Pictured: Chonita [center], Starfish graduate and current social studies educator, completes a class activity with the first cohort of 7th-graders at the Starfish Impact School [Photo by Livvy Runyon]
FROM OUR DIRECTORS

Starfish has always been driven by one guiding question: “How far could she go if...?” In 2017, we were able to truly explore this question.

It was a cold day in November 2013 when we asked “what if we opened our own school?” We had just visited an innovative school near Denver. Everyone in the school was trying to bend the systems—from school culture, administration, and hallway posters to math class—in an effort to meet students where they were. We were captivated by the idea that a school could be designed specifically for the sole purpose of preparing traditionally excluded kids to access opportunities that would otherwise pass them by.

The concept sounds simple: create a school designed to achieve a specific purpose. However, the public schools in rural Guatemala are fundamentally designed for a different era—readying students for a time and economy that valued passivity, rote memorization, and submissiveness. As a result, first-generation graduates of high school are often impeded rather than aided by their education. As you will see in the data of this report, Girl Pioneers coming out of Starfish reach unprecedented heights. It is precisely their trajectory that inspired our question: What if they had a school commensurate with their talent and vision?

This question would not go away. It provoked continued conversation, more questions, and countless consultations with others who helped us think it through. Imagination turned into action as we created a new pathway for developing teachers who mirrored our students—Mayan indigenous young women. Through the truly indescribable generosity of Starfish’s community of educational experts, partner organizations, and incredible network of supporters, we opened the Starfish Impact School in 2017.

Today we can already glimpse the answer to our original “what if” question. On average, girls entering the 7th grade gained the equivalent of three years of schooling in their first year in our school. We have already seen astounding growth in key areas like vocal empowerment and critical thinking. In the meantime, the Girl Pioneers from the original mentorship program continue to illuminate the path ahead with their resolve and courage. None of this would be possible without our powerful network of supporters.

As Nelson Mandela said, “It always seems impossible until it is done.” Thank you for joining us in our journey to make the seemingly impossible possible for the Starfish Girl Pioneers.

Muchas gracias,

Norma Bajan
GT Executive Director

Travis Ning
US Executive Director
When I walked into the mentorship office in the rural community of Santiago Atitlán on my very first trip with Starfish in 2012, I could not have anticipated that one small group of young women would become my personal example of the “Girl Effect.” The 15 Girl Pioneers in the Perlas del Mar (Pearls of the Sea) mentorship group were in 7th grade, and their resilience, determination, and leadership was already palpable. This past November, only five years after that first visit, I had the honor of celebrating their completion of high school at the annual Starfish graduation ceremony.

Rather than representing an end for them, this ceremony was designed to represent the beginning of a new chapter in their lives.

Now, many of the Perlas (left) are already studying in their first year of university, pursuing formal employment opportunities, and taking on positions of leadership in their communities.

The movement promoting girls’ education has gained momentum and depth over the past few years. The conversation has matured from one focused almost exclusively on school access to a deeper dialogue that also emphasizes educational design and quality.

Guatemala represents a country fully experiencing this rapid evolution. While it has effectively increased secondary school enrollment rates among girls, it continues to offer these girls access to a dysfunctional school system designed for a different era. Momentum around access to schooling for girls is severely threatened if high school graduates cannot compete for opportunities in high-caliber universities and/or jobs in the formal economy due to a lack of academic preparation.

Starfish is aware of this challenge. Having graduated hundreds of first-generation girls from dozens of rural public high schools, we are keenly aware of the deficiencies of these institutions. Our experience corroborates what national data reveals regarding the ineffectiveness of public education (only 15 percent of high school graduates are considered proficient in math and reading). In a context where the education of girls is still perceived to be a risky “investment,” the return is questionable, in spite of families’ and girls’ incredible efforts to maximize the educational opportunity.

In 2017, we opened the Starfish Impact School, Guatemala’s first secondary school designed to connect rural indigenous girls with the opportunities of the 21st century. We have already witnessed the powerful impact that young women can make if they have access to a high-quality education in addition to the wraparound support and knowledge that Starfish’s mentorship program provides. As we continue to celebrate and pave the way for young women like the Perlas from our traditional mentorship program, we also eagerly await each new generation of Girl Pioneers who will enter the Starfish Impact School.

Thank you for your dedication to clearing the path for each of the Girl Pioneers. Just as they maintain unwavering optimism and perseverance in the midst of each new obstacle, Starfish as an organization will remain steadfast in its determination to continually improve the quality, intentionality, and impact of our programs so that we may ensure their possibilities are limitless.

With gratitude,

Rebecca Weaver
Board President
OUR MISSION

Starfish unlocks and maximizes the potential of young women to lead transformational change.

OUR VISION

We believe in empowerment, equality, and opportunity for all.
As young Mayan indigenous women from poor, rural communities, the Starfish Girl Pioneers face quadruple discrimination. Each has the talent and desire to succeed but lacks access to the opportunities and tools that will allow her to do so. Our model is based upon four beliefs that allow us to be uniquely poised to unlock her infinite impact.

**Deep, Not Wide, Philosophy**

Our goal is not to reach as many young women as possible. Instead, we **intentionally support Girl Pioneers** to answer the question “how far can she go?”

**Families First**

Our program is holistic and aligned with the community-oriented culture in Guatemala. We want young women to thrive and realize their full potential, and we know this is best achieved when their families can succeed. By **engaging and supporting families**, we achieve sustainable results.

**Congruent Leadership**

With a staff that is 89 percent female and 84 percent indigenous, Starfish is among the few organizations that is **led and run by members of the same communities we serve**.

**Iterative and Open Source**

International innovators introduce revolutionary concepts into rural Mayan Guatemala by training Starfish staff, who then **contextualize, apply, and share the methods**.
**OUR IMPACT**

**THE CONTEXT IS CHALLENGING.**

More than **80%** of rural Guatemalan families live below the poverty line.

82/100 Guatemalan students drop out before finishing high school.

- 68% of uneducated indigenous women are mothers before age 20.
- 9/10 rural Guatemalan schools lack books.

**BUT STARFISH IS INTERVENING AT THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM.**

At the Impact School in 2017...

- **3x** as many hours in the classroom compared to public schools
- 1,000 hours of professional development for educators
- 120 hours of student mentorship
- 3,480 approx. number of hours mentors spent working with families in their homes

In 2017, the Chispa Action Network...

- Convened **50 young women** from **11 departments** across Guatemala.
- Facilitated the education and empowerment training of **16 organizations**.
- Coached **6 Chispacios** to start and build their community projects.

**THE IMPACT IS EVIDENT.**

153 graduates report progress toward the four organizational goals:

- **78%** are on their way to economic autonomy, with the goal of earning at least the minimum wage.

- **56%** are in university, **44%** with scholarships, the goal is 15 years of formal schooling.

- **89%** of graduates under the goal age of 25 remain unmarried and without children.

- **25%** of Starfish team members are program graduates, and **40%** of graduates are involved in community leadership initiatives.
EMBODYING IMPACT

A PIONEERING STORY OF DETERMINATION

Growing up in a rural village outside of Santiago Atitlán, Concepción Micaela, “Chonita,” didn’t think she was cut out for school. Her mom never stepped foot inside one and spent her days tailoring clothing to make a small income. Chonita’s father passed away when she was young, and her two brothers worked to support the family. When Chonita dropped out of school in 6th grade, she was already the most educated member of her extended family. Her mother thought that was plenty of schooling. After working in beading and embroidery for a few years, however, she felt that there was more to the world than her eyes could see. She soon found a school that had a weekend radio program and decided to give it a shot. While continuing her work during the week, she spent every Saturday for the next two years attentively glued to her radio, copying down the invisible host’s words in her notebook. It was during this time she decided she wanted to be a teacher. One Sunday in 2010, Chonita heard about a woman who was seeking applications for a mentorship and scholarship program specifically created for indigenous girls from the nearby rural communities. At 18, Chonita was more than a few years older than the participants the program typically accepted, but her determination impressed her interviewers. Once in the Starfish program, she was enthralled by all the female role models around her, the likes of whom she had never encountered in her community. She was inspired by their ambition and accomplishments, and it opened her eyes to a whole new world of possibilities.

Two years later, Chonita graduated from high school and immediately earned a scholarship to enroll in the local university. Fast forward another two years, and Chonita had joined the Starfish team as a mentor for a group of young girls in Santiago Atitlán, not far from where she grew up. Not only was she becoming a role model for girls in her community, but she was also well on her way to meeting the four Starfish goals of economic autonomy, educational attainment, family independence, and local leadership. Now 27, Chonita teaches social studies to 7th- and 8th-graders at the Starfish Impact School.

Chonita has become one of the women she grew up admiring, and she’s not slowing down anytime soon. Her dream is to finish university this year and complete her thesis next year. When she reflects on her life so far, she affirms, “Education is transformational and helps us to be better family and community members. When a young woman is confident in her abilities, she can do anything.”
Seventeen-year-old Yesmy (left) is a member of the Maripositas Soñadoras mentorship group. She is the oldest of three children. Her goal for the future is to graduate from high school and study business administration in university.

Yesmy’s family is very united and they work as a team to support one another and overcome obstacles. Her family has participated consistently in family meetings and home visits with Starfish. Despite only attending school through sixth grade, Yesmy’s parents see the value of educating their children. They do not want their kids to have the same experience that they had, and they hope that with education, their children will have a good future. Yesmy shared, “My family has supported me by paying for my transportation to school and giving me time for my homework. They have supported me whenever I need it.”

Starfish mentor Yakelin recently commented that Starfish focuses so much on the family because “it is important for the parents to take responsibility for and see the progress of their daughter’s education. We also want each young woman to feel the support of her parents and know how important this is in her family.”
In January 2017, we launched the Starfish Impact School, a project that embodies Starfish’s general lack of patience for incremental change among Girl Pioneers and families. We acknowledge that our vision is audacious—to empower young women from outside the margins of Guatemala to catapult themselves to positions of influence in the community and country in one generation.

This “inch-wide, mile-deep” philosophy will be considered a success in two to five years when the SI School can evidence all of the following characteristics:

**High-caliber academic results through local leadership and implementation:** Guatemala’s elite schools tend to rely on international talent and are designed exclusively for well-resourced students. In contrast, the Starfish Impact School will reach and/or exceed the academic standards of Guatemala’s top schools, but will do so with local Mayan indigenous talent serving traditionally marginalized rural Mayan girls.

**A systematized process to produce local educators capable of maximizing student talent throughout Guatemala:** The SI School is designed to combine external innovation with local talent and context. External innovators in academic content areas (like math or social studies) or in social-emotional/competency-based skills (such as vocal empowerment or growth mindset) share their best practices with Starfish’s Guatemalan leadership.

**How a school can become a platform for accessible and attuned innovation, readily available to other professionals working in education and empowerment of youth throughout Guatemala:** The SI School will be a hub for public schools, NGOs, and other relevant actors seeking best practices to unlock the talent of youth. Open-sourcing will generate coordination and exchange—an abundance mindset—among organizations that eventually will align resources and energy around bigger-picture policy issues of common interest.

**A catalyst for tangible cooperation amid Guatemala’s otherwise fragmented society:** The SI School’s emphasis on 21st-century opportunities requires the input of Guatemala’s private sector to ensure the alignment of talent with the current needs of the formal economy. The school will refute the “us versus them” mentality that often pervades small NGOs and instead enlist the support of Guatemalan business leaders and companies to help mold the talent that they need.

This year we were able to lay the groundwork for realizing these goals by accepting our first cohort of Girl Pioneers in the school, 47 out of 50 of whom successfully completed 7th grade in November 2017. In addition, we broke ground on the construction of the physical building that we will move into in January 2019. After months of perfecting the school design and preparing the land in Sololá, Guatemala, construction officially began in November 2017. The school is designed to meet global safety standards and will be a platform for sharing best practices with other innovators, educators, and organizations working to address gender equity. To this end, we have incorporated several exciting components into the school design, such as larger classrooms with windows to facilitate observation without disrupting classes. Once construction is complete, the building will accommodate 300 students, grades 7 through 12.

The school construction was made possible with the generous support and collaboration of several key champions, including [Cont.]
a Guatemala City general contractor, the village council of indigenous elders in Sololá, the Starfish staff, our architect, the local government, and Jim Ward. We were thrilled to receive the support of the national and municipal governments as well as generous in-kind donations from several Guatemalan companies to help make the school construction possible.
Growth comes as a result of perseverance and determination—two qualities that 8th-grader Yesica Maribel has demonstrated since she entered the Starfish Impact School. The youngest of five children, Yesica is the first person in her family to attend school. Like all of the Starfish Impact School students, Yesica’s native language is Kaqchikel, and she entered Starfish with a very limited grasp of the Spanish language. Even though it was difficult at first, Yesica made an effort to improve her knowledge of Spanish because she wanted to increase her chances of one day finding a formal job. She said, “If one learns Spanish, one can find a job because almost everyone speaks Spanish.”

Now, Starfish educators have noticed how much her Spanish has improved after practicing with her classmates and reading books in Spanish for her classes at the Starfish Impact School. With these skills, Yesica hopes to help her family and become a lawyer one day.

Pamela, an 18-year-old from Panajachel, is a member of the Youth Effect mentorship group. Though her mother, a single parent, only studied through the 3rd grade, she was committed to making sure that Pamela had the opportunity to continue her studies. In 2013, Pamela was accepted into the Starfish mentorship and scholarship program. As a high school student, she has persevered while maintaining good grades and also keeping a steady job at a women’s beauty store. Along the way, she has learned valuable lessons during her time with Starfish. “Starfish has changed my life so much. When I started, I was very quiet and shy. Starfish has given me a lot of support and opportunities. It has motivated me to be a young woman who can express herself.”

Pamela will graduate in 2018 and plans to continue studying in university. She is determined to have faith and confidence in her ability to succeed, sharing, “I want to challenge myself to see how much I can achieve.”

Born with a physical disability, Lorena was told from an early age that she would not succeed in school. The local primary school did not want to let her enroll, and yet she entered and persevered through her education with the encouragement of her parents. Once she reached high school, Lorena heard about Starfish at just the right time, shortly after her parents told her she would soon have to stop studying because of the financial burden. With her acceptance to the Starfish mentorship program, Lorena successfully completed high school in 2016. She began participating in Starfish’s New Horizons graduate program and started university as a Quetzal University Fund scholar in 2017. She is currently studying in the city of Xela and has demonstrated significant resilience and courage in facing the cultural and lifestyle changes of being away from her family. As a law student, Lorena wants to work as an environmental lawyer and open her own legal office. “People don’t respect our environment. Nature is our life. I want to help so we don’t suffer in the future.”
The Chispa Action Network convenes young female leaders throughout Guatemala to unite their strengths and create positive change in their community and their world.

In 2017, we added a new and exciting event to the Chispa Action Network called “Colaboremos” (Let’s Collaborate). This three-day workshop allowed leaders from six Chispacios (Spark groups) to work together to develop and improve their project designs. This intentional and intensive session focused on project planning, brainstorming, and fostering deep connections among the leaders of the Chispacios. The participants left with a plan to continue working alongside their peers to create change in their communities.
With the intention of fostering closer relationships among Chispacio leaders, the number of participants in 2017 was reduced to 50 girls, representing nine departments and multiple communities. The girls learned about sustainability, reflected on their lifestyle and how it impacts our world, and discussed how to lead more sustainable lives. During the summit, representatives from five Chispacios shared the results of exciting projects they completed in 2017. Then the girls worked on designing projects that would increase sustainability in their communities. Chispacio leaders reached a consensus about the project for 2018: teaching recycling to people within their communities and developing creative ways to reduce, reuse, and recycle.

During 2017, six Chispacios successfully completed their projects of impact. These projects focused on the Sustainable Development Goals such as improving quality of education, helping families living with malnutrition, and rebuilding bathrooms. Chispa girls led other youth and adults in their community to complete a project that benefited all.

Girls from Association for Integral Development: Women Work Together (ADIMTU), one of our partner organizations, were able to raise funds to create small libraries in public schools in rural San Marcos. The Chispacio from Carlos F. Novella Foundation worked hard to rebuild bathrooms in their school that were clean and appropriate for girls, improving their hygiene and providing a safe space. The Chispacio from Limitless Horizons Ixil in Chajul learned how to create three different types of home orchards to train malnourished families on how to cultivate their own food and then provided them with the materials to get started. The Chispacio from Starfish developed a campaign to create awareness around eliminating the use of plastic bags, and the Chispacio from Rise Up created a campaign to reduce trash in their community and increased the number of trash cans in San Andres Itzapa.

These young women are leading change in their communities as models for other youth and Chispa participants who will develop new projects during 2018.
**TESTIMONIALS**

She’s the First has been conducting site visits with Estrella del Mar (Starfish) since early 2011. She’s the First has the utmost confidence not only in Estrella del Mar as it exists today, but also in the Estrella del Mar of tomorrow. Their innovation, dedication, and commitment to equality will serve the community well for years to come.

**Christen Brandt**  
Co-founder of She’s the First

Over the past thirty years as a foundation manager, I have worked with hundreds of international nonprofits. I believe this experience has taught me a lot of what it takes for these organizations to be successful. I believe that it is critical to be a learning organization. Starfish does this extremely well. Starfish continues to be successful because of very strong and talented Guatemalan leadership and strong US-based management that provides strategic leadership and financial resources.

**Peter Konrad**, Philanthropic Advisor

I have known many projects, but never one like Starfish. In Guatemala, the most extreme poverty comes to those who are indigenous women living in rural areas. In this organization it is those indigenous women from rural areas who are the focus of the project and the change-makers in their communities. It is worthy of replication and collaboration so that more girls can receive these life-changing opportunities.

**Maria Kaltschmitt**, Guatemala City Entrepreneur

I learned about Starfish through Dining for Women (DFW). I was so impressed by their work that I had to see it for myself. The opportunity to interact with the students, mentors, teachers, and staff in Guatemala exceeded my expectations. Starfish is making profound changes in both the lives of the girls and the communities around them.

**Chris King**, Director of Home for a Home

The Starfish team has been very intentional and responsible with the way they have developed the girls’ school, ensuring that the program objectives and implementation are driven by community needs and input. It is really great to see an NGO with such a transparent, effective, and sustainable approach.

**Scotney Young**, Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Independent Development Professional
OUR TEAM

Leadership Team

Travis Ning
Executive Director

Norma Baján Balán
Guatemala Executive Director

Mercedes Alvarado
Guatemala Finance Director

Andrea Coche Mendoza
Program Director

Oscar López
Director of Innovation

Vilma Saloj Chiyal
Director of the Starfish Impact School and Science Educator

María Cecilia Arriaza
Director of Collaboration

Guatemala Team

Mayra Leticia Ben Chuj
Starfish Impact School Selection Mentor

Hector Ben Xoquic
Accountant

Ana Canís López
Administrative Assistant

América Castro Vargas
Administration and Human Resources Coordinator

Mercedes Floridalma Coché Quiejú
Finance Coordinator

Juana Verónica Cosiquá Julaju
Visits Mentor

Concepción Cua Lacan
Social Studies Educator

Celena Cuy Chom
Productivity and Development Educator

María Isabel de la Cruz Diego Lejá
Starfish Impact School Mentor

Andrea Yessenia González Cox
Starfish Impact School Mentor

Nina López Pérez
Starfish Impact School Mentor

Blanca Elizabeth Marroquin Diaz
English Language Educator

Yakelin Menchú Par
Sololá Mentor

Ana Lucía Morales Ortiz
Monitoring and Evaluation Manager

Marlen Karina Muj Cúmes
Natural Sciences Educator

Silvia Graciela Naz Calel
Panajachel Mentor

Paola Petzey
New Horizons Coach Manager

Celestina Poz Bocel
Math Educator

Margarita Sacuj
Custodian

Manolo Juntoj Saloj Cumatz
Information and Technology Manager

Petrona Sanchéz
New Horizons Coach

Marcela Odily Santizo Anleú
Mentorship Curriculum Manager

Selena Sotoy Lopic
Starfish Impact School Selection Mentor

Jeronima Sulugüi Chumil
Kaqchikel Language Educator

Allexy Eduarda Tacán Coxo
Spanish Language Arts Educator

Beverly Tecún Cojon
Director of University Access and the Quetzal Fund

María Ixkik Teny Puac
Spanish Language Arts Educator

Roselia Toj
Program Coordinator
OUR FINANCIALS

Starfish maintains a streamlined US office in order to maximize our impact in Guatemala. Our US office consists of one part-time and two full-time employees who support our 40+ member team in Guatemala. Since 2012, we have had annual external audits of our finances, always striving for full transparency for our donors. Learn more about our financials at http://starfish-impact.org/financials.

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* Please note, in 2016, our annual restricted revenue increased due to the initiation of a capital campaign to build the Starfish Impact School in Guatemala.
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Julia Gatten
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Catherine Hance
Curt Harris
Rebecca Harris
Sara Lewandowski and Christopher Harris
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Todd Landrum
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