

LIFE IS SWEET

Most families that participate in Bridge Communities' Transitional Housing Program take about two years to make their way from homelessness to self-sufficiency, but not Yvonne Hernandez. With help from her Bridge mentors, Yvonne used the tools and skills she discovered she already had and established a wonderful new life for herself and her three children in just over 15 months!



Yvonne Hernandez entered Bridge Communities' Transitional Housing Program April 1st, 2010. The divorced mother of three young children had been living with her ex-husband's parents for a year prior and didn't realize that she and her kids fit the definition of "homeless."

"I did not think I was homeless because [my ex in-laws] have always made me feel that their home was also my home and my children's home since I had lived there with my ex before our divorce," Yvonne explained. "It was a tough thing to swallow when I entered the Bridge Program and realized that since I could not provide a "roof" over my children's heads, we were considered homeless...it was very hard to accept."

Yvonne's sister had a friend who had been in Bridge's Transitional Housing Program, and when they recommended it to Yvonne, she took the next step to apply and was accepted into the Program.

"The hardest thing for me was by far letting go of the spending that I was doing. I controlled and I wanted to control everything – my finances, what my children did...So the hardest moment I had was giving up my finances to my mentors and showing them what I had done the past three years."

Yvonne had her associate's degree in Medical Assisting and had worked at her current job for five years. But she felt an overwhelming sense of hopelessness, because she felt she would never be able to provide for her children because of her financial debt.

"I wanted a future home for my children so they could have their own space," Yvonne recalled. But her uninhibited spending prohibited her from moving toward that vision. "When I first entered the Program, I had gone shopping about a week before I moved into my apartment, and I had to show [my mentors] my receipts...I had spent a little over \$500 for things that I had bought for my apartment that I thought I needed. And when I showed them, they were shocked." Yvonne acknowledged to her mentors that she had a problem identifying the difference between the things she wanted and the things she and her children really needed and where to draw the line.

Yvonne credits her mentors from Glen Ellyn Bible Church with helping her overcome her despair to see that she could not only hope for but strive for a brighter future. Yvonne's mentors taught her that she was already equipped with the tools and skills she needed to take on the challenges life had presented her; she just needed to use them effectively and persevere to create a better life for her family.

Yvonne's goal in entering the Program was to ultimately become a homeowner. She understood that, in the short-term, it would mean focusing on controlling her spending, eliminating her debt, and building savings. So with her mentors' guidance and encouragement, Yvonne concentrated her effort and attention on her short- and long-term goals.

Yvonne gratefully credits her mentors with helping her identify and achieve her goals, saying, "My mentors have helped me achieve both the short- and long-term goals I had. My



short-term goals included paying off my debts, including school loans, and I achieved this. My long-term goal was to one day be a homeowner, and because of their help, I am now a homeowner!"

In July of this year, Yvonne and her children moved into a four-bedroom home in West Chicago that became available through a partnership between Bridge Communities, DuPage Habitat for Humanity, and DuPage County (for more about the collaboration, see article in this issue of *Connections*).

"I felt relieved when I moved into my Bridge home," Yvonne recalled with a smile. "I felt that finally I was going to make my life work with my children, that I could move on as a single mom and not have to depend on someone else or other family members. It was just a big relief knowing that I had support."

But her mentors were much more than financial advisors and accountability partners.

"My mentors are my family. They were always a phone call away and attended to both mine and my children's needs. They showed me and have taught me so many things that are essential to being a single mom. Because of my mentors, I have become a self-sufficient, responsible and determined person."

These days, Yvonne continues her work as a Medical Assistant at a urology office in Chicago's western suburbs.

"My future is now bright thanks to Bridge and my mentors," she said joyfully. As far as Yvonne's plans for the future, "I plan to enjoy my new home in West Chicago with my children and make many wonderful memories."

When asked what she would like to say to families struggling with the same sense of despair Yvonne felt just under two years ago, she had this to share: "To anyone reading this story, I hope they would be inspired. With perseverance, persistence, patience and love, all things are possible. I am now enjoying life with my children, and I have Bridge and especially my mentors for making my life sweeter."