

2012

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.



From the President

Dear Friends and Supporters:

We have just completed our fifth year of operation and, because of your ongoing support, we were able to enroll seven new Starfish Connection children this spring, bringing our total from 24 to 31. This means we also engaged seven new mentors to pair with the children. Once again, many of these new mentors are former educators.

This year's annual report focuses on this wonderful group of volunteers who are the cornerstone of our success. You will read about some in our Spotlight sections. I heard a quote recently. "Those who can, do. Those who can do more, volunteer." This is certainly true of our mentors.

Each mentor signs up for a 10-year commitment to a child, and enthusiastically gives of his or her time to ensure a child's success academically and in life. The mentors constantly look for opportunities for their Starfish children to learn and experience all that their community has to offer. Our mentors also look at the obstacles that are in the Starfish child's way and work with the child and family to overcome them. Starfish mentors have been successful in doing both. And they do it with joy in their hearts. As one mentor wrote to me early in her experience, "I cannot thank you enough for Starfish. I feel more gratitude in my heart than I can ever express. Starfish has opened a wonderful new world for me."

Because of our mentors and Starfish Connection programming, our children have done extremely well once again, in school and on their Connecticut Mastery Tests. They have also experienced things they might never have had the chance to do, like visiting a Wolf Conservation Center or learning about engineering by building and testing Vibrobots from the Eli Whitney Center, adding to their knowledge of the world and to their general education. Teachers tell our mentors that Starfish Connection enrichment experiences form a focal point for the children's written work and oral expression in class.

Of course, none of this would happen without you, our Community Partners and Sponsors. Your generosity makes it all possible. Thank you all so much for your belief in our mission and your continued commitment to Stamford's youth.

Sincerely,

Judy Martin, President

Starfish Mentors: The Heart of Our Program

Twenty-four mentors provided guidance, support, and opportunity to our students over the past year. Some of these mentors have worked with their students since Starfish Connection began in 2008, while others are just beginning their association. Why do mentors volunteer so much time, energy, and kindness to our students? Listen to their own words...

- *Becoming a mentor for Starfish gave me the opportunity to give back to the community that has given me and my family so much.*
- *I see myself less as a wise, older teacher to P than one who appreciates this young, striving individual and aids him to be the best that he can be ... It is a gift for me to be able to share my love of learning, commitment to positive community relations, and pride in our nation with this young person.*
- *Starfish is so different. I am one-half the relationship and my Starfish child is the other. I give my time, my enthusiasm, my ideas, my encouragement, my willingness to be there for my child, and he makes me proud and happy and hopeful.*
- *We went on a Mission to Mars – how cool is that!*
- *Our first day together! First we went to the Mill River Playground. And then we went to Roll'n on the River with fun, arts & crafts, music, entertainment by the Swingset Mamas, pizza & ice cream, animals to admire, a flower tattoo, and meeting so many people. It was a great time for both of us!*



When I started mentoring B, her parents were very detached from her education. It was challenging to explain to them the importance of being involved. However, as a result of the program's support, her parents have come to understand and appreciate how essential a good education is to B's success. Today, they are very engaged in her school and extracurricular activities and I'm able to help them participate in meaningful ways. – Maria Millan

Starfish mentors become involved in their students' lives. They are the stars and the heart of our program. This holistic approach helps Starfish children succeed academically, athletically, and in the arts. It gives our Starfish children the opportunity to participate equally with children from more privileged homes and to enjoy the same cultural and educational experiences.



Activities 2011-2012

Enrichment

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 interests and talents. In addition to these weekly and summer programs, Starfish Connection provides group enrichment activities at nearby educational sites.



Our 3rd and 4th graders visited **Sunnyside** in Tarrytown, New York, Washington Irving's home. They stopped for dinner afterward and then attended **The Great Jack O'Lantern Blaze** located at historic Van Cortlandt Manor in Croton-on-Hudson.

The **Eli Whitney Museum** in Hamden, CT, brought an experimental workshop to the Harry Bennett Library for the Starfish students. Museum educators helped the students and mentors build "Vibrobots" designed by English physicist and author Neil Downie.

It amazes me how much of an impact we have on these children. – Rosalea Fisher

The children were so engaged, they hardly realized they were learning math and science while racing their creations.

The **Wolf Conservation Center** in South Salem, New York, was the setting for an after-school outing for Starfish 5th, 6th, and 7th graders to learn about wolves, their relationship to the environment, and our human role in protecting their future. Children and mentors had a chance to howl with these beautiful animals!

Bill Dressler's private backyard train collection in Shelton, CT, was a great hit before setting off to pick apples at **Beardsley Cider Mill Orchard** last fall. The group had a chance to watch a cider-pressing demonstration, and each child brought a bag of apples home fresh from the orchard.



The South American celebration **Brazil! Brazil!** was an exciting opportunity for the students to see live Broadway theater. Blending the rhythms of Rio's Carnival with acrobatics and soccer-inspired street dance, it was an energizing and memorable performance. This special day also included a Metro North train ride and lunch in the Grand Central terminal dining concourse.

Starfish students greeted the arrival of spring with separate activities for the younger and older children. Our 3rd and 4th graders began a bio-diversity hike at the **Bartlett Arboretum** in Stamford and ended at the Animal Embassy at the **Stamford Museum and Nature Center**. They were guided by Keith from Animal Embassy who also engaged the students in a hands-on experience with rescued exotic animals.



Our 5th, 6th, and 7th graders explored the **Donald M. Kendall Sculpture Gardens** at PepsiCo World Headquarters in Purchase, New York. Everyone had a chance to find a favorite piece of art among the 40 major works of sculpture by 20th-century artists. The carefully landscaped grounds provided a great setting for a picnic lunch, which was followed by an art appreciation lesson at the **Neuberger Museum of Art** at SUNY Purchase.

As mentors, we've made a long-term commitment to work with these children as they mature into adolescence and young-adulthood. And through community service, they are learning that there's a responsibility that goes with receiving. They're part of this community and we all need to take care of it.

– Jim Benjamin

Community Service

One of the Starfish Connection requirements is that high school students do one hour per week of community service. Until our children reach that age, many of our mentors participate in community service projects along with their Starfish children on an individual basis. Some do park cleanups. Others work in food pantries and soup kitchens. This year, one of our mentors, Julie Barker, organized a Starfish community service event for Earth Day – the cleanup of John J. Boccuzzi Southfield Park in Stamford.

The children spent a few hours cleaning this neighborhood park and beach area, keeping track of every piece of litter they collected. The final tally was sent to the Ocean Conservancy to be added to those of other volunteers around the world.



Success Story

M is a 5th grade boy who enjoyed a variety of activities to which he was exposed in Starfish Connection, but did not take to any one in particular. His mentor, an avid car enthusiast and classic automobile judge, exposed M to the skill of judging car shows. Since then, M has been by his mentor's side judging four shows and also participated in a training program for junior judges to hone his skills. M has now become a car enthusiast and has started to build an expertise all his own.

Looking for an interesting activity, my Starfish child and I chose Odyssey of the Mind. This team-based program teaches students how to identify challenges and think creatively. I never expected to become so involved with the team, and I think I looked forward to our weekly meetings as much as M did. It was extremely enriching and a once-in-a-lifetime experience. – Carol Lilienthal

Our Community Partners

None of what we do would be possible without our wonderful Community Partners who respond to our requests to provide services to Starfish children. It takes a village, and we are proud to have such a generous group of people and organizations making up the Starfish Connection Partnering Village.



You will read about some partners, including REACH Prep and Dr. Steven Shaby, elsewhere in this Annual Report. Others you may have read about in past reports. A couple are highlighted here.

We began a partnership with Marc Aquila of Giuliano's Music Center last year. All Starfish Connection children are required to play a musical instrument at school at least through elementary and middle school. For some, music becomes an extracurricular activity they love, and they choose private lessons as their individual Starfish Connection enrichment activity. Private lessons can become financially prohibitive. But, with Giuliano's as a partner, our children receive excellent instruction at a reduced rate. Some children reinforce skills on instruments they play at school and some have added a second instrument through these lessons.

Garry Feldman, President of US Computer Connection, began a partnership with AITE, Stamford's technical high school, several years ago. He collects used computers from the corporations his company supports, has AITE students refurbish them, and distributes them to needy children in Stamford. As part of our contract with Starfish Connection families, every Starfish child receives a refurbished computer to use until we provide them with a new laptop for high school.

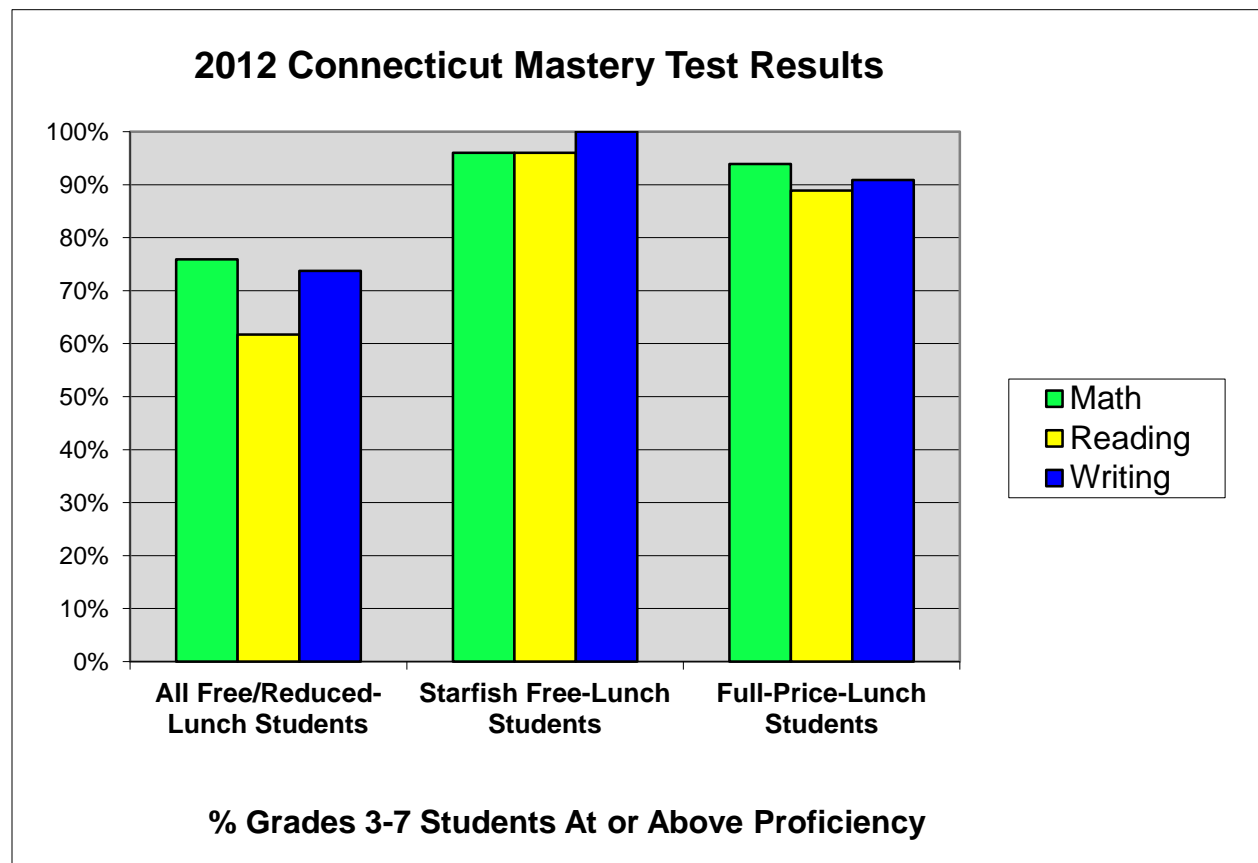
Our used computer requirements are more stringent than most since we load them with Microsoft Office, a wireless card, and much more. In response, Garry has organized his charitable giving so that Starfish Connection receives identical, more robust computers that enable our own additional enhancements. Each year, we receive a half dozen or more computers from Garry.

Results

CMT Performance

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 July 2012 once again tell a very positive story.

Our Starfish children did extremely well on their CMTs this spring, and they continue to outperform significantly their demographic cohort in the city of Stamford and in the state of Connecticut.



This year, we had 23 children who took the CMTs (grades 3-7). 100% made grade level or above in Writing. All but one made grade level in Reading and the student who did not make grade level has since been prescribed reading glasses. Only one of our students tested below grade level in Math.

Even though we are separated by gender, several generations, and nation of birth, I think of us as soul-mates who were brought together by Starfish Connection. – Marlyn Agatstein

Other Achievements

We are delighted that one of our students was accepted this year into the REACH Prep program. He is a highly motivated student from a very poor home. When Starfish Connection gave him a computer in 3rd grade, one of the first things he did was to surf the Internet. When his mother asked what he was looking at, he said, “Colleges. And, I think I want to go to Yale!”

With Starfish Connection’s support, this may become a reality for K. This year he was one of only 26 students out of 150 applicants accepted into the REACH Prep program! REACH Prep is a demanding and highly competitive program that prepares students to attend selective, independent middle and high schools and top-tier colleges. Our student’s mentor guided him as he completed his REACH Prep application, worked with his mother to see that all the paperwork was completed, and discussed the interview process with both to ensure that they presented the best case for admission.

During the 18-month REACH Prep program, we will support K and his family with transportation, funding, and guidance on independent school applications to ensure his success.



Success Story

G and Y are 3rd and 4th grade girls whose reading skills were adequate, but not strong. Their mentors, both retired teachers, decided to start a Girls’ Book Club. The four members read and discussed books together throughout the year. In the spring, Y participated in her school’s Battle of the Books competition and read the second-highest number of books in her class, allowing this quiet and unassuming girl to be the spokesperson for her class at the Battle. Both girls have become avid readers, and their CMT reading scores this year reflect as much, with both scoring a 4 on a 5-point scale. The Club was so successful (and fun) that two other Starfish girls and their mentors have decided to join, and a Boys’ Book Club has begun!

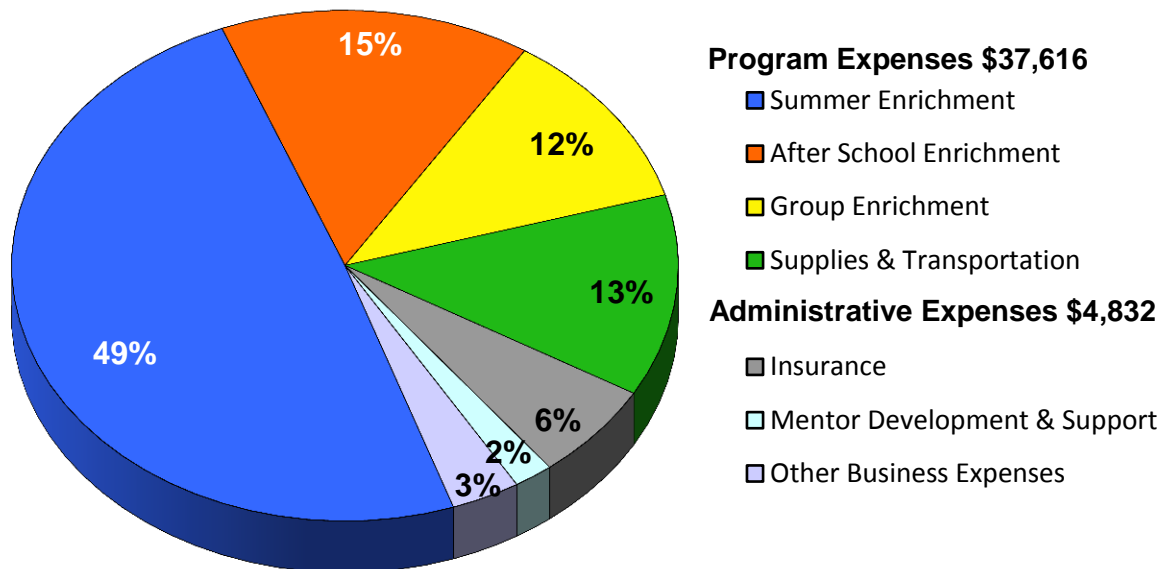
Finances: Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2012

2012 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	\$50,250
Founders' donation	\$ 6,100
Individual gifts	\$14,400

2012 Expenses



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!

Corporate and Foundation Grants

Ally Bank Foundation
First County Bank Foundation
First Niagara Bank
General Electric Company
General Reinsurance Company
The Herbert & Sarah M. Gibor Charitable Foundation
The Knobloch Fund at Fairfield County Community Foundation
NewAlliance Bank Foundation
Purdue Pharma L.P.
St. John's Community Foundation
Tools for Life Foundation

Community Partners

Bartlett Arboretum
Camp Hi Rock
Computers for Kids
Ferguson Library
Girl Scouts of CT
Giuliano's Music Center
Lakeside Pottery
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 Young Artists Philharmonic
Stamford Youth Foundation
Stamford Youth Services Bureau
Stamford Youth Soccer League
Steven Shaby, OD
US Computer Connection
Bernie Weiss, Photographer
Westport Country Playhouse
Yerwood Center
Young Mariners Foundation



Individual Gifts

Irene Bryan *in memory of her daughter, Elia Bryan*

Lynne Burgess

Michael & Maureen Cacace

Mary Ann Cadieux

Trish Carroll & Dick Strahota

Maryanne & Jim Chambers

Roberta Cohen

Amy Davis

Ernie & Susan DiMattia

Ron & Carmen Domonkos

Herma Ehrlich

Naeem & Susanah Fayyaz

Richard & Rosalea Fisher

Nancy & Richard Freedman

Edward & Donna Fuhrman

Giuliano's Music Center Parents

Janet & Dale Greenwood

Ginny Gwynn & Jon Bellis

Tomas Haendler

Kate & John Herman

Duane & Leana Hill

Donald Huppert

Sheila Katz

Jennifer & Mark Lapine

Carol & Scott Lewis

Judy & Mark Lowenstein

Gene Martin

Judy & David Martin

Risë & Marty Mattler

Ellen & Joel Mellis

Maria Millan

Roz & Merritt Nesin

Marilyn Ott

June Rosenthal

Edith Samers & Ed Smith

Betsey & Arthur Selkowitz

Diane & Steven Shaby

Maddie Shapiro

Judith & David Singer *in memory of their son, Jonathan Singer*

Dr. Constance Stevenson

Lauren & Steven Strelsin

Eileen & Steven Swerdlick

Clarence & Minnie Stanley

Susan Taylor & Allen Brown

Temple Shalom Nursery School Parents

George Vogel

Kathryn Walsh & Wesley Romansky

Joan Wexler

Cynthia Wicker & Clemon Williams

Mike & Ronnie Wiederlight

Ira & Penny Wolff



Mentors

Marlyn Agatstein
Meryl Allen
Julie Barker
Jim Benjamin
Trish Carroll
Herma Ehrlich
Rosalea Fisher
O.B. Gray
Ginny Gwynn
Kate Herman
Suzanne Horn
Donna Hughes

Susan Krieger
Kathy Larkins
Carol Lilienthal
Corine Matarasso
Maria Millan
Liz Rubin
Margo Sandahl
Janet Schneider
Alan Sosnowitz
Carroll Tobin
Kate Urbank
Renee Zinn



Board of Directors

Judith A. Martin
Chair

Patricia Carroll
Secretary

David R. Martin
Treasurer

Jennifer W. Lapine

Maria Millan

Judith Singer, Ph.D.

Kathryn Walsh

Cynthia Wicker-Williams

Starfish Connection, Inc.
1127 High Ridge Rd., #255
Stamford, CT 06905
203 - 276 - 9690

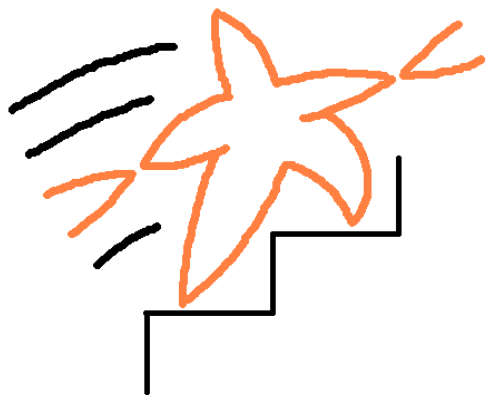
mail@starfishconnection.org

Success Story

K is a bright 5th grade girl who works hard at school. She has always done well on her writing and math CMTs, but has struggled in reading, even with extra help at school.

Her mentor arranged to have Dr. Steven Shaby, a local optometrist, examine K's vision free of charge. He determined that she needed reading glasses and would also benefit from vision therapy to correct a vision tracking issue. Starfish Connection purchased the vision therapy CD for K to use and Dr. Shaby has continued to monitor her progress, free of charge. The results so far are very encouraging.

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.