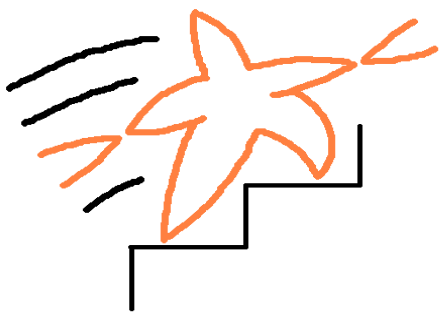


2020

# Annual Report



Starfish  
Connection

## *From the President of the Board*

---

Dear Friends,

In this unprecedented year of challenges, I am deeply proud of the role Starfish Connection has played in supporting our community. Under the exceptional and compassionate leadership of our executive director, Janet Schneider, we have connected with our families in new and innovative ways. Our mentors, team leaders, volunteers, and members of the board have assessed the needs of our families. They have coordinated access to local resources, provided technical support to students, and strived to maintain normalcy through virtual music lessons, reading groups, and academic and emotional guidance.

Our remarkable Janet is now stepping down as executive director, after four outstanding years, in order to enjoy a long-anticipated retirement with her husband, Marc. She remains a Starfish mentor and will become an active member of our board.

Janet is transitioning her responsibilities into the very capable hands of Donna Wolff. Donna received a PhD in biochemistry from NYU and worked as an executive in the healthcare and medical education fields for over 30 years. Her research experience and background in educating medical students and professionals will provide unique insights to our students. Donna has been active with Starfish Connection for three years, and she is the mentor for a student who is entering Stamford's AITE high school in the fall.

I am looking forward to working with Donna on our plans for this year and the years to come. With your generous support and the enthusiastic commitment of our board and our mentors, we will continue to serve as a beacon of light and hope to the deserving children in our Starfish program.



Best wishes,

David R. Martin



*President of the Starfish Board of Directors  
David R. Martin welcomes Donna Wolff, PhD  
as incoming Executive Director*

## *From the Executive Director*

---

Dear Starfish Connection Friends and Supporters,

In this pandemic year, Starfish has become a stronger and more essential organization. We have all learned to be resilient, flexible, inventive, and supportive and to embrace technology.

In spite of physical distancing, students stayed in touch with their mentors via Facetime and Zoom, took virtual music lessons, and participated in an online book club. Our mentors monitored student progress, identified the needs of our Starfish families, provided information about community resources, and served as a support system for all.

Our older cohorts met virtually with our Teen Circle Facilitator Harriette Ketover. She guided students in sharing their feelings about distance learning, separation from friends and teachers, and the effects of having routines changed so abruptly. Happily, in June we celebrated the success of our amazing high school seniors in a graduation Zoom event as they enjoyed a special dinner, flowers, and balloons delivered to their homes.

Unfortunately I must also acknowledge the importance and difficulty of grappling with the effects of institutional racism. Starfish is an organization which is dedicated to combating this injustice. We provide underserved families with resources and tools to overcome tremendous obstacles, many of which were created by systemic racism and poverty. We want our students to live in and play an important part in shaping a fair and just society for everyone.

We have made a 10-year commitment to our Starfish students. Please know our important work depends on your support of our program and students. It is with great appreciation that I wish to thank our donors, mentors, community partners, and board members. The success of our unique program is due to the vital and selfless work of so many.

I am excited about the next chapter of our organization as I join the board of Starfish and turn over the executive directorship to the capable hands of Donna Wolff. I feel so honored to have had the opportunity to care for Judy Martin's legacy. Under Donna's leadership, Judy's dream will continue full steam ahead.

Sincerely,



Janet Schneider



## *Congratulations, 2020 Starfish Graduates!*

**Judeley Jean-Charles** graduated from AITE with an exceptional record in academically challenging classes. He has been awarded a full scholarship to Wesleyan University! Judeley has always been



excited about the Starfish program: the field trips, enrichment activities, friendships, and even the requirement to do community service. He surprised both his mentor, **Julie Barker**, and our founder, **Judy Martin**, when he volunteered for his first job at Ferguson Library, inspired by librarians who visited his school. Judeley has also volunteered at Mill River Park, the YMCA's after-school program, and at his church. He has been a responsible guide to his younger sister, even as his parents worked long hours. As a junior, he began working at the Pedigree Ski Shop and also at Grade A Supermarket, where he is now an essential worker. Judeley is an independent

thinker who has much to contribute to class discussions. His interests include music and computer science, but whatever he chooses, Judeley's sense of responsibility and commitment to his studies will carry him far.

**Yasmin Reyes** graduated in June from Stamford High School. Over the last ten years, with her mentor **Carroll Tobin**, she has embraced every activity offered to her and has developed into a confident young woman. Yasmin has learned to play both the violin and guitar. She used her talent to share music throughout

the high school by setting up concerts, playing in the halls, and becoming first chair for second violin in the school orchestra. She has enjoyed participating in regional competitions with the Winter Percussion Band. Yasmin is an avid reader and a member of a Starfish Book Club. She has been on the Mayor's Youth Leadership Council and was chosen for the Leadership Academy.

Joining the Girls Who Code program, Yasmin created a website and learned several coding languages. She has worked as a barista, cashier, dog sitter, and house cleaner, all while achieving strong grades and challenging herself with AP classes. She has been awarded a scholarship to Skidmore College!





**Pablo Solares** is bilingual and has a talent for languages, excelling at the advanced level in reading and writing. He has always had a love for animals which he attributes to many happy hours he spent with his grandmother whose hobby was raising animals. By third grade, Pablo was caring for a guinea pig named Toby and a pet goldfish. He also became interested in anything and everything related to dinosaurs. Two of his favorite excursions with his mentor, **Marlyn Agatstein**, were a day spent at the American Museum of Natural History, exploring all the dioramas and other exhibits on dinosaurs, and a trip to Dinosaur State Park in Connecticut.



He also became interested in anything and everything related to dinosaurs. Two of his favorite excursions with his mentor, **Marlyn Agatstein**, were a day spent at the American Museum of Natural History, exploring all the dioramas and other exhibits on dinosaurs, and a trip to Dinosaur State Park in Connecticut.

Pablo has a tremendous grasp of culture and history and can talk knowledgeably about virtually any topic. Pablo has the mind of a curious scientist and still has a

passion for animals. He now tends a beautiful, huge aquarium with much care, thought, and constant education. The study of marine science may be in his future, and attending UConn Stamford will be a great start for our passionate Starfish.



# Changing Lives

---

When I met Alyson in June 2019, she had just completed second grade. One of the first things I learned about her was that she did not know how to swim. This was something Alyson really wanted to



do! I set out to help her last summer by taking her to a pool to which I have access, and she began to practice basic strokes. Alyson was fearless in the water and enjoyed it, so she enrolled in a beginner swimming class at the Y. In the fall, her swimming skills really took off when she began lessons at Chelsea Piers, arranged and paid for by Starfish. She spent the fall in the younger splash pool, but by January, Alyson had graduated to the big pool. I met her mom there one Monday, and we both had tears in our eyes as Alyson demonstrated the backstroke with confidence.

Caroline Romans, Mentor



Over the past two years, Jairon and I have read (me first and then I give my book to him) 18 Vince Flynn fictional novels in the "Mitch Rapp" series. In my busy schedule it may take me 30 days to read each book. Jairon, who is now completing his sophomore year, reads them on the bus and whenever



he is not doing his school work. He polishes them off in a week or less. I am amazed at his interest in these CIA spy thrillers and his ability to read and follow each story. Often, it is difficult to get children to read, much less 500-page books! I love that it gives us something we share and can talk about. It is truly a treat for both of us! Book #19 is due to be published in September and we are both looking forward to it!

Fred Rossetti, Mentor



Gemere and I had an especially fun outing. We went shopping for some sorely needed school supplies. He took the lead, carefully and thoughtfully making his selections. We followed the shopping



excursion with lunch, which gave us a chance to talk about many things including school and, of course, basketball. We shared his goals and the things that can sometimes get in the way. Throughout the day, Gemere took the lead, pushing the shopping cart, comparing prices, selecting the checkout line, making the restaurant choice, and selecting the most cost-effective items on the menu. He enjoyed taking charge and sharing his exploits with his family. It was such a fun and rewarding afternoon for both of us!

Susan Toliver, Mentor

Last year, when the former CEO of First County Bank, Rey Giallongo, and his wife, Cheryl Palmer, retired to South Carolina, I volunteered to be the new mentor to Cheryl's student, Cindy. We've already had many happy moments. One of the most memorable was having the pleasure of escorting Cindy to the *Laurel House Champions for Recovery* dinner at the Delamar Hotel. It was especially poignant because Cheryl and her husband were among the honorees, and Cindy had a chance to celebrate with them. During the evening we socialized with many of the other guests and Cindy seemed so poised and grown up. She even got out on the dance floor!

When I brought her home, Cindy happily told me what a great time she had had. As a relatively new mentor with little experience with young people, it made me feel like I was floating on air. I felt so pleased knowing that Cindy had enjoyed spending time with me at the event. I'm so glad I made the decision to join the family of Starfish mentors!

Karen M. Kelly, Mentor



Keyli auditioned for and got the lead in her school musical. *Canceled!* She was excited about her upcoming two weeks at sleepaway camp. *Canceled!* Then she planned to attend summer camp at Curtain Call in Stamford. *Canceled!*

I am happy to report that, in spite of these bumps in the road, Keyli continues to do very well academically and is willing to try all the alternative experiences I can find for her. Her ability to focus and stay positive in this difficult time confirms my strong belief in her ability to succeed. This is what Starfish is all about!

Diane Green, Mentor





# Academic Results

---

Since the inception of Starfish Connection, our students have consistently outperformed their peers, both statewide and in the Stamford Public Schools, on standardized assessments of academic achievement. This year, because of Covid-19, Connecticut did not conduct statewide testing, so we do not have a quantitative measure of students' proficiency. Instead, we look to other measures.

- Our students continue to enroll successfully in AP classes.
- Many of our students find a passion for music through Starfish-sponsored lessons and have earned places in competitive music programs both in the community and in our high schools.
- We are proud to have our graduates enrolled at the following highly selective colleges, often with full or significant scholarships: Morgan State University, Skidmore College, Tufts University, and Wesleyan University as well as UCONN Stamford and Southern Connecticut State University!



*Educator Marc Schneider helps a young violinist*



*Britney is a rising 7th grader earning good grades in math, but with a curiosity beyond the daily lessons. Starfish mentor, team leader, and retired math teacher Fran D'Agostino volunteers time for Starfish students who want or need extra attention Britney knew the how of doing her math problems, but Fran helped her understand the why. There have been many "aha" moments. An hour a week made a big difference in Britney's abilities. She has enough confidence now to pursue her interest in STEM courses.*

*Lynne Burgess, Mentor*



# Financials: Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2020

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

## 2020 Income

Grants	\$ 43,500
Owner/Founders' Donation	\$ 7,500
Individual Gifts	\$ 25,591
Interest	\$ 161
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>\$76,752</b>

## 2020 Expenses

### Program Expenses

Summer Enrichment	\$ 5,243
After-School Enrichment	\$16,668
Group Enrichment	\$ 6,765
College Prep	\$ 1,130
Computers	\$ 3,900
Starfish Supplies	\$ 5,281
Encumbered Funds	\$ 8,500
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>\$47,487</b>

### Business Expenses

Insurance	\$ 2,803
Postage and Mailing	\$ 569
Other Operating Expenses	\$ 3,701
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>\$ 7,073</b>

**Total Expenses** **\$54,560**



*Community service cleanup project at Cummings Park*



*Starfish Connection is an all-volunteer organization. We do not incur any staffing or building costs. Business expenses are paid in full by the founders, and all donations and grants go directly to programming for Starfish students.*



## *Starfish Activities*

Hiking at Storm King Mountain – Pizza-making with David’s Catering at Wright Tech Food Lab – Pursuing individual talents and interests – Starfish students started the 2019-2020 school year with a very active agenda!



## *And then...*

The spring brought canceled programs and unprecedented challenges, social isolation, and remote learning. So many Starfish group activities, individual lessons, and summer camps were canceled.

***...our mentors took on new roles***

## *Staying Connected*

---

My first year as a mentor coincided with my first year of retirement. It gave me lots of time to engage with Daniela. I have introduced her to ice skating, swimming, museums, and theater. When the pandemic arrived, I knew we had to find creative ways to stay connected. It was so important to make sure she stayed on track during remote schooling. Daniela and I have talked on the phone almost every week since March, catching up on her schoolwork and life, including her birthday in April.

*When the pandemic arrived, I knew we had to find creative ways to stay connected. It was so important to make sure she stayed on track*

When summer came, Daniela's 5-week camp at Sacred Heart was canceled, but Starfish arranged for her to go to Mill River camp for three weeks and to the Y for two weeks. She has loved it! This was such a wonderful thing for a little girl who usually stayed with her mom at work in the summer. Daniela never fails to entertain and amaze me with her intellect, perception, and curiosity. We are so grateful to Starfish. I feel very lucky that she and I and Starfish are a team because she is going places!

Daina Schuman, Mentor



From the time I met Zariah over two years ago, she has matured in every way. We celebrate that progress with her friends in the Starfish program. So many opportunities have unfolded with programs and relationships. Throughout this pandemic, Zariah has continued to stay connected with her Starfish friends. We celebrated her 5<sup>th</sup>-grade graduation with lunch in the park and a special gift of recognition. Even though we could not hug, and we wore masks, the bond between us was tangible.

Jean Gray, Mentor



# Contributions

---

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

## 2020 Corporate and Foundation Grants

Betsey & Arthur Selkowitz Family Foundation  
Credit Suisse  
First County Bank Foundation  
General Reinsurance Company  
Gibor Foundation  
Grossman Family Foundation

The Knobloch Fund at FCCF  
Louis Casale Charitable Foundation  
St. John's Community Foundation  
Stamford Rotary Trust Fund  
Young Women's League of New Canaan

## 2020 Community Partners

Atelier Constantine Popescu Music  
Ballet School of Stamford  
Bartlett Arboretum  
Bernie Weiss, Photography  
Beyond Limits  
Bruce Museum  
Camp Hi Rock – YMCA  
Thomas Cassone, Attorney at Law  
Chelsea Piers  
Convent of the Sacred Heart Summer Program  
Crescendo Music  
Curtain Call  
David's Soundview Catering  
Ferguson Library  
Future 5  
Girl Scouts of CT  
Greenwich Academy LINKS Program  
Greenwich Music  
Jewish Community Center  
Michael Mezzapelle, CPA  
Mill River Collaborative  
JD Ospina

Pathfinders Adventure Camp  
Pinot Palette  
Pro Bono Partnerships  
The Residence on Summer Street  
Dr. Steven Shaby  
SoundWaters  
Stamford All-School Musical  
Stamford Board of Recreation  
Stamford Museum and Nature Center  
Stamford Music and Arts Academy  
Stamford Peace Youth Foundation  
Stamford Public Schools  
Stamford Symphony  
Stamford Twin Rinks  
Stamford Youth Services Bureau  
Stamford Youth Soccer League  
Temple Shalom Nursery School  
Terry Conners Rink  
Women's Mentoring Network  
YB World Taekwondo Academy  
YMCA of Stamford  
Young Artists Philharmonic

## Volunteers

Julie Barker, Copy editing  
Trish Carroll, Graphic design  
Fran D'Agostino, Tutor  
Lauren Eisen, EiDesign  
Janie Friedlander, Psychologist

Donna Hughes, Administration  
Harriette Ketover, Teen circle facilitator  
Gary Lesowitz, Tutor  
Bernie Weiss, Photographer

## Mentors

Marlyn Agatstein  
Sarah Arnold  
Julie Barker  
Jim Benjamin  
Lynne Burgess  
Jill Burns  
Susan Conner  
Fran D'Agostino, *Team Leader, Middle School*  
Jackie Dixon  
Rosalea Fisher  
Jean Gray  
Margaret Gray, *Co-Team Leader, High School*  
Diane Green  
Richard Hahndorf, Jr.  
Kathleen Heslin  
Dee Hoo  
Susan Horstmann  
Kathy Joyce  
Isabel Katz  
Karen M. Kelly  
Kathy King  
Alice Knapp & Walter Young  
Peter Lasalandra  
Peter Lilienthal  
Jami Lo, *Co-Team Leader, High School*  
Paola Mallozzi  
Corine Matarasso  
Maria Millan  
Bette MocarSKI

Meg Mooar  
Lisa Musilli, *Team Leader, Elementary School*  
Betsy Nagurney  
Karen Neems  
Midge Pappas  
Joyce & Jay Riemer  
Arisleyda & Ralf Riehl  
Timothy Rogers  
Caroline Romans  
Liz Rosano  
Fred Rossetti  
Sarah Santasiero  
Marilyn Schlosser  
Janet Schneider  
Daina Schuman  
Dianna Shattuck  
Mara Siladi  
Jeanne Simon & Jake Danziger  
Frances Sink  
Mary Smith  
Maria Sosa  
Carroll Tobin  
Susan Toliver  
Gail G. Trell, *Musical Instrument Coordinator*  
Tracy Vodola  
Alma Weinberg  
Cliff Wells  
Kenneth & Lori Wentworth  
Donna Wolff



*Team leaders (l. to r.) Fran D'Agostino, Lisa Musilli, Jami Lo, and Margi Gray*

## Individual Gifts

Kenneth & Gwynn Asher  
Sharon Beadle  
Lynne & Josh Berrett  
Ellen Bromley & Tom Gizicki  
Lynne Burgess  
Laura Burwick & Peter Brandt  
Trish Carroll & Dick Strahota  
Jeff and Valerie Cohen  
Susan DiMattia  
Irene Durand-Bryan  
Elaine & Robert Erichson  
Heidi Fieldston & Howard Ostroff  
Nancy & Richard Freedman  
Barbara & Stan Friedman  
Friends of The Residence on Summer Street  
Donna & Ed Fuhrman  
Philip Giordano  
Lise Gordon  
Jean Gray  
Margaret Gray  
Diane & Henry Green  
Barbara & Ed Guttman  
Ginny Gwynn & Jon Bellis  
Margaret Halleck  
Karen & Dennis Hannigan  
Lois Hartman  
Jevera & William Hennessey  
Duane & Leana Hill  
Stephen Hoffman  
Suzanne Horn  
Barbara Jacobs  
Barbara & Robert Karp  
Barbara Kasman & Arthur Wernicke

Gail Korval  
Susan Krieger  
Peter & Carol Lilienthal  
Jami & Steve Lo  
Nina & Norman Lotstein  
David Martin  
Gene Martin  
Herbert Martin  
Rise Mattler  
Maria Millan  
Lisa & Mario Musilli  
Roslyn & Merritt Nesin  
Marilyn Ott  
Margaret Peterson  
Robin & Rick Redniss  
Gregory Reppucci  
Tim Rogers  
Caroline Romans  
Harold & Ann Rosenbaum  
Sarah Santasiero  
Janet & Marc Schneider  
Ann Sexton  
Steven & Diane Shaby  
Jerome Silber  
Judy & David Singer  
Kim & Greg Spies  
Lauren & Steve Strelsin  
Janet & Lou Ursone  
Joan Von Trapp  
Kathryn Walsh & Wesley Romansky  
Donna Wolff  
Eric Zhang





## Board of Directors

---

David R. Martin, President

Kathryn Walsh, Secretary

Jeff Cohen

Barbara Guttman

Jennifer W. Lapine

Maria Millan, Parent Facilitator

Judith Singer, Ph.D.

Janet Schneider, Executive Director (ex-officio)

## Why “Starfish”?

---

Once, a man walking along a beach noticed a boy in the distance going back and forth between the surf’s edge and the beach. As the man approached, he saw that hundreds of starfish had been stranded on the sand as the tide retreated.

As the man watched, the boy picked up the starfish one by one and placed them back in the surf. The



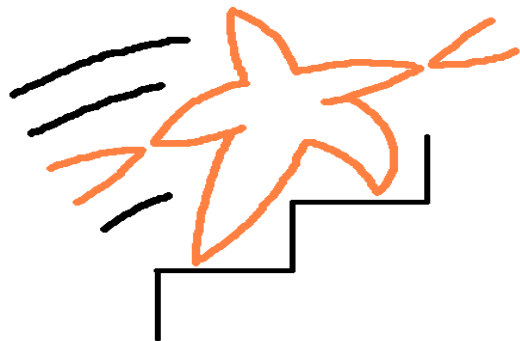
man was struck by the apparent futility of the task. As he came up to the boy the man said, “There are miles of beach covered with starfish. You can’t possibly make a difference.” The boy stooped down, picked up one more starfish, and carefully placed it back in the ocean. Then he turned to the man and said, “It sure made a difference to that one!”

The heart of our Starfish program is having an impact on individual lives by keeping students engaged in academic, cultural, and athletic activities. We believe that, in order to be successful, students need more than academic preparation. They also need exposure to enriching cultural experiences and athletic opportunities to instill a sense of confidence.

We select five promising 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students each year from the Stamford Public Schools and match them with individual mentors. These adults commit to guiding their students from 3<sup>rd</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades and beyond. Most mentoring programs are short-term interventions. Ours is longitudinal, comprehensive, and individual – it’s about transforming lives one at a time.



*Photo credits: A special thank you to Bernie Weiss of Bernie Weiss Photography who provided many of the photographs in this annual report*



# Starfish Connection

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

To learn 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, Inc.  
1127 High Ridge Rd., #255  
Stamford, CT 06905 203-276-9690  
[mail@starfishconnection.org](mailto:mail@starfishconnection.org)