

2023

Annual Report



Why Starfish?

Once, as a man was walking along a beach, he noticed a boy off 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.

The man was struck by the apparent futility of the task. With so many starfish, many were sure to perish. But the boy continued to pick up the starfish one by one and place them back in the surf.

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!"



From "A Starfish Story" a film by Kesh

***BECOME A MENTOR
And Make a Difference!***

Congratulations to Our Three 2023 High School Grads!



Left to right:

Alex Midy, University of CT-Storrs, Sahara Salim, University of CT-Stamford ,and Jonathan Sanchez, Western CT State University

On the Cover: Starfish High School students on their way to visit Tufts University with parents and mentors.

From the President of the Board

Dear Starfish Friends and Supporters:

It was 17 years ago when Starfish Connection was founded. Our longitudinal program of enrichment and mentoring for promising high-need students from elementary through high school continues to be a success.

This last year, like every year since our founding, Starfish students have exceeded the achievement of other high-need students in English/Language Arts and Math on state assessments. And since our first group of students graduated from high school and went on to college, every year we have graduated additional students and sent them to attend the colleges of their dreams. As a bonus, I can't count how many mentors have said to me that guiding these students has been one of the most rewarding experiences of their life!

Our mentors, community partners, team leaders, camp directors, music instructors, tutors, donors, Board members, and parents have all been critical to making this happen. Once again, we thank them for their hard work and dedication, making sure our students have bright futures for themselves and their families. We could never have achieved so much for these students without their help.

And to make all the parts work together, we have been very fortunate to have great leadership from our Executive Directors. My wife Judy Martin started Starfish Connection and grew it from scratch. She created a new model for mentoring, and with her love for the students and personal dedication she made it work. Unfortunately, Judy passed away just days before our first student received her acceptance letter from Tufts University.

But one of Judy's happiest moments was when Janet Schneider agreed to take Judy's place as Executive Director. Judy's trust and confidence in Janet was well founded. Janet not only ensured the continued growth and success of Starfish, but she made it better and it prospered under her care.

When Janet retired as Executive Director (she remains as an active Board member), Donna Wolff became our new leader. Donna faced a new challenge, the pandemic. In-person school classes were closed, student enrichment programs were cancelled, and mentors and students were often unable to meet together. But Donna persevered and managed us through these difficulties. I can't thank Janet and Donna enough for what they have done to serve our students and continue the Starfish legacy. Donna is staying on as a Starfish mentor, but she has decided to step down as Executive Director this last February.

It gives me great pleasure to announce that Regan Allan is our new Executive Director. In just a few short months her knowledge, experience, and consistent hard work have shown us all that Starfish is in great hands and is poised to grow and continue to improve in the future.

I am so proud of this organization, and proud of people like Regan and so many others, who contribute so much of themselves to make the world a better place for students on their journey through life. In the midst of so much turmoil in the world, the generosity of so many to help these promising students gives me renewed hope for the future. Thank you to all who have helped Starfish and in our journey.

Best wishes,



David Martin



From the Executive Director

Dear Starfish Connection Friends, Supporters, and Volunteers:

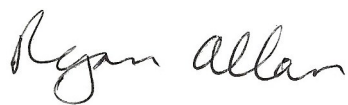
I am thrilled to be writing my first Annual Report letter as Executive Director of this wonderful organization. Judy Martin was a hero of mine and when the Board asked me to follow in her footsteps, I was honored and excited to become part of a community of people who are passionate about the success of our Stamford Public Schools' students. I believe deeply in the Starfish mission and with my background in education, community experience in Stamford and just being a mother of four children, I know I can make a difference in the lives of Stamford's underserved students.

We had another successful year for our Starfish students, with enrichment trips, instrumental music back in school, camps, cultural events, tutoring and college preparation, parent meetings, and Teen Circles. As usual, our students outperformed other high needs students in standardized testing. Although the pandemic seems to be in the rearview mirror, we are still seeing its effects. Some of our students experienced trauma during the pandemic and we are supporting them with counseling. We are also seeing the effects of learning loss, particularly in math, so we are exploring the possibility of tutoring or an academic boot camp type experience to fill in the gaps.

In this year's Report, I'm bringing back some of the Success Stories Judy used to highlight in years past. You can read about our students who are excelling in various areas, students who have struggled during COVID, and of course our three Class of 2023 graduates who will be attending college. You'll also see the many faces of Starfish; our mentors, volunteers, community partners, parents and of course students, including our newest cohort of six students and mentors who started last month.

I would like to dedicate this Annual Report to the many volunteers who have assisted me during this transition, including Jami Lo, Margi Gray, Fran D'Agostino, Mary Smith, Lynne Burgess, Maria Millan, Bernie Weiss, Gail Trell, Marc Schneider, Kathy King, Judy Singer, Jeanie Melfi-Smith, Jennifer Lapine, Barbara Guttman, Jeff Cohen, Alice Knapp, Sarah Arnold, Lisa Musilli, Donna Hughes, Marilyn Schlosser, Karen Kelly, and of course David Martin. Special thanks to Janet Schneider and Donna Wolff who paved the way and aren't tired of my many phone calls and emails!

Sincerely



Regan Allan



Congratulations, 2023 Starfish Graduates!

All about Alex Midy, written by his mentor Paola Mallozzi

Alex and I first met when he was in the third grade. He wasn't my mentee at the time, but we would get together with him and my student almost weekly. A few years later my mentee left the program, and his mentor left the area, and so I began working with Alex.

Alex was easy to mentor. He was always willing to participate in any Starfish activity, reached out to me when he was struggling and listened to any suggestion I made. I developed a nice relationship with him and his mom. Alex is a very quiet young man with wonderful values and appreciates all that life



During his middle and high school years he was a volunteer at his church, played basketball and ran track at Westhill and prioritized his studies. He valued every opportunity that Starfish offered him. He is a wonderful young man and will be studying at UCONN in Storrs, Ct. I have no doubt that he will be a credit to his family, his community and to Starfish.

All about Sahara Salim, written by her mentor Mara Siladi



I am thrilled to have the opportunity to express my gratitude as Sahara Salim's Starfish Mentor. I know that Starfish will be proud to claim her as an alumna and for having guided her toward her goal as a medical professional. I have watched Sahara grow from a serious third grader to a bright, committed, passionate, and hardworking high school senior. Judy Martin recruited me with her infectious passion for this great program that she established with her husband former Mayor Martin.

Sahara knew she wanted to pursue a career in medicine when I met her in third grade and her love for the field of science has been demonstrated by her commitment to follow a pre-med major in college. Sahara has proved to be a caring, passionate, serious minded student and human being with many friends and a loving family. She has a great sense of humor and works beyond what is expected to solve problems. She was the Senior Class Student Government Secretary of her high school and was selected prom queen.

Sahara has made me proud and fortunate to have been part of her life as a mentor and a support to her family. We have become each other's extended families in more ways than I can say! Deep appreciation goes to Starfish program, and the system it has put in place!

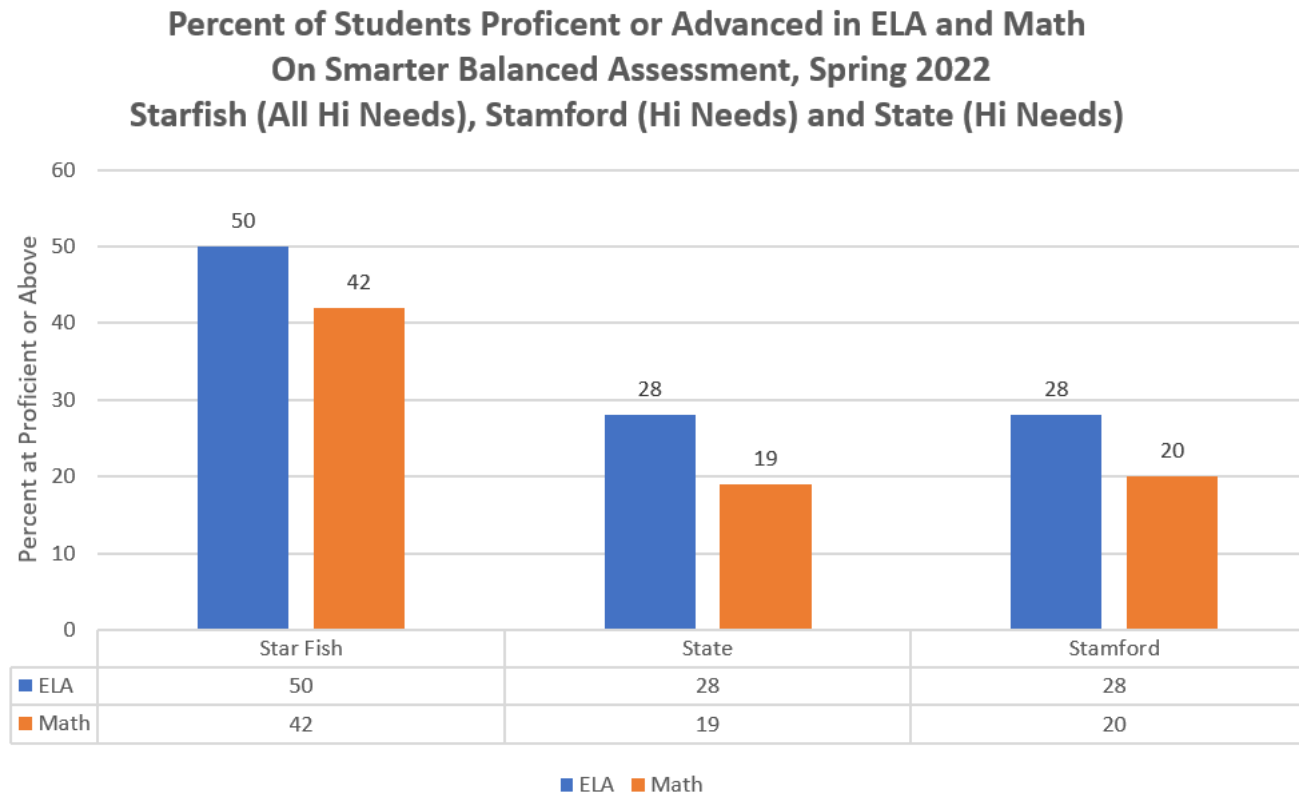
All about Jonathan Sanchez, written by his mentor Fran D'Agostino

I am grateful to Starfish Connection for the opportunity to mentor Jonathan for the last ten years. When I first met Jonathan, while he was very enthusiastic about becoming a Starfish he was also very quiet. It was hard to keep a conversation going that didn't involve me asking "20 questions." To help Jonathan in this area, I would invite Kevin, his older brother who was also a Starfish to accompany us. Kevin is very easy to talk to and I soon found that I knew Kevin more than I knew Jonathan. So I told Jonathan that he could think of me as his grandmother—which really did change our relationship. Jonathan is like a grandson to me!



He has faced and conquered challenges and disappointments. When grades were an issue, he worked harder and brought them up all while finding time to assist at Mill River Consortium, playing baseball, and working at various part time jobs. He has learned how to advocate for himself and has developed into a competent and capable young man with a promising future. And we now have wonderful conversations! I am so proud of him! I am also grateful to his parents and to Kevin. They are a wonderful family and I am so happy they allowed me into their lives and to mentor Jonathan. May God continue to bless them.

Academic Results



Our latest SBAC scores show that Starfish Connection’s students exceeded scores of other high-needs students in Stamford and the State in English/ Language Arts and Math.

2023 Starfish Mentor, Student and Parent Survey

Starfish is a humanistic program that prides itself on working one on one with students and mentors. At the same time, Starfish seeks continual growth and for that purpose group data are important. A survey, conducted in winter 2023 with students, parents and mentors, collected stakeholder requests for program growth.

It is gratifying to learn that "students love their mentors and want to spend more time with them." Mentors "love spending time with their students and feel guilty when they do not have as much time."



A common theme expressed by students, parents and mentors is a desire to explore and learn - students would love more field trips to historical and cultural sites; parents would like workshops "geared to specific ages" and are interested in their children learning to swim; mentors would like more training around topics like "social-emotional learning. cultural humility, racism and the curriculum of Stamford Public Schools."

With support from the Starfish Board and Program Leaders, the requests from the Starfish community will be on the agenda for the coming year.

Celebrating Our Starfish Milestones



At our high school graduation celebrations, graduating students and mentors share speeches about each other and receive gifts. Mentors receive a sweatshirt from the college where their student will attend and students receive a MacBook Air, \$1000 check for books and other college expenses, and \$500 dorm room shopping spree! We know college is expensive and we want our students to start off on an even playing field, so we equip them with some financial support so they can succeed.



Below: Eighth Grade Rising Up Ceremony: Students and mentors participated in a panel discussion to give tips about middle school to younger students.



Below: Barbecue for our rising fifth graders entering middle school.







Music Program 2023

Music continues to be an important component of a Starfish student's experience. Students are required to play an instrument from Grades 4-8. Many of our students choose to continue playing in high school and if there is interest, Starfish will pay for private lessons. The Stamford Public Schools music program is slowly growing back since COVID and we are proud of our partnership with the school system, as well as Intempo and Stamford Music and Arts Academy, so we can challenge, prepare and inspire our students to be the musicians of the next generation.



Enrichment Activities 2023

Starfish exposes students to events and experiences that they might not have otherwise, because we know the power of seeing the world outside your door. The 8th grade cohort started a book club, middle schoolers went Ziplining and the elementary school students visited Eden Farms. We also had some students attend shows such as the Nutcracker, the Stamford All School Musical and Stamford High's annual musical, Prom.



Success Story by Donna Wolff



James Quispe is a Starfish senior at AITE HS majoring in engineering and computer science. He is an outstanding student with a challenging courseload including several college courses, AP classes, and consistently high grades. James enjoys sports, is a volleyball setter for Westhill HS travel team, and played travel soccer in middle school. James is most passionate about music and his first-generation Peruvian heritage. This summer, he travelled to Peru and visited his extended family for the very first time.

James is also an accomplished and talented musician. He plays cello for Intempo and the Greater Connecticut Youth Orchestra. He traveled to Guatemala this summer with the Intempo orchestra as a cellist, and even won a scholarship for his airfare. This summer he has a job teaching music to young campers at Intempo camp.

We went on several college tours including Columbia University, Yale, and MIT (with his family and me in the car). While waiting for the Columbia tour to start on the steps of the library, James told me, "I feel like I belong here". James hopes to study mechanical engineering in college, is passionate about cars and hopes to engineer new ones.

Our Community Partners Help Us Get Ready for Camp and for School

Once again Selma Maisel Nursery School students helped us with backpacks for our students who attended Camp Hi Rock. The backpacks were full out sunscreen, toiletries and of course bug spray!

Again this year, The Residence at Summer Street community and staff accessed new school supplies from donors and filled and distributed fifteen new backpacks to our high school students in time for school.



College Prep

Navigating the college application process is daunting. We hire tutors and have retired Stamford Public Schools staff volunteer to assist students with finding the right college, practicing for SATs/ACTs, completing the college application and writing the dreaded essay. We also encourage mentors to visit colleges with their students and we charter a bus to take the entire high school group, including mentors, students and parents to visit a college.



A sentiment that resounds with all Starfish mentors is that it goes by so quickly. In just a blink, Sury Luna, the precocious yet shy 2nd grader I first met, is now a confident young lady about to start high school.

Unexpected challenges have been thrown in Sury's path over the past 6 years. Most notably, the mold at Westover which forced her to adapt to a new elementary school and the hurdles COVID put in her way while transitioning to and graduating from Middle School at Scofield. Throughout it all she has been changing, adapting and moving forward. Each one of our Starfish have learned very early how to adapt and have done it beautifully.

Starfish has provided Sury with some wonderful summer adventures. She attended the Sacred Heart Outreach program through elementary school and for the past two summers she attended the Live Girl program held at St Luke's in New Canaan. She told me that her time at Live Girl "enabled me to get to know so many new people from different backgrounds while having fun learning new things". I have seen that participating in these programs has given her confidence and self-awareness that she will use to continue to grow and move forward.

Sury will be embarking on her high school journey at Westhill this fall. We are both excited for this next transition filled with ways to expand her already inquisitive mind, to make new friends, and to explore new opportunities. I feel so lucky to be a part of the team of family and friends looking out for her and guiding her on her way. I am looking forward to working with Sury and her entire cohort to be sure they have a smooth and successful start to their high school experience.

Success Story
by Margi Gray



Success Stories by Jami Lo



There are many challenges facing high school students as they begin embarking on the college process. Choosing challenging classes, but not impossible, managing homework, community service, jobs, extracurriculars, and family life to name a few. At the end of Sophomore year we begin to discuss colleges and the steps needed to move forward. They include staying on top of grades, deciding on which colleges to explore, visiting colleges, deciding whether to live at home or live on campus, preparing for the PSATs, possibly SATs, considering areas of study and finances. The list goes on and on! This is an exhausting and stressful process for the best and most supported students.

Our Starfish students are supported and guided through this process by their mentors, High School Team Leaders and parents when possible. During this process we occasionally find students who are emotionally struggling. We can sometimes identify difficulties when a student who had As begins to drop to Ds and Fs for no apparent reason. This is exactly what happened to several of our students last year and this year. Mentors recognized the problem and sought help from parents and guidance counselors. Here are their stories:

A Starfish student was struggling with grades and keeping up with classwork. There was a noticeable attitude shift, so we talked to her and the parent. The family was amenable to receiving extra support, so we set up the student with a counselor in school. During the time she was counseled, there was a positive shift in her grades and attitude.

A Starfish student was not given adequate support needed by the school and Starfish arranged for her to receive weekly private counseling. It was discovered that the student was being bullied and it only became apparent when a crisis ensued. The private counselor she had been seeing identified the situation, contacted the parent, and helped them attain additional medical help. The student's grades and attitude didn't immediately improve; there were definitely ups and downs, but by the last marking period, she had made honors! Her attitude is one of perseverance, positivity and enthusiasm for the upcoming year.

A Starfish student was struggling with her family situation. She had been in counseling for many years with a community-based mental health organization, but as Junior year was ending, it became clear she wasn't getting the support she needed. Stamford's mental health organizations have experienced an explosion of requests since COVID and they are over-stretched and under-resourced. In this case the counselor at this organization was unable to meet the needs of our student. She is a straight A student with challenging classes positioning her to apply to a prestigious scholarship program. Our concern for her current home situation and the trauma she is likely to experience as she reflects on the past for her college applications made it clear to us that she would benefit with additional professional support. If she is selected, the scholarship will provide full tuition and cover all of her college expenses for 4 years. As a result, we connected the student with a counselor at our expense, to support her through this challenging time.

We expect a lot from our Starfish students and we have to evaluate students as whole persons- the mind, body and heart. When they demonstrate harmful negative behavioral changes, academic or personal, we need to consult their parents and their school counselor in an attempt to attain the resources to support them. If after taking these first steps our students continue to struggle and if they are receptive to professional counseling, we must have the resources to provide it. It is essential to have mental health practitioners available to meet our students' emotional needs. It can mean the difference between success and failure in the Starfish Program and more importantly, in each of their lives.

Contributions

2023 Corporate and Foundation Grants

Round Hill Community Church, Inc

Claire L. Helsing Foundation

St Francis Episcopal Church

Kiwanis Club of Stamford

Grace Fippinger Foundation

Louis Casale Jr. Charitable Fund

Fidelity Charitable Fund

Hill Family Fund

William Knobloch Foundation

First County Bank Foundation

2023 Individual Gifts

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Lynne Burgess

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Jeff Cohen

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David Martin

Gene R. Martin

Maria Millan

Dori Mitzi

Lisa & Mario Musilli

Roslyn & Merritt Nesin

Rich & Robin Redness

Timothy Rogers

Janet & Marc Schneider

Greg Schneider

Arthur & Betsy Selkowitz

Diane & Dr. Steven Shaby

Kimberly & Greg Spies

James Terry

Gail Trell

Janet Ursone

Kathy Walsh & Wes Romansky

Kendall Will

Robert Wolf

Success Story by Regan Allan



I first met Ethan at my first Starfish parent meeting. He walked right up to me with his dad to shake my hand, introduce himself and welcome me to Starfish. I was impressed with his poise for being just 10 years old! His parents told me how much they value Ethan being in Starfish and we began to text back and forth, sharing his successes and challenges. His mom shared that Ethan loves the art lessons we provide through the Stamford Music and Arts Academy and that he recently won a contest for his sketch, pictured at left.

Unfortunately, Ethan's mentor had a change in work and needed to travel more, so she resigned as a mentor. We know that life happens, but when mentors have to resign, it's important that we find new mentors for our students as soon as possible. In the meantime, our Team Leaders, volunteers, other mentors and even me step up to support the student. Luckily, we were able to find a new mentor for Ethan within 3 months, but there is always a need for mentors, so please consider volunteering!



Volunteers

Donna Hughes, Administration

Gail G. Trell, & Mark Schneider, Music Program Coordinators

Bernie Weiss, Photographer

Mairead Collins, Teen circle facilitator

Jeanie Melfi-Smith, Education Advisor

Judy Singer, Grant Writer

Mentors

Jack Alexander

Sarah Arnold

Sharon Beadle

Marlen Bodden

Jim Bradley

Arthur Brody

Lynne Burgess- Camp Coordinator

Missy Cole

Susan Conner

Fran D'Agostino- M.S. Team Leader

Nicky DeRosa

Jackie Dixon

Linda Feld

Margi Gray- H.S. Team Leader

Deb Hirsch

Dee Hoo

Susan Horstmann

Kathy Joyce

Karen Kelly

Kathy King- E.S. Team Leader

Alice Knapp

Peter Lasalandra

Peter Lilienthal

Jami Lo- H.S. Team Leader

Mike Magarian

Paola Mallozzi

Gina Martin

Danette Melchionne

Midge Pappas

Karen Plant

Tim Rogers

Caroline Romans

Liz Rosano

Fred Rosetti

Sarah Santasiero

Marilyn Schlosser

Nancy Schulkind

Dianna Shattuck

Mara Siladi

Mary Smith- E.S. Team Leader

Caroline Spooner

Susan Toliver

2023 Community Partners

Anne Mochulsky, Balancing Act Financials

Atelier Constantin Popescu Music

The Ballet School, Stamford

Bartlett Arboretum

Beyond Limits

Bruce Museum

Thomas Cassone, Attorney at Law

Chelsea Piers

Crescendo Music

Curtain Call

Fairfield Pizza

Ferguson Library

Future 5

Girl Scouts of CT

Greenwich Academy, GATE Program

Intempo Music School

Jewish Community Center

Mill River Collaborative

J.D. Ospina

Pinot Palette

The Residence at Summer Street

Sacred Heart Greenwich, Summer Program

Dr. Steven Shaby

SoundWaters

Stamford 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

YMCA Camp Hi-Rock

YMCA of Stamford

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Jeff Cohen

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Barbara Guttman

Jennifer W. Lapine

Jeanie Melfi-Smith

Maria Millan, Parent Facilitator

Judith Singer, PhD

Janet Schneider, Secretary

Regan Allan, Executive Director (ex-officio)



Above from left counterclockwise: Jami Lo (HS Team Leader), Rosalea Fisher, David Martin, Margi Gray (HS Team Leader), Regan Allan, Janet Schneider, Judy Singer, Jeanie Melfi-Smith, Maria Millan and Fran D'Agostino (MS Team Leader). Not pictured: Mary Smith and Kathy King (ES Team Leaders), Barbara Guttman, Jeff Cohen, Jennifer Lapine.

Thank you to Judy Singer for editing this Annual Report and to Jami Lo, Margi Gray, Janet Schneider and Donna Wolff for their assistance.



Starfish Connection, Inc. is a 501c3, mentor volunteer organization, whose mission is to address Stamford's opportunity gap by providing long-term mentoring, after-school and summer enrichment programs, and educational support to promising students from the city's underserved families. We pair a mentor with a student, one-on-one to provide these resources from 3rd grade through 12th grade.

We welcome new mentors, donations, and support from the community. Please ask us how you can help!

Visit our website to learn more about Starfish Connection. Go to: www.starfishconnection.org

Starfish Connection, Inc.

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Stamford, CT 06905

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.

