

LIBERATED LEARNERS

NORTH STAR'S NEWSLETTER SPRING 2022



Max and Sam enjoy a nice Common Room hangout

A Surge of Optimism

by Executive Director Kenneth Danford

Happy Spring! The winter was a bit of a challenge for us all, and now we are feeling some optimism as we enjoy more sunlight and fresh air. North Star went Zoom-only for three weeks in January during the Omicron surge, but this month we have canceled our March spring break to offer our members an extra bit of in-person time. When we made this announcement at a weekly community meeting, I asked teens to recognize that relatively few teens in this country would be happy to hear that their school was canceling spring break!

In terms of Covid-19, the CDC announcement at the end of February that it is now safe to be indoors with no masks in 70% of the country made me feel like the Road Runner in the cartoon, when he runs off the cliff but his legs keep spinning super-fast! We

have been following the CDC guidelines, as well as paying attention to the news, but it's taking us a bit of time to catch up to this new recommendation. Overall, our staff very much appreciates the overwhelming support of our teens and parents for the past two years as we have negotiated our way through the pandemic.

The new year has brought a different sort of surge to North Star—we have welcomed a host of new inquiries! The cold, dark winter seems to produce a lot of school refusal among teens, who no longer are willing to cooperate with the system. Some families have initiated homeschooling on their own, but are seeking more community. A few are beginning to consider options for next year, and are sometimes surprised or inspired by North Star's rolling

admissions. The process of teens joining North Star is often slow—the steps from phone calls to visits to family conversations to overcoming anxiety to actually attending can sometimes take weeks. On the other hand, sometimes it takes hours! Supporting this process with each family continues to be one of my favorite aspects of my work. Observing our current members and staff welcoming these newcomers is beyond gratifying.

In case you missed it, in February I moderated a panel titled What Still Matters? North Star Alumni Over Age 30! Thank you to Jacob Miller-Mack, Kiva Singh, Sphennings Wright, and Ellen Morbyrne for their insightful sharing and participation. This one is a keeper, and you can find the video recording of this panel on North Star's Facebook page or in my blog on www.kennethdanford.com.

In other happy news, North Star is being named one of the ten most progressive schools in the world by HundrED, and we will be featured at the Leaps Summit sponsored by the Qatar Foundation. Stay tuned for more on this event.

In this issue, you will meet the one-and-only Atticus Belmonte. Atticus is a lifelong homeschooler, and along with his family, represents the best of this movement. Now 17 years old, Atticus produces immersive theater

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A No-Pressure Social and Learning Outlet

by Atticus Belmonte, Recent North Star Alum



Hi there! My name is Atticus Belmonte, I'm 17 years old and I am a North Star alum and a lifelong homeschooler. I also work on a farm, and I am a theater person.

Learning has always been something that I have been able to control to a certain level, and North Star has certainly helped me with that. My parents never made the decision to enroll me in public school, and I am honestly really grateful for that. They always presented it as an option, if I ever felt that it was the right decision for me, but it just never seemed appealing.

That being said, I never was and never wanted to be at home 100 percent of the time. I think one of the biggest misconceptions about homeschoolers is that they literally don't do anything. Even homeschoolers who don't follow a specific curriculum are constantly learning from the world around them. For the most part, I did follow certain curricula and programs from home, but I also have been a part of various homeschool programs throughout my life.

As I started to reach my tween/teen

years, I was interested in finding people of my age group that I would fit in and get along with. North Star was the perfect place for that. I found many classes about things that I was interested in, and other people with similar life experiences to me, as well as people with different experiences. North Star felt like the perfect no-pressure social and learning outlet; I could take classes, but very rarely had homework, and was never ever graded. I could hang out with people my age, but without the regular judgments and social rankings of public school.

There are so many amazing highlights from my time at North Star. In addition to all the classes I took, I went on a service trip to Quebec, I helped to put together and perform an amazing play, and I even learned how to make the perfect grilled cheese. I gradually moved from North Star to taking classes at Greenfield Community College, as well as online classes at Holyoke and Massasoit Community Colleges. North Star was the perfect transitional period for me. I find community college to be similar to North Star in some ways; everyone comes from a different learning level (a lot of people there are homeschoolers/North Star members!) and there is a lot of freedom around which classes I choose to take. While I am beginning to try and get an Associate's Degree, I still am able to focus on things that I want to learn about, very similar to my experience at North Star.

I took my first GCC class, Intro to Gender and Women's Studies, in the fall of 2020. Due to you know what, that class was online. But in the fall of 2021, I finally took an in person class at GCC! It was a film photography class, so I got to spend lots of time in the darkroom, developing my photos. It was at that point that I realized I wanted to focus on community college, and move on from North Star. But this decision to move on came with no judgments or disappointed remarks from anyone in the North Star community. The amazing thing about North Star is that I was able to make that decision confidently, without feeling judged. And I was able to make that decision while still keeping in mind all of the amazing and impactful experiences I have had at North Star. I am so grateful to everyone there and everyone in my community for supporting me in learning exactly the way that I want to.



From the Desk of the Outreach Director

by Jodi Lyn Cutler



Greetings to all,

It has been a challenging year, but we are looking forward to resuming a more normal routine soon. Our community has certainly made the best of the hard situation due to the pandemic.

We had our second annual Get Down With Your Hometown online music festival in January, with two nights of amazing artists. Musicians came from near and far to join us online, including North Star and Institute for the Musical Arts alums in the early stages of their careers, as well as illustrious internationally acclaimed musicians who support the work of North Star, IMA and the Shea Theatre. I hope you were one of the fortunate 2,500 people who tuned in to Get Down with your Hometown. The event generated more than \$30,000 and produced a lot of praise and awareness for North Star. We were delighted to work with such a great team

of collaborators, and are already planning for next year!

The Ozzy Klate Memorial Funds have been distributed to this year's recipients and we are pleased to be supporting five North Star teens' projects, including building a guitar, launching a production of Phantom of the Opera, a special sewing machine, and blacksmithing classes. We look forward to having these teens share their projects in the spring.

SAVE THE DATE! We will celebrate North Star's 25th anniversary (a year late) with an Anniversary Bonanza on Saturday, June 11 outside at North Star. (Rain date: Sunday, June 12.)

Everyone is welcome—current families, alumni, alumni parents, former staff, board members, and our loyal friends. The event is still in the planning stages, but you can count on touring the new and improved building, enjoying the North Star Band, playing games, and seeing old friends! And food from Bueno Y Sano! Stay tuned!

Lastly, we are collecting North Star-related photos for our Anniversary Bonanza and future marketing materials. Please send them to jodi@northst-arteens.org, and identify the people in the photo (unless they are Ken, I am pretty good at picking him out!)

Hikes!



Surge, continued from page 1

shows that are astounding. He has grown up in a solid homeschooling community independent of North Star, though he has been a member of our program for the past four years. Last year he added a part-time job and community college classes to his already full schedule, and now he has arrived at the end of his North Star career. His long-term arc of growing up outside of the conventional system inspires everyone who knows him, and he is an example of what North Star strives to make possible for other interested families. Congrats to Atticus as he moves along. We are delighted we get to continue working with his younger brother and parents for a while longer!

North Star 2021-22 In Pictures



A fierce game of UNO in the Common Room



Gathering fallen branches for a backyard fire



Building a fire



Inside/Outside



Homemade pasta in Food & Culture class



The Gathering Place



Making electromagnets in Science Class



Volunteering at Amherst Survival Center



At the picnic table on a warm fall day



Hiking at Conway Hills



Appreciating a wolf tree



Enjoying a day in early spring

Introducing Dr. Perry (Ylfa), The Anatomy Teacher

I'm Dr. Perry but my friends call me Ylfa (which is Icelandic, means wolf and is pronounced "ilva"). I have been teaching Anatomy & Physiology (A&P) this year at North Star.

I trod the traditional American path to becoming a doctor: public school K-12, college, medical school, residency, a career in the U.S. healthcare system, burn out. As it turns out, this was right around the time that my kid burned out on school. We were both ready for some unschooling.



So, in 2020, I quit medicine and my kid quit school and we were freeeeee! Free to wander off the paved roads of grading, rating, and standardization. Together, we started learning to trust ourselves as we let curiosity and joy be our navigators. We are learning that if we stay on the flat, paved roads of society's expectations and rules, we'll miss the adventures of the jungles and the truths we can only see from the mountaintops. And we are having so much fun.

So, a year into the adventure, I thought, what could be more fun than unschooling with one kid? Unschooling with a bunch of kids! Hence, my anatomy and physiology class. I am an unabashed nerd and loved medical school. I find the human body fascinating and learning how to heal it empowering. So I pitched a class that would not just be high school level A&P but more of a mini medical school. I wanted to teach not just the normal body systems but also common diseases and how to diagnose and treat them. So I pitched the class and hoped there would be a few science nerds who might check it out. I was rewarded with a group of enthusiastic, creative, and funny students and we are having a great time!

Thus far we have explored the cardiovascular system which included spinning digital 3D cardiac models, watching videos of open-heart surgeries, and dissecting pig and lamb hearts. We also watched movie and TV scenes that depict spurting arterial bleeding so students



could test their knowledge of vascular anatomy (most notably, the hacking off of a knight's limbs in Monty Python's "The Holy Grail.")

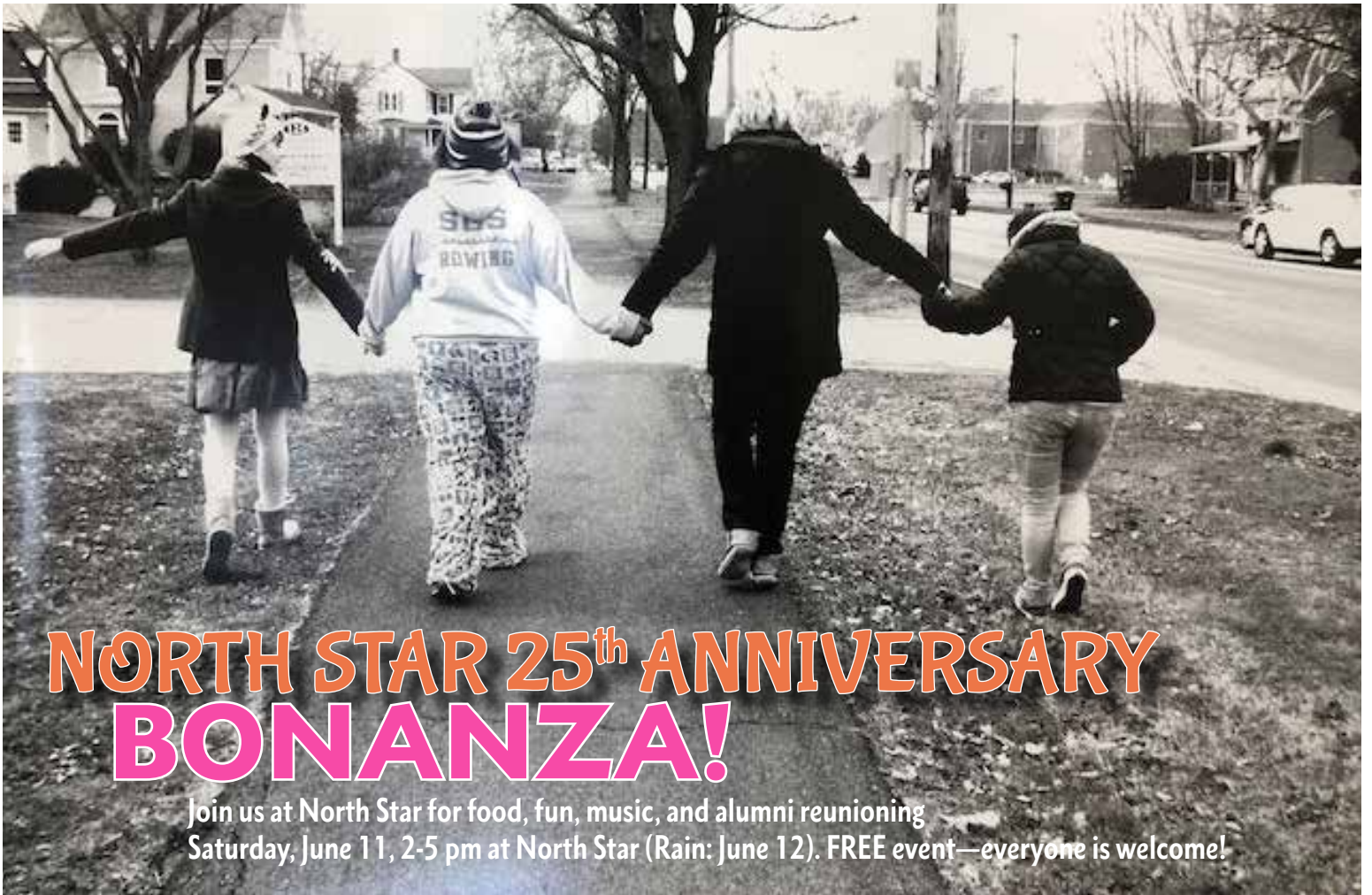
We then explored the gastrointestinal system. This included videos of upper and lower endoscopies (tiny cameras on flexible tubes inserted through the mouth or anus) as well as open and laparoscopic abdominal surgeries. The gastrointestinal unit allowed us to explore related issues like nutrition and the curious array of non-edible items that people swallow. Students did an excellent job of identifying those items on abdominal x-rays including earrings, coins, nails, sewing needles, and spoons...yes, that's right, spoons.



We are now exploring the respiratory system. Students recently learned to spot the signs of respiratory distress in kids. We also had a virtual tour of an operating room with an anesthesiologist (also named Dr. Perry...because he's my big brother) who showed us the various tools and machines they use to help people breathe.

Up next, I'm bringing in a Harvard-trained pediatric neurologist to teach all about the brain and nervous system (I met Dr. Dredge in medical school...and married him).

It has been inspiring and rewarding to teach students who show up each week because they are curious and having fun (rather than obligated and needing a "good grade"). They ask amazing questions that lead us down interesting paths of inquiry. They also realize that an anatomy and physiology class can do more than impart scientific knowledge. It can make them better writers (more realistic murder scenes!), better artists (knowing what lies under the skin makes drawing the human form more precise), and, in one student's case, a better volunteer firefighter! And what am I getting out of it? I get to reconnect with the passion I felt when I was first studying the human body. I get to develop teaching skills. I get to join an inspiring community. But, mostly, I'm having a ton of fun!



NORTH STAR 25th ANNIVERSARY BONANZA!

Join us at North Star for food, fun, music, and alumni reunioneing
Saturday, June 11, 2-5 pm at North Star (Rain: June 12). FREE event—everyone is welcome!

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A project of Learning Alternatives, Inc.

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