

2014

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!"



One of our mentors received the following note from the mother of two of our Starfish Children.

“Hi, Mrs. Trell, I am very happy to inform to you, that Mónica was accepted in the Greenwich Country Day School, Link Program for summer. I am very, very happy and grateful to you, Mrs. Agatstein, and Starfish Connection for the big help in the education of my kids. Everything I dreamed for me when I was a student is happening with them. Thanks a lot.”

From the President

Dear Friends and Supporters:

With your generosity and backing, we have just completed our 7th successful year as a preeminent mentoring program in Fairfield County. We have come a long way from our initial enrollment of four children in 2008, having just enrolled eight new rising 3rd-graders, bringing our total to 42 students.

The focus of this year's annual report is on our wonderful community partners who provide group and individual enrichment for our Starfish Connection children as well as discounted and free admission to some of our area's most treasured resources. A unique aspect of the Starfish Connection program is the enrichment component. Without the enrichment we provide through our community partners, most of our children would do little to nothing after school and during the summer. This is a recipe for disaster in their teen years and later. Instead, our children thrive in dance classes, music lessons, on sports teams, and in many other activities. They also have full summers at camps, specialized summer programs, internships, and jobs.

The Executive Director of one of our community partners, Young Mariners, recently wrote, "Under the guise of play and fun, after-school enrichment ... [activities] help students learn teamwork, discipline, organization and focus while nurturing positive relationships with others. Studies prove over and over that out-of-school activities not only improve academic performance, they increase confidence, curiosity, critical thinking, problem-solving, and leadership skills. A 2002 Rose Institute report shows the return to taxpayers on investments for out-of-school-time experiences ranges from \$3-\$4 for every dollar spent."

Our experience confirms this. We see our children blossom as they explore new activities, build skills and talents, and learn about the world. Children who have had little to say in class begin to open up, telling teachers and classmates about the things they've done through Starfish Connection. Shy children gain confidence. Teens begin to advocate for themselves. And all are focused on their academic work and proud of their accomplishments.

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 "Judith Martin". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Judith" written in a larger, more prominent style than the last name "Martin".

Judith Martin, President and Executive Director

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 or more third-grade children from Stamford's high-risk socioeconomic groups and provides mentoring, advocacy, educational support, enrichment, and extracurricular activities throughout their elementary, middle, and high school years. During their high school years, we work with them to find volunteer opportunities, internships, and jobs, as well as providing college preparation support.

In June we enrolled our eighth cohort of third-grade students, bringing our total to 42 children who will enter the third to tenth grades in September 2014. All of the students are selected from Stamford's Public Schools, and they all qualify for the free-lunch program based on family income.

Because of our hands-on approach, we are always within arm's reach if a child or teen 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.



Success Stories

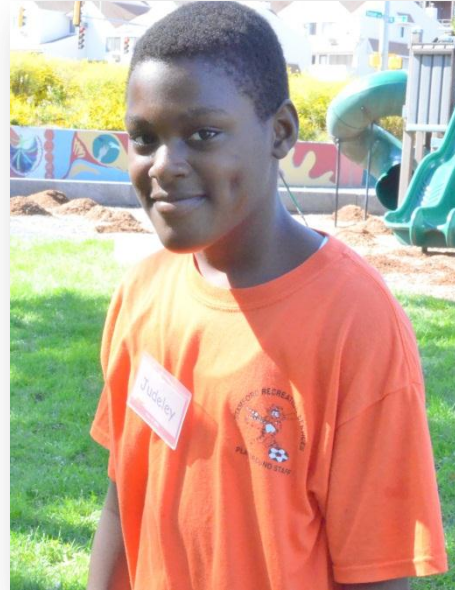
One of our 6th-grade boys is a budding pianist who exhibits a great deal of talent. He began playing piano for the Stamford Young Artists Philharmonic's jazz ensemble, catching on to improvisation quickly. But, it was hard work, and he quit after their fall concert. His mentor, believing his talent should be fostered, worked on the issue with him, refusing to let it go. His parents, wonderfully supportive of what Starfish Connection was trying to do, also encouraged him to continue. This spring, he rejoined SYAP, and he began taking lessons from a master instructor this summer as well.

Community Partnerships

Most of our community partners are organizations that provide support to Starfish in the form of free or reduced rates for youth services and programs. These partnerships enable us to offer excellent enrichment programs while stretching the funds we receive from grants and individual donors, thus sustaining our viability.

Other partners offer services such as counseling, medical, educational, and employment support to our children and parents, most often free-of-charge. Still others collect needed supplies for our Starfish children. Without their generosity, we could not do what we do for and with our Starfish participants.

Many of our partners are not-for-profit organizations themselves, using funds they have raised in support of Starfish Connection's youth. The Stamford Museum & Nature Center and the Bartlett Arboretum give our mentors and youth free access to their exhibits, trails, and grounds all year-round. The Bruce Museum also offers free museum access year-round. The Stamford Symphony, Stamford Young Artists Philharmonic, All-School Musical, and the Ballet School of Stamford offer us free tickets to all concerts and performances, and Curtain Call offers tickets at highly discounted rates to mentors and youth alike.



In addition, some of our athletic centers offer free or discounted services to our members. Stamford Twin Rinks offers free skating and rentals during any public skate time. And, our newest partner, Chelsea Piers, offers discounts for use of their 6,000-square-foot Splash Zone, Adventure Center, and batting cages. All of these organizations offer places for our mentors to meet their students in order to do something fun, educational, or entertaining.

During the summer, we partner with a variety of organizations that offer our students camp experiences, cultural and academic programs, internships, and employment opportunities. Summer can be a time when low-income youth languish, leading to poor academic performance. Starfish students are fully occupied in the summer and return to the classroom ready to learn.



Camps such as Long Ridge, YMCA's WOW camps, Pathfinders, Hi-Rock overnight camp, Young Mariners' Blue Water Bound sailing program, SoundWaters' Bluefish program, Stamford Museum & Nature Center's Junior Curator program, Girl Scouts of CT's Camp Aspetuck, Curtain Call's Summer Stock, the Mead Creative Summer Program, Giuliano's Summer of Rock, and the Arredondo-sponsored LINK programs all offer weeks of summer education and fun.

Recently our older Starfish Connection members have reached the age when they are looking for internships and jobs. The Mill River Collaborative has offered both to our youth through their Stewards program where teens learn about environmental science while caring for Stamford's new park. And, the Young Mariners' Blue Water Bound program has offered an internship to the first Starfish 'graduate' of their Blue Water Bound sailing program.



Finally, many of the youth services organizations in Stamford offer Starfish students after-school enrichment ranging from sports teams to music lessons. Stamford Youth Soccer League is a popular choice for many of our youth, some of whom play on the travel league. Some are involved with Little League or play on local football teams. Others practice cheerleading through the Stamford Youth Foundation or City's Recreation Department.

A number of our youngsters take private music lessons at Giuliano's Music Center, some becoming proficient enough to join the Stamford Young Artists Philharmonic. Many of our children have enjoyed ice skating lessons at Terry Conners Rink. Center Stage and the Ballet School of Stamford offer dance classes, and the JCC and YMCA offer swimming lessons, karate, hip hop classes, and other activities. This spring Chelsea Piers signed on as a Starfish Connection partner to offer discounted clinics and classes in gymnastics, basketball, baseball, squash, lacrosse, volleyball, and swimming.



Group Enrichment Activities

Elementary School

This year's younger children enjoyed a variety of group activities, including theater, art, sports, and science throughout the year. All of these programs were enthusiastically enjoyed by our 19 elementary school children.

We began the year with a day in New York City, including a train ride into the City, followed by lunch in the Grand Central Station concourse, a walk through Times Square, and a performance of Peter Pan at the New Victory Theater. For many, it was their first train ride to NYC, and for all it was their first Broadway show!



In early December, one of our mentors, expert potter Liz Rubin, led the group in pot making at the Clay Art Center in Port Chester. The pots were fired by Liz and later returned to the children to give as holiday gifts to family members.

During our very long and dreary winter, our children spent a Saturday afternoon having a 'blast' at Chelsea Piers' Adventure Center. They began their activities at the Jump Zone, jumping on the many trampolines, and then moved to the Climb Zone, with its cutting-edge 22-foot climbing wall. They finished the afternoon at the Splash Zone that features three fun and exciting pools with water slides.



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

Finally, on a glorious day in early June and after a delicious picnic lunch, we boarded SoundWaters' 80-foot schooner for a 3-hour tour of Long Island Sound, and a hands-on science-infused learning experience. Starfish children helped raise the sails, hauled in a trawl net, and examined the ecology of the Sound. They tested the Sound's water quality along Stamford's coastline and touched and examined live animals from the Sound. What a way to end our year!



Middle and High School

Our teens 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, and substance abuse.

But, it wasn't all "business." They enjoyed a November trip to Queens to visit the Louis Armstrong House where we had a guided tour, learning about his life and music, followed by a trip to the nearby Moving Image Museum that integrates works of art, artifacts, audio-visual presentations, and interactive exhibits of the motion picture industry.



In April, our older teens toured Manhattanville College and had an informational session with a college admissions officer. For a number, it was their first visit to a college campus. On the tour, they visited academic buildings, the student center, and a dormitory, finishing up with a meal in the dining commons. Our 6th- and 7th-grade students toured Westhill High's Agriscience program and will tour AITE, Stamford's technology high school, in the fall. Both are excellent magnet high school programs for them to consider.

Finally, we had two events for the whole group last fall. On a beautiful Saturday morning in late September, we partnered with Alex Domico of the Mill River Collaborative to pull non-indigenous plants from along the riverbank and to clean and spread mulch at the playground. It was a great opportunity for the children to learn about invasive



and native plants and to help enhance the beauty of this downtown park. It was hard work, but for a very good cause, and was followed by a picnic in Stamford's wonderful new park.

In October, Starfish mentor and board member Trish Carroll organized a lovely recital at the Mianus River Park's Treetops Chamber Music venue, compliments of Don Brownstein and Lisa Tannenbaum. Music continues to be an important part of the Starfish

program with all of our children participating in school musical-instrument programs. Thanks to Giuliano's Music Center, and our recent partnership with New World Chorus, which seeks out donated instruments for us, our Starfish children have had an opportunity to develop musical skills and appreciation. A number of our most talented student musicians played and sang for us, some alongside their mentors.



Academic Performance

This year, along with many other Connecticut Schools, the Stamford Public School System administered the SBAC standardized test, developed to align with the new Common Core State Standards. Last spring's administration is being used to work out the kinks of the new test, and so, individual scores are not being reported. Therefore, we have no standardized test scores to report this year.

However, based on report card and teacher information, we have reason to believe that all our children are continuing to do extremely well academically. Once again, our children are averaging in the A to A- range, with only a few falling into the B range. All are working hard at school and are always excited to share their report cards with their mentors. In a few instances, when we've seen a drop in grades over the course of the year, we've gotten involved to ensure that the children work with their teachers to turn their performance around.



Our 6th- and 9th-grade students 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 at their Teen Circles, our students made the transitions without a hitch and with great results.

*All our children continue to do extremely well
academically*

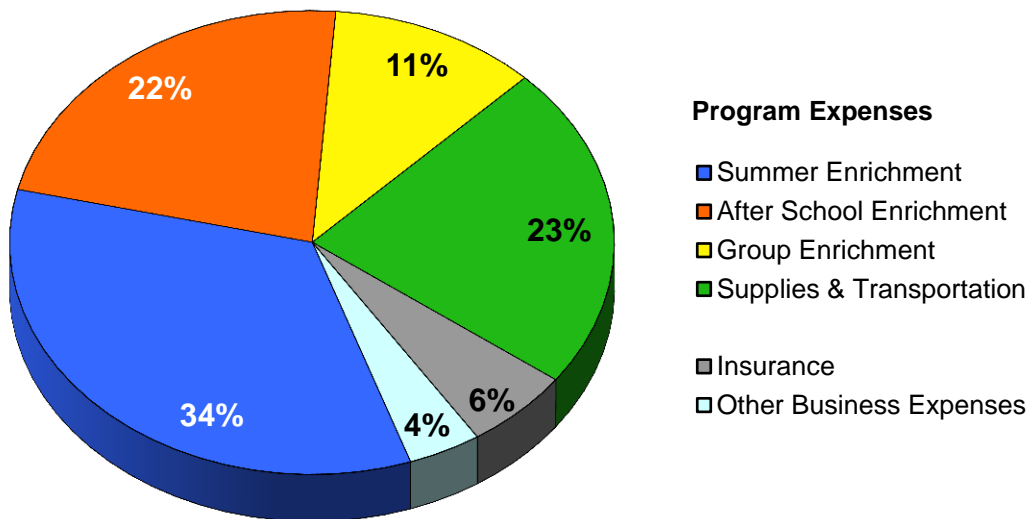
Financials: Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2014

2014 Income

In addition to funds provided by the founders to cover all business expenses, Starfish Connection received program support during the 2014 fiscal year from local foundations, companies, and individuals:

Grants	\$57,062
Founders' donation	\$ 6,000
Individual gifts	\$20,450
Interest	\$ 157
Total	\$83,669

2014 Expenses



Student supplies include musical instruments, computers, camp supplies, and material needed for school and after-school activities.

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
Herbert & Sarah M. Gibor Charitable Foundation
John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
The Knobloch Fund at FCCF
Michael's Inc.

Nellie Mae Education Foundation
Pitney Bowes
Purdue Pharma L.P.
St. John's Community Foundation
Tools for Life Foundation
United Methodist Women
Young Women's League of New Canaan

Community Partners

Arredondo Foundation
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
Girl Scouts of CT
Giuliano's Music Center
Harriette Ketover, Teen Circle Facilitator
Jewish Community Center
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 Conners Skating Rink
Women's Mentoring Network
Yerwood Center
Young Mariners Foundation
YMCA of Stamford

Individual Gifts

Marlyn Agatstein
Gayle & Geoffrey Alswanger
Jon Bellis & Ginny Gwynn
Allen Brown & Susan Taylor
Irene Bryan in memory of daughter, Elia
Lynne Burgess



Michael & Maureen Cacace
Mary Ann Cadieux
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Selkowitz Family Foundation
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Judy & David Singer in memory of son, Jonathan
Stephanie Snow
Lauren & Steven Strelsin
Eileen & Steven Swerdlick
Lani Saylor
Temple Shalom Nursery School Parents
Joan Wexler



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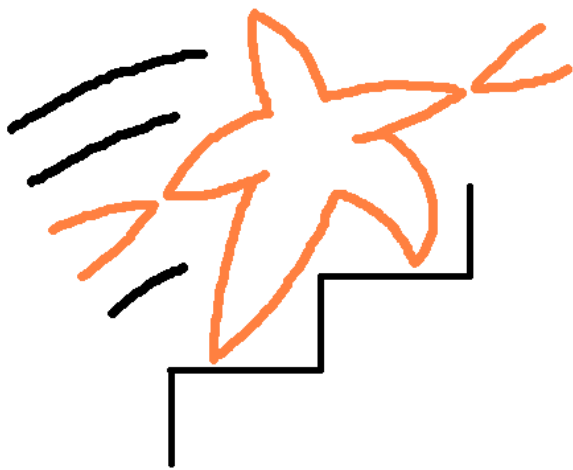
mail@starfishconnection.org

Success Stories

One of our 6th-grade boys became a volunteer at the Ferguson Library. He did this on his own, pleasantly surprising his family and mentor.

Our high school students all volunteer in the community. One works with adults at Neighbors Link, helping them learn computer skills. Another is a Reading Partner at the Chester Addison after-school program. A third helps during homework hour at Yerwood Center's after-school program, and the fourth volunteers at Stark School's ROSCO and Young Mariners programs. And, in December, a group of 6th- and 7th-graders baked holiday cookies for Kids in Crisis, exemplifying our commitment to community service.

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



Starfish Connection

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