In an effort to provide a better future for his family, Ken Alexander had been in school full-time to complete his degree, while working part-time as well. Then, in 2008, he was suddenly laid off from his job.

His wife, Jerrie, had been staying at home with their daughters, Jorie and Jaida, and was finishing cosmetology school. Ken’s unemployment eventually ran out, and the family sank into debt.

“In our last months of school, we were living off of school loans just to pay our bills,” says Jerrie. As the years went by, it was a bigger and bigger mess.”

For four long years, the family struggled to stay afloat in this manner, but fell further and further behind on their bills. They hit their low when they were evicted from their apartment.

“When we got evicted, it was in the middle of January in a blizzard,” remembers Jerrie. “And to see all of our belongings left out and put in a dumpster—I’ll never forget it, it was so traumatic. We went back to the apartment complex a few weeks later to see a friend, and when we pulled in, the girls both started panicking in the backseat. You never want to see your kids go through that.”

The family was reduced to living in their minivan, occasionally staying in hotels when they could and subsisting off of dollar-menu options from fast food restaurants. Then, the family learned about Bridge Communities. They were accepted into Bridge’s Transitional Housing program in early 2013, and connected to their mentors through St. Isaac Jogues Catholic Church in Hinsdale.

When the Alexanders first met with their mentors—Bob, Barb and Chris—they jumped right into the program. Explains Jerrie, “We knew we were going to do whatever it takes to succeed.”

“In our last months of school, we were living off of school loans just to pay our bills.”

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Connections is a publication of Bridge Communities, Inc., a program providing transitional housing for homeless families.

The mission of Bridge Communities is to transition homeless families to self-sufficiency by working with partners to provide mentoring, housing, and supportive services. Our vision is a community where all families are healthy, financially stable, and living in affordable housing. Each of our core values, Partnership, Empowerment, Integrity, Respect, Hope, apply to everyone involved in Bridge Communities – clients, mentors, program partners, volunteers, donors, board members, staff and community.

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

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Taskeen Khan: A True Sleep Out Saturday Star

As a child, Glen Ellyn teen Taskeen Khan participated in Sleep Out Saturday with her family, sleeping in their car for the night and collecting donations for Bridge Communities when she went trick-or-treating the week prior to the event. Once she was a sophomore at Glenbard West, she decided to take her involvement to the next level.

“I knew the more teams there were, the more we’d raise,” Taskeen explains. “When I shared Bridge Communities’ vision with my friends, everyone saw how important this was. Not only did we raise money through Glenbard West, but my friends at Islamic Foundation School in Villa Park, Muslim Society Inc., and Naperville North High School galvanized their own teams. In friendly rivalry, we collectively raised over $4,500.”

In addition to sleeping out at St. Mark’s Episcopal Church in 2013, Taskeen and classmates Clair Tylke, Diana Rivera and Jeremie Barbosa also held a series of bake sales to support Bridge, culminating with a final bake sale onsite at the SOS Rally. “I want fundraising for SOS to become a Glenbard West tradition that continues even after we graduate,” Taskeen says. “We were able to raise quite a bit of awareness about SOS in our school, other DuPage schools and my mosque, and we raised a substantial amount of money. Sleep Out Saturday is an amazing event to take part in.”

“We thank Taskeen for all she did to bring together her network of friends to raise funds and awareness for homeless families,” says Jennie Gates, Special Events Manager. “We hope her grassroot efforts will encourage others to reach out to their own network and join in this year’s efforts.”

Do you know a high school student that would like to get involved with Sleep Out Saturday? Contact Jennie Gates at 630-545-0610 ext. 12 or jennie.gates@bridgecommunities.org.
If housing is our foundation, then mentoring is our fabric.

If housing is our foundation, then mentoring is our fabric. First there was the idea that the key stabilizing factor for a homeless family was providing a clean, safe apartment. Then there was the idea that people—laypeople—would be willing to volunteer their time to help homeless families meet the challenges that brought them to homelessness. In 1988, co-founders Mark Milligan and Bob Wahlgren brought these two simple ideas together, with absolute confidence that the resources would be found to meet the needs of “just a few” homeless families. Twenty-six years later, “just a few” now number over 600 families who have been brought through the transition to a life of self-sufficiency.

Today I salute the thousands, that’s right, thousands of volunteers who have provided the first line of direct service to our families over the years—our mentors. Watch any of our videos in which our families bear witness, read any exit survey, go to any of our events, visit any of our Learning Resource Centers—and between the lines of any success story ever told of Bridge Communities, you will see the marks left by our mentors. An informal survey of 50 mentors who had all attended our Mentor University series in October showed the average length of service of mentors to be about eight years—one mentor in particular had 20 years of service. There have been countless hours given, countless problems solved, caring without end, and lives changed, year after year.

Today our mentors number well over 200 volunteers taking time out of their lives each week to assist our families as they forge a path toward self-sufficiency. Mentors are parents and grandparents, native-born and immigrants, elderly and young, white collar and blue collar. Mentors believe in the power of the family. Mentors bring both life experience and professional skills. To our families, mentors bring friendship, consistency, support and accountability during our rigorous program. Mentors have had their own hopes and dreams, overcome their own adversity, and they model these hopes and dreams to our families. Most of all, mentors care. We couldn’t ask for a better group of people to have as the first line of direct service to our families.

If you as a reader are a mentor, we thank you for all you’ve done and will do. If you know a mentor, reach out and thank this person. If you wish to become a mentor, call me.

John R. Hayner, Chief Executive Officer

Thank you!

After serving more than 20 years as a Program Partner and mentor, Ken Murphy of St. Peter’s Catholic Church in Itasca is retiring, and passing the torch to fellow mentor Ken Cleveland. Says Murphy, “Taking someone from hopelessness to dignity was one of the most rewarding things of being a mentor.” We thank him for his outstanding service and dedication to Bridge families!
The Alexander Family: Whatever it Takes to Succeed  continued from page 1

whatever it takes to succeed, because they were doing all of this for us. To know there’s people who take time out of their lives every week to check on us, and that there’s donors who help support Bridge—we would not be here without them."

Getting involved in Bridge’s employment program was a big turning point for the couple. “Being turned down over and over for jobs really weighs on your psyche. I had gone into interviews before so nervous, and under so much pressure to get the job and support my family, and it had all come across in my demeanor,” says Ken. “Mary told me, ‘You need to be more confident, you need to smile more.’ I took the class and I did about five mock interviews with people who were willing to critique the interview for me afterwards.”

Participating in the employment program has paid off for both Jerrie and Ken. In July, Jerrie was offered her first job in 12 years, and now works full time at a manufacturer of microfiber cleaning cloths.

Then, in September, Ken obtained a full-time job at a large printing company. He held a part-time job for a few months as well, and the two jobs combined allowed the family to pay off many of their bills. “Now we only have a few things left to pay off, and we even have money in savings,” he added.

With the family’s financial situation more secure, they could start to work on rebuilding their lives and improving themselves from the inside out. According to the Alexanders, their mentors make sure they’re on top of doctor and dentist visits for every member of the family. Both Ken and Jerrie have made lifestyle changes, resulting in better health for all four of them.

Says Robyn Mason, the Alexanders’ case manager, “Ken and Jerrie are definitely two of the most kind-hearted persons you would ever want to meet, and the girls, Jaida and Jorie, are indeed a reflection of their parents with their soft voices and cute-as-a-button smiles. They’re simply a wonderful family that you take pleasure in working with.”

One of the most rewarding things for the Alexanders has been seeing the positive impact the program has made on their children. “Bridge was very active to help us with Jorie’s development. Before, she wouldn’t interact with other kids, and she had really just shut down,” Jerrie explains. “And now, she has made a complete turnaround. For the first time, she has all As and Bs, and she started drawing and playing piano. Jaida is in kindergarten, and she is doing really well, too.”

With the parents and kids on a great path, the Alexanders feel optimistic about their future after Bridge. “What we’re learning really are all just good habits: budgeting, saving receipts and seeing where the money goes,” explains Ken. It’s good to have someone to be accountable to as we learn the new process. Now, it is more taking ownership and a lifestyle change that we’ll continue as we leave the program.”

Investing in Homes + Hope

Investing in Homes + Hope is more than just the name for our Bridge Communities Capital and Endowment Campaign—it’s exactly the opportunity that’s available to our supporters. Through this Campaign, you’re providing not only housing for Bridge families, but hope and a path to a better life as well.

The purpose of the Campaign is twofold: to raise at least $5.5 million toward purchasing five new apartment buildings throughout DuPage County, which will house nearly 30 more homeless families per year; and, to build an endowment fund, ensuring that Bridge Communities will be there to serve homeless families well into the future.

“As a retired staff member who worked for Bridge Communities for 14 years, I know first-hand what kind of organization Bridge is, and I am proud to be a part of the team that helped Bridge grow,” says Marge Bartlett. By supporting the Investing in Homes + Hope campaign, Bridge will be able to continue that growth and provide the services that homeless families need to become as self-sufficient as possible.”

Since the launch of Bridge Communities’ Investing in Homes + Hope Campaign in January 2011, we’ve made significant headway toward our goals—and it’s all thanks to

Gary and Marge Bartlett
Bridge Communities is proud to debut A Chair Affair, a unique opportunity to appreciate and celebrate beautiful artwork through the transformation of chairs, stools and benches. From May 27 to June 11, patrons can visit stores in Downtown Naperville to view these fun, whimsical, funky and avant-garde chairs. These outstanding pieces of artwork will showcase the creative talent of local artists supported by generous sponsors who have made this event possible. Vote for your favorite on www.bridgecommunities.org, and on June 12th, join us for an exciting evening of delicious food and cocktails, a silent auction and a high energy live auction at Wentz Hall, on North Central College’s beautiful campus in Naperville.

Tickets for the June 12th event are $40 and include a sumptuous hors d’oeuvres buffet and open bar. Proceeds of the event benefit Bridge Communities’ programs, transforming the lives of homeless families.

Purchase your ticket and vote for your favorite chair at www.bridgecommunities.org.

Sponsored by:

Clune Construction Company  |  Naperville Bank & Trust  |  Naperville
Marscetti  |  Water Street District  |  DuPage Medical Group

our loyal friends like you. As a result of your generosity, we are pleased and humbled to share that:

• Bridge supporters have donated $5.2 million to Investing in Homes + Hope.

• Bridge is actively pursuing opportunities to purchase two properties in 2014, one of which will be in Naperville, thanks to a $300,000 grant from the City of Naperville’s Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding.

• Donors have boosted our endowment fund to $1.3 million toward a $2 million goal.

“Through a generous gift to our Campaign, we have strengthened our employment program via an employment fund within the endowment,” explains Resource Development Director Amy Van Polen. “Because of this, we were able to add another part-time job counselor to staff and fund job readiness classes for our clients. To date, nearly 60 clients have attended these classes.”

If you would like to invest in homes + hope for homeless families in your community, please contact Amy Van Polen at amy.vanpolen@bridgecommunities.org or (630) 545-0620 ext. 12.
Bridge welcomes Joseph Hoff to the board as well. Joseph is retired from a 35-year career in finance, most recently serving as Managing Director/CEO of HSBC Retail Services. As part of his Board responsibilities, Joe now serves as the chairman of Bridge’s Development Committee. Joe is a past member of the Wheaton Lions Club, and created a scholarship fund at NIU College of Business for students in financial need.

New Board Members:

David Larson, Executive Vice President and Regional Market Head of Wintrust Financial, joined the Bridge board in November 2013. David oversees the bank’s Managed Asset Division, as well as Wheaton Community Bank, Old Plank Trail Community Bank and St. Charles Bank. David and his wife, Julie, are Bridge mentors through the program partner Lives In Transition.

Coleman Tuggle, Principal, Triform, LLC, is also new to the Bridge board. Coleman has a background in corporate banking and real estate investment, and has served on the school board for High School District 86 and for the Village of Hinsdale. Coleman also volunteers as a tutor with Literacy DuPage and as a mentor with LINK Unlimited.

New Staff:

Lisa Doyle joined the Bridge Communities team in December as Communications Manager. Lisa arrived at Bridge after more than 5 years of managing the volunteer program at People’s Resource Center, and has a background in magazine publishing. She has volunteered for Metropolitan Family Services and DuPage Children’s Museum, and is active in the DuPage Association of Volunteer Administration.

Success Stories

- Teneshia, who obtained an interior design internship, and has already interviewed for jobs upon her graduation
- Leah, working full-time as a barista, earned a 20% raise
- Ashley, who is in the paralegal program at COD and started a part-time job in a law firm
- Nidia, who obtained a job as an office manager for a landscaping firm and quickly received a 30% raise
- Alexandra, who got a $40,000/year job working as a human resource analyst
- Tia now works as a scheduler for a medical group
- Lashonda, who accepted a customer care job for $14/hour
- Shannon, now working at a daycare center, full-time with benefits
- Yvonne, a graduate who has worked full-time at her job for over a year, and just received a 7% raise
Led by Manager of Employment Services Mary Zienty and Employment Counselor Jodi Fegter, Bridge’s employment program is helping serve our families in unprecedented ways. Some examples of the major strides they’ve made for Bridge families include:

**Job Readiness Workshops.** When job-seeking clients first enter the Bridge program, they attend a 4-week job readiness class. After completing the 10-hour workshop, the clients are energized and ready to take ownership of their job search.

**Just An Interview.** Through this program, local employers agree to provide an in-person job interview to qualified applicants from Bridge Communities. Prior to applying, the clients work with Bridge’s employment team to ensure their skill set is a good match for the open position, and attend job readiness workshops, prepare their resumes and go through career assessment testing. These partnerships offer Bridge clients an edge when applying for jobs, because while the clients have to be hired on their own merit, just getting selected for an interview is the first obstacle they must overcome.

**Accent Reduction Classes.** Bridge sponsors speech therapy classes in accent reduction for clients who speak English as a second language, and need help improving their American dialect—especially important in the age of phone interviews. In 2013, four Bridge clients benefited from these classes.

*Read our cover story, “The Alexander Family: Whatever it Takes to Succeed,” to learn about their employment success!*

Community Partner Spotlight: Phonak

Bridge partnered with Phonak, a global leader in hearing technology headquartered in Warrenville, as part of its “Just An Interview” initiative, and the program has worked out with great mutual success.

“Mary Zienty and her team identify appropriate candidates and work with them to apply online,” explains Cindy Strohm, Vice President, Human Resources at Phonak. “Currently we have three employees who came to us from Bridge – all hired solely on their own merit,” said Strohm.

**Do you work for a company that supports charitable causes?**

**Do you think the company may want to support Bridge Communities?**

**Let us know!** Contact Margo Matthew, Director of Grants, at 630-545-0610 ext.25 or margo.matthew@bridgecommunities.org.
This June, Glen Ellyn homeowners open their beautiful backyards once more for the exceptional, annual Garden Walk: Through the Garden Gate. As Bridge Communities passes the baton to the Glen Ellyn Junior Women’s Club, who will manage the Garden Walk henceforth, Bridge is thankful to remain the beneficiary of the proceeds of the event.

The 2014 Garden Walk will take place on Saturday, June 21 from 10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m., and will showcase several private gardens throughout Glen Ellyn. Ranging from the formal to the whimsical, from the grand to the diminutive, the gardens are living works of art and sure to delight the senses. New this year will be a French market, where attendees can shop for items to decorate and accentuate their own gardens. The event will also feature presentations from Master Gardeners at select gardens, who will provide horticultural tips and advice.

Tickets are $25 through June 19, and $30 beginning June 20. Children’s tickets are offered to children 12 years and younger at a reduced cost of $15. Tickets can be purchased at www.glenellynjuniors.com. Thank you to the Garden Walk sponsors: Bruss Landscape and American Gardens.