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.”

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In June, the next generation of Bridge Builders took to Cantigny Youth Links for the first annual kids’ golf outing benefiting Bridge Communities.

Co-chairs Jennifer Wild, Tina Favia and Greg Pierce envisioned a kids golf outing to bring the next generation into the fold in hopes of teaching them about Bridge, raising funds and having fun in the process.

Nine foursomes brought kids ranging in age from five to 14 to the scramble format outing. Each foursome dressed in a different theme, with themes ranging from 50’s poodle skirts to mini Happy Gilmore and more. Each foursome was teamed with an experienced captain, courtesy of the Glenbard West Boys Golf Team.

The co-chairs challenged each participant to raise $125.

“The fundraising would not only generate revenue for Bridge Communities; it would also give the kids the opportunity to share Bridge Communities’ story with their family, friends and neighbors – a first step into the world of fundraising,” explains Greg Pierce.

In all, the kids raised close to $4,000, for which Bridge Communities is extremely grateful.

“It’s great to see young people getting excited and passionate about a worthy cause like Bridge,” says Joyce Hothan, executive director at Bridge Communities. “They represent our future leadership and our future donors, so seeing them enthusiastically jump into fundraising for Bridge is very heartening.”

Prizes were awarded for classic golf outing competitions like longest shot, closest to the pin, longest putt, along with a prize for the best foursome theme.

“Our hope is that next year we will reach even more kids and have even more participants raising money and having a blast on behalf of Bridge Communities,” says Jennifer Wild.

If you’d like to learn more about Bridge Communities’ Kids’ Golf Outing or any of the other ways kids can get involved in supporting Bridge, please contact Amy Van Polen at (630) 545-0610 ext. 12 or amy.vanpolen@bridgecommunities.org.
Make a Change

“I had my children with me. It was cold. We had a bit of a breeze; it could have been a lot worse. We had a nice fire; we kept it stoked. We had cardboard boxes, and it was a very interesting experience. I think that it was good for us that it was cold and we were uncomfortable, because it makes you realize just a little bit more what it could be like to be homeless.”

~ Melissa Hall, SOS Participant

None of us wants to find ourselves in the dire strait of homelessness. But unfortunately, our community is home to hundreds of families – our own neighbors – who don’t know where they will sleep tonight or how they will manage to make it through the year, the month, the week, or even just the next day.

As the days get cooler and the nights get longer, our hearts are warmed and our spirits brightened by the excitement building around Sleep Out Saturday. This year, Bridge Communities’ annual event to raise awareness and funds for families afflicted by the struggles of homelessness takes place Saturday, November 5th, 2011 at locations throughout DuPage County.

You can make a change!

You can change the life of a homeless family. You can open the heart of a neighbor to the plight of those in need right here in our community. Participate in Sleep Out Saturday, and you can help make a change in the lives of our neighbors who need it most.

Since 2003, more than 6,000 participants have helped to make a change in the lives of families in DuPage County.

Over 1,500 teens, children and adults will spend the night outside on November 5th, 2011 in tents, boxes and cars to raise awareness about family homelessness and funding for Bridge Communities’ Transitional Housing Program. This “wake up call” event offers opportunities for participants to give back to their community, raise public awareness about family homelessness, and inspire empathy for those in need.

“I had no clue…I knew that people were homeless, that they had troubles, that there were people who had to sleep out in boxes. But this brought it home for me; it made it more personal to me…And that, in whatever way I can, if I can make a small difference, I want to do that.”

~ Susan Baltaragis, SOS Participant

Groups, families and individuals are all encouraged to participate in Sleep Out Saturday by registering at www.sleepoutsaturday.org. A Group is typically comprised of children or teens from a faith-based, Scout or community group; group leaders direct educational activities, encourage group participants to raise funds and supervise the Sleep Out. Sleep Out Stars are families or individuals who are not participating with an organized group. Stars commit to help raise awareness and funds to support Bridge Communities and are also encouraged to participate in special Sleep Out activities.

An inspirational Rally – complete with music and inspiring stories from Bridge clients and their families – kicks off Sleep Out Saturday at 6:30 p.m. at Bridge Communities, located at 505 Crescent Boulevard in Glen Ellyn. Transportation from the Sleep Out Saturday group sites to the Rally is provided.

Stay current with the latest on Sleep Out Saturday by visiting www.sleep-out.blogspot.com.

Want a quick and easy way to give your financial support to Bridge Communities and Sleep Out Saturday?

Text BRIDGE to 20222 and make a $10 donation

It only takes a minute to make a change that can last a lifetime.

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Oxford Bank and Trust, Providence Bank, Selden Fox, Ltd., and SportsMed-Wheaton Orthopaedics
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.”
We all remember that predictable classroom assignment given during that first week of school: “How I Spent My Summer Vacation.” If you weren't happy about returning to school, it further reinforced why you wanted to be back on vacation! Luckily, I always had something noteworthy (at least in my mind) to write about, whether it was about our family vacation, out of town visitors, or the many adventures with my childhood friends in Chicopee, Massachusetts.

Bridge Communities has sensitized me to making sure that homeless children have those special summer memories to write about, too. The worries of the grown-up world come too fast to these children and encroach on their carefree, daydreaming days. Kids need to be kids for as long as they can. Giving their families a safe and secure place to call home enables them to have the childhood they deserve. Bridge Communities also makes sure each homeless child who comes to us has uninterrupted access to school, no matter what type of crisis their family is experiencing. School is often their one anchor in a sea of uncertainty. Also, every child who wants to go has the glorious opportunity to experience that quintessential experience of childhood – summer camp!

This year, 16 Bridge kids went away to camps in Kentucky and Wisconsin. Nothing beats the memories and experience of that classic childhood rite of passage: going away to camp. I bet a lot of you still can remember that feeling conjured by the alchemy of mixing anxiety with excitement when you wave that final goodbye to your family and head toward friends disguised as strangers.

Thanks to the generosity of Naperville Evangelical Covenant Church and Bridge Builders, wonderful childhood memories have been set for life. I want to share some of the Bridge kids’ “take-homes” from camp:

“Tubing is awesome!”

“I was scared in the beginning, but the counselor was so nice. I have a new friend.”

“I used my new sleeping bag at nighttime. Do I need to give it back?”

“We didn’t watch TV. We played tons of games. We were outside most of the time.”

Just kids being kids…that’s what I love most about Bridge Communities!

If you’d like to learn more about Bridge Communities’ summer camp program, or any of the other wonderful programs offered through Bridge Communities, I’d love to talk with you. Please feel free to contact me at (630) 545-0610 ext. 11 or joyce.hothan@bridgecommunities.org.

Letter from Joyce Hothan
Executive Director

Heather Wachter Joins Staff

In June, Heather Wachter joined the Bridge Communities staff as communications and donor relations coordinator. Heather’s passion is putting her communications and marketing skills to work to help mission-driven organizations succeed. She spent several years in the chamber of commerce industry, where she worked with her Bridge colleague Jennie Gates, and has volunteered her skills at several organizations, including United Way, Kids’ Day Out, Naperville Area Humane Society and Community Christian Church.

In the newly created role, Heather will share news and stories with Bridge Communities’ friends and supporters and the community at-large through media that include newsletters, web sites, brochures, e-blasts, blogs, press releases, Facebook, and more. As a part of the development team, she will also work with current and prospective donors.

“Bridge has such an incredible mission, and it’s driven by a fun and passionate group of folks who are also very talented professionals,” she says. “I’m really glad to be a part of it.”

Prior to joining the staff of Bridge Communities, Heather worked with her husband, Brad, at their business, Senior Living Recruiters, and also operated her own communications and marketing firm. They live in Aurora with their two sons, Johnathan and William.

Heather would love to hear from you! If you’d like to connect with her, you can reach her at (630) 545-0610 ext. 30 or heather.wachter@bridgecommunities.org.
What happens when three of DuPage County’s strongest forces unite? Simply put: great things.

Bridge Communities joined forces with DuPage County and DuPage Habitat for Humanity in a unique collaboration to provide permanent housing for qualified families in need.

DuPage County received $5.2 million from the Federal Government’s Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP) as a part of the Housing and Economic Recovery Act of 2008. The NSP was established for the purpose of stabilizing communities that have suffered from foreclosures and abandonment.

“Our goal with the money we were getting was to get it out into the community as quickly as possible,” explains Mary Keating, director of DuPage County community development. “We reached out to the partners we had already developed in the community that we knew had the capacity to implement the programs quickly. Keating adds that “DuPage Habitat for Humanity was one of the most logical partners” because of the strong track record of success already established between the County and Habitat.

“We like the model Habitat uses for leveraging donations and volunteer efforts to provide sustainable housing for working families. Combine that with NSP funds, and it really made for a great partnership,” Keating continues.

DuPage Habitat for Humanity was able to purchase eight foreclosed homes using NSP funds. The plan was to rehabilitate those homes and then find qualified families to purchase them at greatly reduced rates, with the intent of long-term residency for the benefit of both the family and the neighborhood.

Sarah Brachle, executive director of DuPage Habitat for Humanity, explains, “Knowing we had the stimulus funding coming, we were able to outreach to other organizations in DuPage to see how we could work better together.” Bridge Communities seemed like the perfect partner.

Both DuPage Habitat for Humanity and Bridge Communities have rigorous application processes to ensure that the families selected for their programs enter with a high potential for success.

In order to qualify for a Habitat home, each applicant must attend an information session and complete an application. If the applicant meets Habitat’s eligibility requirements, its Family Selection committee interviews the family, reviews the family information and recommends the family to the Board, which then reviews the recommendations and finalizes the family’s selection.

Similarly, applicants to Bridge Communities’ Transitional Housing Program undergo a multi-faceted application process. A series of interviews with various Bridge Communities case managers, along with a drug screening, background check and credit screening, are carefully considered before a Program Partner makes the final decision. Only then does the intensive two-year Transitional Housing Program begin.

“In a logical progression, we want to help families go from tough times to renting to stable home ownership,” Brachle continues. “The families that have gone through Bridge’s Transitional Housing Program are really ready for the next step of home ownership.”

Joyce Hothan, executive director of Bridge Communities, notes that “families that graduate from the Transitional Housing Program have gone through two years of intensive mentoring and training in a range of areas that include debt management, financial planning, educational tutoring, employment counseling and essential life skills. Bridge provides support, training and preparation for that next step, which includes renting apartments for most graduates and home ownership for some of our over 100 families that we work with every year.”

“When you add Bridge into the mix, it completes the circle,” concludes Keating. “Our partnership with Habitat is about property, and then Habitat’s relationship with Bridge is about the family. To have a family be able to graduate from Bridge is an indication that they are prepared to take the next step in home ownership.”

Brachle agrees. “We’re thrilled with the opportunity to work with Bridge clients. We know that the families will be great partners because they’ve already gone through a rigorous selection process through Bridge.”

To date, three of Bridge Communities’ graduated client families have purchased rehabilitated homes from DuPage Habitat for Humanity that were recovered and rehabilitated thanks to the NSP funding made available by DuPage County. One of those Bridge graduates is Lila Petty.
“When Habitat said I was accepted, it was exciting to know I would have somewhere permanent. When I was younger I went to four different high schools,” says Petty. “Knowing my kids would go to one school and be established meant a lot to me.”

“Lila was very, very hard working,” says her Bridge mentor, Geri Wrasse. “When she first came to us, her credit was bad, but …she worked very hard to get her debt cleared. [Her home dedication] was extremely joyful! I’m so happy to see a family complete everything and come out ahead like this.”

Susan Ryan, another of Lila’s Bridge mentors, agrees. “There was nothing [Lila] wouldn’t do to make a better life for her kids. After she left the Bridge program, she set her sights on home ownership, and last year she made the application to Habitat and was accepted. To say she was thrilled is putting it mildly.”

“There would have been no Habitat [home for me] without Bridge,” Lila stresses. “I wouldn’t have been able to get the Habitat house unless I went through the Bridge program.”

What started as a service project of the Baird & Warner GoodWill Network in Glen Ellyn in 2003 has become one of the most highly anticipated design events on Chicagoland’s annual calendar!

Tickets are on sale now for the annual Kitchen Walk benefiting Bridge Communities. Mark your calendar for October 14th and prepare to be amazed and inspired by the latest in home kitchen design.

Sponsored by Baird & Warner and Drury Design Kitchen & Bath Studio, the Kitchen Walk generously supports Bridge Communities’ Transitional Housing Program. Each ticket sold provides one night of housing and services to a Bridge family. So the more friends you bring, the more families you’ll help!

“It’s a great way for [Baird & Warner] as an organization in Glen Ellyn to really give back to the community and really to help Bridge Communities,” says Carrie Morris, Baird & Warner realtor and Kitchen Walk coordinator. “With all the charitable organizations being hurt by cuts in funding, we should do whatever we can to help. The Kitchen Walk is a wonderful way to raise funds and awareness for such a deserving organization as Bridge Communities, right here in our own hometown.”

Tickets for the Kitchen Walk are on sale now for $25 ($35 the day of the event) and are available at Baird & Warner (543 Pennsylvania Ave.), Drury Design (512 N. Main St.), Bridge Communities (505 Crescent Blvd.) and online at www.bridgecommunities.org. Admission includes access to all houses on the tour and also to the AfterWalk hosted by Drury Design. Tickets for the AfterWalk alone are available for $10.

“It is an honor to once again be the presenting sponsor of the Glen Ellyn Kitchen Walk to support the very worthwhile efforts of Bridge Communities,” says sponsor Jim Drury, co-owner and studio manager of Drury Design Kitchen & Bath Studio. “We’d like to thank our clients for their participation as well as all of the homeowners, volunteers and participants.”

The gourmet AfterWalk reception takes place from 5:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. at presenting sponsor Drury Design and features light appetizers by Craig Bell, Wolf and SubZero corporate chef. The evening will also feature a silent auction to raise funds for Bridge Communities.

The Kitchen Walk takes place Friday, October 14th from 12:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. at homes throughout Glen Ellyn. All proceeds from ticket sales and the silent auction benefit families in Bridge’s Transitional Housing Program. For more information, please call (630) 207-7530 or visit www.kitchenwalk.org.
Bridge Communities is a non-profit transitional housing program serving residents of DuPage County. The program provides families with housing, case management, transportation, tutoring, life skills mentoring, job readiness and training with the goal of achieving lifelong independence and permanent housing.

Bridge Builders Scholarships Help Make College Dreams a Reality

Bridge Builders provided $4,500 in scholarships to five students of Bridge client families. Congratulations to the 2011-2012 Bridge Builders scholarship recipients:

- **Joanna**, a freshman at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign;
- **Adelbert**, a junior at Winona State University in Winona, MN;
- **Adrian**, a junior at the University of Illinois at Chicago;
- **Roaa**, a senior at Columbia College in Chicago;
- **Steffi**, a senior at Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design in Milwaukee, WI

Incoming freshman Joanna is excited to see her dreams becoming a reality.

“I have been accepted into the Air Force ROTC program and will be majoring in Aerospace Engineering,” Joanna shared enthusiastically. “My goal is to join the Air Force and eventually to be a commercial pilot. I am very excited for this wonderful opportunity to go away to school, especially a great engineering school!”

Before she departed for school, Joanna left a special message to Bridge Builders and its contributors:

“I am very grateful for this scholarship, and for being in the Bridge Communities program. To receive this scholarship is wonderful. I am so excited to be going to such a great school. Thank you for all your support and all the work you have done over the years to help our family.

“Being in the Bridge program has changed my life. My future would have definitely been different. We would have gone on trying to make ends meet and trying to just get by. Bridge gave us the opportunity to have a better life, especially after all we have been through. I probably would have been in a very different situation. I have always been positive and tried to push forward. But Bridge really made it possible for me to achieve what I want to do. Bridge changed the lives of our entire family.”

“Any child of an active Bridge Communities client family is eligible to apply for a scholarship,” Kathy Doyle, scholarship co-chair for Bridge Builders explained. The applicant must be planning to attend either a two or four year college or trade school.

“We’ve got a very dedicated group of volunteers in Bridge Builders, and they want to see these kids succeed in life,” scholarship co-chair Patricia Lekacz added. “We believe that offering these scholarships is just one more way we can support them on their journeys.”

Bridge Communities is grateful to Bridge Builders for providing the vision to create the scholarships and the dedication to raising funds to make our Bridge kids’ college dreams come true.

Our sincere and hearty congratulations go out to Adelbert, Adrian, Joanna, Roaa and Steffi!

If you would like to learn more about Bridge Builders’ scholarship program, please contact Kathy Doyle at kdoyle196@aol.com or (630) 942-0824 or Patricia Lekacz at plekacz@att.net.