



## First Star Academies: Origins and History

In 1998, Peter Samuelson, a film producer and philanthropist based in Los Angeles, and Sherry Quirk, President of One Voice - the National Alliance of Abuse Awareness, based in Washington DC, conceptualized the need for an advocacy organization to fight for the rights and well-being of abused and neglected children, including those in foster care. Peter had previously founded [www.starlight.org](http://www.starlight.org) and [www.starbrightworld.org](http://www.starbrightworld.org), and thus in 1999 the new charity was named [www.firststar.org](http://www.firststar.org), continuing the children's rhyme. Then based in Washington DC, First Star's original Mission was:

To bring together leaders in the fields of education, media, health care, social services, science, public policy and law to raise awareness of the need for enhanced children's rights in the United States. To educate and inform the public on these and related issues.

To work with lawmakers and cultural standard-bearers to advocate for and enact far-reaching, nonpartisan improvements in the legal and social status of the children of the United States.

First Star's volunteer President, Peter had originally met Dr. Kathleen Reardon, then a Professor in the Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California, in 1990. She and colleagues at USC performed research to validate the premise of Samuelson's and Steven Spielberg's Starbright World non-profit. Samuelson subsequently invited Dr. Reardon to become a Board Member of First Star, and in 2007, she began research for a book about foster care, directed at lay people, and designed to create awareness and a sense of urgency to ameliorate the children's circumstances. The book, *Childhood Denied: Ending the Nightmare of Child Abuse and Neglect* was published in January 2009 by Sage Publications, and was described by the publisher as:

An exposé of how America ignores and often discards its most vulnerable children. Delving into the political, legal, and social factors of children at risk for abuse and neglect, it chronicles the plight of abused children across the nation and provides a "report card" for each U.S. state. With a practical, journalistic, and social scientific approach, this fervent book emboldens child welfare professionals, government representatives, lawmakers, child attorneys, law enforcers, and the general public to respond more effectively and consistently to the needs of children at risk.

Addressing the fact that only 3 percent of foster children graduate from 4-year colleges, author Kathleen Kelley Reardon PhD also introduces in *Childhood Denied* the concept of university-based Academies for high school-aged foster children to prepare them for success in higher education. The nonprofit First Star made creation of foster Academies its major priority, working with major universities to establish First Star Academies at UCLA, the University of Rhode Island, George Washington University and the University of Connecticut, with further Academies in development.

First Star contributed considerable research and content to the book, which became the 'anthem' of the charity and an eloquent expression of its Mission. In the book, Dr. Reardon first proposed leveraging the academic excellence, life-skills, role modeling and community of major universities to encourage and enable high school aged foster youth to graduate from high school and then attend and succeed in colleges and universities.

Urged on by the potential of this intuitively powerful concept, that foster youth were missing the encouragement and possibilities that middle class youth took for granted, that as a result they hardly ever went to college, and that the missing environment could well be found, ready-made, on a good college campus, Peter and Kathleen searched for prior programs that leveraged the power and community of universities to house, educate, encourage and advocate for foster youth throughout their high school years. After looking in Europe, Asia, Australasia and North America, they could find no comprehensive present or past program that seemed an analog, and felt that at very least, such a hypothesis should be explored in a pilot program. It seemed to make sense. Peter wrote in May 2009:

“We believe the many children and young adults who are currently being fostered other than in optimum individual families or facilities would surely have many benefits from the on-campus concept:

- An atmosphere of achievement.
- Abundant role models.
- A surrounding sense of community including those of learning, the arts and sports.
- A sense of belonging.
- The sense of an extended family.
- Close proximity of many qualified experts on Faculty.
- The enhanced possibility of aging out of foster care into undergraduate status.
- The enhanced possibility of university employment on aging out of foster care.
- The presence of job out-placement experts on the campus adept at placing young people.
- The point of pursuing this concept is to carefully test it at one site and to measure the results compared to the available alternatives. It is a time-limited, scrupulous beta test of a new modality to see whether the intuitive sense that many experts have expressed of seeing a potentially major uplift in these children’s lives is substantiated by actual practice and metrics.”

While full-time residential care on college campuses was an early goal, it became clear that partially-residential programs would be better attuned to the imperative of preserving the youths’ permanent relationships, wherever they existed. Partially residential programs would also fit better with university capabilities. The result was a model including four residential summers, monthly non-residential days, and an online program of engagement, thus preserving and enhancing individual family placements for our youth at all other times.

In April 2009, Samuelson met at UCLA with Dr. Suzanne Seplow, then head of Residential Life and with Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, Dr. Janina Montero.

It emerged that the Federal Student Aid Form, the FAFSA, had recently begun asking whether applicants were, or had previously been, in foster care. Dr. Montero and her colleagues had already established support systems on campus for undergraduates thus identified, known as Bruin Guardian Scholars. A meeting took place between First Star, Dr. Montero and Chancellor Gene Block, who was very supportive of a new endeavor, a First Star Academy for high school aged foster youth, to serve as a kind of ‘farm team’ for the Bruin Guardian Scholars who were studying ‘in the big leagues.’ Chancellor Block said that in his ten year plan, he had mandated that UCLA would create pathways to post-secondary education for youth when none of their relatives had ever attended university, and that UCLA would strive to be the most excellent neighbor to the surrounding communities of Los Angeles. The new idea, he said, would live perfectly within that mission.

In late 2009, First Star hired Kara Soldati (néé Allen) who was completing her MSW, to collaborate on writing a Business Plan for a pilot First Star Academy at UCLA, including detailed plans, budgeting and

timelines. With the Plan in hand, during 2010, First Star raised full funding for the first year of operation of the Academy from external donors, with assistance from the University through its own donations in-kind. Walter Kappeler was hired by UCLA in March 2011 as the first Director of the First Star Bruin Guardian Scholars Academy at the University. Working closely with the Department of Children and Family Services of the County of Los Angeles, the first recruited Cohort of thirty rising 9<sup>th</sup> graders moved onto the UCLA campus on June 28<sup>th</sup>. 2011. Wally's exceptional foundational work provided a strong basis for much later refinement of the Academy model.

Hasbro, Inc. was one of the funders of the First Star Academy pilot at UCLA. They were impressed with the program, and so the President of the Hasbro Children's Fund, Karen Davis, asked to bring the program to the University of Rhode Island, where President David Dooley had read Dr. Reardon's book. Kathleen then met with Susan Herbst, the President of the University of Connecticut. With a business plan by Christopher Noblet, UConn gave the third First Star Academy a green light. Alongside in-kind contributions by the University, Dr. Reardon raised substantial funding from the Connecticut Department of Children and Families, and the Lego Foundation. An outstanding team, headed by Vice Provost Sally Reis, Dr. Maria Martinez, Susana Ulloa and David Mrotek further developed the UConn Program. The then-board of First Star, including Kevin Reardon, Sherry Quirk, Gary Levine, Judge Charles Gill and others contributed greatly to the early stages of Academy development. In particular, board member and then Executive Director Lisa Garr implemented an Academy located at the George Washington University in the District of Columbia, and supervised it for several years. Teresa Zutter was its first Director.

In October of 2011 University of Michigan third year Law student Paige Chan (néé Fern) reached out to First Star. Having read an LA Times article about the program at UCLA, Ms. Chan had been able to secure a commitment from a donor to implement a First Star Academy at the University of Michigan and wished to learn from the UCLA pilot. Though the Michigan Academy did not become a reality, Ms. Chan visited the UCLA Academy in the summer of 2012, and in her new position as the Skadden Fellow seconded to the Alliance for Children's Rights in Los Angeles, offered to become the Educational Rights Attorney for all youth in the First Star pilot Academy at UCLA. Ms. Chan created the Educational Legal Partnership model, formalizing First Star's partnership with the Alliance, and ushered in a new era in which First Star became a major player in the national foster youth services community. In February 2015, once her fellowship at the Alliance concluded, First Star hired Ms. Chan as its National Director of Academies. Under her guidance and supervision, the Academy model has been refined, standardized and greatly expanded. The Executive Director of First Star, Robin Winston, has supervised the further advancement of the national First Star charity to support its mission. Peter Samuelson continues to serve as volunteer President and CEO of First Star.

Entering the summer of 2017, First Star has over 400 students at thirteen Academies across the United States and one in the United Kingdom, with many more future Academies in development. The Program has achieved and maintained a 91% conversion to colleges and universities for its graduating students, against a national benchmark for foster youth of 10%.