

LIBERATED LEARNERS

NORTH STAR'S NEWSLETTER WINTER 2023



Resting and reading in the Common Room

A Place that Makes Change Possible

by Executive Director Kenneth Danford

Happy 2023! North Star is enjoying its 27th year as we welcome new staff and members to our community. In particular, we welcome two alumni to our staff: Aaron Damon-Rush as Alumni Coordinator, and Kim Chin-Gibbons as Social Media Manager. In addition, we are delighted to have Olivia Nied as this year's Americorps Service Member, and you can read Olivia's introduction included in this newsletter. Collectively, Aaron, Kim, and Olivia offer fresh energy to our veteran (and always energetic!) core staff.

Our membership has hovered around sixty teens this fall, though in the past six weeks we've seen a rush of new inquiries. I'm always excited that North Star is interesting and appealing to teens who need something different, though I'm also a bit overwhelmed to

see the amount of stress and frustration that these families are experiencing in their current or former schools. North Star's presence offers a powerful way for these teens and families to seize the moment and take some control over their daily and weekly routines, and I love being the host of a place that makes such change possible.

Our community continues to be welcoming and caring, and our teen members continue to appreciate having peers, adults, and allies who hold a safe and active environment. Our staff continue to offer unusual courses, including for example: Body Modification in Different Cultural Contexts, Hiking, Electronics, Restorative Practices, Science: Matter and Motion, Desserts, Let's Build a World, Banned Queer Book Club, The Marvel

Age of Pop Culture, Advocacy for Neurodiverse Individuals, and Trans Sex-Ed (taught by a teen.) New offerings come along every week! Each of these groups has a loyal following.

We have more ambitious plans in the works, including two large community fundraisers: Get Down with Your Hometown at the end of January, and the long-awaited return of Circus Smirkus in July (see Jodi Cutler's update in this issue.) Loran Saito will be leading a service trip to Washington, D.C. in March. I recently took a small group to visit another Liberated Learners Center (Bay State in Dedham, MA) and I hope to make more such trips this winter and spring. Kizzi Collier hosted a successful book fair on our behalf at Barnes and Noble, and various art, music, gardening, and science projects are ongoing.

As Alumni Coordinator, Aaron Damon-Rush is reaching out to every alum and we hope to establish the North Star Alumni Association later this spring. For now, we are confirming contact information, activity updates, and each alum's willingness to share this information. Please be on the lookout for Aaron's outreach.

With so much going on and with so many staff available in the building, I've been shifting some of my time to the consulting, writing, and meetings I do with the Liberated Learners network

continued on page 3



My Favorite Thing About North Star

by Willow Scott, Current North Star Member



Over the course of my life, my education has been all over the place. I've never stayed at a school or educational program for more than three years. I went to a local private school from kindergarten to second grade, before my parents pulled me out because it wasn't intellectually stimulating enough. I was "unschooled" for three years, during which time I learned essentially nothing of academic value. Despite this, those years are some of my favorite childhood memories, times when life was simple and all I had to learn was what the small world I lived in had to teach me. Life was good, squirrels were plentiful, and I was content with not having that many friends as long as it meant I didn't have to do math.

But my mom had to start working again, and she needed to find a school to put me and my older brother in. My older brother went to Four Rivers, but I wasn't old enough for Four Rivers yet. Instead, my mom wanted me to go to Four Winds, a very small independent middle school. I didn't want to go back to school, but my mom told me

I needed to visit Four Winds before I shut it down entirely. I visited, and after noting that there weren't many students, the building was small, and the schoolwork was done independently, I told my mom that if I absolutely had to go to school, I guess I'd go to this one.

I have fond memories of that school, but by the time I was eleven or twelve, I wanted more of a social life. I told my mom that I wanted to start going to Four Rivers as a seventh grader in the fall of 2018. When I stepped into the school for the first time, I realized that there were likely more people my age there than I'd interacted with in the past five years. I figured out a social group quickly enough, and fell into a role at school: the class clown. I was diagnosed with ADHD and built up a reputation of being a slacker, and an emotionally volatile one at that.

The stress started to build. I was used to that awful feeling of knowing that I have homework, knowing that I need to wake up early in the morning for school, but still being unable to force myself to study or sleep. Being used to it didn't make it any better—my mental health suffered. I didn't care about academics, I didn't have the bandwidth to care. I cared about seeing my friends. While my school friends tried to help, most didn't know what to make of me. I lashed out at friends, classmates, teachers, and my family. My ADHD meds didn't help. I felt hopeless and overwhelmed all the time.

To make matters worse, in the middle of eighth grade, they switched me and all my best friends to different classes. I would cry in my mom's room, wondering what was wrong

with me, why I was "very smart" but still couldn't finish an assignment to save my own life. On one such night, my mom pulled her computer out and told me to stop crying and come look at a website. It was some sort of homeschool program called North Star.

As soon as I heard "homeschooling," I was on board. I'd had enough of school. I went in for a meeting with Ken and started attending North Star occasionally, while still being enrolled in Four Rivers. Whenever I would refuse school, my mom would just say, "Okay, well then you have to go to North Star instead." So I would. I didn't talk to most people however, and I didn't really know how to change that. My true friend group was still at Four Rivers. Then, a few weeks into my being enrolled at North Star, COVID happened.

I went to the online classes for one year, and still didn't really have any North Star friends, though I was invited to a discord server and started talking to some kids who went to North Star online. They invited me to hang out, but I was socially anxious and unsure, so I declined. In September of 2021, North Star switched to in person again, and I started my first full year of real North Star shenanigans.

I decided to sit with a group of kids who looked fun, and over the course of the next few months I became good friends with several of them, and even started dating someone new, who I'm still with now, almost 15 months later. North Star had people who actually seemed to appreciate me. For the first time in

Continued on page 4

From the Desk of the Outreach Director

by Jodi Lyn Cutler



Hello everyone! At this writing we're almost ready for the third annual music festival benefit "Get Down with your Hometown," that will air January 28 and 29. This festival benefits North Star, and our friends at the Institute for Musical Arts (IMA) and the Shea Theater. We have an amazing lineup! Indigo Girls, Chris Smither, Rachael Price, Martin Sexton, June Millington, Naia Kete, The Suitcase Junket, Jamie Kent, Cris Williamson, Marcia Gomes, The Nields, Cloudbelly, StompBoxTrio, Sunset Mission, The Nields and many, many more. Our thanks to our incredible sponsors, donors and viewers. You can learn more about this event and how to tune in at www.getdownhometown.com.

This year's festival is dedicated to Jana Ivanov Abramowitz, a beloved alum of North Star and IMA, who had performed at the Shea, and who was tragically murdered last summer. We will feature highlights from summer festivals on Day 2, including a tribute by Jana's band, Tropical Hot Sauce.

We are excited to announce that we are able to bring Circus Smirkus back to Northampton this summer! Woohoo! It has been three years and are excited to have them at the Three County Fairgrounds for four shows,

Saturday and Sunday, July 8 & 9, 2023. In order for this to be a success we need your help. Would you or your company be a sponsor? We can offer great advertising exposure for your company/organization at many levels. Could you be one of ten host families for the traveling troupers? I can attest that having two (or more) performers stay in your home is a joy! We also need volunteers at the shows, help getting the word out. Please mark your calendars and bring you're your friends and family. Tickets will go on sale by June 1. We will update our website with information and send emails.

If you don't know Circus Smirkus, you are in for a treat. Think Cirque du Soliel, with 10 to 18 year olds performing and a lot of awe-inspiring moves coupled with hilarity and slapstick humor. Whenever I watch a show, I leave exhilarated and my cheeks hurt from smiling so much. They travel from town to town and benefit the hosting organization and perform to sell-out crowds in Circus Smirkus' very own 750-seat, European-style, one-ring big top tent with live original music.

Please contact me if you are interested in helping in any way. Thank you!
jodi@northstarteens.org



Hikes!



*Making change possible,
continued from page 1*

to spread our model. I expect to continue this shift in the coming years, as our confidence grows that North Star is stable and in good hands.

This personal shift makes the teen essay in this issue all the more meaningful for me. Willow Scott came to North Star during the pandemic, and we've seen them grow up over three years. I appreciate Willow's participation at our weekly Community Meeting (Willow's Gecko of the Week), and I see Willow in the common room in the thick of our social scene. However, I am not Willow's advisor, nor do I have classes or tutorials with Willow, and our incidental interactions have been limited due to my reduced presence. Reading their essay moved me, as their sharing gives light to some private history and growth that hasn't been obvious to me, nor I presume, others. Having Willow articulate their experience from trying various schools and independent homeschooling, to exploring and experimenting with our community, to now adding in community college and more young adult activities confirms so much of our work. Our job is to host, welcome, support, propose, and accept. It is not to push, enforce, demand, or focus on outcomes. Willow's writing reveals what this meant to them, and how they are better off three years later. Thank you, Willow.

Thank you to each of you for your ongoing interest and support. Our Giving Tuesday campaign was a solid success, and each of your gifts supports us both materially and emotionally. Best wishes for the new year. (K.D.)

Willow, continued from page 2

my life I have friends who see me as a first choice and not just someone they tolerate. The lower stress environment of North Star as opposed to school caused me to be able to actually focus on the things that mattered to me.

What's more, I actually started to feel motivated to learn things. I signed up for GCC classes, and plan to use the credits to transfer to a 4 year school at some point.

I go to classes both in and out of North Star, but honestly, on my list of priorities and list of things I like about North Star, classes are not at the top. The people I met here, the social connections I made were far more beneficial to me than any class could be, and I'm very grateful that I'm able to have the opportunity to live my teenage years with people I like, and with the freedom to do what I like. That's my favorite thing about North Star. 🌻

North Star Fall 2022 in Pictures



Our 2022-23 Americorps Member, Olivia Nied



My name is Olivia Nied. I'm a 25-year-old DIAL/SELF Americorps member serving here at North Star during this current term. This is my second year as an Americorps member, and I can honestly say that it takes a unique kind of person to join Americorps. It's not something people often do for the money, you do it for the community and the connections.

During my first Americorps term in 2021-22, when I was serving at The Brick House Community Resource Center in Turners Falls, MA, I noticed a pattern among the young people who frequented the drop-in teen center after school hours. Many of the young people I was regularly interacting with were completely exhausted by public school. The constant disruptions in routine caused by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the ongoing social isolation and struggles to find supportive friend groups, and the lack of autonomy and choice in what they could learn were leaving students completely drained. Many of

the stories I heard from the day-to-day lives of the young people I was serving resonated deeply with me, because they were similar to my own experiences.

For me, public education often felt like wading through molasses. The only solace I found from the stress of learning differently and being told I was "inconvenient," was playing music with my band when I got home at the end of the day. When my previous Americorps supervisor mentioned that North Star was looking for a new Americorps member, I was overjoyed by the prospect of serving in an environment with students similar to me, who were passionate about being in the driver's seat of their own education. I was even more excited by the opportunity to offer classes to students on topics that I was passionate about such as the meaning behind music as a way to make connections and express emotions, neurodiverse advocacy and music performance.

For one of the first times in my life I've been able to utilize my ability to focus intensely on very specific (and possibly rather niche) topics of discussion, and to see young people generally respond favorably to that, and even suggest ideas of their own! That's what makes North Star unique. It's student-driven, and choice and autonomy are core components of what makes the community so vibrant.

Serving at North Star has inspired me to pursue furthering my education in working with students that learn differently, and also to explore my options to utilize music and the performing arts as a means to form connections and inspire other young people. North Star is truly an institution that celebrates differences and

provides young people with hope and a sense of belonging that I believe could stand to be more present in public education. I'm proud to be one part of this community.

Serve at North Star in 2023-24 with DIAL/SELF Americorps!

DIAL/SELF AmeriCorps Members build relationships with young people and support them in developing skills, connection, and confidence in their learning.

The DIAL/SELF AmeriCorps program has three core elements:

- On-site direct service with young people (e.g. at North Star)
- Community team service projects
- Weekly workshops covering topics such as: youth work best practices, arts in learning, motivational interviewing, conflict resolution, restorative circles & practices, multiple intelligences, inclusion and equity, civic engagement, and life after AmeriCorps.

For 1,700 hours of service (over the course of 10 months), DIAL/SELF Members gain:

- A compensation package of up to \$23,895, including personal/sick days, a stipend and Segal Education Award of up to \$6,895
- Free health and child care
- Forebearance on student loan repayment during service
- Practical experience & leadership skills
- Professional connections
- A supportive learning community

DIAL/SELF encourages people of all backgrounds and social identities to apply! DIAL/SELF makes reasonable accommodations for service and interviews.

DSAP is now accepting applications for AmeriCorps Members for the 2023-2024 service year. Visit dialself.org/amicorps.html for more information and to apply! Admissions are on a rolling basis, with the priority deadline on February 15.



SAVE the DATES!

North Star is SOOOO excited to welcome back the one and only

CIRCUS SMIRKUS

BIG TOP TOUR

Saturday, July 8, 1pm & 6 pm

Sunday, July 8, 11am & 4 pm

Three County Fairgrounds

New! Improved ventilation systems in the big top.

Ticket info coming soon!

NONPROFIT ORG
US Postage
PAID
Northampton, MA
Permit No. 13

A project of Learning Alternatives, Inc.
RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

45 Amherst Road
Sunderland, MA 01375
NORTHSTARTEENS.ORG

