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## Where Westport meets the world

By: Dan Woog

[Unsung Hero #317](#)

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Since its founding more than 70 years ago — with help from several Westporters, and important funding from the Westport Woman’s Club — [STAR Lighting the Way](#) has grown into a vital resource for people with individual or developmental disabilities.

STAR provides a wide array of services for over 700 individuals in Fairfield County, from birth to their senior years. STAR helps them live full lives with independence, freedom of choice and personal growth, through early intervention pediatric therapies, family support, high school transition, customized employment and job support, assistive technology, adult day services, recreation, and residential support in group homes and apartments.

For over 40 years, Katie Banzhaf has been an integral part of STAR. This Friday marks her last day as executive director. She looks forward to traveling, and pursuing her passion for gardening.



Katie Banzhaf

But, Banzhaf told [NewCanaanite.com](http://NewCanaanite.com), she has also always been passionate about “the employment of people with special needs. At a very early age, I just realized that life could be better for (them). I wanted to be part of that.”

She began volunteering as a teenager in her native Cincinnati, taking residents of a state institution into the community.

While working as a consultant involved with job training for people with IDD, she was recruited by STAR. Around the country and worldwide, Banzhaf received a call from STAR and the rest is history.

In 4 decades at STAR, she told NewCanaanite, she watched clients move from infant services into high school, college and then jobs. “The continuity with the clients, and being able to see them grow and with their families has been a real gift.”

One is Joey Agostino, the well-known “DJ Joe”; he works in a flower shop, and plays music on the side. Another client started his own vending machine business.

“It’s somebody believing in them and saying let’s do everything in our power to support them.



**Katie Banzhaf (far right) with (from left) State Senator Bob Duff, Westporter and Staples High School graduate Wyatt Davis, State Representative Lucy Dathan.**

“I’ve really worked hard to make sure I’ve done a lot of lobbying with the state so that we can offer better wages and better benefits. There’s still more work to be done with that as well. But STAR has really become a family and I hope it continues to have that feeling and it’s a place that people want to work.”

Banzhaf passed praise for her work back to her colleagues and STAR members.

In a farewell note she said, “Whatever has been achieved over my time as executive director has been the result of a great team effort. For that and more, I am grateful to the board of directors, the staff, parents, and the individuals we support who continue to teach me about strength, determination, and the joy of realizing their dreams.

“You have all played a part in ensuring that my professional life was meaningful and joyful.”



**Katie Banzhaf and Westporter Mickey Herbst, a longtime STAR board of directors member and supporter.**

STAR director of philanthropy Peter Saverine says, “There is so much more to Katie’s story. For over 40 years she has been dedicated to STAR, and she spent a lifetime dedicated to advancing services, inclusion, rights and opportunities for people of all abilities.

“She is a hero here, and to thousands of families in Fairfield County.”

Congratulations, Katie, as you retire from such a meaningful, impactful career. Thank you for all you have done, for tens of thousands of people. Your legacy will live on for decades.