

LIBERATED LEARNERS

NORTH STAR'S NEWSLETTER FALL 2021



Inspired by the Netflix series "High On the Hog," the Food & Culture class made macaroni and cheese over a fire using a recipe originated by Thomas Jefferson's Paris-trained, enslaved chef, James Hemings

Back Together Again for Year 26!

by Executive Director Kenneth Danford

Welcome to Year 26! We are in-person and loving it! North Star is a merry place, and the exuberance of the teens connecting with each other is thoroughly rejuvenating.

The dominant image for me of life at North Star this fall has been looking out of my office window and seeing a large gaggle of teens walking to the Sunderland Corner Store. The newest activity for this crew is called "Going to Under the Bridge" at the new town park by the Connecticut River. Many of these teens have been on the rough end of the high school social scene, and seeing them traveling in a pack is truly heartwarming. This entire process has evolved without adults, except for some reminders to avoid sending "cliquey" signals to those unsure about how to join in the adventure. The group has

responded with direct and open-ended invitations, making the whole situation doubly heartwarming.

We have begun the year with about fifty teen members, a number slightly less than in past years. The number of new and incoming teens is about our usual amount, and the small decline in the total membership is the result of several teens slipping away during the year-and-a-half that our building was closed. We have had a bit more attrition of third-and-fourth-year members than usual, and I assign that fully to the pandemic. What is interesting to me is that North Star is not seeing any particular growth or rush of new members due to the pandemic. I have read some reports that more families are choosing to utilize homeschooling

around the United States this year, but so far, that movement has not reached our program. I believe that most teens and families are eager to get back to business-as-usual, and that means there is some real excitement for being back at high school with one's friends, sports, and other activities. North Star often has a surge of new members in the winter, so I'll be curious to see what happens as this year progresses.

Meanwhile, our staff members are as happy as the teens to be back together, and we have a range of new and returning classes, including: Fire, Future of the World, Food and Culture, Band, History of Rock and Roll, Chorus, Writing Your Life, Games, Acting Adventures, Consent in the Romance Novel, Herbalism, Language Journeys, Science, and Games, among others. Loran leads a weekly hike and a weekly volunteering trip to the Amherst Survival Center.

This year the North Star kitchen has been used much more actively than in the past. Teens are frequently making lunch, treats, and other ambitious delights. The outdoor space is loud and playful. We are having a weekly community meeting to work out the issues of communal living. We have a deep well of good-natured commitment from everyone here to make North Star pleasant and appealing for everyone.

Overall, welcome back to all of us!

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I Don't Have to Ask Permission

by Tove Schweitzer, North Star Member



Homeschooling was always a dream of mine, but I never imagined it could become my reality. It wasn't a new concept to my family, as my older siblings were homeschooled until a little over halfway through elementary school. I was the youngest and started school in first grade so I never really considered myself to have been homeschooled. But I never forgot what it was like—the community we had and how at-home I felt. A part of me always longed to go back to that, but it just didn't seem like a possibility. My dad died when I was in sixth grade and my mom worked from home, running her own translating business. There would have been no one to homeschool me, and so I stayed in public school.

I excelled academically and had a great group of friends. I played Ultimate Frisbee in the spring and ran cross country in the fall. I expected to stay at my same school, with the same people, doing the same things, until I graduated, and then go off to college to study some more before finally achieving my dream of working in animal conservation. School was routine, and I never gave it much thought. But

as I got to high school things began to shift. The workload was almost twice as much and it felt like some of the teachers were just as bored as the students. Everything was just assignments and due dates. Schoolwork became a chore, something I was being forced to do, not something I chose. I started to overthink even the simplest assignments, and cry over the more challenging ones.

By the time I got to my sophomore year of high school I was in a really dark place. I would wake up at 6:30 to be at school by 8, where I would sit at a desk for seven hours and the second I left I started my homework. I usually did not go to bed until midnight. I was perpetually exhausted and overwhelmed. I started faking being sick just so I could stay home. My mom had to drag me out of bed every morning for school. I wanted to cry just thinking about having to do this for the next four years.

Even as I felt myself falling, my grades never slipped, I stayed the perfect student, but that could only last so long. By February of my sophomore year (2020), I didn't know what to do anymore. I had stopped talking to most of my friends and I was just so done with everything: the schoolwork, the depression, and most of all, the complete and utter exhaustion. After an emotional talk with my mom we decided something had to change, and it started with me spending a week in a psychiatric hospital. And as bad as that week was, it was just what I needed. On my way there, I noticed the relief I felt at knowing I didn't have to go to school the next day, didn't have to do my homework, or sit through classes. I realized just how much school was contributing to my

depression, and so did my mom.

When I got back home she sat me down and said, "What would you think about leaving school?" I told her that, of course I would love to leave, but there was just no way it would work out. She didn't have time to homeschool me and we didn't have anybody else who could. Then she mentioned North Star. She explained that this way there would be people there to support me and she wouldn't have to do everything alone. It seemed perfect. I immediately agreed, and it was decided. I was leaving high school.

I chose to continue with public school until the end of that year. Everything was online and because no one had any idea what they were doing, the workload was fairly small and relaxed. That summer was so much fun. I no longer had the feeling that I was supposed to be doing schoolwork. Knowing I didn't have to go back to school in the fall was so freeing. I got my permit and started driving with my mom whenever I got the chance. I also got a job as a cashier at a grocery store in my town. I felt in control of my life again.

Then the school year came around again. I remember my first North Star class. Instead of feeling miserable, I was excited. The class was online, as all classes were last year, which was strange. Especially because I didn't know anyone, but it was still a lot of fun. It was a genetics class and I remember the atmosphere was so different from what I was used to that it took me a while to figure it out. One of the first things the teacher said was that she

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Personally, I have been busier than usual with my consulting work to share our model with others. Our Liberated Learners webinars have involved people from over a dozen states and the countries of India, Vietnam, Singapore, Japan, Spain, and Argentina. We are actively supporting the creation of new programs in Louisville, KY; Arlington, MA; and Pittsfield, MA. Over the spring and summer, I co-facilitated a new course about self-directed learning called Another Way, for more than a dozen participants. I am a part-time helper for the Alternative Education Resource Organization's School Starters course. In October, we welcomed visitors from Chicago, IL and Santa Barbara, CA who are looking to start new projects. I was interviewed by Gerry Kirk for his podcast, and I was a featured guest on Galileo's weekly conversations.

North Star is known as a leading program in the United States and around the world in the field of alternatives to conventional school.

In all of these conversations, the difficult task of making programs and small schools financially stable is always a top-level issue. North Star has come a long way, thanks to your generosity. We welcome and appreciate your continued support on Giving Tuesday, our major annual fundraising appeal to alumni and friends. Thank you.

In this issue, you will hear from Tove Schweitzer. At age 17, Tove has a full, busy, and independent life. It's hard to imagine that two years ago we met in a low point of her adolescence. Tove is capable, mature, and open to trying new things. I find it inspiring and powerful to see how enabling her to let go of her

schooling stress has allowed her to thrive. It seems so simple. However, we know that Tove and her mother were unlikely to choose independent homeschooling for this phase of her life, and that North Star's presence was necessary for this transition. Tove, along with each of the other individual stories we see on a daily basis at North Star, keeps us motivated to maintain North Star. I appreciate Tove's willingness to share her story here.

You also hear from our two Americorps service members this year, Derek Czajka and Jesse Gwilliam. Their presence and energy are major contributions to our community, and I'm delighted they are introducing themselves to you.

Best wishes for the upcoming holiday season.



A beautiful fall afternoon at Mike's Corn Maze



Volunteering at Amherst Survival Center



Tending the embers in Fire! class



Chopping okra outdoors in Food & Culture class



Setting up recycling stations at Franklin County Fair



Last-minute Halloween costume tweaks

New to Our Core Staff this Year: Derek and Jesse



Derek Czajka (left) and Jesse Gwilliam, North Star's 2021-22 Americorps interns

My name is **Derek Czajka**, and I've lived my whole life up to this point in California. I've enjoyed exploring the Valley and getting to know folks at North Star, and I'm looking forward to what the rest of the year will bring.

I've been interested in self-directed education for the past few years, which is what led me here. I started looking for alternatives to conventional school while I was working on school climate and school-based mentoring in a public school in San Francisco. I began to notice how many of the kids I worked with—curious, active, driven, bold—didn't fit into the mold that the classroom wanted to fit them into. Too often, the things they were curious about weren't on the curriculum; their activity was considered disruptive; their drive was dismissed because it wasn't applied toward schoolwork; their boldness was called disrespect. So I sought out folks that, like me, are asking what a learning space that really supports these learners would look like. I'm eager to spend this year at North Star exploring that question with others.

While I'm here, I'm looking forward to sharing many of my interests with the community. Before the pandemic, there hadn't been a period longer than six months where I wasn't singing in a chorus since I joined my first one at age nine. I'm glad to be back at it now, both at North Star, and in a church choir in Amherst. I've also had a lifelong interest in languages. Most recently, I've

spent almost a year and a half learning to speak Irish (sometimes called Irish Gaelic). It's been an enjoyable journey, and also a great way for this introvert to meet new people. Other interests of mine, though they may not currently be center-stage, include technology, audio production, math, history, fantasy/science fiction, and many more besides. During my time at North Star, I'm always up to chat about any of these topics, or to have a good game of cards.

My name is **Jesse Gwilliam**. I graduated from UMass Amherst in May 2021. Following graduation, I held an internship at the Connecticut River Conservancy over the summer, then began my Americorps service in mid August.

I read as much as I can, mostly non-fiction, such as history or social theory. My greatest interest is learning about the world from a critical perspective. My purpose is not only to interpret the world, but to change it. At North Star, I strive to spark interests in those with budding passions and encourage the pursuit of personal interests.

As my service at North Star continues, I hope to build stronger relationships with teens and be someone that they can trust and talk to. My hobbies consist of playing, listening to, and seeing live music. Additionally, I enjoy working out and try my best to keep a consistent schedule that allows me to become stronger and lift heavier chunks of metal.

30 Pies! 26 Years! North Star's Bake-a-Thon for Amherst Survival Center

by Loran Saito, Program Director

Way back at the very beginning of North Star (1996) when it was still called Pathfinder, Ken gathered together a group of teens the Tuesday before Thanksgiving to bake pies for Amherst Survival Center's annual community Thanksgiving meal. By the time my oldest child joined North Star in 2009, the tradition had morphed into a full day of baking in the borrowed kitchen at Pioneer Valley Co-Housing in North Amherst, led by then-Program Director Catherine Gobron. The traditions included lots of fancy crust stylings, a pizza lunch, music, and even a screening of *The Road to El Dorado*. Somewhere along the line, the event became a minor fundraiser for North Star as well. In 2013 or so, I joined the fun as a parent volunteer, peeling apples and rolling out crusts side-by-side with a pack of North Star teens.

When I stepped into the role of Program Director myself in 2015, I had big shoes to fill. One of the proudest moments of my initiation to North Star came when a skeptical teen, who had previously informed me that I was running my first Bake-a-Thon all wrong, told me in the end it was, in fact, a very good Bake-a-Thon. Yes! Long live tradition!

It seemed like our traditions would continue unchanged forever, but then came the pandemic. In 2020, Amherst Survival Center was forced to adjust the way the community meal was presented, and could no longer accept community contributions. Furthermore, we could not meet as a North Star community to bake together. In a one-year stopgap measure, I met with several teens on Zoom, and we prepared pies for our own families.

This year we are happily back to our tradition of baking pies for the Survival Center, but in a new way. Because we need to work in a ServSafe certified kitchen with a ServSafe certified supervisor, a small number of teens (regular ASC volunteers plus 1-2 other experienced teen bakers) will gather at Amherst Survival Center's kitchen. We'll perform a power-bake and make 30 pies in 2½ hours. The experience will be different from the longer, more leisurely days with a big crowd at the co-housing common room, but I'm excited to see what we can accomplish together. And of course we will be proud to share delicious homemade apple and pumpkin pies with members of our extended community!



Pathfinder teens baking pies at Pioneer Valley Co-housing kitchen, November 1996. Can you name the people in the photo? Email ken@northstarteens.org.



Mixing pumpkin pie filling, November 2015. (l to r) Sophie Dana-Zilberberg, Lucy Lomax, Maya Turriago, Nolan Saito



Grace Martenson, Mia Huggins, Jonah Ferdman-Hayden and Noah Hornick, November 2012



Apple and pumpkin pies baked at home over Zoom, November 2020

From the (Home) Office of the Outreach Director

by Jodi Lyn Cutler



North Star's impact on our students and their families continues to astound me. Life-changing: that is how it was and is for my family. I think about where my son, Ben (now age 26), would be if we hadn't found North Star. He most definitely wouldn't be the happy, successful man he is right now if I had continued to force school on him. He entered North Star at 12, decompressed, found his passions, and jump-started his life and career at 15. North Star was transformational for him and for so many others.

My work is to help other families have the opportunity that I had and feel the relief that comes when you decrease the misery of your child and give them hope and agency in their life. North Star's policy has always been to include everyone regardless of their ability to pay the full fee, and your support for this vision has helped us maintain this commitment.

You can contribute to

North Star in several ways. First, you can refer potential families to North Star. Growing our membership is good for everyone involved, and is also our best fundraising avenue. Second, you can volunteer your time in a number of ways, including one-one-one tutoring, improving our indoor and outdoor spaces, and perhaps even joining our Board of Directors. Third, you can make a financial gift. Giving Tuesday, the National Day of Giving, is November 30 this year. It is an ideal moment to donate to North Star. We appreciate your generosity, and we welcome both one-time annual gifts and recurring monthly donations.

In this season of gratitude, we'd love to hear from you regarding your reflections of North Star. Your words and accompanying contributions are inspirational! Donate November 30, or anytime, on our website: northstarteens.org.

Next up, we are working hard to create an impressive 2nd annual Get Down with your Hometown online music festival to support North Star, Institute for Musical Arts, and the Shea Theater. To sponsor or advertise for this fabulous concert, please contact me at jodi@northstarteens.org. Save the dates: January 28 & 29. More details to come soon!

Hikes!



wanted us to have a say in the direction of the class. If there was something we were interested in we could tell her and then she would work it into a later class. It was amazing.

I found myself excited to go to class and participate in discussions. I remember on one of the weekly hikes with North Star we took a walk around a lake. We ended it on a small beach and I really wanted to take off my shoes and walk through the water. I asked Ken if I could and he said, "If you want to do it, do it. You don't need my permission." That was such a weird feeling. I was in charge of making decisions for myself and he trusted me to do that. So of course, I immediately took off my shoes and splashed into the water. A couple other kids joined me and together we waded through the leaves and sticks, finding small rocks or schools of minnows. I couldn't believe this was real.

That fall, I took five classes at North Star, including a world history tutorial. I continued working and driving, and in the spring, I decided to take a couple classes at the community college near me. With the help of my North Star advisor I enrolled and signed up for American Sign Language 101 and college algebra. My schedule was full but it didn't feel stressful. Instead of dreading each event written on my calendar I was excited for them. I got to decide what I was going to do, I got to be in charge of my own education!

Now, almost a year and a half after leaving school, I am finally able to be in-person at North Star and it's even better. I get to hang out and talk with other kids when we aren't in class. Even on days when I don't have class I still sometimes show up just to be there. I am also taking two

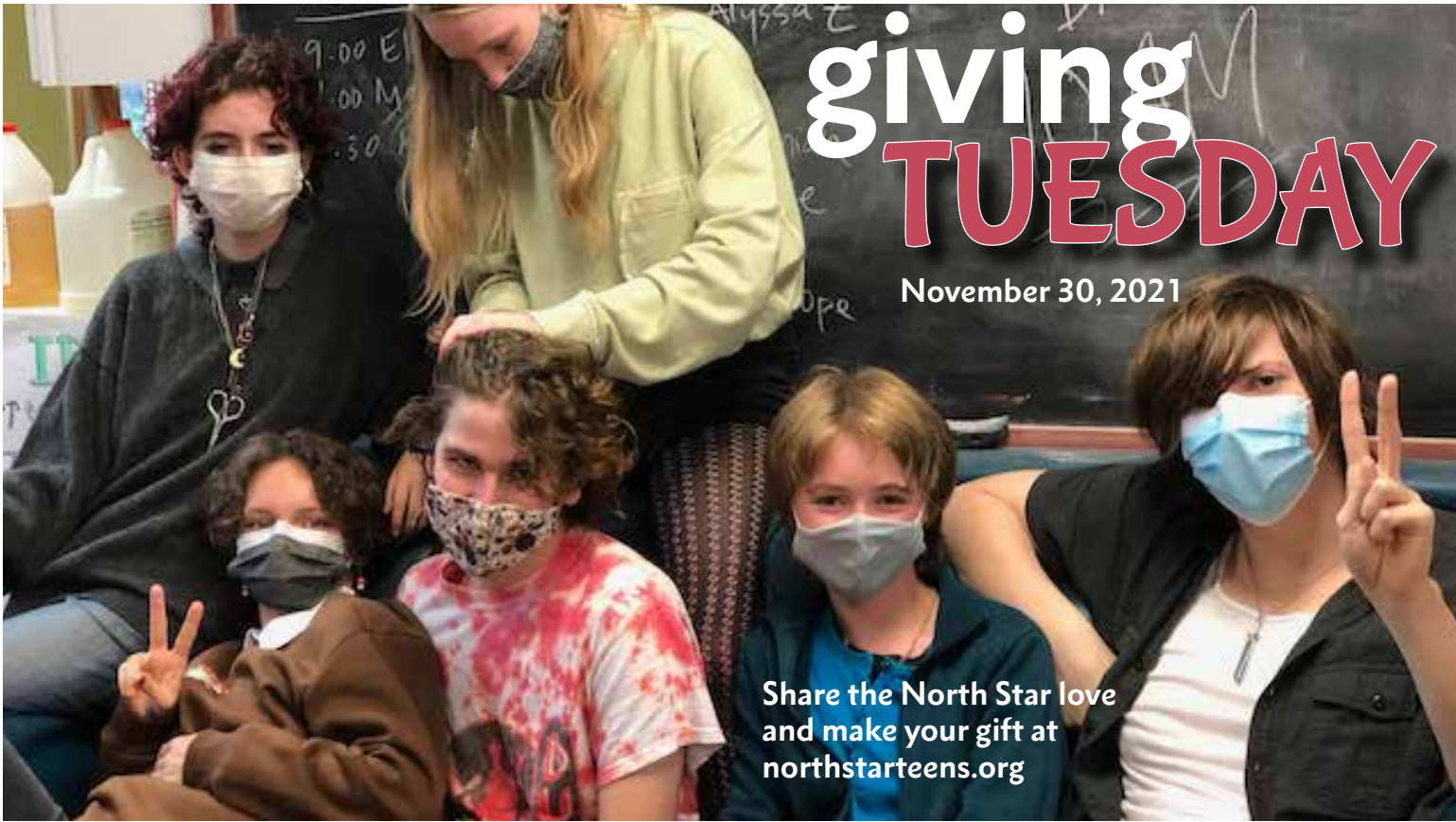


classes at the community college. This semester I have Astronomy and English 101. I love my astronomy class and even though I am not a big fan of English I still like going to the class. I have found that just knowing that I chose to do something makes it a lot more enjoyable. And because I chose to do everything that is in my schedule, everything is a lot more enjoyable.

I still work as a cashier and continue to play Ultimate Frisbee with my old school. I now have my license and even bought myself a car earlier this year. I have gained so much confidence and independence this last year. Being able to decide what I am going to learn and do has been so much fun. Sometimes I think back and I can't believe how much time I spent being miserable in school. A lot of my friends are still in school and not one of them seems to enjoy it. In our group texts they have endless conversations about

assignments and essays and how much they have to do. Sometimes we talk until 1:00 a.m. as they finish their schoolwork. It just seems so ridiculous that people have to do that. I feel so lucky to have a place like North Star to support me through everything and give me a place to explore my interests without being in school. At this point, I can't imagine it any other way.





giving TUESDAY

November 30, 2021

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