

STARFISH FOUNDATION PRESIDENT'S REPORT FOR 2020

First and foremost, I'd like to take this opportunity to personally express my gratitude to my fellow board members, Patricia Clason, our membership, and our community advocates for the amazing work we accomplished and for generous support we received in 2020. This was a challenging year for all of us – board members, volunteers, graduates, and those we commit to serving alike. As we witnessed, many of us were somehow impacted by the Coronavirus, the deadly pandemic that attacked our health and our normal way of life. Those things we did every day, like going to the office, running to the grocery store, and hugging our friends and family, quickly became experiences for which we longed.

We began 2020 strong. There were six participants for the January Healing Warrior Hearts retreat, supported by nine assistants and two instructors. In February, because of the connections she made at the 2019 Waukesha Veterans Expo, our Vice President and Healing Warrior Hearts Supervisor, Dianne Young, was invited to share about Healing Warrior Hearts at Pilgrim United Church in Fond du Lac. The balance of the year seemed limitless as the Starfish Foundation board members and our dedicated volunteers anticipated another exciting year. Healing Warrior Hearts and Taking It Lightly retreats were scheduled. As one of three finalists, we eagerly awaited the opportunity to win a fundraising gala sponsored by the Bartolotta Restaurant Group. We also looked forward to numerous face-to-face community outreach events like Locust Street Days, National Nights Out, and the VA Mental Health Summit.

As retreats were canceled and the world around us changed, in April we offered REBOOT support Zoom calls that helped several of us connect and share the impact of the ongoing trauma associated with COVID-19. Participants were able to share their experiences and support one another during that difficult time.

In person meetings were quickly replaced by Zoom calls, and hugs were replaced, hopefully only temporarily, by elbow bumps and head nods. With hope in our hearts and the personal knowledge of how this work positively impacts trauma survivors, we forged ahead. Our team came together to plan retreats that were safe for all participants and staff, and in accordance with CDC guidance and best practices. We also continued to support those in our community through webinars and other educational collaborations.

On May 24, 2020, to keep our community connected and to raise funds to support our Center home, Patricia hosted a "Rent Party." The event was a great success! Many thanks to those who participated and donated to keep the Center doors open, and a special thanks to Joanna Grace who wrote a fun theme song, which can be found on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/F0n3z4msY5U>.

Despite COVID, summer provided some great outdoors opportunities to spread the news about our programs and to have some fun while raising money. On June 20th, several of us participated in the New Point of View, an equine therapy program at Diettrich Farm. This unique event was an introduction to the possibility of future collaboration or at least, the ability to share about each other's work to other trauma survivors.

On July 21 (after prior COVID related game delays), the Milwaukee Milkmen selected Healing Warrior Hearts to be the Charity of the Game. A good time was had by all as Starfish member and Healing Warrior Hearts Supervisor, Rachael Johnson, threw out the first pitch. Patricia Clason and I appeared on the jumbo screen as we were interviewed about Healing Warrior Hearts and the Starfish Foundation.

Dianne Young, our resident historian, documented the event by capturing videos and photographs. Foundation Treasurer, Rick Benoit, along with Dianne and Patricia, manned the tent sharing information about Healing Warrior Hearts with inquiring baseball fans while accepting donations and selling chances to win prizes. Team Michelle (my amazing family, affectionately coined because of their unwavering love for me and their dedication for supporting veterans) came through once again by walking the aisles to sell 50/50 raffle tickets. It was also wonderful to connect with some of our purple family members - Brandy Reding, Barbie Murray-Charging Crow, Rose Perry, and Ariel Kopac. I cannot thank the Milwaukee Milkmen organization and event staff enough for being so kind and generous throughout the entire process. After a fun evening of community and baseball, we raised about \$1,500 for the Healing Warrior Hearts program and received an invitation to return next season. We hope you can join us.

With the cancelation of most of our “normal” summer community events, the silver lining came when we were selected by the Angels of the Road to be the beneficiary of their annual Ride for Veterans in September. Planning an event with the potential of cancelation and/or major modifications due to a pandemic was certainly a challenge, especially when the venue doors were closed three weeks prior to the event specifically because of COVID. Despite all that was in front of them, including the unexpected and devastating loss of fellow board member and event co-originator, Michelle Hagen, they were determined to hold the event.

On the morning of September 13th at American Legion Post #449, riders revved their engines and started their day-long journey to get their passports stamped at the other six participating locations. Back at headquarters, those not partaking in the ride enjoyed good food, games, and cheered on the Packers on a BIG screen during the Healing Warrior Heart's Watch Party hosted by Patricia. In addition, participants had many opportunities to win amazing raffle prizes. I had the honor of leading an online silent auction effort, which expanded our reach outside the walls of the event venue and into the hands of supporters unable to attend the event in person. A few weeks later, we were presented an astonishing donation from the Angels of the Road totaling \$22,000 (I think Patricia, Rick, and I almost fell over at the presentation ceremony)! If you don't know, the donation from this one event will cover an entire year of Healing Warrior Hearts retreats (6) and will help provide healing for dozens of participants and staff! We cannot say thank you enough to the women of the Angels of the Road for this amazing generosity.

A special thanks to some of our extraordinary volunteers and supporters that attended the event (both in-person and virtually) - the Justham Family, Jack and Lisa Perry, Joe Carpenter, Kim Stuart, Michelle and Rob Frost, Patrick Shea, Denise and Marvin Northway, and Rose Perry – and to MKE Video and Jon Taylor for the big screen experience of the Packer game.

As we looked forward to co-hosting the VA Mental Health Summit with our own Rachael Johnson, in partnership with the Veterans Health Coalition, this event was also transformed into a virtual one. This year, Healing Warrior Hearts was also scheduled to be one of the featured non-profits. With the aid of technology, Patricia and Dianne were still afforded the opportunity to give a presentation about the Healing Warrior Hearts program. The event provided connection for of the presenters who collaboratively created a wealth of information and resources that can be found at <http://www.veteranshealthcoalition.org/mental-health-summit/> - I encourage everyone to take a look.

Another pleasant surprise was afforded in November when we received a special donation from the students at Franklin High School, in collaboration with Saber Manufacturing. The students and instructor

were happy to present a metal American flag, crafted with their own hands, on behalf of their family members and in appreciation of the work we do for Veterans.

Here is a link to an album of photos: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/PChR2ykiQzmthYgA7>

Here is a link to a short video that was put together with highlights from the day:
<https://youtu.be/bYBd9O0KOZU>

Here is a link to the social media posting that the students created:
<https://twitter.com/SaberManufactu1/status/1326511768810762241>

December started with Giving Tuesday. We had fun promoting the Starfish Foundation and Healing Warrior Hearts while raising money to support our work. During the weekend of December 12 and 13, Patricia, Dianne, and Starfish member and Healing Warrior Hearts staffer, Kim Stuart, had fun interacting with the sponsors and donors at Fill the Boat, an event benefiting Healing Warrior Hearts. A big thank you to the sponsors, Reeds Marine and Whiskey Ranch of Delavan and their staff for an awesome event!

The year ended with another successful Operation Grateful Giving. It looked a little different – no BIG gift bag stuffing event, but rather shifts of volunteers working diligently to prepare over 300 gift bags for local veterans. And while I personally look forward to delivering gifts to patients at Milwaukee's VA Medical Center every Christmas Eve, this year gift bags were delivered to the VA, Vets Place Central, and Boudicca House to be handed out to residents/patients by facility staff on Christmas Day. This event was done in partnership with Rolling Thunder Chapter 2, American Legion Post 18, Unit 18 Auxiliary, Humana, Milwaukee County Behavior Health, Jelly Belly, Oneida Nation, and many other donors too numerous to list. It was humbling to see so many people willing to give of their time, love, and talents, to show gratitude for our local veterans during the holidays, especially during these challenging times. This is definitely one event I can't wait to do again, in person, next year!

In closing, I believe that reflecting on 2020 is important as we move forward into 2021. Of course, it will be easy to remember our negative experiences – I am certain that at some point in this last year we have all struggled. That being said, I encourage you to take a moment to really think about and embrace the good – perhaps it was spending *real* quality time with your family members, hosting social hours to connect with friends via Zoom, or learning a new skill. We are all here because we have come through difficult times before and I am confident, with our tools and rosters in hand, we will make it through again. In 2021, compassion, empathy, love, and support of our community will be arguably more important than ever and of course, we cannot do this without you!

Respectfully submitted,

Michelle R. Hawley
President, Starfish Foundation