

# Connections

*Connecting families facing homelessness to a better future.*

Valencia: “They never made me feel like a project. They made me feel like family.”

At the start of the pandemic, Valencia was living with her one-year-old son in a studio apartment with serious mold issues. Staying in the apartment during lockdown would have meant constantly exposing her son to mold, and Valencia knew the risks that could pose to a young child.

It was not an easy choice, but for the safety of her child and herself, she knew they had to leave. After that, Valencia and her son spent months moving from house to house, doubling or tripling up with friends and family, living paycheck to paycheck.

She just needed a couple of months to build up her savings and plan her next steps forward. However, Valencia could not find the stable housing her family needed.

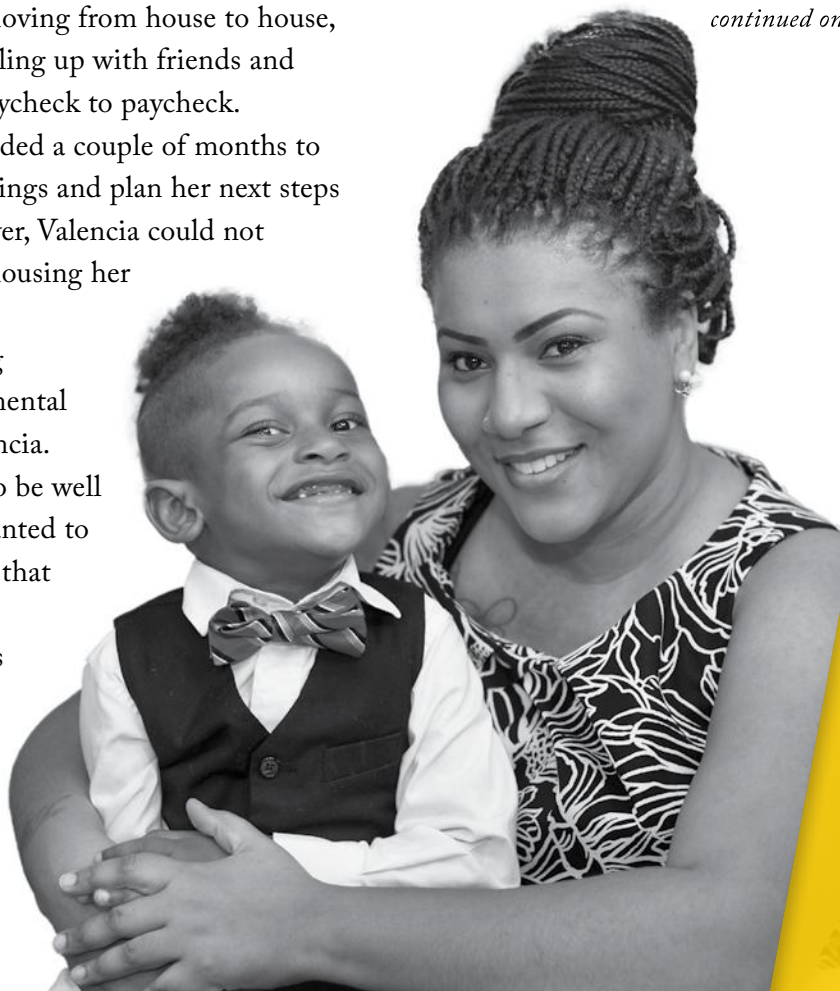
“I was going through a bad mental state,” said Valencia. “I just wanted to be well for my son. I wanted to give him things that I couldn’t have.”

Valencia was preparing to celebrate the holidays with her son in a

shelter when she started searching online for help and came across Bridge Communities. Three days before Christmas, they were welcomed into the safety and stability of a Bridge apartment and connected with her mentors, Tom and Mary from First United Methodist Church of Downers Grove.

“That day we moved in,” Valencia recalled, “my son and Tom connected instantly. It was one of the most beautiful

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**“They never made me feel like a project. They made me feel like family.”** *continued*

connections I have ever seen. Now, Tom and Mary are Grandpa Tom and Grandma Mary.”

Valencia quickly felt a sense of community within her Bridge apartment building. Surrounded by other families in the Bridge program, Valencia built friendships with other clients over their shared experiences. The children in the building would all play together, and the moms would always be there to help each other out.

**“Bridge has given me a second chance. Without it, I have absolutely no clue where I’d be today.”**

“I love each one of my neighbors. That building was so loving. It was like finding long-lost sisters,” said Valencia. “Everybody felt safe. I couldn’t ask for a better community.”

Valencia put in a lot of hard work while in the program. She initially struggled with budgeting and working her way through the program with a toddler.

“The budget sheet was a lot. I couldn’t master it for the longest time, but my mentors and case manager worked with me on it until I had it down pat,” recalled Valencia.

She also found support in Bridge’s parenting courses.

“I was struggling being a single mom and wondering how

other moms get through it. My kid didn’t sleep during the night till he started going to school, so it was years of just two or three hours of sleep.”

During the parenting class, she connected with other mothers in the program who lived through similar circumstances with their children. It helped her realize that things get better and gave her the encouragement she needed to push through her hard times.

Valencia took advantage of all the opportunities available through Bridge, including our employment workshop, 4 Weeks to Success: Getting Hired, Retained, and Promoted.

“The employment classes were amazing! I feel like I could interview for any position on Earth and get it,” said Valencia. “I shared so much of what I’ve learned, and it helped so many other people. I still have the binder from that class. It helped me land my current position.”

Today, Valencia remains a very busy woman. She works two jobs in the healthcare industry, including one with Veteran’s Affairs. She always wanted a position in government, and thanks to the help she received from Bridge’s Adult Education and Employment team, she finally got one.

Valencia has also achieved

another long-time goal of hers: becoming a homeowner!

Earlier this year, Valencia exited the Bridge program. Having paid off all her debt and built up her credit score, she purchased her new townhome in Aurora. Despite her initial struggles, Valencia is now a master of her budget sheet and still uses it to stay on top of her mortgage.

Her son is thriving in school, where his hugs and friendly, energetic attitude have made him the school’s unofficial greeter. On top of that, his academic progress has exceeded anything Valencia could have imagined for a three-year-old.

“My son has his own story: from living house-to-house, car-to-shelter, then to transitional housing. Now, I can give my child a college savings account, which is something I wanted more than anything,” Valencia said. “I don’t know if I would’ve been able to do that without Bridge’s assistance. We’re really grateful.”

Valencia and her son love their new home and still receive regular visits from Grandpa Tom and Grandma Mary. Their family is happy to be putting down roots in DuPage County for years to come.

“Bridge has given me a second chance,” said Valencia. “Without it, I have absolutely no clue where I’d be today.” 🏡

# Celebrating 35 Years of Homes and Hope



Dear friends,

Since 1988, Bridge Communities has had the honor of transforming the lives of over 950 families facing homelessness in

DuPage County. Our co-founders, Mark Milligan and Bob Wahlgren, envisioned an organization that empowered volunteer mentors to journey shoulder-to-shoulder with families as they worked toward permanent housing and security.

I am so proud to know that on any given day there is a team of mentors meeting with a client family, often across the kitchen table, working together to create life-long change, just as it was 35 years ago. Many processes have changed over the years, but what has not changed are the caring spirits, the capacity for both mentor and client to enrich each other's lives, and the hope for a brighter future.

Throughout our 35-year history, it was the dedication, passion, and generosity of supporters like you that created the opportunity for our neighbors in need to embrace the housing and programs provided by Bridge and begin their lives anew. We cannot do this work without you. Bridge Communities now houses and mentors

over 100 families every year and continues to evolve our programs to ensure each family's experiences are even more impactful and transformative.

I look forward to celebrating our 35th Anniversary with you and sharing stories of our mission and accomplishments. Please follow us on social media, join us at an upcoming event, or volunteer to become a mentor; we welcome your engagement.

Most of all, I look forward to partnering with you in the years to come. Just as in our early days of Mark and Bob's leadership, Bridge remains committed to building strong, lasting relationships based on trust with our mentors, Program Partners, volunteers, donors, and the broader community. So join me "around the kitchen table" as we work together to create our vision of a community where all families are healthy, financially stable, and living in affordable housing.

With heartfelt thanks,

Amy Van Polen

*Interim Chief Executive Officer*

## What Will Be Your Legacy?

The decision to make a planned gift from your estate is a personal statement about who you are and the causes that matter most to you.

Your estate gift to Bridge Communities helps forever change the lives of your neighbors facing homelessness and leaves a lasting legacy of kindness and generosity. Your gift can also help you achieve your financial goals.

To learn more about the ways you can create a lasting legacy that can benefit you and your family, reduce your taxes, and change lives forever, please call (630) 403-5090 or email [amy.vanpolen@bridgecommunities.org](mailto:amy.vanpolen@bridgecommunities.org), or contact your financial advisor. All inquiries will be held in strict confidence.



CORNERSTONE  
SOCIETY



## Q&A with Alec Dorner

Data & Evaluation Volunteer

### Q. How did you first hear about Bridge Communities?

A. I first heard about Bridge Communities from Susan Ryerson Espino, Bridge's Director of Data and Evaluation. She responded to a question I posted on a Salesforce forum and was gracious enough to give me some insight into the mission of Bridge Communities and how Bridge was using the Salesforce platform to further that mission.

### Q. What do you do as a volunteer?

A. Through my group, Force for Change, I volunteer with Bridge Communities as a technical resource to help customize the Salesforce platform to meet their needs. I am also a member of the Insights and Impacts Board Committee providing strategic insights into how the organization can use a data-driven approach to measure their success.

### Q. What inspires you to continue volunteering with Bridge?

A. What inspires me most to continue volunteering with Bridge is quite simply the



mission. I love what the organization does for those who are at their most vulnerable, so it's pretty easy to stay motivated to help.

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

A. My favorite thing about volunteering with Bridge Communities has to be the people. Those within the Bridge staff with whom I have had the pleasure of working have all been so passionate about the mission; it's absolutely contagious! 🏠

**Bridge's data and evaluation capabilities are crucial to our ability to adequately measure client success and improve outcomes.**

**Bridge is always looking for volunteers offering their professional skills. To learn how you can volunteer in a way that's most fulfilling and impactful for you, please contact Mary Slade at [volunteercoordinator@bridgecommunities.org](mailto:volunteercoordinator@bridgecommunities.org).**

## Help Put a Family on the Road to Success

It was just a matter of time before Angelina's old car broke down leaving her unable to go to work, drop her child off at daycare, or attend classes to earn her degree. However, thanks to a generous donor, Angelina can continue working towards self-sufficiency.

You can help a mother provide for her family by donating your used vehicle. We currently have five families in the Bridge program in need of a car.

To learn more about how to donate your car to a Bridge family, please contact Paul Matthews at 630-403-5104 or [paul.matthews@bridgecommunities.org](mailto:paul.matthews@bridgecommunities.org).





## 35 Years of Bridge Communities

Thank you for helping us reach 35 years of homes and hope!



**1988**

Mark Milligan and Robert Wahlgren founded Bridge Communities, originally named "The Apartment Project," and opened their first apartment to a family facing homelessness.

**1992**

The Apartment Project officially became Bridge Communities. We had the capacity to house six families.



**1994**

The Program Partners concept was created, and churches signed on. This unique service model allows us to serve more families and provide clients with financial support, volunteer mentors, and housing resources.



**1995**

The Children's Program was created as staff expanded. *In 2022, our Children's Program served more than 150 children in the Bridge program.*



**1996**

Bridge Communities completed construction on our first apartment building in Glendale Heights, demonstrating our long-term investment in DuPage County.



**1997**

The Employment Program was created. *In 2022, our Employment & Adult Education Program provided nearly 60 of our clients with one-on-one employment counseling.*



**2000**

Bridge Communities was honored as a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) "Best Practices" winner.

**2002**

Sleep Out Saturday launched, raising over \$2 million for families facing homelessness over the past 20 years.



**2010**

Bridge launched Investing in Homes + Hope campaign, resulting in additional housing for Bridge families and a \$2 million endowment.

**2012**

Bridge Communities hosted its first Reality Kitchen 101 class for clients. This would later evolve into our Nutrition Program.



**2015**

Bridge expanded our Children's Program through our Break the Cycle of Homelessness campaign.

**2016**

Bridge was honored with a \$200,000 Neighborhood Builder Award from Bank of America.



**2017**

A \$600,000 multi-year grant was awarded to Bridge to build a robust Data and Evaluation function. Bridge reached a total of 25 buildings owned and was serving over 100 families every year.

**2023**

Bridge Communities celebrates 35 years and the honor of having helped over 950 families transition from homelessness!



## Continuing Our Equity and Belonging Journey

**T**his year, Bridge Communities took new steps in our learning journey to better understand the societal disparities and inequities in which we live by attending a series of education workshops with staff, developing learning goals, and rolling out initial education workshops with mentors.

These efforts, led by our Equity and Belonging team of staff, board members, mentors, and

Program Partners, will continue to inform how we carry out our program, plan our events, and engage with our clients and community.

We hope that you will join us for this learning journey and share your thoughts and questions with us by contacting Amy Van Polen at [amy.vanpolen@bridgecommunities.org](mailto:amy.vanpolen@bridgecommunities.org) or (630) 403-5090.

## Thank you for your support!

Our friends in the community make a world of difference to the families we have the honor to serve.  
Thank you all for your generosity and compassion!



Thank you, Jack and Jill Foundation

Jack and Jill of America, West Suburban Chapter donated totes full of goodies encouraging togetherness for our client families. They also made a generous donation to support our mission. Thank you!



Thank you, Alpha Kappa Alpha

A big thank you to the Chi Sigma Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority for their overwhelming response to Bridge's need for African American haircare products.

We are so grateful to White Castle and their customers for their generous donation of over \$11,500 raised from a round-up campaign. Thank you for your amazing generosity!



Thank you, White Castle



Thank you, Lee and Quinn

Many thanks to Glenbard West High School students, Lee and Quinn, who ran a donation drive to collect essential items for our clients' supply closets.



Thank you, Great Lakes Credit Union

Thanks and welcome to our newer partner Great Lakes Credit Union for facilitating financial literacy programming for both parents and their kids at our Peer Support event.



Thank you, BMO!  
BMO is a major supporter of our data and evaluation efforts, having donated \$60,000, and counting. We are so grateful for their support.

## Celebrating Women, Transforming Lives

Danada House, Friday, June 19, 11:00 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

Join us for the 13th annual Celebrating Women, Transforming Lives luncheon as we celebrate two outstanding women in our community who are agents of change for others.

We will honor Maria Salgado with the Lives Transformed award. Maria is a Bridge graduate who now mentors other mothers. Erica Nelson, a community leader who epitomizes service to others, will be presented with the Transforming Lives Award.

Join us for beautiful springtime views from the lovely Danada House in Wheaton and enjoy a delicious gourmet lunch prepared by My Chef Catering. Individual and table tickets are available for purchase at this QR code.



## The Bridge Communities Golf Classic

Cog Hill Golf Club, Tuesday, August 29

Bridge Communities invites golfers and guests to one of Chicagoland's finest golf venues. Golfers will enjoy exclusive 18-hole access to Cog Hill's championship course No. 2 – The Ravines for an afternoon of friendly competition and on-course games.

Afterward, Golfers and their guests will continue the par-tee at an entertaining reception to include dinner, drinks, auctions, and more!



**Tickets for your single, twosome, or foursome will be available for purchase on June 1 at [bridgecommunities.org](https://bridgecommunities.org).**

**Choose one of our win-win sponsor packages or suggest your own custom sponsorship. Contact Jen Bystry at [jenifer.bystry@bridgecommunities.org](mailto:jenifer.bystry@bridgecommunities.org) or 630-403-5095.**

### Board of Directors

Laura Jensen, *Chairwoman*  
Sara Stolmeier, *Vice-Chairwoman*  
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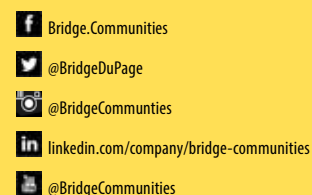
*Connections* is a publication of Bridge Communities, Inc.

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.

505 Crescent Blvd., Glen Ellyn, IL 60137  
New address as of May 1, 2023:  
500 Roosevelt Rd, Glen Ellyn, IL 60137  
630-545-0610

[www.bridgecommunities.org](https://www.bridgecommunities.org)

We want to share all the latest and greatest news from Bridge Communities with you. Connect with us on social media:





505 Crescent Blvd.  
Glen Ellyn, IL 60137  
630-545-0610  
Fax 630-545-0640

[www.bridgecommunities.org](http://www.bridgecommunities.org)

Bridge Communities is a non-profit organization that houses and mentors homeless families who live and work in DuPage County.

\*New address as of May 1, 2023:  
500 Roosevelt Rd, Glen Ellyn, IL 60137

**Please help us save on printing and postage.**

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TIME SENSITIVE MATERIAL  
PLEASE DELIVER PROMPTLY

Because of your help

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

- **Claudia** is the first client to graduate from our Stability Program and has now moved into our Transitional Housing Program.
- **Daniel** got a new job making \$60,000 with great benefits.
- **Simeon & Cing** closed on a new home in Winfield with a backyard for their kids.
- **Jennifer** graduated from the Transitional Housing Program and went into our Pathways Program as she continues to pursue her Special Education and Teaching degrees.
- **Kiana** got promoted to assistant team lead and is now making \$22/hour.
- **Carmel** went back to school and earned an A in her first class!
- **Theresa** got a job making \$21/hour. She will be working from home, which allows her to stay closer to her children.
- **Anissa** used advocating skills she learned from Bridge's Employment team to secure both a raise and a promotion!
- **Chanadda** found a new job. She even had her pick of two different job offers!
- **Uniqwia** earned her Certified Nursing Assistant certificate and already found a job.
- **Gloria** recently moved into her Bridge apartment with her daughter. The security of the program allowed her the space to focus on her family and regain the motivation to work on her dreams.



When you journey alongside the families of Bridge Communities, you empower families as they work toward self-sufficiency, permanent housing, and a lifetime of security and success. Please make a gift in honor of Bridge Communities at [www.bridgecommunities.org](http://www.bridgecommunities.org).