

LIBERATED LEARNERS

NORTH STAR'S NEWSLETTER FALL 2017



Tai shows off the Baked Orange Cauliflower and Seasoned Rice made in Lunch Class

This year we welcome Lexi Polokoff as an Americorps Staff Member. Her class, Art as Your Tool, is among the most popular here. Her smile is a welcome presence in our common room every day! Perhaps the most popular new class is Ellen Morbyrne's Lunch Class. Three days per week, Ellen organizes a group of five to ten teens to cook various vegetarian dishes. It's a quality operation: stir fry, quesadillas, pasta, and yesterday, orange cauliflower. Stay tuned! Another new group has been a weekly volunteer trip to the Amherst Survival Center, thanks to Loran Saito. (We just conducted the 22nd Bake-a-Thon for Amherst Survival Center in November.) Current member Fares Croteau has generated the monthly "North Star goes to the Movies" on half-price night at our local multiplex. One other new contributor is Kizzi Collier, North Star alumna and current Division Three student at Hampshire College. Kizzi is sharing her knowledge of herbalism, literature, and health, as well as brightening the conversation in the Common Room.

In fundraising news, North Star has become a model Circus Smirkus host organization, and our efforts led by Outreach Director Jodi Cutler netted more than \$37,000. Our Celebration of Self-Directed Learning was an inspiring affair, with the highlights of hearing from playwright and Theater Professor Phil O'Donoghue

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Daily Inspirations at North Star

by Executive Director Ken Danford

Welcome to Year Three in Sunderland, and Year Twenty-Two for North Star! While the program and staff feel familiar to me, the social community feels fresh and open in an unusual way so far this fall. We had a number of high profile members from last year either move on from North Star or reduce their time here, which has created some space for the current members to take on some new roles. The staff has enjoyed observing the kindness, laughter, and initiative of various new members who have ensured the continuation of our safe and comfortable space. I value many aspects of our work, but one highlight remains watching teens who felt socially alienated or excluded in schools come to North Star and discover that they, too, can have friends and be part of a community. It's hard to express the sense of "miracle" for some of our members this year.

We have appreciated a few notes from parents recently that I would like to share. One parent recently emailed:

"Nice seeing you today! I just wanted to tell you how thrilled we have been as a family that our son is attending North Star. He is such a happy guy, his stress has disappeared, and his love of learning languages is being nourished and supported. It is such a pleasure every day to drop him off. Thank you for providing such a wonderful program."

Another parent emailed: "Our days and nights have changed for the better. My son and I are closer and share more with one another, and every day he comes up with new things he wants to explore. I feel some kind of crust has fallen off his potential and his curiosity, already. Thanks, again, for what you do."

North Star
self-directed
LEARNING
FOR TEENS
northstarteens.org

Never Looking Back

by North Star Member Aidan Falla



Aidan represents North Star at a public event in the summer of 2017

Switching to North Star was a hard choice, but I've never looked back and I don't think I ever will. When I think about my life at North Star, it has been an interesting journey of finding out not just who I am but who I want to be, and more importantly, what I want my life to be. Right now I feel I am creating the foundation for my adult life. This is due to North Star's system, which, in my opinion, is almost an "unsystem," if you will. It's a place that doesn't just give you the freedom to grow but the support to figure out how you want to grow. And for that I am so grateful that I came to North Star.

Right now, I'm fourteen years old, and this is my third year at North Star. I've found that I really like Mixology (making up my own combinations of juices and sodas), and I'm excited to become twenty-one years old so I can take a real bartending class. I also plan to have a life in comedy. In preparation for these careers, I expect to go to college to study Psychology and Business. I am also thinking up entrepreneurial ideas; currently I'm imagining a Diet

Café where all the portions can be divided into smaller sizes. The point is that I am always thinking about my future.

To me, the problem with school was that the point was to teach me an assortment of facts and then test me to judge my intelligence. It was a system designed to find my weaknesses rather than help me to develop any personal strengths.

After waiting about four months until I completed the sixth grade, I eagerly joined North Star, excited about the potential of trying something new, while still feeling a little cautious about this unfamiliar model. And to be honest, I was fairly immature and I did not fully detox from school until the last two months of my first year. I was used to being told what to do, and it was hard to define what I wanted to do for myself. That said, I still look at my first year as a personal success because, as shaky as I was socially, I learned the most I ever have in a year. I had many good relationships with North Star staff. I learned a lot from Jorrell Watkins, an Americorps member who taught me

all about Ancient China (very interesting); Melanie Dana, a core staff member who taught me the complete and extensive history of rock and roll, and who is currently teaching me physics. Dan Cabral, another Americorps member, was my reading tutor. He taught me how to really spot metaphors and see things like real-life influences in a book or how to foreshadow an over-arching symbol. Sheri Rosenblum, my math tutor, helped me get to Algebra Two and consistently blows my mind with other ideas. Those are just a few of the staff here that have helped me flourish.

I began my second year feeling confident knowing that everyone is here for me. That's the same for everyone who goes to North Star, and it feels personal. So I decided to relax way more than I did in my first year, knowing someone always had my back. I definitely felt more social and happy to be in the common room talking with others. This was also the year I decided to do comedy. So I took lots of writing, psychology, and even philosophy classes just to get different perspectives on various subjects. I also attended classes on Improv Comedy, Small Engine Repair, Band, Advanced Concepts in Science, and Let's Make a Blog.

While I have been at North Star, I have still been eligible to play sports for my public high school, Frontier Regional High School. I'm a fairly athletic person, and I plan to be on the Track team this year. I've also played indoor soccer and baseball, and I love to ski.

In addition to my planned learning, I like to watch a lot of news to get various perspectives on world events. I watch both MSNBC and

From Reluctant Reader to Book Group Leader

by Kizzi Collier, *Extended Staff*



Kizzi browses her favorite section of the library

The last thing that I ever expected to do was enjoy reading. Since I was a child, reading was always the bane of my existence. My parents had a hard time getting me to read, and traditional schooling didn't make the process of wanting to read any easier. In school, I was always forced to read the books that were considered the "real forms of literature" and the "classics" that every person had to read.

Due to my stubbornness, I decided never to read any of the books for class. Unfortunately, this made the teachers think that I wasn't at the same level as all the other children and it prompted them to put me in a lower level class for English. Maybe because of that, my dislike of reading continued until I was sixteen.

In my sophomore year at the Franklin County Technical High School, I left to join North Star. I found out about North Star through one of my best friends and, to be honest, was hesitant at first. You know how people tell you as a child "you can be anything you want to be when you grow up?" Well, in traditional schooling, for me, that didn't exactly work

out. However, when I came to North Star I was able to guide and control my time with what I wanted to learn. North Star was the place where I could begin becoming the person I wanted to be when I grew up. North Star is where I started enjoying reading. I was able to read anything I wanted to. What did I enjoy reading? I began consuming a romance novel almost daily. I transformed from the girl who hated reading with a concerned family around her, to a girl who began reading more than the rest of her family.

After North Star, I went to Greenfield Community College (GCC) and got my associates degree in Liberal Arts. I spent five years working in retail, while finishing my degree. After a few more years of working, I finally settled on Hampshire College. Last year I completed my third year of college and this is my final year.

The last year of Hampshire is dedicated to your Division III. The Division III is, simply put, a giant independent project the student gets to choose. My Division III is a paper on the erotic romance novel. I am studying what is considered

an erotic romance novel, why the genre should be taken seriously, and interviewing women who read the novel and how it influences them and represents their sexuality. I don't think I ever would have chosen this project if it weren't for North Star and the freedom it allowed me.

Thanks to Hampshire College I am able to do work study at North Star. As a former North Star member, I am now teaching classes there to incredible students. Currently, I am teaching a Young Adult Fantasy Book Club and an Herbalism class.

I would like to teach someday and North Star has been a great place to get my feet wet. North Star has once again been the start of a new and exciting journey and I am delighted to see where it takes me.

NOTE FROM LORAN: I first became aware of Kizzi in 2011, when I came parent to watch the North Star Theatre production of *Persephone*, in which she played the title role. I was intrigued when Kizzi contacted me this summer to see if she could get involved at North Star as her work-study job. Kizzi has been an important presence here this fall, both because of her teaching contributions, and because of the relationships she has developed with our teens simply by being present, cheerful, curious and engaging in the Common Room. Although it seems that a former North Star member would automatically understand how things work here, it turns out that is not always the case. Kizzi, however, completely understands what happens here, and embodies the spirit of open learning that makes North Star tick. Thanks for being part of our happy North Star year, Kizzi!

Alumni, continued from page 1

and the presentation of our first Ozzy Klate Memorial Fund Awards to five current members. The event generated more than \$30,000 to maintain our policy of welcoming all interested families to North Star. We are grateful for this community support.

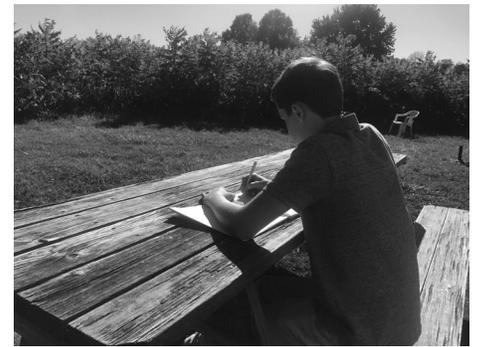
Among alumni, we celebrated the election of Otis Wheeler and Tim Dolan to the Greenfield Town Council in November. We have seen many of our newest alumni spread out around the world: Siena Rose (Cici Bloomberg) in Japan, Emme Geryk in Montreal, Evan Saito in Colombia, and Elias Konturas at Yestermorrow Design/Build School in Vermont. Please keep the updates coming!

I have continued spending a good amount of time consulting with others interested in our model. This year we have supported the creation of Embark Center in Leesburg, VA and BigFish Learning Community in West

Dover, NH. We've had conversations with several people operating small programs interested in converting to our model in Brooklyn, New York, Wilmot, New Hampshire, Marin County, California, and Moncure, North Carolina. Our Liberated Learners Network of centers is growing, and we are delighted to see our ideas being considered around the world.

In this issue, current member Aidan Falla describes his experience with North Star. He is literally growing up before our very eyes, having joined at age 12 and now in his third year. One of my favorite moments each week, in good weather, is Aidan's saxophone tutorial with our Music Teacher Ben Betts. They prefer to do this lesson outdoors, close to my office window, giving me a enjoyable set of songs as background to my afternoon work." His reflections and observations are insightful, and I look forward to being part of Aidan's life for several more years.

Aidan, continued from page 2



Fox to get different opinions. This helps me not only with my comedy, but also just to be able to spark up a conversation.

I feel both prepared for the future and thankful for the present. I fear that if I were in school and said I want to be a Mixologist and a Comedian that I would be discouraged from these ideas. At North Star, it seems almost every staff member is encouraging. I think the North Star slogan, "Learning is natural. School is optional" sums up the reason I'll always be a North Star member.

Bake-a-Thon 2017 for Amherst Survival Center Five hours. Thirty pies. North Star teens. Go.



From the Desk of the Outreach Director

Jodi Lyn Cutler

On November 5, North Star hosted its 14th annual Celebration of Self-Directed Learning at the Hadley Farms Meeting House. Thank you to all who attended and donated to North Star!

If you were unable to attend, you missed a moving and inspiring (and delicious!) event with approximately 150 North Star enthusiasts. We honored the first ever North Star Ozzy Klate Memorial Fund Awards to five current North Star members (Leo Lindop, Olivia Bielski, Kim Chin-Gibbons, Greta Ekstein, and Grace Lucas). Phil O'Donoghue moved and entertained us with his very funny telling of his journey from being kicked out of school to becoming a successful playwright and professor. Cate Damon shared the joy of finding North Star for her son, Aaron, whose inner spirit and imagination was tamped down by his life in school, and the experience of seeing his vitality return thanks to his new path with North Star. Current member Leo Lindop shared their struggles coming from a multi-cultural home, the loss of their father and the support and direction they have found being dually enrolled at Greenfield Community College and North Star and being a Peer Leader through Community Action. All this was followed by an incredibly touching appeal by North Star's Administrative Director and alumna, Ellen Morbyrne, who inspired deep and meaningful giving.

If you would like to make a donation to support our important work, you can easily go on our website, or mail a check to North Star, 45 Amherst Road, Sunderland, MA 01375.

There are many ways to volunteer throughout the year:

- Spread the word about North Star (let more teens/families know about it)
- Spread the word that the North Star building is available for rent (evenings, weekends, Wednesdays and in the summer)
- Donate to North Star for Valley Gives day (\$10 minimum, \$25 or more greatly appreciated)!
- Encourage others to give to North Star on Valley Gives day
- Sign up for a cleaning crew
- Chaperone for dances
- Help out at the annual Bake-a-Thon
- Be a host family for two Circus Smirkus troupers (so much fun!)
- Help distribute promotional materials for Circus Smirkus
- Put up lawn signs
- Distribute flyers at high traffic locations (libraries, ice cream shops, coffee shops, toy stores, grocery stores, etc.)
- Distribute flyers at community events (fireworks, farmers markets, craft fairs, Green River Festival, etc.)
- Solicit advertisers for Circus Smirkus
- Solicit donations for raffles held at Circus Smirkus
- Volunteer at Circus Smirkus
 - ushering,
 - taking tickets
 - parking cars
 - distributing programs
 - hawking raffle tickets, etc.
- Attend variety shows and other North Star events
- Offer your services to improve our space (handy-person skills, painting, etc.)
- Distribute North Star brochures to doctors, therapists, counselors, afterschool programs.

WISH LIST

ITEMS

Picnic tables
Outdoor furniture

Quality kitchen knives
Cutting boards
Baking pans and sheets
Pot holders
Stand or hand-held mixer

Minivan

Computers and tablets in good condition
3-D printer
Graduated cylinders
B&W 35 mm film
USB-C to USB dongle
Hand-held dry erase boards
Room-darkening shades

House plants
Perennial garden plants
Landscaping materials

Quality basketball hoop

Guitar strings
Drum skins
Amp
Ukelele

White noise machine

VOLUNTEER SKILLS

Paving of our parking lot
Handyman/woman
Snowplowing services
Solar power
Teachers in a variety of topics (contact loran@northstarteens.org)

ALSO...

Renters for our building (evenings, weekends, summer)
An endowment

Contact:
info@northstarteens.org



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45 Amherst Road
Sunderland, MA 01375

A project of Learning Alternatives, Inc.
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**SAVE YOUR
QUARTERS and
JOIN US on
May 1, 2018**

May 1 is Valley Gives Day, a
Valley-wide day of giving to
your favorite non-profits.

Mark your calendar and help
North Star compete for bonus
cash prizes for highest number
of donations and largest totals
donated.

The minimum donation is \$10,
and every donation helps!
SAVE YOUR QUARTERS for
a special Game Day at The
Quarters in Hadley; details to be
announced!

Check your email and North
Star's Facebook page for regular
updates.

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