

LIBERATED LEARNERS

NORTH STAR'S NEWSLETTER SPRING 2021



North Star members Siggie and Harry enjoy a wade in the Mill River on a warm March day

Light at the End of the Tunnel?

by Executive Director Kenneth Danford

We welcome the Spring, and the hope that comes with a widespread COVID-19 vaccination program. For now, we anticipate completing this academic year much as we started it back in September: with some limited outdoor-only time along with extensive online opportunities. I'm happy to report that most of the North Star Core Staff members are making progress with the vaccination process, though we will remain cautious about in-person gatherings until all of our immediate family members have also received vaccinations. We also realize that most of our teen members will not be eligible for vaccinations until the Fall, at the soonest. So, we continue on doing the best we can, which turns out to be pretty decent!

Over the past few months, the North Star program has fallen into a fairly

impressive weekly rhythm for many of our teens: a handful of online classes, a tutorial or two, a weekly Community Meeting, and a weekly Advisory session. In addition, some teens have participated in our in-person hikes or community service opportunities. Beyond that, our teens have faced the pandemic much as the rest of us: learning independently, pursuing hobbies, spending time with family, and sometimes gathering outdoors with others. It's been a challenge for everyone to maintain some short-term inspiration and a long-term positive outlook.

I have enjoyed this structure as much as possible: two weekly classes, a dozen advisory meetings, a semi-weekly hike, a community meeting, and a staff meeting have offered a welcome balance to my life. I have missed seeing

my parents and children, as well as the North Star community, and I anticipate the coming months with some eagerness.

Meanwhile, North Star has had some highlights the past few months. First, we turned our Zoom life into an opportunity to welcome Distance Members into the North Star program this year, and we now have thirteen members who live in faraway places: California, Texas, Florida, Connecticut, eastern Massachusetts, and Portugal. We've found their energy and enthusiasm to be a wonderful contribution to our classes and community. We look forward to working with our Liberated Learners network to continue offering some version of a Distance Program in the Fall. For this issue, we have chosen to feature one of these Distance Members, and I thank Jeffrey Norris and his parents for sharing their experience with such a compelling story.

Second, in January North Star helped to co-organize a multi-day online Music Festival, Get Down With Your Hometown. You can read more about this event in the message from Outreach Director Jodi Cutler in this issue. This concert produced several new friendships, a joyful event, and some decent fundraising. Talk about "making lemonade out of lemons," this initiative was truly spectacular!

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Time for the Things that Interest Me

by Jeffrey Norris, North Star Member



I have always had a complicated relationship with school. As far back as I can remember I would complain to my parents that school was wasting my time, and that it was pointless. Those feelings were handled well by my parents and in school because I went to very progressive Montessori schools through 8th grade, and then a high school that followed new models of education. Being in the San Francisco Bay Area, I was able to find an amazing high

school named Saint Mary's College High School. They were very good at helping kids cope with the high amount of work and stress that happens in high school. There was a time to get help from teachers outside of class every day, the teachers were super supportive whenever they realized someone was struggling, they really stressed taking classes that you could handle and enjoyed, and they emphasized the importance of mental and physical

health. Saint Mary's was amazing and helped me with all the negative feelings I had towards school.

Before the pandemic started, I was feeling pretty good about school. I never really liked it, but I thought I could stick it out at least until the end of high school. Once the pandemic started in the spring of 2020, my school went online for 3 hours a day, which worked even better for me. I was so much happier with school because I had more time to work on my own interests, such as running, cooking, learning to drive, spending more time with my family, and playing the video game Dota 2 at a serious level.

This is when I discovered I could learn a lot in a shorter amount of time with self-directed learning, and still have time to do things that I love. I also learned that being able to take care of my mental and physical health was easier when I had a more flexible schedule.

Due to the pandemic, after the school year ended I had to move halfway across the country, from California to Texas, and switch to a much more traditional school environment that was nothing like I had experienced before. Halfway through the first day of 11th grade this past fall, I was completely shutting down and crying, because the schedule was overwhelming, and I was taking more classes than I ever had before. That day I started thinking about how I could find some other option for my schooling. I asked my parents about homeschooling. My mom's friend told her about North Star and we found Ken's

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Supporting His Journey

by Katie Norris, North Star Parent

As a Montessori-raised kid from Pre-K through 8th grade and then a Montessori-based dementia care specialist, I insisted that my son Jeffrey would go to Montessori schools at least through 8th grade. I knew that the modern school system did not foster a love of learning in many people (not all, because my husband LOVED a very traditional style of school.) Despite our different learning styles, my husband and I both really wanted Jeffrey to be able to follow his own path, learn at his own pace, and not be dictated by grades and tests that we knew were not a measure of emotional or intellectual intelligence. We wanted him to also learn how to communicate with others, know himself, and have a good moral compass.

Jeffrey has always had an interesting relationship with school. He mostly loved school as a kid, but we did have to move a few times and some of

the Montessori schools he attended had a parent culture that led to a high pressure environment. In those schools, he felt like he was never smart enough, there was a ton of

We wanted him to learn how to communicate with others, know himself, and have a good moral compass.

busy work, and he could not pursue what he loved to learn. Each time he was in a school like that, he started to tear up homework, shut down, have emotional outbursts, and the joyous, constant smile left his face.

When he reached high school age, Jeffrey went to an amazing progressive Catholic school with updated educational practices. Jeffrey was on the cross country and track teams, he had friends, and most of the classes used a didactic teaching style that he

liked. He also got a job at a gym as a Ninja Warrior coach. He was doing great.

We then had to leave California because it became too risky for us to live in such an expensive area, always at the edge of our means, during a pandemic.

We moved to Texas to be by family and we found a great school, but it was more traditional. Jeffrey joined the cross country team and loved it. The kids and coaches were amazing, but as soon as the actual school started, he was a mess.

Literally within an hour on the first day he was again crying, tearing papers apart, and emotionally unstable. He was overwhelmed and started to question the purpose of life, which was really concerning for us as parents.

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Light at the End of the Tunnel, continued from page 1

I'm relieved to share that despite this difficult year, North Star's finances are in remarkably good shape. Our loss of two consecutive Circus Smirkus fundraisers has been offset by two successful applications for PPP loans – thanks to our local Greenfield Savings Bank. We have also received a long-term EIDL loan from the SBA, which gives us a large cushion while we aim to restore our normal routine. Meanwhile, our long-term donors have continued their generosity to North Star, and our regular program has generated a steady amount of Membership Fee income, which is our primary source of funds. For all of the economic chaos of the pandemic, North Star has maintained its payroll and

proceeded calmly. I offer my sincere appreciation to everyone who has contributed to this success.

On a personal note, I have also been part of a group launching a new course for people interested in self-directed learning: Another Way: A Course for Visionary Educators Seeking to Liberate Children to Learn Naturally. I am excited to have three partners in this project, including Cassidy Younghans, Lora Smothers, and Sundiata Sundiata, and to offer our collective knowledge and coaching in a group setting. (see learninganotherway.com for more information.)

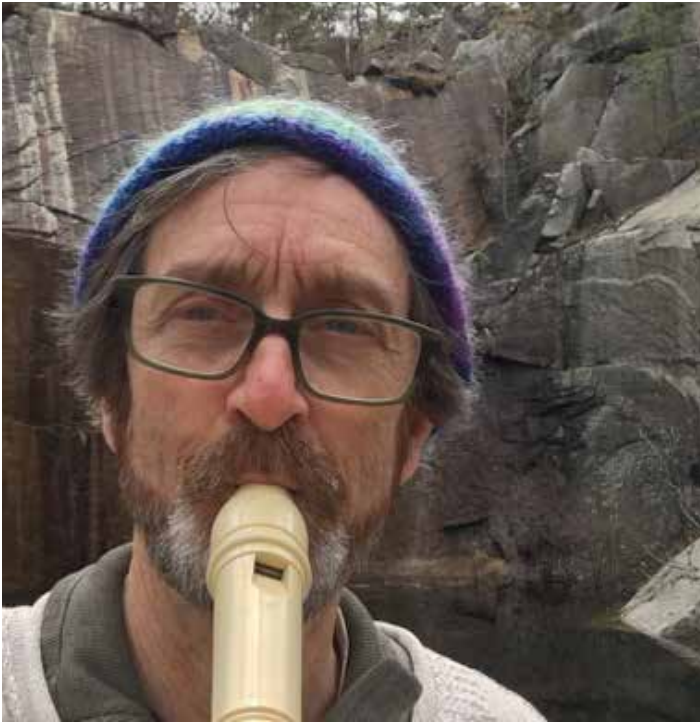
I hope each of you has been able to find a positive way to manage this

past year. I anticipate returning to our normal in-person routines as soon as possible, and I am grateful to everyone across the country who is working to make that possible. For now, enjoy Jeffrey's story as an informative example of life at North Star this year. ☘



Struggle and Light: A Year On Zoom

by John Sprague, Core Staff Member



A year ago everything changed—the pandemic taking over, a lockdown, mask-wearing, physical distancing. The shutdown seemed to happen almost overnight. As late as March 10, I still had plans to take a trip to California to see my two sons during the upcoming spring break. On March 11, UMass announced they were moving to fully remote learning. Suddenly it became apparent that I, and all of us, had to change our plans completely. North Star followed suit, and I cancelled my trip.

Last spring was a scramble, figuring out how to put our program online via Zoom. As a staff we had a steep learning curve, especially in finding ways to keep the sense of community alive. Many of our teens were in shock, as they lost core elements of their lives—being at North Star regularly, and seeing their friends in person. We quickly lost some members who could not deal with the Zoom-based program, and the loss of social contact. Nonetheless we persevered, learning how to function in this new situation, and ending the year on a positive note with a successful virtual shindig.

This academic year has seen North Star wholeheartedly engaged in trying to offer the best experience possible remotely, and it's startling to realize that a whole year has gone by, living primarily in a Zoom-and phone-based world. Of course there have been many challenges and stresses. Some teens cannot deal with Zoom

at all. Of those who do take part, many don't like to have their videos on. While I respect and support these choices, as a teacher I miss the engagement and information I receive from body language and facial expressions. I've adapted, using my imagination and intuition to tune in other ways. I am developing new ways to relate, and a new sense of where "here" is. Sometimes "here" is a Zoom room with portals into all of our homes.

Of course we really miss seeing each other in person. Luckily at North Star we were able to start the start the year with some splashes of in-person experience via masked, socially distanced times under the tents, as well as hikes and service groups. We want to see each other— even with masks — and are looking forward to more tent time in May. There, I run an informal music group under the tent. Although the sounds of the road and the wearing of masks makes it harder to hear each other, it is still so good to connect that way.

As a musician I've lost a lot of what I normally do with others. It's just hasn't been possible. I've watched my jazz musician son endure a year without almost no gigs. For performers, it's been hard economically, but also creatively and emotionally, missing the nourishment of seeing and playing in person with each other, and for each other.

During all this, in September my musician son became a dad, and I became a grandfather. My son and his family live in Pasadena, CA. They send me pictures and videos, and we Zoom sometimes, but I have yet to meet my grandson and have not seen either of my sons in person for over a year. Sometime my advisees tell me how isolated they feel, wondering whether life will ever return to normal. For them, and for some of my friends, fighting depression is a challenge. We're all tired of Zoom.

At the same time I am often so moved and inspired by the tremendous creativity we are finding in the midst of this pandemic. I've even had some great gigs, parties and dancing experiences on Zoom. I have a new friend based around mirroring each others' movements on Zoom. As a teacher, while I've struggled sometimes to know what to do, I've also had some of my best classes ever. With the weather warming and light beginning to illuminate the end of the Covid tunnel, I am encouraged and looking forward to what life, and North Star will look like next year.

A friend told me about North Star. We watched all of the videos we could and the three of us talked to Ken. We knew North Star was a perfect fit for him, but it was still a scary transition since we were brought up in families that felt there was no other way to learn than to go to school, and then you had to go to college to have a good future.

At the same time, we saw our son's mental and physical health go downhill. He started having a hard time with running, and he was not sleeping well. He was suffering, and if anything ruins a future, it is constant suffering.

Since joining North Star, Jeffrey has been so much happier. His health has improved, his sleep is better (sleep was important for his healing because sleep is when our brain solidifies learning, stores memories, as well as when it processes trauma) and he is learning things he loves.

We love that he is taking classes like Harm and Punishment, rather than

things like English Lit. 202 where, when he expressed his opinions and beliefs, that was seen as outside the scope of learning. For us, learning is not just about what technical rules and concepts you remember, but how you apply those to life to make the world a more just and loving place. This is what he is learning at North Star and on his own.

As parents, we still worry. Did we do the right thing? If he wants to go to college, can he get in? We get a lot of pressure from other people who say we are setting Jeffrey up to not be able to function as an adult.

However, the research just does not support the idea that one must learn in a traditional model in order to be a functioning adult. In fact, research shows how detrimental the perfection pressure of traditional school is on kids. Kids who are homeschooled or unschooled get into colleges that are a great fit for them, if that is something they want to do. They work hard because they know that if

they want to learn or do something, it's up to them to just go do it. Many of them spend time with people of all ages because they have not spent all their time with peers, so they know how to communicate effectively. They also have a deep compassion for people who are different and who do things differently, so they bring a kind of empathy to the world that we really need.

Honestly, to have our son no longer crying and asking what the point in life is, has made this all worth it. On top of that though, he smiles all the time again, and he talks to us about things he is learning. We get to spend so much more time together as a family—walking the dog, cooking, rock climbing, time with our family quarantine pod, and meals together.

We are excited to see how Jeffrey shapes his future, and we feel honored to be his parents and support his journey. ☘

Having Fun While Helping the Community

by Loran Saito, Program Director

One of the highlights of our unusual North Star year for me has been volunteering with a group of teens every other Thursday at Manna Community Kitchen, located in St. John's Episcopal Church. We help with assembling and packaging to-go and shelter meals, and occasionally do other tasks to help out.

We always have a great time. I am glad that the teens get to witness an organization that provides for the community with generosity, care and joy. The food is delicious and abundant, and the teens often take home some lunch to share with their families. I am also proud and happy

to watch North Star members' enthusiasm and resilience. They have fun just by being together, with an underlying desire to do something kind for people who really need their help.



From the (Home) Office of the Outreach Director

by Jodi Lyn Cutler



This week marks one full year since I last took an indoor photo at North Star!

We just learned that the Circus Smirkus Big Top tour is cancelled for the second year in a row.

The highlight of our outreach over past few months was been the creation of a brand-new event, Get Down with your Hometown or GDHT. GDHT is a collaborative music festival presented by North Star, the Shea Theatre, and the Institute for Musical Arts. The weekend-long online concert took place in January and lifted spirits and raised money and awareness for all three organizations. The 42 performers ranged from local teenagers to Grammy award winners, located from Northampton to Los Angeles to Nashville to Amsterdam! (www.getdownhometown.com) More than 3,000 viewers logged on from around the world. We

had a lot of fun building relationships with our local friends, and we have already planning next year's festival! Thanks again to the GDHT Sponsors and MCs.

Once we can meet again in person, we will resume our monthly information sessions and our lovely Lunch and Learn program (thanks, Bueno y Sano!). In the meantime we hope you will continue to spread the word and help families whose teens may be struggling with whatever form their school is taking. North Star offers rolling admissions (yesterday can be your last day of school!), and we welcome all interested families. More importantly, we are no longer accessible only to those within driving distance of western Massachusetts. We currently have members as far away as California, Texas, Florida, and Portugal, and we anticipate continuing some sort of distance program for next year. Please share the possibility of North Star with friends and family near and far. You will never know whose life you could change!

Hikes!



TEDx Talk. The presentations really resonated with me and sounded like exactly what I was experiencing. We set up a time to talk with Ken, and after that I knew I wanted to be at North Star, I just didn't know when I would make the change.

The one thing I loved about my new school was my cross-country team, and I wanted to fulfill my commitment to the group. I stayed for half of a semester, but I was miserable, shutting down, and my grades dropped drastically. The day after my last cross-country race at States, I finally took the leap of faith and dropped out.

About a week later I started taking online classes with North Star: Harm and Punishment, Race Relations, and Election 2020. These classes really sparked my interest because they let me think about the world in a way that normal school never allowed me to do. I was able to focus on what I actually thought instead of what would be easiest or get me the best grade.

As well as taking classes, I got to do things that I never would have had the courage and time to do if I were still in school. I took multiple mobility courses online, which taught me about joints, muscles, and how they move as well as how to help people improve them whenever they have something like a thrown out back or pain with movement. It was mostly an online, on-your-own class, with one live Q and A each week through Zoom. I had a really good time with the classes, but it was weird being the youngest participant by far. I just completed the course, and I am now a certified mobility coach.



Jeffrey rock-climbing

In addition to this course, I also continued to focus on my fitness in ways I couldn't have done in school. I rediscovered passions that I had lost, such as playing basketball and rock climbing, as well as continuing to run and learning to rollerblade.

In addition to my physical interests and North Star classes, this year I've pursued a bit of academics as well. I have been able to read books that I found interesting and watch their movies, such as *Hillbilly Elegy*, *Educated*, and *Nomadland*. I have learned more about finance from reading *The Millionaire Mind* and talking to my uncle who is the Vice President of a money management firm. I am also preparing to get my learner's permit and studying for the GED.

Being able to be a part of North Star virtually has helped me and my family so much with this whole process of leaving school. The biggest part was the confidence we got from

knowing that we had help and could figure out how to take the road less traveled with help from North Star. It is so helpful to have an external structure, and have a place to check in with every week and keep me on track. I doubt my family and I would have had the confidence to make such a big change alone, and the virtual program was what we needed.

The biggest change for me has been in my mind. I feel so much better about myself, and am working on fixing all of the mental blocks that held me back before. In school I felt trapped, and believed that whenever I was finished with my academic career, I would just be left with a bunch of emotional problems that I never got to work on because I was too overwhelmed by school, leaving me feeling lost and dysfunctional. Now that I'm at North Star I have the space to discover who I am, and set myself up for adult life once I get out of the "high school" phase of my life. ☘



North Star member Jonah checks out Chapel Brook Falls during a group hike



North Star members Janet, Harry and Siggi take in the view at the top of Skinner Mountain during an early spring hike

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