Erin’s favorite study spot isn’t in a quiet library or at a dimly lit coffee shop, but instead at her dining room table. It’s here that she studies long hours for her College of DuPage course load, where she is working hard to become a Licensed Practical Nurse. It’s a scenic spot, for the walls around the table are decorated with inspiration for all her hard work, photographs of her daughters Leah, 5, and Meghan, 2.

“I’ve always been interested in nursing,” said Meyers. “It literally is part of who I am. I am a caregiver and nurturer by nature. Now that I am in the nursing program at COD, it’s nice to see everything start to materialize.”

Born in rural Ohio, Meyers was restless in a small town where everyone knew one another. A rebellious teenager, she joined the navy, which she served in for almost two years. Once out of the military, Meyers moved to Massachusetts where she worked for a restaurant and eventually became the manager. The restaurant closed, but a former co-worker offered her another food service job in Elk Grove, where she moved to with no friends or family. While in Illinois, she married and had two daughters, but after six years, the marriage disintegrated in the midst of her husband’s physical and substance abuse issues.

“Things just escalated, and snowballed very quickly,” said Meyers. “I decided, no matter the sacrifices, I had to make a fresh, healthy start; for my kids and for me.”

Coming out of her relationship, Meyers had lost her food service job and was living with a friend she knew from church. When her friend asked her to move out, she was jobless and still handling her divorce proceedings. As she was waiting to get an order of protection from a legal office, she saw a Bridge Communities flyer on a bulletin board.

“Helping Oneself, While Giving to Others

“I’ve always been interested in nursing... It literally is part of who I am. I am a caregiver and nurturer by nature.”

Connections

Connecting Homeless Families to a Better Future

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Bob Wahlgren Receives Golden Trowel Award

Bob Wahlgren, Co-founder of Bridge Communities was awarded a Housing Action Illinois Golden Trowel Award in November. Every year, Housing Action Illinois presents Golden Trowel Awards to individuals or community-based organizations that have made significant contributions toward achieving housing justice in Illinois by working to increase or preserve the supply of quality affordable housing.

As co-founder of Bridge Communities and past executive director of Community Housing Association of DuPage (CHAD), Bob has worked tirelessly to preserve and create affordable housing options for low to moderate income families and individuals across Illinois.

In 2007, Bob began to raise the issue of how affordable rental units in condominium and town-home homeowner associations could be preserved. From his initial concern of protecting CHAD’s rental units, came a statewide initiative. In 2010, working in partnership with Housing Action Illinois, Bob’s initiative was passed into state law.

Bob was also instrumental in the development of Illinois’ first Shared Equity Homeownership Program initiated by Bridge Communities in 2007. Graduates of the Bridge Communities’ Transitional Housing Program that qualify for homeownership can purchase a minimum of 20% of a 2-bedroom condominium, therefore earning increasing equity and financial benefits of homeownership. This program is unique in that it provides a path for moderate income families who by traditional standards would be unable to take part in the benefits of homeownership.

Bridge Communities congratulates Bob on earning a Golden Trowel. Bob continues to be a visionary leader and inspiration to all of us at Bridge and to families in need.
Bridge is happy to welcome Lainie Kennedy to the board of directors. Lainie’s 17 years of progressing human resources experience will provide invaluable expertise and guidance to the organization. “When I was approached to join the Bridge board, I was honored to join such a highly regarded organization,” shared Kennedy. “I have great respect for the client families that show such determination to build a better life.” We welcome Lainie and look forward to her sharing her professional knowledge and passion for helping families in need. Lainie resides in Glen Ellyn with her husband, Marco and their two daughters Paige and Claire.

We also welcome new staff members: Yvonne Naese, director of operations, Vicky Joseph, Naperville community outreach coordinator, Tom Thiltgen, case manager, and Pam Howe, education coordinator. Each of these new staff members brings a vast level of knowledge and enthusiasm to their position and we are so pleased they have joined Bridge. Please introduce yourself the next time you see any of these new faces at the Bridge office or an event.

We also say an “almost” good-bye to a long-time, valued staff member, Barbara Trczinski. Barbara joined Bridge nearly fifteen years ago and brought such creativity, expertise and dedication to her position as education coordinator. In early March, Bridge friends gathered to celebrate Barbara’s contributions to the hundreds of lives she has positively impacted. We are grateful to Barbara for how she developed the Children’s Services and Educational Programs. Words alone cannot express our love and respect for Barbara and all that she has brought to the families served by Bridge. While we will miss her in her role as educational coordinator, we are thrilled that she will continue to provide consulting services to our families with infants and pre-school age children.

Bridge Communities has started a new program designed to ensure our client families have safe, reliable transportation. While Bridge is blessed to receive used donated cars that we then give to client families, we typically have more need than supply; and because some client families can afford a small monthly car payment, we have launched a new car pilot program designed to provide newer used cars that those families can purchase through Bridge. Last month, in partnership with Gearhead European Auto Repair, we “sold” our first car to Corinne. Corinne was a great candidate for this program as she has recently enrolled in the Transitional Housing Program; she works full-time, has managed her debt repayment and financial counseling has learned how to manage a small car loan. Corinne plans to pay off her car in just a couple of years and should have a reliable, low cost car that will keep her two daughters and her safe for a long time to come.
Helping Oneself, While Giving to Others  

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and decided to give them a call. When told by Bridge that she needed to be working to be considered for the Program, she wasted no time in getting her education and career aspirations back on track. Once she was hired as a health caregiver she was then selected for interviewing and then offered a place in the Bridge Communities Program. “When I interviewed Erin for the Program, she had already started to make the changes needed to help her and her kids. She had goals, great follow-through of all requests and skills that just needed the time to develop. I could immediately tell that she wanted to succeed,” said Molly Howieson, Erin’s case manager.

Her can-do spirit began to permeate immediately into her work with her mentors, who give her advice on money management, family life, and other responsibilities.

“She came to us with a budget, which is unusual for a client,” said Jim Paulissen, one of Erin’s mentors at St. John’s the Baptist Church in Winfield. “I thought, well, there goes the first months of our work!”

With her career goal of becoming a nurse already decided, it was only a matter of finding the right education. After taking prerequisite courses at College of DuPage last spring, Meyers is now enrolled in the College’s Licensed Practical Nursing Program. After a full day of class, she studies late into the evening after cooking her daughters their dinner and reading them bedtime stories. Meyers is currently interviewing for College of DuPage’s Federal Work Study Program, which allows students with financial need to work an on-campus job to help cover tuition costs.

“She sets very high goals and wants to be perfect,” said Paulissen. “I’m not saying its bad, but she puts a lot of pressure on herself. We’ve tried to get her to relax a little bit.”

Erin’s daughter, Leah has also benefited through a volunteer tutor that works with her weekly to help her catch-up academically. “The well being of her daughters is Erin’s top priority. She has been open to all interventions for not only herself, but also for Leah and Meghan,” shared Howieson. “One of the qualities I most admire in Erin is her desire to help others and share her gratitude.” Erin has already shown this to Bridge when she helped the organization obtain a $5,000 grant from the Naperville Masonic Temple Association.

Even though her schedule is becoming increasingly difficult, Meyers wouldn’t have it any other way. She is quickly approaching graduation from College of DuPage and is discerning if she will apply for the Registered Nursing Program. She’s embraced the winding path she’s traveled and is excited for the future. “Erin has let past unhealthy relationships knock her off her schooling path. She is so thrilled that she now believes enough and has the opportunity to achieve these long held goals,” said Howieson.

“When God shuts a door, he opens a window — I believe in that,” said Meyers. “I am extremely grateful to Bridge and my mentors and the countless hours of volunteer time. Also there needs to be a spotlight on God. When a person has hope, anything is possible.”

Garage Party Benefits the Car Donation Program

The buzz around town is all about the rockin’ Garage Party Benefit held on January 31st. A crowd of more than 350 guests joined us for what is being called the party of the season. We are thrilled to announce that Bridge Builders raised more than $22,000 to support Bridge Communities’ Auto Donation Program.

Many families enter our Transitional Housing Program with a car that soon breaks down, or sometimes no car at all. Donated used cars are refurbished and given to clients in need of safe, reliable transportation to work, school and child care. Our Auto Donation Program is a critical part of getting our families back on the road to self-sufficiency.

We would like to thank Bridge Builders, especially Deb Ritter’s impressive leadership, for organizing and hosting such a fantastic party. We also thank the entire
Springtime for me means fragrant blooming trees, daffodils poking out of the ground and cleaning away the remnants of winter. My spring cleaning this year at Bridge was saying goodbye to some well worn office furniture.

Fifteen years ago when I started at Bridge Communities we rented our first office, even though by then Bridge was already eight years old. Before I came along our co-founders and their merry band of volunteers had not yet put down roots. I needed a feeling of permanency. Our first office was in the building we now own, but at the time, we merely rented one small room. We furnished it with a dining room table, some end tables and a coffee table to match from a furniture outlet store nearby. We also became new owners of donated, slightly used “Holiday Inn” chairs.

In that office hung a frame which had this saying in it; “One hundred years from now, it will not matter what kind of car I drove, what kind of house I lived in, how much I had in my bank account or what my clothes looked like. But what matters is that the world may be a little better because I was important in the life of a child.” Author Unknown

During this spring cleaning I am finally saying goodbye to the “vintage” hotel chairs and the tables and dining room table, turned desk that I used all these years. What I’m not discarding is the framed, “What Matters” quote from our original office. It aptly suggests a sentiment that doesn’t just sit in its frame, but is for Bridge Communities an important guiding principle that influences our decisions to this day.

The 101 families that we served last year included 103 adults and 159 children. Our founders were motivated to start Bridge because they were moved to action knowing there were homeless children in their community, without a bed of their own to sleep in. Bridge Communities Strategic Plan holds within it a bold commitment to be important to in the lives of more and more homeless children. Our ambitious plan to purchase 5 more apartment buildings in the next 5 years provides unequivocal focus on that guiding principle to continue to make a difference in the life of a child!

When a case manager and her friend were recently visiting one of our buildings to deliver furniture to a new Bridge family, they were greeted at the apartment door by a mother and her young son. Before they could exchange words with the mom, the little boy grabbed the friend’s hand and excitedly pulled her to see his very own new bedroom. That tug of her hand, moved straight to a heartstring, and now she is a strong supporter of Bridge. It’s all about the children!

Bye-bye old table and chairs. Actually, I’m not sad and only a bit nostalgic about giving away that original furniture. What I will not say goodbye to is the sentiment expressed in the quote that hung on the wall of our very first official office. It is our mantra which motivates our work and our strategic plans all these years later. It’s been a simple, yet powerful model from the beginning; one homeless family, one apartment and program, one transformed life of that family! Making the difference in the life of a child, what could be more profound!

Joyce Hothan
Executive Director

Save the date for the next Bridge Builders event. To add your name to the invitation list, please contact Margo Matthew at margo.matthew@bridgecommunities.org.
Bridge Communities re-opened its fully renovated Naperville Learning Resource Center (NLRC) with a ribbon-cutting ceremony March 13th. Joining Bridge Communities’ staff, volunteers and client families were Naperville dignitaries, including Mayor George Pradel who cut the grand re-opening ribbon.

“We are very excited about the re-opening of our Learning Resource Center. This Center hosts a full schedule of family fun activities designed to help our client families become more engaged with one another, provide a positive learning environment for our children and serve as a welcoming meeting space for our client families and volunteers,” said Pam Howe, education coordinator for Bridge Communities. The NLRC serves as a place for tutoring lessons for both children and adults, as well as a space for children to do homework, play, read and talk with caring adult mentors.

NLRC renovation began on January 27, 2011 with hopes that a newly designed and full-service Center would further Bridge’s educational programming and community-building goals. Much of the renovation success came from Bridge’s partnership with Naperville Covenant Church. Through generous financial donations and many volunteer work hours, Naperville Covenant Church was able to raise the funds and workers needed for the remodeling. “We are sincerely thankful to everyone at Naperville Covenant Church for helping to make this renovation a resounding success,” said Howe.

Naperville Covenant Church has dedicated hundreds of volunteer hours to the NLRC throughout the past two years as congregation members have served as volunteers in the NLRC providing a safe, educational and fun spot for Bridge Communities’ client families to visit two nights every week. During this time Church volunteers have developed wonderful relationships with the homeless children as they work on homework, celebrate holidays, create craft projects, read, and work on the computers and internet.

Bridge Communities understands and values the impact a safe, healthy learning environment can have on a child’s life. The NLRC provides such a space. This newly renovated space will help us reach our goal of providing the resources necessary to help change the every day lives of the nearly 25 Naperville homeless families we serve in our Transitional Housing Program.
Spent a glorious day on Saturday, June 18th 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 will open their gardens:
Valerie and Jim Carroll, Beth and John Jostrand, Nina and George Podrasky
Linda and Norm Rahal, Betsy and Floyd Rogers, Kay and Bob Wahlgren

Purchase tickets for $20 through June 16th or $25 after that date.
Tickets are now available online at www.bridgecommunities.org.

Beginning May 9th, tickets can be purchased at the following locations:
McChesney & Miller Grocery, 460 Crescent Boulevard
Harris Bank, 405 Pennsylvania Avenue
Just The Bookstore, 288 Main Street
Winesstyles, 715 Roosevelt Road

Make a day of it and enjoy lunch at a local Glen Ellyn restaurant that will donate 10% of your purchase to Bridge Communities.

You are invited to a summer evening of fine food, live entertainment and the company of good friends. The Glen Ellyn Garden Party will exclusively feature one of Glen Ellyn’s finest homes and gardens open for your pleasure just one night. Location details, garden photos, and ticket information are available at www.bridgecommunities.org.

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 2011 GLEN ELLYN GARDEN WALK HAVE BEEN GENEROSLY GIVEN BY

- American Gardens
- BRUSS Landscaping, Inc.
- Glen Ellyn Bank & Trust
- Via Panera
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.

How will you be remembered?

Your decision to make a planned gift is a personal statement about what you care about and who you are.

There are many ways to make a lasting legacy, provide for your loved ones and receive the assurance that your personal philanthropic goals will be achieved in perpetuity. The simplest act is to leave a bequest in your will. Should you decide to include Bridge Communities in your estate plan, you may wish to provide the following language to your attorney in preparation of any will:

**Form of Bequest**

“I give to Bridge Communities, Inc., located in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, the sum of $____, for its general use and purposes.”

**Form of Residuary Clause**

“I give the residue of my estate, both real and personal [or a specified fraction or percentage thereof], to Bridge Communities, Inc., located in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, for its general uses and purposes.”

If you provide for Bridge Communities through your estate plan, please let us know so we may acknowledge and thank you. All gifts made through your will, trust or other type of estate plan can be an enduring tribute to a family member or other loved one.

You can become a charter member of the Cornerstone Society. If you are interested in exploring your planned giving options, please contact Bridge Communities today at (630) 545-0610 ext. 12 or amylvanpolen@bridgecommunities.org.