Fresh out of class at a community college, Brenda didn’t want to go home. Pressure to move out of her parents’ home was mounting. She was considering dropping out of school with only five classes remaining to work full-time in order pay the bills as a single parent with a daughter. The stress was visible on her face as she waited for the bus.

A chance encounter with a stranger helped turn it all around.

“A man came up to me and asked ‘What’s wrong? You look stressed,’” said Brenda. “I explained my situation to him and he gave me this yellow brochure and it said Bridge Communities on it. I thought ‘What kind of scam is this?’ but I also thought ‘Why don’t you call?’”

She did call, and nearly two years later Brenda has shown herself, and her 7-year old daughter Angeli, that with hard work, anything is possible.

Brenda and her parents moved to the western suburbs when she was 19. She went to a community college while working full-time, with hopes of transferring to a bigger school someday to pursue her dream of being a paralegal. She found herself in a “bad relationship with a good product,” giving birth to her daughter Angeli at only 24 years old. The father abandoned Brenda, forcing her to put school on the back burner to raise Angeli alone. Soon she lost her primary job working for a medical bill review...
Connections is a publication of Bridge Communities, Inc., a program providing transitional housing for homeless families.

Bridge Communities is a non-profit 501c3 organization, with offices in Glen Ellyn, whose mission is to: 1) inspire and effect change by advocating for homeless families, 2) provide services and opportunities that connect families to a better future, 3) collaborate with faith-based partners, community groups and businesses to leverage resources and create long-term solutions, and 4) lead by example through our innovative programs and grassroots involvement.

Our Vision: To create communities where families in need have safe and affordable housing.

505 Crescent Blvd., Glen Ellyn, IL 60137
630-545-0610
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www.bridgecommunities.org

It's time to recognize and honor our client's accomplishments!

Jenn completed the Bridge Program and has moved into a fair-market rental apartment

Arlene was promoted at her job earning a $2.15 raise

Brenda graduated from College of DuPage with an Associates degree specializing as a paralegal and earned a job at a local law firm

Jill started a new job as a counselor at a local non-profit agency. She will soon graduate from College of DuPage with an Associates degree.

Isabel was promoted at her job

Tenisha started working as a teacher assistant at a local child care center

Makayla started a new job as a bank teller

Tamara will soon graduate from the Bridge Program and has been approved for a home mortgage through the DuPage Homeownership Program

Lilly started a new job as a customer service representative for a Fortune 500 company

Susannah completed her first semester at Benedictine University with above average grades

Neicy just got engaged and is moving to Atlanta

LaTonya graduated and was hired as a teacher with the Chicago Public Schools

Sonya paid off all her debt and is for the first time DEBT FREE!

11 new families have joined the Bridge Program since January 2010

16 client families are enrolled in college

7 high school students will graduate in June – ALL have plans to attend college
On my way to lunch today, I was musing about how often I meet people over lunch to talk about Bridge Communities. Of course I always love talking about the mission of Bridge. I know business lunches are a common practice, but it made me think of some comments I heard our Bridge staff make at our recent mentor training. Many of them said they got a call from one of us at Bridge and the next thing they knew they were working for the organization. I realized that a lot of good things happen by gathering at a table to break bread.

Besides satisfying our hunger and receiving bodily nourishment, the ritual of breaking bread or just sitting around a table is a very time honored tradition with families and friends. Going to lunch with potential or present Bridge donors is a great way to let people know about the work we are doing. It allows for a wonderfully personal exchange regarding the interests of people and the work that we do with homeless families. This back and forth exchange provides the opportunity for people to feel our passion for changing the lives of homeless families and to relay the many successful transformations we have witnessed. The conversation around the table takes soulful turns, when it strikes the cords of compassion and empathy for so many who are struggling in our communities.

This sharing around the table is carried forth in our model of pairing mentors from faith based and community organizations with homeless families in order to share together the journey from homelessness to long term housing and well being. This is replicated practically every day of the week, when the seventy five Bridge Communities’ families meet around their kitchen tables with their mentors. They may not be sharing a lunch like I so often do, but the mentors and families are sharing with each other their collective wisdom about life and the skills like budgeting, time management, and parenting needed to thrive. If you asked me for an object that was symbolic of the work we do, I would say it would be a “kitchen table”.

I am confident that the families in the Bridge Program and their mentors, as well as our staff will continue to carry on this time honored tradition that is the foundation of our Program’s success. I know there will be many wonderful things that will happen based on this simple yet profound time honored ritual.

I send out the challenge to those of you who are reading this article, to give me a call (630-545-0610, ext. 11) or email me at joyce.hothan@bridgecommunities.org so we can get together for lunch to share in this tradition. Be prepared to hear about Bridge!

Joyce Hothan
Executive Director

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**Hope Among the Flowers**

**Downers Grove Garden Walk, Saturday, July 10th**

9:30 am – 3:30 pm

$20 per ticket


*All proceeds benefit the transitional housing program at Downers Grove First United Methodist Church.*
and her parents could no longer afford to house her and her daughter. She was considering living out of her car, but fate intervened in the parking lot with the Bridge brochure.

Brenda didn’t consider herself homeless, but Bridge explained that she fit the criteria. She entered the Bridge program in November 2008 and at first had trouble dealing with the constant responsibility of working with her assigned mentor team from Corpus Christi Parish in Carol Stream.

“It’s very hard,” Brenda said. “Not only do you have to be on everything — you have to keep every receipt to show them. I thought I was a good spender, but you really learn a lot about yourself. It’s definitely a challenge.”

“When she first came here there was some reservation,” said Fran Splitgerber, one of Brenda’s mentors. “It’s a big thing to lay out your life to strangers. After she began to trust us, she knew we have life experience to offer her. You could see she had a more relaxed presence and she was bringing a new energy to us and her workplace.”

Once fully involved with the Bridge Communities Program and with her housing stabilized, Brenda was motivated to complete school. In December 2009, Brenda received her associate’s degree from College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, Illinois (COD). Always interested in law, she studied to become a paralegal. She will walk at the spring graduation ceremony to demonstrate to Angeli that “anything is possible.”

Upon suggestion from the COD paralegal coordinator, she applied and got a job as a paralegal at a law firm that specializes in Immigration, Employment and Family law as well as Mediation Services, practice areas that Brenda finds most interesting. She recently started working full-time, also contributing officer manager duties. Even though she is tired at the end of the day, the job is worth it.

“I like the diversity of the job assignments,” said Brenda. “It’s not boring. I’m not just typing away. I think it’s a great chance to get experience. I get to get up and do things.”

Brenda has taken advantage of the resources Bridge gave her access to. She works with her mentors to gain financial independence and is taking advantage of a counselor and parenting lessons. Thanks to the car donation program, Brenda was able to trade in her gas-guzzling ride for a “new” used car.

“My daughter loves the car,” said Brenda. “I just look at it as a way to get from point A to point B, but it’s interesting to see how kids look at things. She says, ‘Look mom! It’s purple!’ ”

Not just a patron of the color purple, Angeli is a regular renaissance girl. She loves to read, play soccer, and most of all — dance. Bridge has helped Brenda find inexpensive extracurricular activities for Angeli, who has taken Irish, ballet, tap and hip-hop style dance lessons. It’s only logical that the two spend time together watching the TV show “Dancing With the Stars.”

She has her eyes on the future too. Angeli’s college fund is already started, with hopes that her education won’t take as many twists and turns. Brenda is taking a first-time buyer class for potential homeowners through Bridge. Finally without debt in her life for the first time in years, she has set her sights on finding a nice place to raise Angeli. She also plans to someday receive her bachelor’s degree and hopefully attend law school. Even though it might take a while, she’s already made it this far.

“Don’t give up — stay with it,” Brenda said. “I met a former Bridge client who is now a nurse and she said the same thing. Sometimes I think to myself ‘I’m so fed up, it’s too hard!’ You have so many obstacles, but just don’t give up and keep going with it. Look at me, I’m almost there.”
Spending a glorious day on Saturday, June 19th touring six beautiful, private Glen Ellyn gardens. Master Gardeners from the University of Illinois Extension Office of DuPage County will be available at select gardens to answer all of your gardening questions.

Thank you to the generous homeowners that opened their gardens:
Natalie and Dan Coombes, Domini and Bob Deitch, Beth and Doug Merlo, Colleen and John Moelmann, Gabrielle and George Statathopoulos, Arlene and Gerry Zito

NEW THIS YEAR
Join Master Gardener, Stephanie Dalton, Edens Gate Gardening, for an interactive presentation that will answer all your questions about container gardening. You will learn how to create containers that will add color and texture to your garden and patio. The presentation will be from 1:30 to 2:00 pm at the Statathopoulos garden.

Purchase tickets for $20 through June 17th or $25 after that date. Tickets are now available online at www.bridgecommunities.org. Tickets can be purchased at: McChesney & Miller Grocery, 460 Crescent Boulevard, Harris Bank, 405 Pennsylvania Avenue, and Just The Bookstore, 288 Main Street, Ice Lolly Café 22W535 Butterfield Rd. beginning May 10th.

Make a day of it and enjoy lunch at a local Glen Ellyn restaurant that will donate 10% of your purchase to Bridge Communities. Restaurants include: Bells N’ Whistles Snackery, Tap House Grill, Danby’s Station, Shannon’s Irish Pub, Sante Fe Mexican Restaurant, and Honey.

You are invited to the home of Linda and John Smith for a summer evening of fine food, live entertainment and the company of good friends. The Smith’s garden exudes effortless beauty by incorporating natural stonework with shade loving perennials into the landscape design, multi-tiered ponds and meandering stream. Blue-stone patios are surrounded by ponds filled with goldfish, turtles and other wildlife. Mature trees provide a shady canopy for hours of relaxing entertaining.

This garden is only open for the Glen Ellyn Garden Party and will not be featured as part of the Glen Ellyn Garden Walk.

Purchase tickets for $100, which includes a ticket to the Glen Ellyn Garden Walk. Tickets are available at www.bridgecommunities.org or call 630-545-0610.

DONATIONS TO THE 2010 GLEN ELLYN GARDEN WALK HAVE BEEN GENEROUSLY GIVEN BY
For this Bridge Communities family, college is now a family affair.

Corvez will be the first in his family to go to college when he attends Northern Illinois University (NIU) in the fall. He’s already inspired his mother Cherilyn to start taking classes at Benedictine University in Lisle to get her associates degree.

The family entered the Bridge Communities program in 2008, and was enthusiastic about Corvez’s aspirations of higher learning, but new to the sometimes-complicated college application process. Rose Madison, a scheduling coordinator at Benedictine and a graduate of the Bridge Program, reached out to the family to lend Corvez a helping hand.

“When applying to college I was lost,” Corvez said. “I don’t know anyone who had done it before. Rose made it easy. She helped me step by step.”

Corvez is the most recent in a handful of college-bound students that Rose has mentored in the art of college preparation. She used to call Bridge to inquire if there were any families with students that could use help, but Bridge now recommends them to her. Rose has three daughters who are now adults, so she has plenty of experience in helping teenagers grow.

“Bridge Communities was such a great experience for me and I learned so much and met such great people,” said Rose. “When I completed it I wanted to be able to give back to Bridge somehow.”

Cherilyn was born and raised in Chicago, living and working there as a single parent with Corvez and daughter Chovannah. When the economy got sparse, she lost her job and the family was forced to live with friends and family in the suburbs and commute to Chicago for work and school. This quickly proved to be nearly impossible. They ended up staying with a friend in Glendale Heights that recommended Bridge Communities as a housing solution.

“Bridge offered us a lot of resources and opportunities,” Cherilyn said. “I took advantage of the car donation program. I worked with a mentor team and case manager to decrease my debt and understand what resources in the community I can use. I was introduced to food pantries and employment training options. They gave me resources of food and education for my children.” Cherilyn now works full time for a non-profit organization that raises awareness and support for individuals with Autism.

During the weekly visits to the family’s home, Rose would review Corvez’s transcript and schedule and check in on homework assignments. The two would then look through attractive programs at potential colleges, checking to see if their requirements matched his interests. Corvez plans to major in business and computer science, a good fit considering working and playing on computers is one of his favorite activities.

Corvez ultimately had the final say on his college choice, selecting NIU because of its excellent academics and its proximity to home.

Sometimes the constant work with Rose was tiring for Corvez, who was busy as a member of a high school football team that had a memorable run to the Illinois state championship game last fall. Finishing homework and being on top of his college applications were a lot to handle after a long practice.

“She was on my back, always nagging me,” Corvez laughed. “Sometimes after football practice I just wanted to go to sleep. She really brings a lot of energy. That’s the best part about it. “

Rose recently took Corvez for a visit to the NIU campus in DeKalb, a trip that finalized his decision. He was impressed by campus’s transportation system and enjoyed the fact that student housing is organized by major.

For a woman who works with college students everyday, Rose knows Corvez has what it takes.

“I think he is an amazing young man,” Rose said. “I love the way he’s always mindful of everything. He is a determined man and you can tell he is very passionate. I think it’s a family that will go far and do well because they have a zeal about themselves. It’s very encouraging.”

Corvez is looking forward to attending Northern Illinois University this fall.
Meets some every day Superheros

Every one of us has a superhero inside, waiting to come forward, to save the day, to help those who need it most, to change the world (or our little piece of it).

We know this because we see superheroes every day at Bridge Communities. We see our Bridge moms overcome the challenges of homelessness to provide the stability, safety and strength needed to provide for their kids and themselves.

It is true that not every superhero wears a cap and a “S” on their chest – sometimes they just go by “Mom.”

We asked some Bridge kids to tell us why their Mom is a superhero. The stories and portraits made us smile as we remembered the joy that kids bring to all experiences.

“My mom took care of me when I got sick”
— Isabella

“My mom is a super hero because she loves me”
— Alexandria

“My mom is a hero because mom stand for . . . Most of Moms Care!”
— Mackenzie

To see more stories about Bridge moms and their heroic acts of motherhood, please visit our website, www.bridgecommunities.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 Support Eight College-Bound Students

Bridge Builders helped fulfill the dream of a college education to eight first generation college-bound students when they presented college scholarships to these formerly homeless teens. Each student was awarded the $1,000 scholarship based on their academic achievements and a personal essay that told of their determination and dreams for their future.

At the award ceremony, students shared where they plan to attend – or currently attend – college and their field of study. The students’ colleges and interests varied; including architectural engineering, chemistry, and fashion design, but what the students all shared was a past that included homelessness. Each of the students’ families are either currently enrolled or were a former client family in the Bridge Communities’ Transitional Housing Program.

First-time award recipient, Adelbert shared, “I have come to understand that my future is in my own hands and I don’t plan on running it into the ground. Furthermore, I know because of organizations like Bridge Communities, my family back home is alright and taken care, and that I can focus on pursuing my own goals.” Adelbert has just begun his second year at Winona State University with a major in chemistry and a minor in psychology. He hopes to someday work for Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.

Thank you to the Bridge Builders, particularly Kathy Doyle and Patricia Lekacz, for their continued hands-on involvement with the teens and children served by Bridge. The Bridge Builders have raised more than $31,000 in the past three years to support college scholarships and other child enrichment activities, such as summer overnight camps, sports camps, music lessons and family-fun outings.