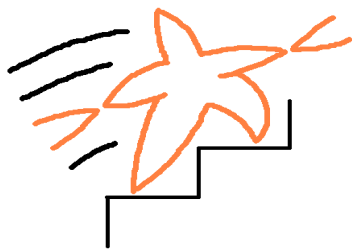


2021

Annual Report



Starfish
Connection

From the Editor

This is our 12th annual Starfish Connection report – each year it is a labor of love and truly a collaborative effort. Our contributions come from across the entire Starfish community with submissions from our executive director, board members, and our mentors, as well as the beautiful pictures captured by our volunteer photographer, Bernie Weiss.

This year a beloved member of that community is absent. Julie Barker, who was a devoted Starfish mentor to Judeley, passed away in October after a long illness. Julie volunteered to serve as copy editor, reviewing my annual report draft each summer. I will never forget the shock of seeing that first “final” draft when she returned it. There, in red, with careful explanations, she had noted every missing comma, incorrect capitalization, misspelling, inconsistent font, and forgotten hyphen. There may have been more red ink than black. Julie taught me a great deal about careful writing, and she kept me on my toes.

Julie’s obituary described her as “an author, editor, world traveler, philanthropist, and friend to all.” I would like to add that she was an extraordinary woman – smart, warm, kind, and generous. She was the guiding light that gave our report its professional polish. It is with a heavy heart that I finish this annual report, and I hope you will forgive any errors you might find. I tried to envision Julie watching over my shoulder, and I did my best to incorporate all the wisdom she shared.



Kathryn Walsh, Editor



Starfish 2021 high school graduates. Clockwise from top left, Amber McPherson, DiAngelo Marroquin, Guisel Sandoval, and Daniela Perez

*On our cover: Starfish student Sherley Renodo with mentor Isabel Katz participating with Starfish Connection in the SoundWaters environmental cleanup. See more about Sherley and Isabel on page 9.
Photo credit: Bernie Weiss Photography*

From the Executive Director

Dear Starfish Connection Friends and Supporters,

If I had to sum up this year, I would use the term, *resilience*. Our students, team leaders, mentors, and parents fought the virus and won, at least for now. Despite school closings, distance learning, isolation from peers, food and housing insecurity, and relatives who passed away due to Covid, we fought back together and made great strides.

Thanks to the generosity of our grantors, personal donors, and community partners, we were able to continue our mission. We provided needed computers and tech support to Starfish families. We adapted after-school and enrichment activities to the Zoom platform, including music lessons and tutoring. We also created fun activities and maintained SAT prep classes, book clubs with pizza delivery, and parent meetings.

Mentors stayed in touch with their mentees on Facetime and with walks in the park, museum trips, and other activities. By March, our community partners offered sports in small groups. This summer, our high school students are CITs and camp counselors, and our younger students are going back to day camps and sleep-away camp.

Our students continue to learn the value of giving back to our community. They performed in a music concert for the residents of a senior living facility, participated in an environmental, beach clean-up, volunteered at food banks, and one 11th-grader made a PSA video for Stamford Health to promote vaccinations for teens.

This year, four Starfish seniors graduated from high school with honors and are entering four-year colleges of their choice with scholarships. In addition, our very first cohort of three Starfish graduates, from 2017, has now graduated from college! One of the three former students is starting a graduate program in engineering while the other two are beginning their careers.

Thanks to their hard work and the dedication of their mentors, these students have bright futures and opportunities for themselves and their families for generations to come. This was Judith Martin's dream and her legacy.

Sincerely,



Donna S. Wolff, PhD, Executive Director



Congratulations, 2021 Starfish Graduates!

Amber McPherson is a remarkable young woman with a clear sense of maturity and a commitment to helping others. She is devoted to her friends and family and, most of all, to her twin sister Ashley. Amber graduated from AITE where she developed a strong work ethic and a passion for helping others. She was awarded the Murray Freeman Scholarship by the Delta Sigma Theta sorority.

Amber's love of children has inspired her involvement with young students through several volunteer positions. She has worked with the Summer Start program for preschool students at Stillmeadow Elementary School and in the Murphy Academy after-school program at KT Murphy School. Her infectious smile, easy-going demeanor, and reliability made her a favorite of both staff and students. Currently she is continuing to work with children at the Jewish Community Center in Stamford.

Amazingly, despite a heavy academic workload, Amber has also found time to work as a peer educator for Planned Parenthood. This has given her a voice to share vital information with other students about reproductive and sexual health, including maintaining healthy relationships. This experience has helped her develop leadership and advocacy skills.

Amber will be attending Southern Connecticut State University in the fall to pursue a degree in Psychology. Her dream is to create a safe space for others to take refuge and where they can feel supported while overcoming their mental health challenges.



Corine Matarasso, Mentor



DiAngelo Marroquin has blossomed, especially over the past four years, into a fine, well-spoken young man. A recent graduate of Westhill High School, Di Angelo has been awarded a significant scholarship to attend Skidmore College in the fall. He is excited about the opportunity to explore the wide range of courses available at Skidmore before choosing a major.

In high school, DiAngelo challenged himself by taking both honors classes and AP classes in his junior and senior years. His favorite AP course was environmental studies which enriched his experience working at Mill River Park in downtown Stamford. He also played freshman soccer for the Vikings. The experience that changed him most intensely was his summer at Camp Hi-Rock in Washington, Massachusetts as a Leader in Training. There, he spent a summer living in a bunk house full-time with younger campers and learning how strongly his actions could positively influence others.

DiAngelo is passionate about music and, especially, guitar, taking advantage of the lessons and instruments provided by Starfish Connection over several years. He plans to take music classes in college, and he was thrilled to learn that he would have access to free instruction provided by Skidmore. Starting in Starfish as a shy, unfocused, and introverted 3rd-grader, DiAngelo has grown into a confident 18-year-old. His future is filled with promise and he is ready for the challenge.



Jim Benjamin, Mentor

Daniela Perez has grown into a confident and accomplished young woman during her time in Starfish Connection. She graduated from AITE with a solid academic record, compassion for others, and an incredible work ethic. Her efforts in high school were recognized by the University of Richmond with a full scholarship.

Daniela was a cheerleader from grades 5 through 10. She attended cheerleading camp and was chosen to be part of an All-American team marching in London's New Year's Day parade. She was an officer in the Spanish National Honor Society and a member of the Latin Dance Club. She also joined Future Business Leaders of America where she won first place in Marketing in her division at the state competition.



Daniela's outside experiences included working part-time at a local restaurant and volunteering at the Ferguson Library and at Building One Community. She interned this spring at Journal of Hope, a local non-profit organization that coaches young people to develop self-awareness through journal-keeping. Her enthusiasm and zest for life will serve Daniela well when she enters the University of Richmond in the fall. What a bright future she has ahead of her!

Janet Schneider, Mentor



When I first met **Guisel Sandoval** ten years ago, she was a shy, quiet second-grader who was very hesitant to express her thoughts. At the same time, she was willing to try everything - new experiences, new foods, and new places! When I watched her conquer the ropes course at Scalzi Park, I knew there was a determination in her that was ready to blossom. And Starfish Connection provided resources and opportunities to bring out the best in her!



Who is Guisel Sandoval now, after 10 years in the Starfish Connection program? She has grown into a confident, mature, adventure-loving, smiling, young woman.

This summer she will be a senior counselor at Camp Hi-Rock in Massachusetts, a program that she has attended as a camper, a counselor-in-training, and a junior counselor. She has always said that camp is fun, and now she will be helping other youngsters explore the outdoors and experience the joys of camp life.

In August, Guisel is eager to move on to her next adventure when she enrolls at Simmons University in Boston. Where this journey will take her is yet to be seen, but, as her mentor, I am sure her life will be meaningful and rewarding. Guisel and I

have learned and experienced so many wonderful things over the past 10 years. It has been a gratifying experience for both of us!

Rosalea Fisher, Mentor



Mayor David Martin and executive director Donna Wolff PhD congratulate 2021 Starfish graduates

Academics

This was a difficult school year, but our students were up for the challenge. Starfish mentors found many ways to keep our students engaged academically. They continued to organize book clubs moving adroitly from in-person get-togethers to Zoom meetings.

Many educators believe that studying music helps children develop discipline and good study habits. Every Starfish child chooses an instrument and begins lessons in elementary school. Despite Covid restrictions, our students continued music lessons with remote connections to their instructors. This provided a structure and sense of normalcy that helped students stay focused during school closures.

As Soyeema's tee shirt proudly proclaims "Smart is the new cool".



Smart is the new cool!

For our older students, PSAT and SAT prep classes continued virtually, and these sessions will resume in person this fall. Under the guidance of our Starfish high school co-team-leader Jami Lo, juniors and seniors attended virtual college tours and information sessions and even participated in one-on-one appointments with admissions counselors at various colleges. Jami also arranged individual parent meetings to discuss critical financial aid information and assist with application forms.

For our high school students, it was a year like no other, and all of our graduates distinguished themselves, enrolling in their colleges of choice with significant scholarships!



Instructor JD Ospina conducting a pre-pandemic SAT prep class. Sessions continued during Covid via Zoom

Financials: Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2021

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.

2021 INCOME

Grants	\$ 56,000
Founders' Donation	\$ 7,500
Individual Gifts	\$ 28,904
Interest	\$ 136
TOTAL INCOME	\$ 92,540

2021 EXPENSES

Program Expenses

Summer Enrichment	\$ 21,833
After-School Enrichment	\$ 13,470
Group Enrichment	\$ 8,667
College Prep	\$ 571
Computers	\$ 9,540
Starfish Supplies	\$ 6,228
Encumbered Funds	(\$ 8,500)
Subtotal	\$ 51,809

Business Expenses

Insurance	\$ 2,757
Postage and Mailing	\$ 544
Other Operating Expenses	\$ 4,001
Subtotal	\$ 7,339

TOTAL EXPENSES **\$ 59,148**



Mentor Susan Horstmann and her student Naomi with Naomi's new computer for high school.

Thanks to generous grants, Starfish Connection, for the first time, provided new laptops to our graduating high school seniors, giving these students the technology to participate fully in their competitive college programs.

We were also able to provide Chromebooks for our students entering high school, and added technology resources for other students. This was a particularly critical need this year as schools moved to remote learning, and the Stamford Public Schools continues to raise technology standards.

I am blessed to have Naomi in my life. I will be forever grateful to Starfish Connection for pairing us. Not only did I gain Naomi as a mentee, but I also gained the love and friendship of her entire family.

Susan Horstmann, Mentor

A mentor's lasting impact

In the summer of 2008, I began mentoring Beverly, hoping to make a difference in her life. What I didn't know is how much of a difference she would be making in mine. As soon as we met, I felt that I had a purpose. It gave me a sense of fulfillment that I had never felt before. When you meet an eight-year-old girl who looks up to you as her champion, and you see such appreciation in her eyes, she instantly becomes an important part of your life.

Thanks to Beverly's hard work and her Starfish experience, she graduated Magna Cum Laude from Tufts University this year with a Bachelor of Arts in Community Health. Although she has not committed to a specific career, Beverly is returning to Stamford with the goal of developing resources and connections to healthcare for underserved residents.

Over the years, while sharing our family's culture and values with Beverly, I came to realize that we all hope to reach our "American Dream" in one way or another. I am very thankful to Beverly's parents for trusting Starfish and allowing me to help them reach their American Dream. I feel honored and grateful to be part of Beverly's life and to see the difference a mentor can make. I look forward to sharing more memories with her and her family.



Maria Millan, Mentor



In April, just as things were starting to re-open, I booked tickets to The Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan. I needed to fulfill a promise I had made to take my student James, a 9th grader at AITE, to the Museum. It was a wonderful adventure for both of us!

We took Metro North to the subway and caught a train uptown. James had never been on a subway and he asked a zillion questions about the system. I tried my best to answer his complex questions about how and when it was created. Yikes! We saw the Goya exhibit and had a discussion about why we both disliked it. James, however, loved the Van Gogh and post-Impressionist art collection, and the Temple of Dendur. He was fascinated by the mummies and the gallery of medieval armor. James is a talented artist who loves engineering, soccer, reading, and playing acoustic guitar. I know that this trip to the Met will leave a lasting impression on him.



James will be volunteering at Person-to-Person, this summer packing food on trucks to help feed people with food insecurity in Stamford. I am so delighted and proud to be his mentor.

Donna Wolff PhD, Mentor



Being part of a family that continues to learn and grow is important to me. Knowing Sherley and her family, being part of her life – to celebrate her accomplishments, to support her during her disappointments, to discuss her aspirations, and to help her navigate a plan to reach those goals – has built a bond between us that is family.

Starfish Connection requires every student in the program to play a musical instrument, and that requirement has changed Sherley's life. She and I have attended many violin lessons, practices, and performances together. I enjoy listening to her play and hearing how her musical talent has developed, but she will tell you, if not for Starfish, she would never have realized her love of music and playing the violin. This year, Sherley was awarded 2nd place in her strings division at the Suzanne Culley Music Festival, a formal competition for music students.



I asked Sherley recently what accomplishment she is most proud of. She said that her years of being an active member of Starfish gave her confidence to pursue her interests and to act on her ideas. This past year, Sherley created an after-school literary club at Westhill High School. She outlined the purpose of the club, developed the members' responsibilities, secured an advisor, and organized the logistics, with a plan to continue meetings in person this next academic year. I am so proud of Sherley and all that she has achieved.

Over the years, she and I have enjoyed a variety of activities together, mostly local events like the Bartlett Arboretum, outdoor and indoor art exhibits, the movies, biking and hiking, and holiday/family celebrations. Meeting Sherley and becoming part of her life has been a gift to me.

Isabel Katz, Mentor



Share in a child's life – It will change your life!

Become a mentor!



Giving back to the community

In May, members of the Starfish community volunteered to join the SoundWaters Environmental Cleanup Day at Cove Island beach. Our students and mentors joined together to help make a difference.



Mayor David Martin (top center) with Starfish students and mentors at Cove Beach Cleanup. Top right, B.J. Mocarski, who organized Starfish participation in the event, with her mentee Esther. Lower right, Jackie Dixon with her mentee Soyeema

Last summer before the start of the school year, members of The Residence at Summer Street invited our high school students to an outdoor reception and generously provided a backpack filled with school supplies to each student. Over the winter, our music students wanted to express their appreciation for this kindness. They reached out to the residents and performed a delightful concert for them on Zoom.



Connecting with parents

Several years ago, former executive director and current board member Janet Schneider identified a critical need for Starfish to involve parents more closely in our Starfish program. Board member Maria Millan enthusiastically signed on, and she has developed a program of meetings for Starfish parents each year since.

This program provides parents with a forum to learn about the Stamford Public Schools and the path to higher education. It has three primary purposes: (1) to help parents understand and access the support offered by the school system; (2) to teach parents how to advocate for their children; and (3) to guide parents in implementing parenting strategies that ensure learning success in school.

Unexpectedly, the program also promoted more frequent communication among the parents and provided opportunities for them to share ideas with each other about cultural opportunities, homework, school programs, and college planning. It has been a resounding success!



Board member Maria Millan

Overall, 70% of Starfish parents attended at least one meeting this year, with several parents joining all three sessions!

In 2020-2021, Starfish presented three bilingual programs virtually for parents:

- *The Effects of the Pandemic on Your Child's Health* – An interactive program to help you identify anxiety, stress, and depression in your child, and what to do about it. Presenter: Dr. Paola Mallozzi, Marriage and Family Therapist LMFT and Starfish mentor.
- *College: It's Never Too Early to Start Planning* – A special presentation to help your child develop college readiness at every grade. Presenter: Jeanie-Melfi Smith, AVID teacher in the Stamford Public Schools and Starfish Connection board member.
- *Help, My Child Is Struggling In School!* – An opportunity to explore education strategies for supporting children with academic or behavioral difficulties. Presenter: Kiomary Sotillo, Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center (CPAC)

Parents have embraced these meetings and have reported that the presentations and discussions are very helpful. An astounding 70% of parents attended at least one meeting this year, and several parents joined all three sessions.



Contributions

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

2021 CORPORATE AND FOUNDATION GRANTS

Betsy & Arthur Selkowitz Family Foundation
Claire L. Helsing Foundation
Credit Suisse
First County Bank Foundation
Herbert & Sarah M. Gibor Charitable Foundation
The Knobloch Fund at FCCF

Louis J. Casale Jr. Charitable Fund
Round Hill Community Church
St. John's Community Foundation
Stamford Rotary Trust Fund
Young Women's League of New Canaan

2021 COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Anne Mochulsky, Balancing Act Financials, LLC-Atelier
Atelier Constantin Popescu Music
The Ballet School, Stamford
Bartlett Arboretum
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Curtain Call
David's Soundview Catering
Fairfield Pizza
Ferguson Library
Future 5
Girl Scouts of CT
Greenwich Academy LINKS Program
Greenwich Music
Jewish Community Center
Mill River Collaborative
Nora's OvenWorks
JD Ospina

Pathfinders Adventure Camp
Pinot Palette
Pro Bono Partnerships
The Residence at Summer Street
Sacred Heart Greenwich, Summer Program
Dr. Steven Shaby
SoundWaters
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
YMCA Camp Hi-Rock
YMCA of Stamford
Young Artists Philharmonic

VOLUNTEERS

Trish Carroll, Graphic design
Donna Hughes, Administration
Harriette Ketover, Teen circle facilitator

Gail G. Trell, Music Program coordinator
Bernie Weiss, Photographer



Starfish volunteers – from left: Donna Hughes, Harriette Ketover, and Gail G. Trell

MENTORS

Sarah Arnold
Jim Benjamin
Lynne Burgess
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
Bette Mocarski
Meg Moor

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 Rosetti
Sarah Santasiero
Marilyn Schlosser
Janet Schneider
Daina Schuman
Diana Shattuck
Mara Siladi
Jeanne Simon & Jake Danziger
Mary Smith
Maria Sosa
Susan Tolliver
Tracy Vodola
Alma Weinberg
Cliff Wells
Kenneth & Lori Wentworth
Donna Wolff, PhD Executive Director



Starfish leadership team prepares to present new computers to our rising 9th graders. From left: Donna Wolff, PhD. Janet Schneider. Marai Grav. Jami Lo. Lisa Musilli. Harriet Ketover. and Fran D'Agostino

INDIVIDUAL GIFTS

American Online Giving Foundation
Jillian Anderson
Judy Aronin
Kenneth & Gwenda Asher
Edmund N. Barker
Lynne & Josh Berrett
Ellen Bromley & Tom Gizicki
Lynne Burgess
Joan Byrne
Trish Carroll & Dick Strahota
Jeff & Valerie Cohen
Irene Durand-Bryan
Amy & Rob Ensign
Elaine & Robert Erichson
Heidi Fieldston & Howard Ostroff
Rosalea Fisher
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John Gol
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Diane & Harry Green
Ginny Gwynn & Jon Bellis
Barbara & Ed Guttman
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Duane & Leana Hill
Zeena Hine
Stephen Hoffman
Suzanne Horn
Donna Hughes
Barbara Jacobs
David W. Johnston

Barbara Kasman & Arthur Wernicke
Joan & Jerry Kranz
Susan P. Nadel Krieger
Gary & Kathleen Larkins
Carol & Peter Lilienthal
Judith S. & Mark G. Lowenstein
Gene R. Martin
James McGovern
Monica M. McQuaid
Maria Millan
Lisa & Mario Musilli
Roslyn & Merritt Nesin
Marilyn Z. Ott
Cheryl Palmer
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Elizabeth Rubin
Richard Russo
Janet & Marc Schneider
Judy Schneiderman
Diane & Steven Shaby
Judy & David Singer
Kimberly & Greg Spies
Lauren & Steve Strelsin
Cynthia Sullivan
Tierpoint, LLC, St. Louis
Janet & Lou Ursone
Kathryn Walsh & Wesley Romansky
Eric Zhang



Moving up celebration for 8th graders, who will attend high school in the fall, with Middle School team leader Fran D'Agostino

Board of Directors

David R. Martin, President
Kathryn Walsh, Secretary
Jeff Cohen
Barbara Guttman
Jennifer W. Lapine

Jeanie Melfi-Smith
Maria Millan, Parent Facilitator
Judith Singer, PhD
Janet Schneider
Donna Wolff, PhD, Executive Director (ex-officio)

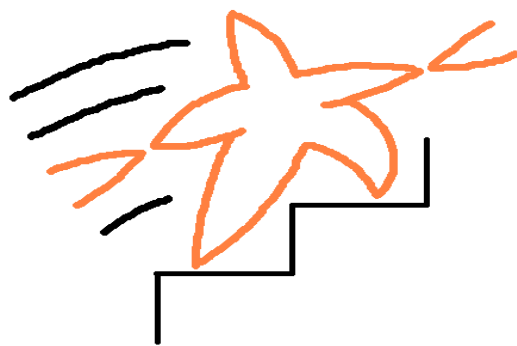


Seated l. to r.: Kathryn Walsh, David Martin, Donna Wolff PhD. Standing l. to r.: Jeanie Melfi-Smith, Janet Schneider, Barbara Guttman, Jennifer Lapine, Jeff Cohen, Maria Millan, Judith Singer PhD

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.

Photo credits: A special thank you to Bernie Weiss of Bernie Weiss Photography who attended numerous Starfish functions and provided so 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.
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