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Bridge Communities, Inc.
505 Crescent Blvd.
Glen Ellyn, IL 60137
630-545-0610, ext. 25

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CONTACT: Margo Matthew
Phone: 630-545-0610, ext. 25
Email: margo.matthew@bridgecommunities.org

Bridge Communities Celebrates 20 Years of Connecting Homeless Families to a Brighter Future

Bridge Communities is celebrating its 20th Anniversary of transforming lives of homeless families who live and work in DuPage County. What began by co-founders Mark Milligan and Bob Wahlgren when they decided, in 1988, to begin to help homeless families, has now become a powerful current of change in the lives of thousands of extremely low to low income families.

Neither one of them realized – at the time renting one apartment for a family of three-what could truly happen if concerned community members banded together, even in some small way to create change and opportunities. Little did they know that the change they were trying to make for that first family would become the largest transitional housing program for homeless families in DuPage County or that the program model would be replicated throughout the country by other caring people trying to help their neighbors. The question I am often asked is: Did you think Bridge Communities would grow into such a large organization when you started it? My answer is without reservation No, but I have always believed that neighbors working together could help the homeless community in DuPage County,” said Mark Milligan. Bridge Communities has grown into over 100 families served annually. Adding to the organizations philosophy that the mentors are the heart of the program, Bridge Communities also provides employment coaching, case management, parenting skill work with the adults and educational enrichment programs for the children. This is all provided through 17 transitional housing or condominium buildings and 7 learning resource centers. In addition, Bridge Communities has an auto donation program directly benefiting a family in the program in need of transportation on their road to self-sufficiency.

The average age of a homeless person in DuPage County is 8 years old, and concerned with helping to break the generational cycle of poverty in the families, BridgeCommunities began in 1996 the after school one on one tutoring program where children learn how to achieve in school. With deep ties in the community to other organizations trying to bring about change, the development of Bridge Communities includes some significant dates that have made it into the organization it is today.

In September 1988 the founders Milligan and Wahlgren share with a small group of friends a new idea they have for helping homeless families transition from despair to hope to rebuild their future. Their friends join their quest and donate funds to help sustain an apartment for three

months. The first automobile is donated in December of that year and a 20 year partnership with the late owner, Mike Fahey, Glen Ellyn based Village Garage & Tire begins. Ted Augustyn has continued this long time partnership.

Being innovative and always thinking outside the box, the year of 1996 brought about many changes from an all volunteer organization to developing internal program solutions with the hiring of Joyce Hothan LCSW as program director. Under her leadership they hired a case manager, employment director, started the children's educational programs, and found permanent office space in downtown Glen Ellyn. "This wonderful alchemy of leadership, vision, dedication, guts, humor, and friendship, has filled the last number of years with a wonderful mosaic of rich memories and touching stories of homeless families transforming their lives," said Joyce Hothan.

Additional highlights of the organization include being awarded a HUD grant in 1993 as an all volunteer organization and the construction of their first owned apartment building in Glendale Heights in 1996. At that time they were serving 15 families annually in cooperation with Catholic Charities, several churches and one neighborhood organization. They also partnered with Community Housing Association of DuPage to provide property management and bookkeeping services which later came to include renting permanent affordable housing for families who finished the program. Bridge Communities experienced a boom in December 1998 in the number of families served – 40 families are now enrolled in the program. In 1998, as more churches adopted the Bridge model of working with homeless families, Bridge evolved into an umbrella organization committed to supporting local organizations sponsoring families in transitional housing. Additional services such as intake screenings and health assessments are added through the encouragement and funding support of Community Memorial Foundation in Hinsdale. The State of Illinois recognizes Bridge's leadership in the "Welfare to Work" initiative with a grant to support their programs. HUD recognizes Bridge as an Illinois "Best Practices" winner for their innovative efforts addressing family homelessness in DuPage County.

Local residents partner with Bridge in 2002 as the Bridge Builders are formed to provide hands on experiences for the families and fundraise for program services. In 2003 R. Whalen Builders step forward to build "A Home with a Heart." They recruit many local suppliers and contractors to build – much of the costs discounted or donated - a beautiful Glen Ellyn home that was sold with all proceeds benefiting Bridge. These funds were used to purchase a new apartment building. In July 2004, Barbara Trczinski and Joyce Hothan co-author *What's It Like to be Homeless?* This hands-on curriculum for adults and children is used by more than 1,000 organizations across the country.

To bring about community awareness of the many issues that bring about family homelessness, Bridge held their first annual Sleep Out Saturday in November 2004. This event brings well over 1500 County residents together for one night to experience homelessness, raise awareness and funds. Rapid growth into 2005 increased Bridge statistics to owning 12 apartment buildings scattered across DuPage County, and 38 partnerships with community and faith-based organizations who mentor and support the 100 families served annually.

In 2006 Bridge launches a shared-equity homeownership program with the purchase of a 6-flat apartment building in Lombard with the addition of two in Westmont and Naperville in 2007. The units are converted into condominiums and a portion of the equity is sold to graduates. Each unit sold fulfills the dream of homeownership for another formerly homeless family.

In looking back 20 years and ahead the next 20 years Bridge Communities thanks the hundreds of volunteers and others who have partnered with them to connect homeless families to a brighter

future. “There have been some fascinating stories, and I smile as we reminisce about the families we served, the volunteers who gave their time and talents, and the many others we have had the good fortune to meet. For many years we approached each “need” one day at a time and hoped we would find a solution,” said Bob Wahlgren. Most of us take a home for granted. For those who can’t, being offered one while they work to make positive changes is a life-changing event. A safe and comfortable place to call home and raise your family can be the first step toward independence.

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If you would like more information about this organization, please call Margo Matthew at 630-545-0610, ext. 25 or e-mail at margo.matthew@bridgecommunities.org.