

**The Power of a Song Sends Strength to Us All -----  
How One Family's Harmony is Teaching Social Sensitivity  
One Word at a Time**

**By Lorey Friedman**

This is a story of hope, endurance and determination. A non-fictional tale of a family sustained by love, working together, united in harmony, producing beautiful music and using God's challenges and special gifts in ways they never thought was imaginable. The distinguished, nominated, award winning, popular book series entitled Starabella (notice the name Tara in the middle) is a unique family project where mother, father and sisters use their individual talents to achieve one goal. Starabella mirrors the aspirations of the Fialco family of Forest Hills, which is for all people to achieve social sensitivity.

Forty one years ago, beautiful baby Tara was born to Sharon and Marvin Fialco. A vivacious, energetic child, Tara would later present perplexing challenges to her parents. Unable to get a diagnosis, they were left with a mystery. The Fialco's became creative in overcoming obstacles, trying hard to mainstream their daughter into society. But, when Tara was six years old, her grandparents sent her a gift that would alter the family's life forever. Arriving to their Honolulu Hawaii home was a piano. Tara took to the piano as if it were a part of her. She memorized the sound of every key and soon taught herself to play any music she heard by ear. She began to compose her own music. Through music she was able to express her thoughts and emotions and reflections on the world around her. The lyrics to her songs showed that she was philosophically precocious. Sharon and Marvin Fialco were lifted by the music to a place of joy where they experienced great pride and marveled not only at Tara's ability but at the blessing of her gift.

The piano became Tara's voice of her soul. As if dealing with her personal challenges wasn't enough, she was forced to face insensitivity by other children. This and dealing with the rest of society pushed her into feelings of isolation. Despite the rejection and cruelty around her, Tara would play songs of hope that reflected her belief in the potential goodness in all people. She created a musical, magical world where all people got along and were accepted exactly the way they were. It is in her music that Tara's genuine nature lies. She shares her vision of a better world to include all people.

Dana, Tara's younger sister with tremendous abilities and talents of her own took an early interest in Tara's circumstances and in her music. Dana began writing lyrics to Tara's music and they would later perform extensively together in local communities. Rather than have their differences separate them, these two sisters were able to connect with their musical talents and shared ideals.

In 1993, Tara and Dana made their first recording of a song called “A New Beginning”. The song epitomizes Tara and Dana’s joint musical philosophy. When they recorded the song, they hoped to remind people that it is possible and necessary not only to reach each other, but also to gain a greater sense of personal fulfillment and self-realization. They wanted to inspire their listeners to make new beginnings personally, nationally and globally. These sentiments are just as meaningful today. In fact, Dana has recently recorded “A New Beginning” for re-release. With tremendous determination and all her innate strength, Tara went on to earn a certificate in Early Childhood Education from Honolulu Community College. She put her degree to good use as she brings her musical message to children.

Since Tara’s mother Sharon, had been Tara’s study buddy, she also informally received an education about child development. Thus, Sharon became inspired to write interactive, educational shows for children incorporating Tara’s music. Tara and her mother made props and scenery and together with guitar, keyboard and amplifier performed in classrooms filled with all types of children. In 1994, even before receiving Tara’s diagnosis of Autism and two years before their move to New York, the Starabella book series emerged from their observations of children at play where Tara performed. They noticed that anyone can become the object of ostracism. Combining Tara’s childhood dilemmas with those of other children, the stories cover a broad spectrum of personal and social situations children confront at home and in school. The Starabella stories hope to encourage the trend of structuring programs to meet the various needs of individual students. If done correctly, all children benefit since being a member of a diverse learning environment prepares all children to feel comfortable in a multicultural, diverse world.

In Book One, children meet Starabella and follow her through babyhood and her early toddler years in the private world of her home. She is the focus of the attention of her family and they do all they can to meet her needs.

In Book Two, children follow Starabella as she ventures into the community, where there are demands for conformity and expectations for appropriate behaviors and following the rules. Just as Tara did, she has the supervision, support and guidance of her parents.

In Book Three, a major turning point occurs for readers and characters as Starabella enters the public arena of kindergarten, where children begin to make their own behavior choices and form their own rules. Children meet the wonderful character of a teacher named Miss Maradise who helps make rules that serve the needs of the whole.

Starabella and her classmates model the behavior of children who embrace diversity in their friendships and make empathetic social choices.

They all work cooperatively to achieve their mutual goal of getting to a "Bright New World", as Book Three of Starabella is appropriately named. The entire Fialco family has been "in"volved and "in"cluded in this project that surely is one of the best live models of inclusion. Each family member contributed what they were best in and together used their strengths to achieve their goal. The Starabella project, from its earliest days of Tara and Dana's childhood music to the CD's and books being heard and read today, reflect and mirror that each of us has something useful to contribute. Starabella brings out the good in everyone.

These wonderful books that have and continue to be the heart and soul of the Fialco family enhance their life with special meaning and purpose. There is an important, necessary message emitted, not just for the children they are intended for. From these books, we can all learn the importance of creating a socially sensitive environment in the school or really any social setting. Learning institutions must be an emotionally and physically safe place for all, where every student is able to contribute. It is only in this type of culture that each pupil can prosper and reach his or her own goals. Not only will the child with special needs succeed. Indeed, showing all types of children diversity helps them to accept difference and live in a diverse world.

Each beautiful Starabella hardcover book comes with its own CD, captivating and fully narrated and sung by Dana. Amazing, vibrant illustrations by Anton Petrov with captions help the listener follow along with the story. CD recordings were produced by Joe Vulpis, AP Music Inc. Written by Sharon, narrated by Dana and based on the inspirational music by Tara, the message of both storybook and music strives to give people the courage to reach for their dreams.

The reader joins the Oclaif (Fialco spelled backwards) in their celebration and triumph over adversity. Pleasantly surprising to author Sharon, children without special learning needs are relating to and rooting for the character Starabella, showing indeed that all of us are filled with kindness and compassion. Starabella really does bring out the best in all of us. Wondering about Dad? Well, without Marvin Fialco's belief in the value of this project and the support and confidence he gave his family, the dream of his wife and daughters would not have become a reality. He provided counsel and feedback every step of the way. Yes, indeed, Dad was and is, a true partner in this family project.

The Fialco family hopes that children (and adults as well) everywhere will see how brilliantly their eyes will shine and how they become empowered when they have the courage to act on their own to reach out a hand to another child, or another person, and see that child, that individual reach out to another and on and on and on. These are the hands that can unite the world. Taken from lyrics of Tara and Dana's music, "It's only up to you".

To order your copy of Book One, Book Two, Book Three, the complete three-book series , the three book music soundtrack , or the CD single “A New Beginning”, please visit [www. Starabella.com](http://www.Starabella.com).



Sharon, Tara, Dana, Marvin

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