

CELEBRATING UNIQUENESS

“IT’S A  
COLORFUL  
LIFE”



Cover artwork inspired by Logan Ledford  
loganledford.com



## 2020-2021 Annual Report

*Providing services to people impacted with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) and their families in Fairfield County since 1952*

Early Childhood Therapies & Education • Employment & Day Services • Residential • Recreation  
Seniors Program • Transportation • Family Support • Sports Buddies • High School Transition



# A Rainbow of Opportunities



## WORDS FROM STAR's BOARD PRESIDENT & EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Some days it feels like we have weathered a dark storm only to find that our lives are colored by a rainbow of new opportunities as we, hopefully, see the waning of the pandemic. Thanks to the extraordinary efforts of our Direct Care Professionals, the flexibility and cooperation of our families, the generosity of our donors and volunteers, and the positive spirit and energy of our participants, STAR is focused on the future—and it is colorful and bright.

Individualized employment remains a primary focus, with nearly all of the individuals displaced during the pandemic returning to work. In addition, young adults entering the work force for the first time are finding new opportunities with STAR supports.

This past year has seen the near completion of our extensive renovation of STAR Headquarters in Norwalk thanks to series of grants from the Governor's Nonprofit Grant Program. Our Seniors Program relocated from St. Peters Church to a spacious new suite in the renovated building complete with access to a kitchenette, sensory room, nurses' station, and state-of-the-art accessible bathrooms and changing rooms. Young adults still discovering their talents and dreams, now enjoy dedicated space for art classes, dance, music, fitness, and gardening with a new assistive technology resource center soon to follow.

STAR Rubino Family Center is reinvigorated with the return of infants, toddlers and children up to age eight receiving direct therapy from our professionals. STAR now proudly accepts insurance, private pay, and HUSKY for

speech, occupational therapy, physical therapy and special education.

Residential services continue paying close attention to COVID protocols to protect residents and staff. A new group residence in Norwalk was developed to replace an aging home owned by the state. Five residents now enjoy a fully accessible and completely renovated home. We began the conversion of the Darien Cottage into a Smart Home showcase with assistive technology generously funded by a grant from The Darien Foundation. Likewise, we began adding smart technology to a handful of other homes as the direction of the future to foster greater independence, safety, and accessibility.

Finally, we continued our amazing series of daily zoom classes to keep everyone engaged and connected, particularly those who are not yet able to return to in-person services. With the help of dozens of community partners and volunteers, the rich content of the classes continues to inspire and amaze. We are so grateful for our many community partners.

It was a proud year for STAR. We faced the hurdles as a team and became stronger and smarter with each one. We celebrate individual triumphs and believe it is truly a colorful life!



**Meghan Cioffi**  
President of the Board



**Katie Banzhaf**  
Executive Director

**RUBINO FAMILY CENTER**  
early childhood therapies & education  
[www.starct.org](http://www.starct.org)

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**Offering Pediatric Therapies from Newborn to 8 Years**

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Barbara Fitzpatrick, Director  
Rubino Family Center  
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# Little STARS, Bright Futures!

## Meet Skyler!

Skyler just turned three, recently started school and took the bus! These milestones, celebrated by his mother Kirsten and father Mike, are extra special for a child with cerebral palsy. Skyler was referred to STAR Rubino Family Center at six months—“A Lucky meeting,” shared Kirsten, “We were so thankful to get in touch with STAR Rubino Family Center and to receive such great support right away. We credit Skyler’s progress to the STAR therapists.” In fact, it was STAR’s therapist who originally suggested that Skyler was presenting like he had cerebral palsy when the family was unsure what was going on. “We felt like he was an infant forever, lacking head support, trunk support, and mobility.”

“STAR showed us, and Skyler, what he can do. That brings us lots of joy.” He was matched up with the right equipment to move and now can participate in life. “Putting him on the bus by himself at three with his paraprofessional brought tears to my eyes. The fact that he is going to a school with typical kids and that he can be part of that experience is a huge thing for our family.”

Prior to meeting STAR, Skyler had no diagnosis. He was developmentally delayed, had difficulty feeding, and used a gastrointestinal tube. He receives four services from STAR including speech (sound production and feeding therapies),



physical, occupational therapy (learning to move his body), and special education (cognitive exercises to learn colors and shapes).

Through COVID, STAR professional therapists made up to five house visits weekly and quickly worked out video conferencing that gave the family more “Hands on” for therapy support. Kirsten expressed, “It takes a very special person to teach through video conference!” Dad is also very involved in the therapy and exercises. He is building a special bench with monkey bars and a vibration plate to help Skyler strengthen his bones and improve mobility. In addition to support from family and friends, Kirsten said, “STAR has been my therapist and go-to resource. STAR supports our whole family.”

“Skyler is still nonverbal, he tries so hard with everything he does.” says his dad. “He is learning animal sounds and you can see how hard he tries to position his lips and produce a sound.” The parents hope that Skyler will learn how to operate a motorized wheelchair in the next year to increase his independence. They believe, with eye gaze devices and new assistive technology, that Skyler will thrive and enjoy a life connecting to others and contributing to the community.

## Meet Ariana!

Patrick and Carolina are young and dedicated parents focused on the well-being of their two-year-old daughter, Ariana. They live in Norwalk alongside their dog Crypto and cat Kiki. Following a normal delivery at birth, Ariana was diagnosed with congenital muscular torticollis, a medical condition involving stiff neck muscles which cause the head to tilt and lean more preferably in one direction. This made interacting with her environment and reaching her developmental milestones more difficult. Infants with this condition also have a high likelihood of developing plagiocephaly aka “Flat Head,” which she also developed. To correct her torticollis, Ariana started to receive physical therapy, and to correct her plagiocephaly Ariana wore a cranial helmet 23 hours a day from 5 months old until she was 14 months. After overcoming those obstacles,

Ariana was recently diagnosed with autism in June 2021.

Ariana was referred to STAR Rubino Family Center at just five months old. Patrick said he and his wife “Really, really liked all the attention of the STAR therapists and the proximity to their home.” In fact, they attribute the astuteness of STAR’s physical and speech therapists, who throughout her therapy sessions, started to recognize Ariana’s autism symptoms prior to her diagnosis. This energetic little girl who loves Peppa Pig, Elmo, and most of all her two pets; joins her parents at STAR Rubino Center several times weekly for speech, physical and occupational therapy. Dad shares that Ariana started walking this year on May 15 — a milestone that adds to one of his proudest moments, while Mom shares Ariana’s first time being able to turn around on her tummy, or finally saying “mommy” as hers.



Photos by: NSMediaMarketing.com



# It's Complementary...

*(Adj.) Separate elements that together equal perfection and make a whole*



**Art Classes** — STAR celebrates the full palette of renowned artists, galleries, and museums –both local and cross country - who have created a colorful life for STAR clients on zoom and in person! Generous grants from the Drew Friedman Community Arts Center and AWI/CT Office of the Arts helped underwrite many new, artistic initiatives to benefit people with IDD.



**ZOOM Community Partners** — STAR appreciates the generous donations of their time and talents by scores of community partners who rallied to provide regular zoom programming during COVID. STAR produced over 400 days of virtual classes with an average of five classes per day—over 2000 hours of special events that brought cooking, art, music, dance, fitness, yoga, and other classes into the homes of STAR participants to keep them healthy, connected, and engaged.

**Sensory Room** — The renovation of STAR Headquarters includes a new room specifically designed to give an immersive sensory experience for people with various abilities. Using lights, sound, colors, and other sensory cues to calm, engage, and help users to develop emotionally and cognitively, the room helps users engage with their senses and reap the benefits of sensory stimulation in a safe and relaxed environment, regardless of their age or ability.



**Seniors Program** — Welcome STAR Seniors Program to their new suite in STAR Headquarters. After a long and happy history hosted at St. Peter's Church on Newtown Avenue in Norwalk, STAR seniors recently relocated to a spacious and bright room with kitchenette, new changing rooms and accessible bathrooms, new nurses station and sensory room adjacent to all of the other lively activities run by STAR Day Services.





# Back to work!



**Over 150 local businesses**, in partnership with STAR, Inc., have provided employment to qualified candidates with disabilities over the years. STAR's leading program of supported employment, although recently facing hurdles during COVID, is focused on getting everyone back to work—some to return to their old jobs, some to start new ones.



Back on the job again are Tom Gogolak, Darien YMCA, and Charlie Sherman, Whole Foods, Darien.

*Businesses that hire people with disabilities statistically perform better relative to their peers and competitors.”*

— Accenture Research Project 2019



**STAR employment solutions** match employer needs with job seeker skills with a significant pool of talent available to work.

**STAR provides onsite support** with job coaches and develops ongoing partnerships with employers providing follow along services. **There are no fees for STAR employment services!**

Labor force needs are met by qualified candidates. **Internal benefits include inspiring staff and impacting morale and productivity.**

STAR is the only Fairfield County agency certified by the Department of Developmental Services and Department of Aging and Disabilities to provide **Customized Employment Services.**



“ Here at SOLUDE we are so pleased to partner with the STAR organization. They do incredible work and we're happy to support in any way we can. Denise has been a wonderful addition to the SOLUDE team. She is a hard worker, reliable and takes great pride in her work. She brightens our workplace. We're lucky to have her!”

**JAZMINE COX**  
SOLUDE  
Director of Operations



“ We love working with the STAR Employment Program! Jamie is a great addition to our warehouse team, and the entire STAR staff is great with communication and collaboration in facilitating his success at Ranger Ready!”

**LAUREN GULLIVER**  
Ranger Ready  
Vice President  
Operations/E-Commerce  
& Administration



“ We have been partnering with STAR for several years. Bjorn has always been a productive employee and we enjoy having him on staff. We recently placed our second STAR employee, and they did a great job of finding the right candidate!”

**RICHARD ANDERS**  
Darien Sport Shop  
General Manager





# Self-Advocates



At three months of age, **Phyllis** and her twin brother became wards of the state due to dire family circumstances. After a few years, she returned to her father until, at age six, Phyllis remembers being dropped off at Southbury Training School (an institution that is still open in CT despite its decreasing population) because of her father's declining health. With four brothers and two sisters, Phyllis could not understand why she, the youngest child, had to leave her family and her twin brother. She spent eight years at the institution and recalls staff members saying, "You don't belong here." She recounts haunting memories of her time there that still bring a tear to her eye over six decades later. She remembers teaching herself how to write, spell and read. During that time, both of her parents died.

In June of 2021, Phyllis moved in to Stoler House at STAR after her previous group home in Torrington, CT closed. For Phyllis, her new room at STAR was love at first sight. She selected new furniture and had the room painted her favorite indigo blue with orange accents and floral curtains. With heartfelt sincerity, Phyllis says she "Loves, loves, loves" her staff, her housemates, her visits to the horse farm, dances, the STAR Senior Center, and all of "The beautiful people I meet at STAR."

Phyllis readily shares her age of 73 and happily recounts her years working in the Danbury Hospital kitchen, hotel housekeeping, assembly, and lawn care. Phyllis is an avid swimmer and competed for many years in Special Olympics. She is proud of her son and grandson who she visits in New York State as often as possible, "spoiling her grandson with gifts and money." Phyllis has a lot of friends and relatives on Facebook and she loves to stay connected. She enjoys crossword puzzles and embroidery. Her next dream job or volunteer opportunity is to read to kids. "I love kids."

The staff at Stoler House attest to the rapid friendships Phyllis made in her new home. They describe her as very "industrious and helpful," as she assists with preparing lunches and meals while offering support to her housemates. "She is a real girls' girl, too! She is very particular about her hair and nails. She says she is 'Forever Young'."

Phyllis is one of over 90 people who receive residential supports from STAR's Direct Care Professionals. During COVID, these professionals are heroes whose dedication and compassion lead them to fulfill their mission of keeping the residents safe, healthy, engaged and connected despite often overwhelming challenges.



**Angie** is a confident, independent self-advocate who

says, "I want the freedom to make my own decisions." This year she celebrates a major milestone and personal goal—a judge awarded her own personal guardianship. Although Angie felt her prior guardian had her best interests in mind, Angie wanted to exercise her rights as a responsible adult to determine her own future. Flashing her beaming smile, she shares, "I am very, very happy. Now, I can do some simple things that I was told were too dangerous for me like taking a walk outside my complex with my housemates to visit Dunkin Donuts, Subway and TJ Maxx. I like freedom."





# Team work!

## STAR salutes our Direct Support Professionals

who serve as a critical line of defense against COVID. Working in close quarters, they help individuals feed, dress, bathe and care for themselves. They support people in safely navigating the community. Throughout this pandemic, they continue to place themselves in harm's way to unselfishly support others and to improve their quality of life.

STAR also salutes the dedication of therapists who pivoted to remote services (so services never stopped), when in-person sessions were not possible until safe opening of the center.

However, that is only the part of their sacrifice that we can see. Many also juggle kids home from school, caring for aging parents, and the financial instability of the economy. Direct Support Professionals are true professionals in every sense of the word; Their compassion and dedication are an inspiration to everyone. We hope you join STAR in honoring them.



**WE ARE HIRING!**



*An affiliated chapter of The Arc*



STAR, Inc. is a non-profit supporting  
Fairfield County neighbors with developmental disabilities.

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**Seeking  
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**STAR Headquarters**  
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Norwalk, CT 06851

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120 East Avenue  
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**STAR New Canaan**  
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New Canaan, CT 06840

**STAR Darien**  
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Darien, CT 06820

**STAR Connections**  
15 Cross Street  
Norwalk, CT 06851



*Our Mission* **STAR, Inc., Lighting the Way** is a not-for-profit organization serving individuals of all ages who have intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), as well as providing support services to their families. We create opportunities for individuals to live full lives with independence, freedom of choice, and personal growth by providing support, services, and advocacy. We inform and encourage the community to recognize and appreciate the value of all individuals.



182 Wolfpit Ave., Norwalk, CT 06851 | 203.846.9581 | www.starct.org



**STAR's 16th Annual Walk, Run & Roll** raised over \$106,000 with a kickoff on the first Sunday in May and a series of events throughout the month. As COVID restrictions eased and the weather improved, the event proceeded with a hybrid format. A small group of STAR participants and fundraising teams joined Katie Banzhaf and some local dignitaries at Sherwood Island as a "first step" towards getting back to in-person events. With zoom and Facebook live posts, the group was able to share the experience with the virtual attendees who also enjoyed online programming that included warm up exercises, face-painting, visits from local celebrities and civic leaders, cooking and entertaining demonstrations and music by DJJoe. STAR is especially thankful for our donors including top teams: Team Ariel, SAWAH, Laura's STARS, Residential STARS, and Team Wolf.



**STAR held two Golf Outings** in the past year at the long and beautiful CT Golf Club in Easton, CT. Thanks to our generous hosts, the Piscitell Family. The first was held in September 2020 and the second in June 2021. Both events enjoyed perfect golf weather, with COVID protocols in place, on a challenging course with fine food, drinks and competitive fun to raise over \$75,000 for STAR. Several STAR participants were part of foursomes at the event and one, Jack Piscitell, had his stars align to win the putting contest!



**STAR Sports Buddies** resumed outdoor activities in New Canaan as a weekly athletic program to match children and young adults with disabilities to typical peers who volunteer as "Buddies". The program continues to grow and welcomes participants and volunteers of all ages.

**JumpSTARS** is a collaboration of STAR and Jumpstart to provide activities that are educational, recreational and social to promote well-being. Parents, relatives, and siblings of individuals impacted by IDD are invited to join this family network. Programs are offered free of charge.

**STAR** received a grant from The Arc of US to participate in **MLK Day of Service**. The grant funds weekly cooking classes for STAR participants and supports STAR's partnerships with Open Door Shelter and Person-to-Person through volunteerism, food collection, and meal preparation for neighbors in need.

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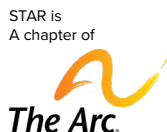
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**STAR is especially thankful for our partnership and support from:**



STAR is grateful to all of our generous corporate, foundation, and individual donors throughout the year. We appreciate the families and friends who choose to make STAR the beneficiary of special gifts in memory or in honorarium, especially those who have included STAR in their estate planning and wills as new members of our STAR Foundation Legacy Society.

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