



Connections

Connecting families facing homelessness to a better future.

Julie: “Bridge Communities is powerful and lifechanging. It is a blessing.”

It seemed like things were looking up for Julie and her five children. Julie had a stable job and had been with the same employer for nearly two decades. She had even recently received a promotion for all her hard work.

However, things quickly took a turn for the worse when her family was unexpectedly

evicted from their home. She had to quickly move her family into a hotel while she tried to figure out a new path forward. After such a terrible experience renting, Julie did not want to just move into a new apartment, sign a new lease, and have her family subject to being forced out once again.

“I was traumatized from the eviction mentally,” Julie said. “There was no question about it. It really bothered me mentally that that had happened to us.”

At that time, Julie was laser-focused on owning her own home, but it just never seemed to work out, no matter how hard she tried. Soon her families’ days in that overcrowded hotel room turned to months, then years.

Julie wound up having to split her family up and move some of her children in with her

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“Bridge Communities is powerful and lifechanging. It is a blessing.” *continued*

sister. She kept trying to find the support she needed to work towards her goals, but because she was employed, she didn't qualify for a lot of the programs she was recommended.

That is, until the superintendent of her daughter's school connected her to Bridge Communities. When her family was accepted into the Bridge program, she recalls being overjoyed.

“I remember thinking this is the boost I need to get to where I was going and accomplish my goals,” Julie said. “I knew it was the best opportunity for me because after being told ‘no’ all the time, that ‘yes’ is different.”

Julie and her family were paired up with mentors from Daybreak of Elmhurst, the transitional housing program of Immaculate Conception Catholic Parish. Immediately, Julie felt a connection. “Oh my gosh, I loved my mentors. I was like, ‘did they pick you guys especially for me?’” said Julie.

Her mentors helped her stay on top of her weekly budgeting, paying her bills, and raising her credit score. It

was a lot of work for Julie, but she knew it would all be to her family's benefit.

“I was always a saver,” Julie said. “Budgeting and planning though was more of a challenge for me, but I knew it was something I needed to do.”

In the Bridge program, Julie embraced all the resources available to her. She used the Bridge Communities Boutique to get professional attire. Her case manager and the Family Wellness Program helped her learn more about batch cooking and meal prep.

Julie even worked with the Employment & Adult Education team to prepare for interviews and transfer to a better paying job.

Meanwhile, her children received tutoring to help them thrive in school. Beyond that, the Children's Program also connected them with opportunities to attend summer camp, take swim and music classes, and even go on college tours.

“I didn't know how much of an impact Bridge had until my son got his first paycheck,” said Julie. “The first thing he

said was ‘how much should I save?’ I was just so happy, and I started teaching him the lessons I was taught.”

Since leaving the Bridge program, Julie was also able to accomplish a lifelong goal of hers: owning her own home. Better yet, because of her stellar saving skills and money management, Julie was able to purchase an entire building, where she manages her own rental business.

“All that knowledge I learned at Bridge, I share with everybody”

Today, Julie's family is thriving, and she works to share all that she's learned while in the Bridge program. Julie has even met with current Bridge clients to share her experience and help them reach their goals.

“All that knowledge I learned at Bridge, I share with everybody,” said Julie. “I am not a financial wizard, but just the base of what I was taught was a steppingstone to something else, so I just have to share.

“I can't even explain the amount of help that I got there. I'm always, forever grateful.” 🍀

**Your
support
changes lives!**

**By making a gift to Bridge Communities,
you help families like Julie's reach
self-sufficiency. Please donate today
by scanning this QR code or visiting
www.bridgecommunities.org/donate.**



Expanding Our Impact: New Initiatives at Bridge Communities



Dear friends,
Bridge Communities is forging new avenues to support transformative journeys from homelessness to hope for the families we serve.

Bridge Communities has always striven to empower volunteer

mentors to guide families toward healing, financial security, and permanent housing. Now, we are expanding this core tenet of our program through our new Direct Mentor model. Launched in 2023, Bridge Communities' Direct Mentor model expands our recruitment sources of volunteer mentors allowing us to serve more families. Historically, volunteer mentors have been exclusively recruited through our faith-based and service partners (called Program Partners); but now Bridge is directly recruiting and managing volunteer mentors, welcoming mentors who may not be affiliated with traditional Program Partners. This new approach responds to an ever-evolving community environment as well as an increasing interest to mentor from Bridge alumni, corporate sponsors, and community members not affiliated with a Program Partner. Our goal is to recruit 10 Direct Mentor teams serving 10 additional client families in the coming year.

It remains a top priority to provide the best resources and educational opportunities to our volunteer mentors who dedicate innumerable hours coaching, listening to, and counseling families as they work together to recover from the traumas of homelessness. Toward that end,

Bridge will introduce new mentor training resources in the coming year, including a focus on relationship development, motivational emotional coaching, equity and belonging, and sharing of best practices in mentor recruitment and retention. And thanks to your generosity we have deepened our investment in programmatic services. Increases in legal services, automobile purchases and repairs, continuing education scholarships, and children's activities are underway, all with the goal to provide client families with the best possible experiences and ultimate outcomes.

And finally, we are thrilled to launch the Bridge Communities Associate Board. This engaged group of emerging leaders consists primarily of persons aged 25 – 40 who are excited to share their ideas and skills in support of Bridge Communities' mission. This is the perfect time to join this fledging group, so if you or someone you know wants to bring their energy, innovative ideas, and commitment to service, please contact Liza Sury at liza.sury@bridgecommunities.org.

Bridge Communities would not be possible without your dedicated support of our continued evolution. Thank you for playing your part as we work together to break the cycle of poverty and homelessness for DuPage families.

In Service to You,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Amy Van Polen'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'A'.

Amy Van Polen, CFRE
Chief Executive Officer

Q&A with Antoinette Gray | Tutor and Associate Board Member

Q. How did you first hear about Bridge Communities?

A. I am a member of Victory Cathedral Worship Center. Through our Give Yourself Away Ministry, I learned about Bridge Communities and its mission to transition families facing homelessness to self-sufficiency. I knew that I needed to use my gifts, talents, skills, and experiences to serve and empower Bridge Communities families more frequently.



Q. What do you do as a volunteer with Bridge?

A. I truly believe, as Shirley Chisholm said, "Service is the rent we pay for the privilege of living on this earth." Therefore, I have served in various capacities to help advance the organization's mission. However, my primary commitment is serving as a tutor of four dynamic scholars and their families. I also serve as their educational advocate, partnering with their teachers and school leaders to ensure

that as a collective we are cultivating a holistic learning community that will help advance their academic growth and development.

Q. What inspired you to join Bridge's Associate Board?

A. The more I served, the more I learned. Thus, I wanted to be the "boots on the ground" voice as a member of Bridge's Associate Board. Subsequently, I could share my volunteer experiences with the organization and present plausible solutions and strategies to help advance the mission, empowering more families to achieve self-sufficiency!

Q. What is your favorite thing about volunteering with Bridge Communities?

A. My favorite part about "volunteering" with Bridge Communities is that I am working with one big family working towards a common goal that is far greater than each of us! Ultimately, through the hard work and dedication of the leaders, staff members, and volunteers, we are the catalyst that is transforming the lives of hundreds of families for generations to come! ! 🏡

Thank you, Antoinette, for your dedication to serving the families of Bridge Communities! If you would like to learn more about tutoring a Bridge child, contact tutoring@bridgecommunities.org.

Celebrate Community Changemakers at our Spring Luncheon

Friday, May 17, 11:00 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. at Mesón Sabika

Join us for the 14th annual Celebrating Women, Transforming Lives luncheon as we honor the inspiring women who are transforming lives through their dedication and service to our community. Guests will be treated to a beautiful luncheon experience, emceed by ABC7's Judy Hsu.

Michelle Lufrano, a Bridge graduate who is passionate about sharing Bridge's mission will receive the Lives Transformed Award. Assistance League Chicagoland West, whose programs and volunteers have transformed lives and strengthened our community since 1935, will receive the Transforming Lives Award.

Individual and table tickets are available for purchase. Visit our website by scanning the QR code to learn more and secure your seats.

Celebrating
WOMEN
TRANSFORMING
LIVES
Presented by



Defining the Core Values of Bridge Communities: Partnership, Empowerment, Integrity, Respect, and Hope

Last year, Bridge Communities worked to review and strengthen our five core values by updating the definitions, incorporating our commitment to equity and belonging, and assigning behavioral norms to demonstrate that commitment.

Every day, the clients, staff, mentors, and volunteers of Bridge Communities embody our values in their work to transition families facing homelessness to self-sufficiency. Here are some real examples of these core values in action.

Partnership

Definition - Staff, mentors, Program Partners, and volunteers work together with client families as they strive toward their goals. Partnership is only possible with mutual understanding and shared responsibility.

Example – Client S is preparing to graduate from the Bridge program and is pursuing her goal of owning her own home. She wants to buy a duplex, where her family can live in one half and rent the other. This can be an intimidating process, but her mentor partnered with her to help her look at duplexes. Together, they are working to find a home that is right for Client S’s family.

Empowerment

Definition - Bridge provides support, encouragement, and resources so that client families can do the work needed to achieve their goals and transcend the challenges of homelessness. Together with a Bridge team, client families create their own goals.

Example – According to Client B, “Getting my degree is something I’ve been wanting to do for forever, but it was through my mentors helping me that I was able to continue to grow in ways I didn’t think possible.” Feeling empowered through her mentors’ encouragement, Client B is now on track to graduate in May!

Integrity

Definition - Bridge is committed to consistency, transparency, honesty, and accountability. We strive to be trustworthy and seek to understand others’ experiences and motivations.

Example – When someone applies to the Bridge program, our Intake team is honest and transparent about our requirements, displaying integrity every step of the process. When Client D first applied, she did not qualify due to ongoing concerns. The Intake team transparently explained the situation and shared resources to help her address those issues. After working on her goals, Client D reapplied, shared her progress with Intake, and was accepted into the program.

Stay tuned for the Fall 2024 issue of *Connections* to see the stories and definitions of our two remaining core values, Respect and Hope.

Thank you for your support!

Friends in the community like you make all the difference. Thank you for supporting Bridge families!



Thank you, Nicor Gas and Inspire

We are so grateful to Nicor Gas and Inspire, a Nicor Gas employee resource group focusing on women’s issues, for their very generous donation of over \$38,000. This incredible amount was raised through their Raising Funds on the Rooftop event.



Thank you to all our Sole Mates

Thank you to everyone who volunteered as a Sole Mate at Wine Women & Shoes. This event could not have been such a huge success without your time, dedication, and spirit.

We’d like to offer a special thank you to the Glen Ellyn community for naming Bridge Communities their 2023 Non-Profit of the Year at the Glen Ellyn Community Awards hosted by the Glen Ellyn Chamber of Commerce.



Thank you, Glen Ellyn community



Thank you, Love Your Neighbor

Love Your Neighbor has been doing amazing work decorating and furnishing some of our clients’ and client graduates’ apartments and houses. Thank you for helping turn their new houses into homes!

A big thank you to the Bloomingdale Township Mental Health Board for their generous \$20,000 grant! We appreciate your generosity and support.



Thank you, Bloomingdale Township Mental Health Board

Broadening Access to Brighter Futures: The Stability Program

In 2022, Bridge Communities launched our Stability Program. This initiative allowed us to expand the number of families we serve by providing direct case management and supportive services for families with more complex needs, giving the families a chance to stabilize in their first year at Bridge.

Two years into this new program, we have accepted 17 families into Stability. Eleven of those have already graduated from Stability and have either gone into our Transitional Housing Program or secured other stable housing.

One of those families is Client C's, our first Stability client. Client C, a young mother of three boys, escaped an abusive marriage and created a better future for her family with the help of the Stability Program. More than just providing safe, stable housing for her family, Bridge assisted Client C in obtaining a divorce, managing her debt, finding counseling for her family, and working towards her GED.

After a year in Stability, Client C seamlessly transitioned into Bridge's Transitional Housing Program. With her mentor team's guidance, she continued paying off her debt, budgeting, and making progress on her goals.

Bridge then helped Client C secure a Housing Choice Voucher. After years of working towards her goals in the Bridge program, Client C had built a strong foundation, and her family graduated from Bridge, maintaining housing stability through the voucher.



Each family enters the Stability Program with their own unique challenges, but what remains consistent is their determination to create a better future for their family. Through these families' tenacity and readiness for change, their dedicated case manager, and the support of our partner, Victory Cathedral Worship Center, these families are thriving in the Stability Program and breaking the cycle of homelessness.

As our Stability Program enters its third year, we look forward to serving even more families facing homelessness.

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Connections is a publication of Bridge Communities, Inc.

The mission of Bridge Communities is to transition families facing homelessness to self-sufficiency by working with partners to provide mentoring, housing, and supportive services. Our vision is a community where all families are healthy, financially stable, and living in affordable housing. Each of our core values—Partnership, Empowerment, Integrity, Respect, and Hope—apply to everyone involved in Bridge Communities.

500 Roosevelt Rd, Glen Ellyn, IL 60137
 630-545-0610

www.bridgecommunities.org

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500 Roosevelt Rd
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Bridge Communities is a nonprofit organization working to transition families facing homelessness to self-sufficiency by working with partners to provide mentoring, housing, and supportive services.

Please help us save on printing and postage.

If you receive duplicate copies of this newsletter, or no longer wish to receive it, please return your mailing label in the enclosed envelope. *Thank you!*

TIME SENSITIVE MATERIAL
PLEASE DELIVER PROMPTLY

Because of your help

With your generous support, families of Bridge Communities recently reached these milestones:

- **Client J** will be graduating with her degree in special education in May.
- **Client V** has been in the Bridge program for less than a year and has already raised her credit score to almost 800 and has \$30,000 saved.
- **Client T** graduated from the program. She found a new job to increase her income, paid off much of her debt, raised her credit score, and saved tremendously. She texted her case manager to say “This program has been truly an amazing learning experience and life changing for myself and my kids. You all have amazing hearts and truly are wonderful at what you do.”
- **Client S** paid off all her consumer debt and raised her credit score to 765. She graduated from the program and moved into permanent housing.
- With immense joy, we join **Client J** in celebrating the arrival of a healthy, precious baby boy. Our warmest congratulations go to Client J and her growing family on this wonderful blessing.



** Clients' names changed to initials to protect their privacy.*



Your support empowers the families of Bridge Communities as they work towards self-sufficiency, permanent housing, and a lifetime of security and success. Please make a gift in honor of Bridge Communities at www.bridgecommunities.org/donate