

LIBERATED LEARNERS

NORTH STAR'S NEWSLETTER FALL 2020



Melanie leads an Earth Science class behind the North Star building in early October

A Healthier Choice

by Executive Director Kenneth Danford

Welcome to North Star 2020! In this difficult year, we've been making the most of our circumstances. Our building has been closed, but we have been gathering two days per week outside for in-person activities – you may have seen the photos! Our academic classes, tutorials, and advisories have been proceeding online, with very positive experiences for those who can manage that approach. I am encouraged by the response of our staff, our teens, our parents, and our wider community. As we transition to winter, we'll be fully online, aside from some outdoor hikes and special activities. I recently summarized my thoughts in my blog (www.kennethdanford.com):

When I'm asked how North Star is coming along this fall, I struggle with starting with whether "the glass is half-full" or the "the glass

is half-empty." We have a lot of redeeming and inspiring moments each week, and I think we are making the best of a difficult situation. In fact, I can enthusiastically report that a solid number of North Star members are very involved with our program and having an interesting year so far. At the same time, there are a number of teens who find taking classes online to be a challenge, and who are only marginally involved with our activities.

I am certain that North Star is offering a refreshing alternative for its members. We currently have about fifty active members, and can welcome a few more, including Distance Members this year from other parts of the country or around the world.

I went on to describe how a North Star

member might generate a weekly routine that involves some online classes, an online tutorial or two, some weekly in-person time outdoors at North Star, a weekly meeting with an advisor, some personal academic projects, and some self-chosen serious hobbies or other pursuits. All told, this sort of self-created schedule offers a solid response to the pandemic, and seems vastly healthier than the standard school-at-home regimen that many young people are confronting this fall. Onwards (as we don't have many choices).

One unexpected highlight of the Fall has been our Distance Members. We have several members from California, Florida, and the greater Boston area. Their active participation has brought some fresh energy and appreciation to our community. We anticipate having a few more Distance Members join us; you may feel free to recommend North Star to teens you know, wherever you are living!

Another highlight of the season has been the sharing of classes and students among the centers in the Liberated Learners network. We are all mostly online programs this year, and we have generated a shared Liberated Learners Calendar of Classes open to all of our members. When you combine the course listings from all of our centers, it reads something like a college course catalog. While teens seem to be cautious about this experiment,

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Learning for Myself

by Sam Kleinman-Eddy, North Star Member



School left me in a dark place and North Star helped me out of it. At school, it seemed that no one wanted to be there, or if they did, they were held captive by a system that didn't let them do what they thought was best. For example, educators who were teaching out of a genuine love for passing on knowledge and seeing children grow were forced to follow a curriculum that prioritized grades over knowledge. I learned this directly: several teachers actually complained about the curriculum or about school policies to classes of mine. The first time this happened was in eighth grade when a teacher was very honest with us about how things worked in the school, and that really got me interested in the way that the American education system works. I understood that it's not the teachers' fault; it's the material they have to teach. The best teachers would come up with ways to put their own spin on the material and make it fun for us, but that felt like a different skill than teaching; it felt like the teacher and

the class were working together to overcome the curriculum.

One of the biggest problems that I had in school was looking around and seeing these other kids who were just as fed up with the system as I was but were taking that out on the teacher in some way – acting out or talking over the teacher or whatever. I could see that that made it harder for the teacher, and watching that happen just made me miserable.

I dropped out of high school half way through my freshman year. I just shut down as a human being. I was spending all day in my room or on the game console. That went on for a month or two, and eventually we moved houses – at this point my parents were splitting up which certainly didn't help the equation. I spent about a week in a place called Burncoat that was designed to help kids like me who were having issues in school, and when I came back I decided to check out North Star. My parents had been looking for alternatives to school and came across North Star and it was just the perfect next step.

I remember my first day very well. I walked into North Star with my mom and started following Ken as he gave us the tour. As we were walking around, a teen member came up to me and welcomed me and asked me what my pronouns were. At that moment I knew that this was a special place. One of the biggest problems I had had with school was the environment it created for the students, and at North Star, the first thing another student did to interact with me was to welcome me and make sure I was comfortable with how I was being addressed. It was very respectful

and thoughtful, and the more I looked around, the more I saw other students acting the same way. That filled me with hope. In my head, it was a direct contrast to the school environment that I'd experienced, where everyone is angry and frustrated and taking it out on each other.

I joined North Star and began going to just two classes, Writing Your Life and Future of the World. I didn't spend time at North Star at that point beyond attending those two classes. One of the biggest reasons why I had felt so clearly "yes" about North Star was that Ken was very clear that everyone does their own thing there. No one's North Star journey is exactly the same as anyone else's. For me that first year was just trying a couple of classes to test the waters. I had already gotten the sense of acceptance and welcome from the community, but I was still hesitant because of the experience that I had had in school.

Another huge part of what had made school so flawed for me was the whole system of grades and rewarding behavior. It feels like the system is just trying to shove information into your head and testing you on how well you retain it. This style of education killed my interest in learning, and reduced my self-image to nothing more than a letter grade. It was horrible to be stuck in, but getting out of it was even worse. School was training my brain to only work in exchange for a grade, and it took a lot of time and effort to break free of that. My first class at North Star was Writing Your Life, and it changed my perception of classes and helped me move

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Exactly What He Needed

by Sara Eddy, North Star Parent

I've just been reading other parents' accounts of their kids' experiences in "regular" schools, and the difference it made for them to come to North Star. We're all telling the same story, and in many ways Sam's journey has been the same—though for all of us this is exquisitely personal.

Throughout elementary school Sam was confident, radiant, delightful and delighted: school was great, and he had fun taking on new challenges. But as he got older, school got to be more and more about grades and discipline and social norms, and Sam started getting quiet and sad and insular. I remember when he was in Middle School, he once said that he wished he had the guts to wear a really bright shirt to school, and I felt like burning down the whole world: why was I sending him to a place every day where he felt so stifled and controlled that he couldn't even

wear a colorful shirt? Still, we pressed on for a while, until 9th grade when, like many North Star kids, he just stopped going to school. I couldn't make him, especially since even if I

He's regained his early confidence, his sparkle, his delight.

coerced and bullied and guilted him into it, he'd just have to come home after an hour or so, suffering massive panic attacks.

So what to do? The idea that my kid was dropping out of school was anathema. Sam's father and I are both doctorates, and he comes from educational prowess going back generations on both sides. My own father was a professor of Education. How could it be that my son was leaving school? He was pulling straight As in all Honors and AP classes: how could he give that up and drop out?

The truth is, though, that all that deep long family history of learning was blossoming in its truest form in Sam: he loved the pursuit of knowledge—he just hated school. I increasingly saw that he had good reason for that, the very same reason that all of these parents' letters are the same. At its best, his teachers were harried support systems trying to work around state-mandated limits on their creativity and skills. At worst, they were more concerned with discipline and testing than with any conceptual knowledge. Leaving school and all of that was the smartest and most frightening possible path, and I am still astonished by Sam's bravery in doing it.

North Star was exactly what he needed. It gave him the space and freedom to develop his own learning process and make his own goals, instead of the cookie cutter methods that had been foisted on him. It gave him knowledgeable, friendly, engaging instructors who were less about instructing than they were about going down a path side by side with him. He's regained his early confidence, his sparkle, his delight. I've had to let him make a lot of decisions that I was not allowed to make when I was his age, which is frequently frightening. But he knows what he's about, thanks to North Star.

Healthy Choice, continued from page 1

the staff at all of the centers are appreciating our mutual aid and support.

While we have not been spending much time inside the building, I'm pleased to report that there has been a lot of progress with the physical space. We have knocked down some walls and built a science lab/maker space complete with its own sink. We have opened up our common room by taking out some of the half-walls. We have improved our heating systems. Some creative landscaping is coming soon. As of the end of October, we now have solar panels installed on our south-facing roof. My thanks to the people who have made all of these improvements possible.

Meanwhile, amidst the pandemic and the uncertainties of 2020, North Star continues conducting its program and teens, including Sam Kleinman-Eddy, continue to learn and grow. In his essay featured here, Sam reflects on his self-directed learning journey. He describes what his use of North Star has meant to him, which turns out to be profoundly more than one might have expected based on his limited attendance over the past couple of years. His feelings about the kindness he has encountered at North Star from other teens and the staff reflect on us all. Sam has truly grown up before our very eyes, and we rejoice in what we see. Congratulations to Sam and his family. Enjoy his sharing. ☘



*Hiking Group enjoys the view in Sunderland.
Photo: Sam Kleinman-Eddy*

The Hidden Benefits of Quarantine

by Gil Kim, Extended Staff Member



I first started at North Star last fall when things were normal. I could physically walk into the Common Room and have one-on-ones with students while, if I was lucky, munching on leftovers from Bread class. But since April, I have instead been opening up my laptop, logging into Zoom, and facing my students through a computer screen, bread-less.

Now that we have gone virtual, I have had to alter my teaching methods. In the past few months, I have become very friendly with PowerPoint and am now an expert at customizing themes and employing animations. When I used to follow along with a physical textbook, I now screenshare online materials through Zoom. I miss seeing everyone in person and saying hi to the staff and students that I do not have one-on-ones with, but I am trying to appreciate the pros of virtual tutorials. For one, I can meet all the seriously adorable pets my students have at home.

One thing that has not changed though, is how lucky I feel being able to teach something my students genuinely want to learn. North Star allows its members to learn what they want, a liberty that I always wished for while attending my traditional middle and high school. I was someone who spent a lot of time complaining about school. I did not truly enjoy many of my classes and felt that homework and studying for uninteresting subjects left me with no free time to do things I wanted to do. But I thought all of that was normal and I was simply living

the life all teenagers had to live. My favorite classes in school were always my electives, like Art of the Cinema and Winter Camping. I know how much I enjoyed those classes, because I personally chose to take them, so I am glad to know that the students I tutor feel similarly about what I am teaching them.

At North Star, because students personally choose the classes and tutorials they want to take, I am satisfied knowing that they do not dread learning and that they have time to pursue their interests. I am often surprised at how much my students accomplish and do with their time. What I glean from our interactions during tutorials is that North Star members are so talented and, importantly, have the time and freedom to develop these talents. My students are involved in such a wide variety of activities, from embroidering, learning three other languages, writing guides on game-building and bee-keeping, to directing and acting in plays, participating in photography competitions, coding videogames, and horse-back riding. So many of these activities would be restricted, impossible, or at the very least much more tiring and difficult to manage, if these students were enrolled in traditional schools.

One of the benefits of being in quarantine in my case is having more free time. Inspired by my students, I'm thinking I might pick up a few skills and explore some passions that I didn't have time for in high school. Maybe in a few months, I will be able to share with my students some of what I've accomplished!

***Note from Loran:** Gil is one of our talented and hard-working work-study students from UMass. In her second year of working with us, we already count on her as a seasoned and accomplished tutor in several areas of study. When I met Gil, the first things that struck me were her cheerfulness and quick sense of humor. Over time I was increasingly impressed by her reliability, flexibility, and her creative approaches to teaching. We are so lucky to have Gil on our team!*



Gil (right) in a tutorial at North Star last year

Fun Figuring It Out

by Claudia Santillan, DIAL/SELF/AmeriCorps Staff Member



Claudia (left) plays a masked game of Boggle with member Dalia in late September

Who am I? Indeed, that is the question that I am working on figuring out in this current chapter of my life. For a long time I was moving through life as if on a conveyor belt: High school --> College --> Grad School. Quite uneventful. It wasn't until I began to really question what kind of life I wanted to live that I decided to make the leap. Did I want to stay on this straightforward path or was I willing to take some risks to build a life that I found meaningful? Shortly after that I exited my PhD program with a Masters' in Toxicology and started to serve as an AmeriCorps member in Oregon, in the field of education. I also began to seek every opportunity to learn and grow, including moving across the country to a place I had never even visited. It was important to me that I make an active effort to expose myself to and connect with people from all backgrounds- the more different than me, the better! Perhaps then I can better understand the world around me and what role I want to fill within it.

But how did I find out about North Star? Last year a friend of mine introduced the model of self-directed learning to me and I quickly went down a rabbit hole. The first book that I read was actually Ken's book, "Learning is Natural. School is Optional". After that, I read more books and blogs, and listened to podcasts. Ken's book blew my mind and John Taylor Gatto's work irrevocably changed the way that I looked at the US education system and our culture's way of treating youth.

For a long time, I too measured my

success according to metrics created to serve institutions and not myself. I sought validation from others, rather than following my own intuition. North Star's core values strongly resonated with my own and I decided that I wanted to further explore the world of self-directed learning. Although I was uncertain about whether I would even enjoy teaching, I knew it was a risk I was willing to take!

I do not know what my future holds. However, I am having fun figuring it out! North Star has been the perfect place for me to continue to explore my own interests and passions as a mentor and individual. I feel fortunate to be surrounded by such a creative, kind, and accepting community. Thank you to everyone who has allowed me to be a part of their time and journey here at North Star.

Note from Lorán: *At a time when every day means figuring things out anew, we are grateful for Claudia's patient, steady presence at North Star, bearing with us as she also finds her own way. Claudia brings a wide range of experience to our staff, from science to social justice. So far she has led Geocaching, Systems of Oppression, and Genetics and Society classes, and she is co-leading a Race Relations class with Ken. Welcome to our community, Claudia!*



Claudia experiments with acrylic pour painting during Art Projects class

From the (Home) Office of the Outreach Director

by Jodi Lyn Cutler



It's been 230 days since we closed the doors at North Star on March 12 due to the novel coronavirus pandemic. While North Star has held outdoor, masked, in-person days, I have been working from home.

Normally, for our fall newsletter, I would be reporting on our successful summer fundraiser, Circus Smirkus, and planning for next year's Big Top Tour as well. Unfortunately, I am unable to do either. The prospect of what may be this coming summer and whether Circus Smirkus's Big Top Tour 2021 will take place is still unknown. Circus Smirkus has been North Star's biggest annual fundraiser each for several years and not having it has hit our budget hard.

What we do know is that kids from all over are joining North Star, as distance is no longer a barrier. If you know a teen who is not thriving in school, North Star could be the perfect alternative. We have rolling admissions so yesterday could be their last day of school, and their new path at North Star can start today!

Tuesday, December 1 is the official National Day of Giving. This year there is no incentive for using a special website or time for donating, so give whenever you'd like, using your favorite method. North Star

accepts donations 24/7/365 on our website NorthStarTeens.org/donate or directly through the mail to North Star, 45 Amherst Rd. Sunderland, MA 01375. Please consider us as you plan your end-of-year giving.

One exciting event we are in the early stages of planning is an online music festival to benefit North Star and our friends at the Institute for Musical Arts (IMA) and the Shea Theater. Be on the lookout for more information about the exciting **Get Down with Your Hometown** event, January 8 and 9, 2021! Mark your calendar for something to look forward to. More information soon.

All is not gloom and doom, I keep receiving, and am continually inspired by, North Star member and alumni testimonials. These range from quick notes and short videos to full blown essays on why people love North Star and how it has changed their lives. I invite you to join them in reflecting on your North Star

experience, or that of your child's or favorite North Star member or alumni and send it my way. I promise that the world will feel brighter when you reflect on North Star's impact.



Hanging out with North Star member Luisa under the tent on a nice day!

GIVING TUESDAY

December 1, 2020

A promotional graphic for the 'Get Down with your Hometown' musical benefit. The graphic is split into two main sections. The left section has a red background with the text 'GET DOWN with your HOMETOWN' in white and red. Below this is a vintage-style microphone on a stand. The right section has a black background with the text 'Institute for the musical arts I.M.A.' at the top, 'North Star SCHOOL IS OPTIONAL NORTHSTARTEENS.ORG' in the middle, and 'SHEA' in large, stylized letters at the bottom. Below the 'SHEA' text is the text 'A MUSICAL BENEFIT'.

towards learning for myself. I heard Susannah, the teacher, describe the writing prompt as a suggestion; in school it had always been directions. I looked around and saw all these kids thinking for themselves and choosing what to write based on their thoughts, instead of writing down what they thought would get them an A. We started going around and reading what we had written, and I was blown away by how different each of the pieces were. Each student had their very particular style of writing. It sort of made my brain malfunction, because I realized that there was this giant part of learning and that I hadn't been able to access it before. I hadn't been thinking for myself in classes, just putting in the right answer.

Learning to reward myself instead of having a grade given to me was a long process. At first, it was very hard to feel motivated to do the work without getting a number at the end. But eventually I stopped thinking about what would happen after the class and started living in the class. I started seeing it as the class itself being the reward. It's kind of like retraining your brain, because at first, learning that grades aren't important is such a shock. In school they seem so important, and when my grades started going downhill, I think it affected my self-worth in a big way. Living with that for a couple of years puts your brain on a certain path; it gets you into a certain groove of "I will do this work only because I have to do it to get better grades." Going from that to just a group that gathers and has a suggestion to help you start writing—it was sort of incomprehensible to me at first: why would all of these students do this if they're not getting a grade for it?

When I talked to these students, I heard them tell the same story that I was living, which was that they had been accustomed to grades and they couldn't really handle not having grades for however long that transition period was for them. For me it was a stretch of maybe half a year. I think this is a process that you just have to go through. When someone is struggling with internal motivation, an adult can try to make it easier by jumping in and offering rewards, but if that had been done for me, I wouldn't be where I am now, because I would still be focused on the rewards, the grades. It's a rough spot to be in, when you're right in the middle of it, and it takes a different amount of time for everyone, but it's important.

I think that the best thing about North Star is its flexibility, how you can vary the way you use it. After that first spring of testing the waters, in my second and third years at North Star I took classes about game design, music theory, guitar, psychology, and a few moral philosophy classes. In my second year, I took part in a North Star Variety show, another big part of the community. Variety shows serve to bring students and staff together, as well as giving both several chances to express themselves or share whatever they like with a very accepting community. During my third year, I started spending more time in the common room, immersed in the culture of like-minded teens. I also took a one-on-one about game psychology. I'd always enjoyed gaming and wondered how games were made, and when I asked my advisor, she found someone that could teach it to me. When I was younger, like any kid, I had a lot of ideas for what I wanted to be when I

grew up. Looking back, I wish I'd had North Star as a resource to pursue those ideas.

During those two years, taking classes at North Star felt like the main thing that I was doing. This year, I'm using North Star in a different way. I attend community meetings and have a one-on-one for HiSet prep, which is also another fabulous thing that North Star offers, and I continue meeting with my advisor, but I'm also working at two different jobs. In my second year of North Star, I started working at Sattva Center for Archery, where I've been shooting for over ten years. Over the summer, I got a job working for Tract, an online education startup taught exclusively by teens: Education by kids, for kids. Here, I can share my interests with other kids, and give them the next steps to pursuing that interest if they choose. I'm finally functioning as a person again, and I credit North Star with that.

North Star is a smaller part of my life this year, and that's not a bad thing. I'm glad to share my story now and to make the point that everyone has a different path through education, and it's ok to make mistakes and find your own way.



Sam and Yuuki the dog enjoy the view during a hike in Sunderland in September, with the North Star Hiking Group.



North Star members Sophie and Ewan shovel mulch to help prepare beds for the winter at Grow Food Northampton's Giving Garden. A small group of North Star teens and staff volunteered there every Wednesday morning throughout September and October.

A project of Learning Alternatives, Inc.
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