundings, the students participated in a self-guided tour of soundscapes that captured and amplified the sounds of nature drawn from diverse settings by several different artists.



These older Starfish also participated once again in the Eli Whitney Museum's pinball machine engineering session. Members of the Museum staff visited us in Stamford to help the older students design and make more elaborate, motorized pinball machines using more advanced plans. This event was particularly exciting for some of our students who have already expressed an interest in engineering as a career.

Expanded Programming

As we worked through our eighth year of operation, our Board noted the need for additional programming in a few areas. The first was nutrition.

Nutrition

We are recognizing that more of our enrollees are overweight, eating junk food, and not exercising as they should. We invited Dr. Madhu Mathur, who runs the pediatric Lifestyle Medicine Center, to speak to all of our children and their parents about healthy eating and snacking.



This presentation was followed by tours of ShopRite with the store's nutritional director, Cora Ragaini, who taught parents, mentors, and children how to read labels and select healthy foods. This was the first of what will be ongoing health-related programming for our Starfish community.

Financial Skills

As our teens reach working age, we are expanding our programming to include skill-building in networking, interviewing, and personal finance. Our older teens were introduced to financial topics in "Money Smart for Young Adults" sessions given by First County Bank representative Freeman Hardison, and our own mentor and financier, Barbara Jacobs. They learned how to maintain a checking account and how to use credit cards responsibly. The speakers introduced the importance of building credit worthiness.

Career Planning

Equally important, all of our teens and tweens were introduced to interviewing skills with Gilda Bonanno, a Communications and Leadership Training consultant. Along with their mentors, they enjoyed a session with Gilda early in the fall called “Shaking Hands with the World: How to Connect with Adults,” which taught communications and networking skills. Mentors followed up individually with their Starfish teens to practice the skills learned – making eye contact, offering a firm handshake, and developing networking lists of adults in their circles who can be of help in seeking internships and work. They then practiced these skills in mock interviews. Afterward, the mentors worked with their teens to identify volunteer opportunities, a high school requirement of the Starfish Connection program, and summer employment.



Focus on STEM

As our girls reach their middle school and high school years, we want to ensure that they continue to excel in the STEM areas, where young women are still underrepresented, both in fields of study and the workforce.

During spring break this year, we partnered with SoundWaters to enroll seven Starfish girls in their week-long Science Stars program. This wonderful hands-on program gave the girls an opportunity to dive into science through experiments, activities, and scientific exploration.



We also particularly engaged our girls, along with the boys, during our Challenger Space Center and model rocketry program. The girls were as enthusiastic and as involved as the boys were during our visit to the Center this year. On their own initiative, two of our 8th-grade girls will be attending AITE – Stamford’s magnet technical high school – next year, while one will attend the Agriscience program at Westhill High School.

Stretching Boundaries

Over the years Starfish Connection has noted that many of our children and their parents are extremely nervous about leaving their homes and neighborhoods. But, we know that the independence children learn through these experiences is critical. College shouldn't be the first time children leave home. Starfish Connection works with a YMCA overnight camp in Massachusetts that provides our children with two and four week camperships at scholarship rates. Typically we have five or six children attend. This year we sent twelve.



We are also teaching our tweens and teens to advocate for themselves, a critical skill as they move into high school and beyond. Many low-income people, particularly people who may be undocumented or have undocumented relatives, tend to go through life quietly, trying not to make waves. So, their children have few role models to teach self-advocacy.

We teach these skills at our Moving Up celebration for 5th-grade students and in our Teen Circles sessions. Our mentors model these skills by advocating for their Starfish children in the schools and with community organizations where volunteer opportunities and jobs exist. It doesn't go unnoticed by our children. Many times this year, Starfish teens have reached out to adults to redirect their lives – change a class, attend a particular school, or go to overnight camp for the first time.

Success Stories

Four years ago, the mentors of some young Starfish girls decided to start a book club to strengthen the girls' reading skills. Over the years, the mentors and girls read a selection of books, came together to discuss them, and finished each meeting with a dinner.

Not only have the children's reading scores improved, but the girls have formed a close bond. This year, one of them urged the others to go to overnight camp with her. While some parents were reluctant at first, the girls convinced their mothers, and this summer all of them enjoyed two weeks at Camp Hi Rock in Massachusetts.

Academic Performance

2015 was the second year the Stamford Public School System administered the new SBAC standardized test, developed to align with the new Common Core State Standards. Its administration is being used to work out the kinks of the new test, so individual scores are not being reported. Therefore, we have no standardized test scores for our students this year.

Based on report card and teacher information, however, we are confident that our children are continuing to do extremely well academically.



Once again, our children are averaging in the A to B range, with only a few grades of C here and there. When a child receives a grade of C for the term, the mentor and Starfish organization get together to determine what is needed. If a child requires extra help, we find a tutor to step in and meet the student's need for academic support.

All Starfish children are working hard at school and are excited to share their report cards with their mentors.

Our 6th-grade and 9th-grade students once again transitioned well into their new middle schools and high schools. These are often difficult years for students, as they must learn new routines, exhibit more independence, and, many times, make new friends and acquaintances. Guided by their mentors and by the skills they learn in their Starfish Teen Circles, all of our students made the transitions without a hitch.



Financials: Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2015

2015 Income

In addition to funds provided by the founders to cover all business expenses, Starfish Connection received program support during the 2015 fiscal year from local foundations, companies, and individuals:

Grants	\$55,896
Owner/Founders' donation	\$ 6,000
Individual gifts	\$15,972
Interest	\$ 220
Total	\$78,088

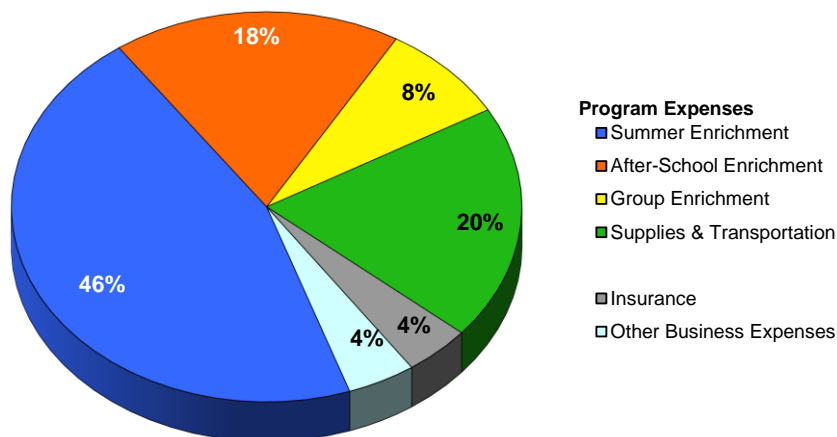
2015 Expenses

Program Expenses

Summer Enrichment	\$32,169
After-School Enrichment	\$12,947
Group Enrichment	\$ 5,824
Supplies and Transportation	\$13,774

Administrative Expenses

Insurance	\$ 2,982
Other Business Expenses	\$ 3,069
Total	\$70,765



Success Stories

A number of our Starfish teens are bumping up against math hurdles. One very bright and capable 8th-grade girl taking honors algebra started receiving C's on her report card. She reached out for help and was tutored this spring by a local physicist and IT executive, Varghese John, Ph.D., who has volunteered with Starfish. At the close of the school year, the student received a B in algebra, something she believes would not have been possible without the tutor's help.

A 6th-grade boy had a very different experience. Shortly after school began last fall, he told his mentor that his math class was too easy. The boy had been placed in college prep instead of the more challenging honors class. The mentor spoke with the teacher and counselor several times, but despite the child's excellent grades, the school did not change his assignment. Finally, the mentor visited the school in person, and the guidance counselor agreed to move the boy in January. This was done, and the boy finished the year strongly in the appropriate class.

Contributions

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

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Ally Bank Foundation

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The Herbert & Sarah M. Gibor Charitable Foundation

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Ballet School of Stamford

Bartlett Arboretum

Bernie Weiss, Photographer

Bruce Museum

Camp Hi Rock

Center Stage Dance Studio

Chelsea Piers

Curtain Call

Ferguson Library

Future 5

Gilda Bonanno, Teen Communications Coach

Girl Scouts of CT

Giuliano's Music Center

Harriette Ketover, Teen Circle Facilitator

Jewish Community Center

Varghese John, Math Tutor

Let's Get Ready

Long Ridge Camp

Mead Creative Summer Program

Mill River Collaborative

New World Chorus

Pathfinders Adventure Camp

Pro Bono Partnerships

REACH Prep

Robyn Goldman, Adolescent Psychologist

SoundWaters

Stamford Museum & Nature Center

Stamford Public School System

Stamford Symphony

Stamford Twin Rinks

Stamford Young Artists Philharmonic

Stamford Youth Foundation

Stamford Youth Services Bureau

Stamford Youth Soccer League

Dr. Steven Shaby

Temple Shalom Nursery School

Terry Connors Skating Rink

Women's Mentoring Network

Young Mariners Foundation

YMCA of Stamford

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Success Stories

One of our 4th-grade girls was born with congenital amputation, absent her lower left arm. One of the Starfish requirements is that the children play musical instruments throughout elementary and middle school.

Though, of course we would have waived the requirement in this case, her mentor instead found videos of one-handed people playing trumpet, the only instrument that can be played with one hand. She showed the videos to the girl, who was delighted and has played the trumpet all year.

Starfish Connection, Inc.

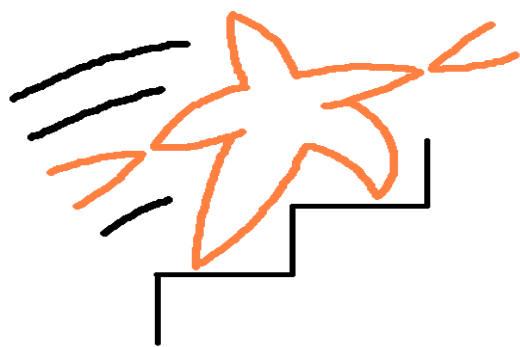
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To find out more about Starfish Connection, visit our website Starfish Connection. We welcome contributions and support from the community. Please ask us how you can help!



Starfish
Connection

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