

2011

Annual Report



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!"

From the President

Dear Friends and Supporters:

We have just completed our fourth year of operation and, because of your incredible support, we have successfully transitioned from a start-up to a strong and well-established non-profit in the Stamford community.

We continue to find and engage wonderful new mentors in the program. This year, five of our six new mentors are educators. All 25 Starfish Connection mentors work to seek out opportunities for their children to learn, grow, and enhance their skills. They are also by their mentees' sides to offer guidance and help them in overcoming obstacles. As a result, the children are doing phenomenally well in school. All had wonderful report cards filled with A's and B's. Their Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) results exceeded our expectations and, again, mirrored the scores of Stamford's well-to-do population.

As we continue to add new children to the program, we have grown our all-volunteer organization in an organic way that ensures the integrity of the program. A number of our mentors have stepped into leadership roles within the organization. This has enabled us to grow without losing the hands-on approach that has been the secret of our success. Trish Carroll and Julie Barker now share the responsibility of seeking out and managing educational group trips. Trish Carroll has also taken on the responsibility of soliciting donations of musical instruments and purchasing others so that each and every Starfish child has the instrument of his or her choice. Donna Hughes works with her fellow mentors to ensure all children are properly enrolled in their after-school and summer activities. Other mentors have organized and hosted events throughout the year beyond those that Starfish Connection planned.

They say it takes a village; we truly operate as one, both within Starfish Connection and within the community. We now have 30 community partners who offer enrichment services or supplies for our children. And, we have received a dozen grants and many individual contributions that have enabled us to make long-term commitments to 25 deserving Starfish children. Thank you all so much for your belief in our mission and commitment to Stamford's youth.

Sincerely,

Judy Martin, President

Who We Are

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.

Each year, Starfish Connection enrolls five third-grade children from Stamford’s

high-risk socio-economic groups and provides mentoring, advocacy, educational support, enrichment, and extracurricular activities throughout their elementary, middle, and high school years. In June we enrolled our fifth cohort of third-grade students, bringing our total to 25 children who will enter the third to seventh grades in September, 2011. All of the students are selected from Stamford’s Public Schools and they all qualify for the free lunch program based on their family income.

Because of our hands-on approach, we are always within arm’s reach if a child falters or is in need of help. We work with the child and parents to delve into issues and seek out opportunities to ensure that the child gets the assistance he or she needs to continue on a successful academic and life path.

Starfish Connection has no paid staff. As we grow, we are developing ways to manage our expanding program, while still ensuring that we can keep our very hands-on approach. This is a cornerstone of our program and essential for our success.

Success Story

While our focus is on Starfish children, our mentors often find themselves helping others in the family, most notably the single mothers raising many of our children. A few years ago, “Linda” asked her daughter’s mentor how she could earn her high school diploma. The mentor steered her to Stamford’s Adult Education program and attended the first meeting with her. Linda completed the National External Diploma Program and earned her high school diploma. The mentor was honored when asked to attend graduation in June, where Linda also received a scholarship to attend the Sanford-Brown Institute to become a medical assistant. What a wonderful example for her children!

Mentors have stepped up to host and organize enrichment and other activities for our children including community service projects. And our photography instructor, Bernie Weiss, is now photographing Starfish Connection in action throughout the year.



One interesting development this year has been the increasing visibility of Starfish Connection not just locally, but in other communities as well, through our presence on the internet. In response to recent inquiries, we have developed a formal blueprint so that other communities might replicate our successful mentoring and enrichment model. We are working with a group in Chicago, for example, which has approached us for advice in adopting a similar program.

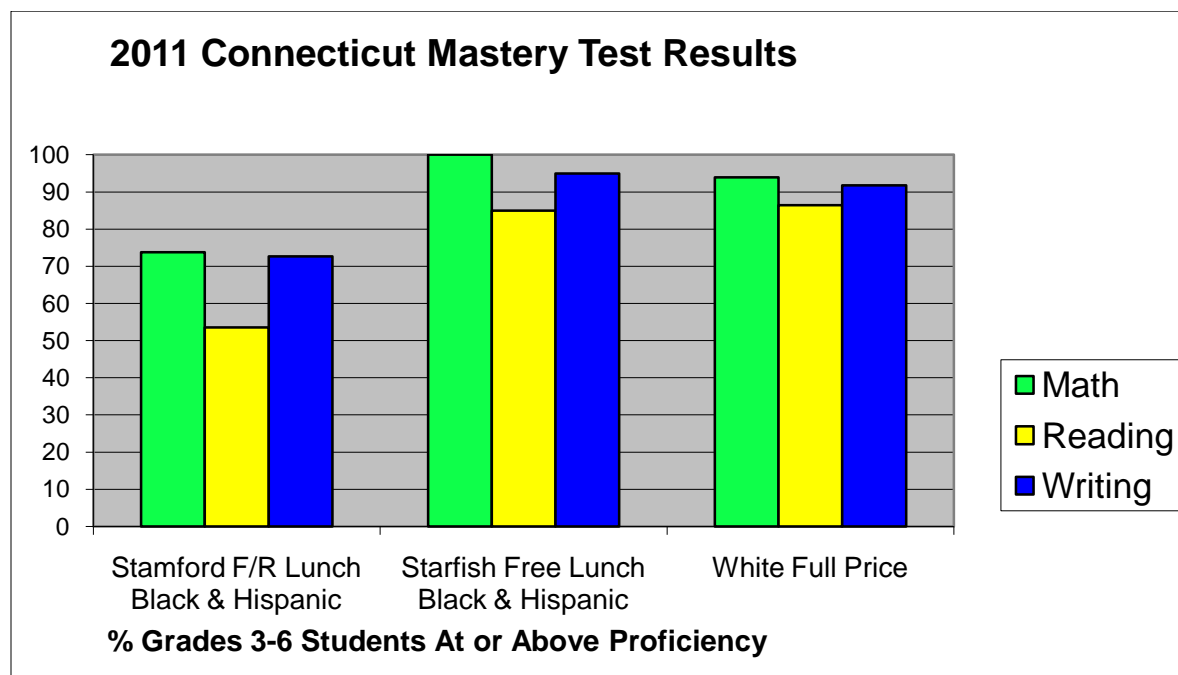
Results

Among other measures, we review standardized test scores and report cards each year to assess Starfish Connection's impact on our students. The Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) results released in June 2011 tell an exciting story.

Our Starfish children are significantly outperforming their demographic cohort in the city of Stamford and in the state of Connecticut. In the CMT chart on page 6, "proficient" is defined as grade-level work.

In math 100% of the Starfish students reached proficiency, marginally better even than the segment of more economically advantaged white students. Very nearly 100% of our Starfish students also reached proficiency in writing.

Reading scores lagged only slightly behind those of Stamford's economically advantaged students, with 85% of our students achieving proficiency. This is an improvement over last year's performance, a direct result of the special emphasis we placed on the reading component of the program over the past year. All mentors have been strongly encouraged to involve their students in the Ferguson Library Summer Reading Program and to promote good reading habits.



F/R – Free and reduced-price lunch

Starfish Connection's oldest cohort just completed sixth grade. All five of the children received report cards with A's and B's, a few having straight A's. This is something of which the children are very proud. The transition to middle school is not an easy one and we are very pleased with how these young people eased into it. Two of the youngsters came to our Moving Up party for the next group of fifth-grade Starfish students and shared their middle school experiences with them.

2010-2011 Activities

Educational Trips and Enrichment

Our Starfish children participate in a variety of after-school and summer enrichment programs. Each child is required to participate in the music program offered in the Stamford Public Schools.

Instrument Petting Zoo

In the spring our third-grade Starfish students received a special invitation to attend a rehearsal of the Stamford Young Artists Philharmonic. This event was an exciting way for each child to select an

instrument to study in the school instrumental program. Over the course of an hour, the students and mentors listened first to the Young String Ensemble, then the Young People's Symphony, the Flute Choir and, finally, the Jazz Ensemble.

The SYAP students then introduced themselves and talked briefly about their instruments. Following this introduction, the Starfish students were able to explore any instrument which interested them. At the end of the evening, the Starfish students had made their decisions: three students selected the violin, one chose the saxophone and two will be playing drums!



Group Excursions

Our third- and fourth-grade Starfish made model rockets on September 25, 2010, at the Challenger Center in Rockland County. This activity followed a morning spent exploring Mission Control and

spacecraft simulators in a realistic introduction to participating in a *Mission to the Moon!*



We returned to Rockland County Community College on a beautiful Saturday in June to launch the children's rockets with the assistance of the Challenger Center staff and Board Member David Martin. It was an exciting event as the rockets soared into the sky from the launch pads.

In December we enjoyed a group outing to the annual Holiday Train Show at the New York Botanical Gardens. The students enjoyed this beloved exhibit of over 150 carefully constructed and detailed



reproductions of New York City landmarks covering all five boroughs. The miniature buildings were made entirely of natural materials to form a fantastic landscape. Making their way in and around the display were a dozen model trains that fascinated the children.

On Martin Luther King Jr. Day in January you would have found our students and mentors “Making Music” at the Faith Tabernacle Church in Stamford. Anthony DeQuattro, percussionist of the Greater Bridgeport Symphony, led this fun workshop. He got students and mentors alike involved in playing music from around the world!



Success Story

B selected the flute to play in the school music program, but after two years, with little practice and a flute that wasn't working properly, her playing was poor. A Starfish mentor who plays flute took this child under her wing and began giving her weekly lessons. One year later, our student's instrumental music teacher placed her in the advanced group and she was accepted into SYAP's flute choir. With this and similar experiences, we realized that Starfish Connection had to amend its music program. We now purchase and maintain instruments suited to each child through a partnership with Giuliano's Music Center, rather than relying on the limited selection available from the schools. We also work more closely with the students to encourage a minimum of 10 minutes of practice each day.



One of the highlights of our program was a trip aboard the Maritime Aquarium's 40-foot research vessel Oceanic. During a 2 ½ hour cruise the students had hands-on experience collecting research samples from the Long Island Sound. What would we find – fish, lobsters, crabs, sea stars? Identifying specimens was definitely part of the fun!

By keeping the children active and engaged, these programs encourage a healthy, intellectually stimulating lifestyle. The children are exposed to a wide variety of background-building experiences and spend far less time watching television and playing video games.

Individual and Small-Group Activities

After-school programs, summer camps, and small-group activities offer many enrichment choices for our students. We match individual interests with programs offered by the Stamford schools, private instructors, sports leagues, and through partnerships with community camps and recreational organizations. Our mentors help the students choose activities and then work with the families to navigate transportation, registration, and other obstacles. All programs are paid for by Starfish Connection.

Again this year, several of our children participated in the Young Mariners Program and passed the required swimming competency exam, a critically important life skill. Once they've mastered swimming, the students are able to participate in Stamford's Blue Water Bound sailing program over the summer. The goal of BWB's program is "to have young sailors return 'safe and sound' from each voyage feeling confident with a heightened sense of self-esteem," an objective that complements our own aspirations for the children.

Success Story

K is a promising third-grade student who is among our very poorest. He lives with his single mother; his father was just released from jail. Using the computer with internet access that we provide for each Starfish child, he was surfing the net. His mother told us that when she asked what he was looking at, he said, "Colleges. And, I think I want to go to Yale!"

Our students chose a variety of other programs this year, including Stamford Recreation classes ranging from cartooning to piano; football and cheerleading with Stamford Youth Foundation; home and travel teams with Stamford Youth Soccer; and ice skating. Next year we will begin a partnership with Terry Connors Rink offering more students a chance to get out on the ice.

Our photography program was a special, new opportunity this year. With the purchase of a point-and-shoot camera and instruction by a local amateur photographer, Bernie Weiss, who volunteered his expertise, we organized lessons for a Starfish child. She now has a website on Picasa featuring some of her photographs.

A year ago, one of our students enjoyed an extraordinary experience with the international educational program Odyssey of the Mind. This fun program encourages students to use creative problem-solving skills to face challenges as a team. We wanted to expand the opportunity to participate this year. With the volunteer leadership of Leslie Ilaw, an Odyssey of the Mind guru, we organized our own Starfish team. Under Leslie's expert coaching our team joined 1500 other students at the state competition in April and placed fourth in its division!



Summer Camps

It is critically important for the students to participate in stimulating physical and educational programs over the summer so they don't fall behind academically. Our Starfish students attended summer programs both locally and, for the older children, away from home. The camps they attended provided a range of programs:

- Traditional day camps: Long Ridge Camp, Pathfinders Adventure Camp, Activities4Kids, Stamford Recreation, and Girl Scout camp;
- Specialty sports camps in basketball and soccer;
- Mead Creative Summer program and Lakeside Pottery for children interested in the arts;
- SoundWaters Blue Fish program;
- Young Mariners Blue Water Bound sailing program;
- YMCA Camp Hi-Rock overnight camp in the Berkshires through the SCOPE (Summer Camp Opportunities Provide an Edge) organization.

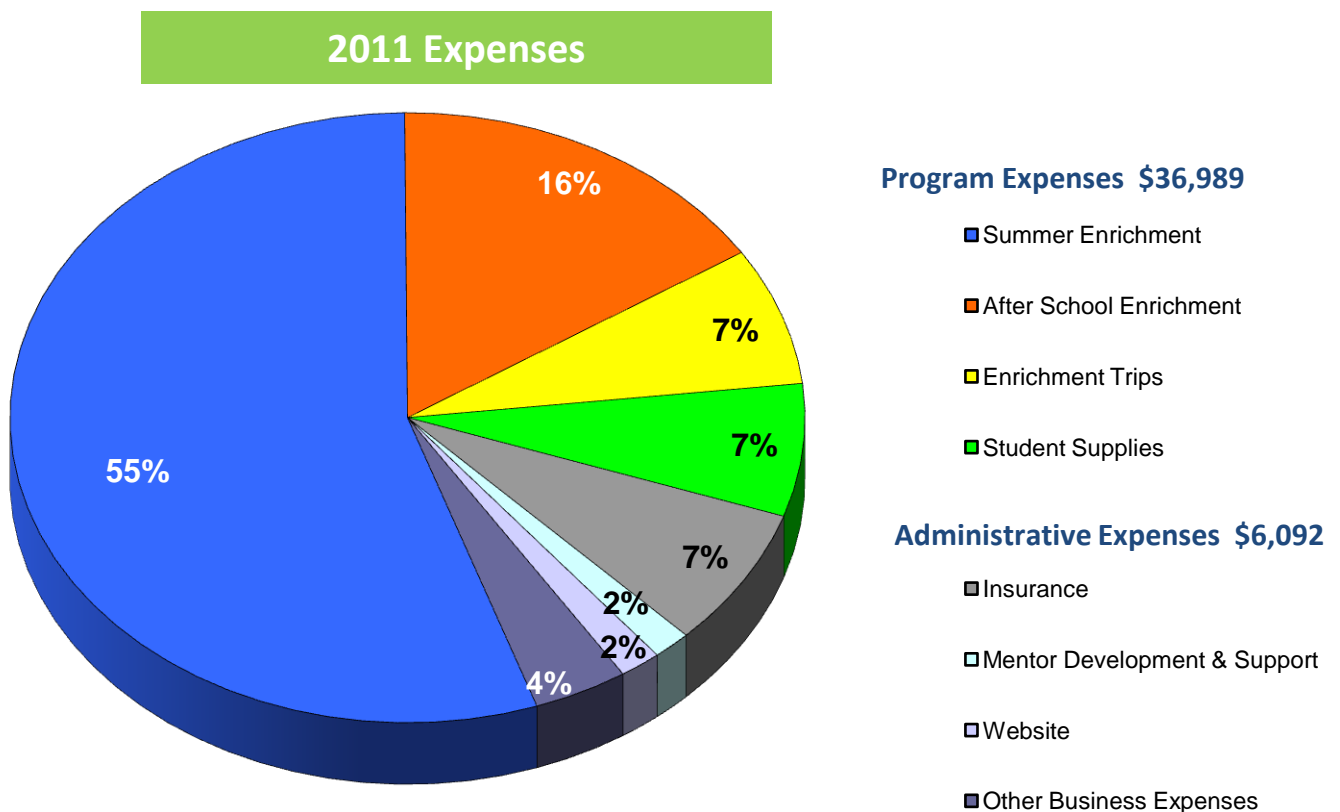
Finances

Fiscal Year ending June 30, 2011

Income

In addition to seed money provided by the founders, Starfish Connection received support during the 2011 fiscal year from local foundations, companies, and individuals:

Grants	\$35,750
Individual Gifts	\$17,151



As Starfish Connection continues to add new students each year, we require increases in funding to provide meaningful experiences for a larger number of children. We're delighted to report an increase of 63% in grants over last year and a doubling of the number of foundations and corporations supporting Starfish Connection! Individual donations increased 71% while the number of donors nearly doubled as well. *Administrative expenses are funded solely by contributions from the founders so that 100% of all grants and donations go directly to current and future student program expenses.*

Contributions

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

Corporate and Foundation Grants

Ally Bank Foundation
First County Bank Foundation
General Electric Company
General Reinsurance Company
The Herbert & Sarah M. Gibor Charitable Foundation
The Hollander Foundation
Joseph W. Nunn Foundation
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Community Partners

Bernie Weiss, Photographer
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Computers for Kids
Faith Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church
Ferguson Library
First Presbyterian Church
Girl Scouts of CT
Giuliano's Music Center
Glenbrook Community Center
Lakeside Pottery
Long Ridge Camp
Mead Creative Summer Program
Pathfinders Adventure Camp
Peak Performance Camp
Pro Bono Partnerships

Robyn Goldman, Adolescent Psychologist
SCOPE (NYC)
SoundWaters
Stamford Museum & Nature Center
Stamford Public School System
Stamford Recreation Department
Stamford Symphony
Stamford Young Artists Philharmonic
Stamford Youth Foundation
Stamford Youth Soccer League
US Computer Connection
Westport Country Playhouse
Yerwood Center
Young Mariners Foundation

Individual Gifts

Geoffrey Alswanger
Anonymous
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*Pictured

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Success Stories

J is a third-grade boy who learned to play piano at his church. He loves playing, but only has a keyboard at home on which to practice. A person in the community donated a piano to Starfish Connection and we thought of J right away. The piano was delivered and the donor had her own tuner go to J's home to tune it. Here is the note she received from him, using his knowledge of similes and school vocabulary words throughout.

Dear Mrs. Colten,

Thank you for the piano. It's perfect as money. When I play it I'm jubilant. I'm passionate about the piano and music.

Love,

J

J has now started taking piano lessons at Giuliano's Music Center, a Starfish Connection partner.

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