

## Family Creates the Starabella Series: A Model of Inclusion for All Children

**By Sharon Fialco**  
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My pen took off as if it were writing a story on its own. My thoughts could hardly keep up with it. Tara was now a young adult. What was this need to tell her story and rewind back to her earliest days? Was it the result of all the pent-up emotions I had experienced over the years, or was I channeling this from some creative source propelling me to share our experiences with younger parents and their children first starting out on their journey together - to help smooth out the terrain upon which they will travel?

I wrote the *Starabella* series with the dream of changing the social climate of classrooms. When Tara was little, I would sit home and cry, worrying about what was happening to her at school; and when I picked her up, it was always worse than I had imagined. It is one of the hardest things a parent has to do - to send a child who is full of enthusiasm and spirit out into the world, and know that child is bullied and see her personal progress be pushed back and have her spirit be diminished by her peers.

My daughter Tara has autism, but would not receive a diagnosis until her early twenties. In her childhood years, the combination of her abilities, talents, chal-



The Fialco Family - Sharon, Tara, Dana, and Marvin

lenges and unusual behaviors presented a mystery. Though families today know much more about autism than when Tara was little, social insensitivity still continues towards any child who seems different for any reason. As I hear and read about the increasing bullying and violence in schools, I realize that though I couldn't go back in time and change things for my daughter, I can try to use our experiences to help children today learn empathy and learn to celebrate differences. I want chil-

dren to experience the rewards of sharing classroom environments where they feel physically and emotionally safe and are encouraged to share what makes each of them special.

One of the most poignant things Tara ever said was that other children treated her as if she did something on purpose to make them be mean to her or ignore her. Her first song, "Feelings of the Past," expressed her wish to go back and change the past, because she thought that if she

could start over and change herself, others would react to her more positively. It did not occur to her that society also owed her acceptance.

We were a lucky family in that Tara was born with an amazing gift of music. Tara started composing music at an early age. Despite the autism that kept her from communicating effectively socially, she was philosophically precocious, which came out in lyrics to her songs. Often bewildered by the insensitive reaction of other children and her consequential isolation, Tara would come home to her beloved piano (the voice of her soul) and play songs of hope that reflected her belief in the potential goodness in all people. One of these songs, "Welcome to a Bright New World," became the inspiration for the *Starabella* series. I shaped the *Starabella* stories around Tara's music, using her wonderful talent and ability not only to entertain children, but also to encourage them to have empathy for an unconventional superheroine and to believe in themselves.

*Starabella* tells the story of a courageous little girl with learning differences, not unlike Tara, who expresses her thoughts and feelings through beautiful music. When she's happy, her eyes shine like stars. She becomes a kindergarten rock star and leads her classmates and listeners/viewers to a Bright New World, where

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**Starabella**  
*A Superheroine For All Children*

**Starabella Audio Book Series**

By Sharon, Tara, and Dana Fialco

These three children's audio books with music and accompanying illustrations were inspired by the music of Tara Fialco. Dealing with autism, Tara composed music to create a magical, musical world of empathy, acceptance of others, and acceptance of self. The series contains 22 original melodies and songs.

Starabella, a courageous little girl with learning differences, becomes a kindergarten rock star who leads her classmates and listeners to a BRIGHT NEW WORLD. There, children play and get along and are accepted for exactly who they are.

Book One features Starabella at home. Book Two features Starabella in the community. Book Three features Starabella at school.

Starabella Books are available for purchase at: [www.starabella.com](http://www.starabella.com)

**Book One**

**Book Two**

**Book Three**

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children play and get along and are accepted for exactly who they are. An interactive segment of the story encourages children listening to help the children in Starabella's class make friendly social choices. There is a "Magical Mirror" at the back of Book Three in which children will see that when they make friendly choices, their eyes like Starabella's shine like stars!

The *Starabella* series consists of three fully narrated audio/picture books with music. Children listen to the story on a CD while they follow along with pictures and captions. The combined audio and visual presentation enhances comprehension and appeals to different styles of learning. Because the pages only have captions, children can go back through the picture books and tell the stories in their own words. The original music in the stories highlights the messages. Tara composed and played the piano or keyboard for 17 of the 22 songs which have been professionally orchestrated. These songs, many of which she wrote as a child, are now inspiring other children. Children will dance, dream and sing along.

The *Starabella* series itself is an example of inclusion. The story behind the story tells of the special relationship between Tara and her sister, Dana. A talented singer, Dana has always been supportive of Tara and they have come together through their music. Dana narrates the *Starabella* stories, wrote additional music, sings most of the songs,

and performs the parts of 12 characters. I published the *Starabella* series with my husband, Marvin. It has enhanced our lives with special meaning and purpose.

The *Starabella* series includes three books:

Book One - "*Starabella: Mystery girl of Music*," features Starabella at home. Children meet Starabella and follow her through babyhood and her early toddler years. Her mysterious behavior and surprising talent puzzle her parents. Above all, her parents wish for "Starry's" eyes to continue to shine and for her to know she is always their little star.

Book Two - "*Starabella: New adventures and Mixed Emotions*," features Starabella in the community. She encounters demands for conformity and expectations for appropriate behaviors and following the rules.

Children who listen to and view Books One and Two celebrate Starabella's accomplishments, feel compassion for her extra challenges, root for her to reach her goals, and gain understanding of her emotions through her music. In this way, they acquire empathy for her by the time she enters kindergarten.

Book Three - "*Starabella: Welcome to a Bright New world*," features Starabella at school, as she begins her first day of kindergarten. Children listening and viewing meet Starabella's classmates, a lively group of

students of varying ethnicities, attitudes, abilities, challenges, and dreams. Though happy in their wondrous new classroom, sometimes the children face social dilemmas. Starabella becomes the catalyst for solving the various social conflict situations. Children listening/viewing the story, share in the wonder as Starabella, through her special connection to the stars and the goodness inside her, magically transforms into a kindergarten rock star. She leads her classmates and listeners to the Bright New World where all their unique paths meet in harmony.

Through the combined efforts of the many parents journeying on their paths and advocating for their children, there are now better educational options for children with special needs. Parents must seek out which program best serves the needs of their individual child. For parents who feel that it compromises their children's civil rights and optimal social and learning potential to be segregated into separate classrooms, more and more children are now members of inclusive classrooms, as shown in Book Three of *Starabella*. The children in Starabella's class work together to get to the Bright New World. Participating in diverse learning and social environments prepares children to become responsible members of democratic communities where people cooperate to reach common goals.

With her innate strength and determination, Tara went on to earn a certificate in Early Childhood Education. She put her

education to good use by bringing her musical message to children. I had been Tara's study buddy. Based on what we learned about child development, I became inspired to write children's interactive, educational shows incorporating Tara's music. Tara performed these shows regularly in schools throughout Honolulu. These shows served as precursors to the *Starabella* stories. Some of the dialogue in Book Three came directly from the children I observed at the schools where Tara performed. I noticed that anyone can become the object of ostracism. Combining Tara's childhood dilemmas with those of other children, *Starabella* covers a broad spectrum of social situations children confront at school every day.

We hope children 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 and see that child reach out to another child and on and on and on. These are the hands that can unite the world. Together we can create the world of our dreams. Get ready to rock! Starabella is leading the way.

*Starabella (Books One, Two, and Three)* is written by Sharon Fialco, based on music composed and performed by Tara Fialco, narrated and sung by Dana Fialco and illustrated by Anton Petrov. Accompanying CD recordings are produced by Joe Vulpis, AP Music, Inc. Books are available for purchase at: [www.starabella.com](http://www.starabella.com).