



Connections

Connecting homeless families to a better future.

● Nina: “Bridge has been a life saver and a game changer for me”

Four years ago, Nina was living in Hawaii, in a happy relationship, attending college and working at a bank part-time. She was focused on graduation and building her career. It seemed like life couldn't get any better.

Until it all fell apart.

“I'd been with my boyfriend for two years when I got pregnant with twins,” she said.

“And then, he got mixed up with some people he shouldn't have, and got into drugs.” He was swiftly incarcerated, leaving Nina to fend for herself. Then, as her pregnancy wore on, her chronic morning sickness weakened her so much that she could no longer keep her job nor stay in school.

With no support system in Hawaii, she returned home to the Chicago area and moved in with her sister. While grateful for the help, “I was so upset because my

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life was falling apart,” Nina remembers. “I was really, really sick, and everything was so stressful.”

After her babies were born, Nina found a job as a cashier at a gas station. But, it wasn’t long before life threw another curveball. Her sister could no longer afford her apartment, so Nina and the twins had to crash in Nina’s mother’s subsidized housing—bringing the number of people in the cramped two-bedroom apartment to seven.

“I would stay at a homeless shelter or in my car. It was so chaotic.”

“My mom would keep the twins overnight, and to make room, I would stay at a homeless shelter or in my car,” says Nina. “It was so chaotic. I was terrified of not having a place to live, and I knew that if my mother got in trouble for housing us, she could lose her home, too.”

Her mother researched Bridge Communities, and Nina immediately applied. It was a huge relief when she and her babies, who’d just turned one, were accepted into the program and moved into their apartment. “It was amazing to have the freedom of our own place, and not be walking on eggshells all the time,” Nina says. But, she knew she still had a long way to go before she’d be fully independent.

The first step was getting into a new routine with her mentors from First Congregational United Church of Christ in Downers Grove. She had four mentors, so at each weekly meeting, two mentors would work with her on budgeting and finances, while the other two would help with the twins. “They were really understanding—though, relinquishing control of my life was a challenge,” Nina admits. “To make lots of changes at one time is hard. But it was all right because I knew that they really cared about me.”

They started out by setting goals with Nina: to get a full-time job; to pay off her debt left from her last months alone in Hawaii; and to build up her savings and raise her credit score so that she could eventually purchase a home.

Before applying for a full-time job, Nina signed up for Bridge’s employment readiness training workshop. “It was great to learn how to create a resume, and also to get to know other Bridge clients,” she says. “Helping one another was really encouraging and helped us build up our confidence.”

Soon afterward, Nina landed a full-time job in accounts payable. And, because of this, she was able to pay off her debt in a year, making her credit score jump from a low of 464 up to 698. She also started a savings account, diligently



socking away her tax returns and one-third of each paycheck toward a down payment for a home.

Things were on the upswing, but Nina knew there was still something missing in her life.

“I’d always loved to learn, and I wanted to go back to school to complete my accounting degree,” she says. “My mentors were supportive because they knew I would be able to make more money in the long run.” She switched to a new part-time job in a corporate accounting department, enrolled in college and is now working toward her associate’s in accounting. She’s keeping on track to graduate at the end of next year, and her employer has already asked her to go full-time once she graduates.

“Nina passionately wanted to complete her degree, even though we weren’t sure at first there were enough hours in a

Two Years In



It's been exciting to observe the shift in our vocabulary over the past two years since the launch of our children's program. In the recent past, we'd said that we were serving about 80 families at any one time. Now we say that we are serving about 300 people: the adults and children in nearly 100 families. Our Children's Services team – Jill, Sharon, and Michelle – now form the core of services to **every single child** in our housing. Services we deliver in house include comprehensive developmental assessments, completing full health profiles, after-school tutoring, and social and educational enrichment group activities in our five Learning Resource Centers.

Equally as impressive are the many partnerships we have in place that are essential to having each child thrive in their communities. To name a few:

- The 24 public school districts where our kids attend school, making sure that families are well connected to them and receiving all the necessary services;
- Our behavioral health partners – SamaraCare and Metropolitan Family Services, who provide essential trauma-informed counseling to children whose

development has been disrupted by the crisis of homelessness;

- Project Help – who deliver a parent education workshop series and a home visiting program for parents requesting additional coaching in parenting skills;
- YWCA – who help families navigate the State of Illinois child-care subsidy and find the most appropriate day-care options.

What have we learned since making the commitment to these new services? We have learned that, as much as we value the public schools as partners, they also value us to reach their achievement goals with the kids. We have learned that parents will readily seize the opportunities we provide for their children and for their own development as good parents. And just as importantly, we have learned that our donors and friends have rallied to support this groundbreaking addition to our services. Thank you to all who have stepped up to make the children's program an essential part of the new fabric of Bridge Communities.

Sincerely,

John R. Hayner, *Chief Executive Officer*
Bridge Communities

day to accomplish it all," says Suzanne Thibeault, Nina's case manager. "And now, Nina is maintaining a 4.0 GPA while still balancing everything else! Nina's fierce determination to succeed has been incredible to watch. We're all so proud of her."

As Nina ends her time in Bridge's transitional housing,

she's switching into Bridge's Pathways program, locking in an affordable rent for the next year as she completes her degree. She's thankful for the opportunities she's had in Bridge, and knows her life would have been very different without it. "It's been a life saver and a game changer for me,"

Nina says. "There's no way I could have had this life for my kids and saved money without the support of the program, the resources it offered, and the people involved. Bridge is just an awesome program that gives people a second chance." 🏠

Q&A with Jerry Zielinski | Mentor



Q. How did you first get involved with Bridge Communities?

A. I retired several years ago and have done what is typical for retirees – some travel, a lot of reading, helping my wife in her garden – things I had little time for before retiring. However, I felt a need to do something more, something more meaningful. After attending a training program from Our Lady of Mt. Carmel in Darien, I joined two fellow parishioners as mentors to a Bridge-sponsored family. Our client, Ines, is a single mom with two children.

Q. What do you do as a mentor?

A. As mentors, we helped Ines develop budgeting skills and find the wealth of resources

available to her. Ines wants to continue to work in health care and is pursuing an Associate's Degree in Health Information Technology. Ines, a CNA, was born and raised in Togo West Africa, a French-speaking country. With English as her second language, she has found pursuing this degree challenging, but is doing so with passion.

As we continued to work as mentors, I began to help Ines with her studies. I pick up copies of the text books she uses, read the assigned material and then meet with her to talk about what has been assigned. I make sure not to do any of the course work for her, but I provide a sounding board. I've been learning quite a bit myself.

Q. What's your favorite Bridge memory?

A. During Ines' second year with the Bridge program, she completed the requirements for naturalization. My fellow mentors and I were invited to Ines' citizenship ceremony. To see her take the oath of allegiance and become a citizen of the United States was both heartwarming and humbling.

Q. What's the best thing about volunteering with Bridge Communities?

A. Working as a mentor for Ines and her family has been a very rewarding experience for me. I feel that I am making a positive contribution and doing something important. 🏡

What's new at Bridge Communities?

Your support makes a world of difference for Bridge families! Because of you, we've been able to introduce new and unique programming for families this spring and summer. These include:

Summer Reading

Program: This past summer, more than 40 Bridge kids participated in the Summer Reading Program. They kicked off the summer by setting individual reading goals, then checked in monthly to track their progress and earned prizes along the way. The challenge culminated with a pizza party celebration and a "back to school" night event!



Argonne Field Trip: In June, Argonne National Laboratories hosted a group of Bridge kids for a special STEM day onsite at the lab, complete with tours, learning labs and experiments! The kids loved getting an inside look at careers in math and science, and their parents were thankful for their kids' once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Art and Science Nights: The YWCA Metropolitan Chicago held a series of Art and Science Nights for Bridge kids over the summer at the Learning Resource Centers. The kids had a blast creating mini sugar cube structures that could withstand a golf ball "earthquake," and learned about engineering and construction in the process!



Childcare during workshops: We recently secured childcare for Bridge kids while their parents attend Bridge's Employment Workshops. The volunteers at Naperville Covenant Church have been essential to helping the parents attend class and achieve greater success in their careers!

Our Learning Resource Centers (LRCs) are the hubs of Bridge activities—and we need your help to keep them running! **If you are interested in volunteering, please contact Sharon Drucker at sharon.drucker@bridgecommunities.org.**

A Chair Affair Arrives in Hinsdale

Your favorite “chairity” event is on the move—please join us for the debut of A Chair Affair – Hinsdale on October 5! This fall, A Chair Affair’s cocktail auction & gala will be held at the beautifully redesigned Community House in Hinsdale.

You’ll be able to enjoy in person all the one-of-a-kind pieces of chair artwork, designed by local artists. Starting September 11, they’ll be on display throughout businesses in downtown Hinsdale, Clarendon Hills, and at retail locations in Burr Ridge and Oak Brook.

Online voting for the chairs will be available through October 5, when they’ll be moved to The Community House for the main

event—and you can bid on your favorite chair and take it home at our live and silent auctions! You’ll also enjoy raffles for exciting prizes and experiences, a wine pull, and brand new for this event, a jewelry pull featuring exclusive pieces from Kendra Scott.

Tickets for the October 5 event are now available! Your \$50 ticket includes an hors d’oeuvres and dessert buffet, plus an open bar. Proceeds of A Chair Affair go directly to support Bridge’s transitional housing program and the 130 homeless families served this year. **Purchase your ticket today on bridgecommunities.org.**



A Chair Affair

Gala Reception & Auction Event

Thursday, October 5, 2017

The Community House
415 W. 8th St., Hinsdale

\$50 ticket

6 p.m. Cocktails and Buffet reception,
Art Preview and Silent Auction

7:30 p.m. Live Auction

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Partner Spotlight: Grace Pointe Church - Naperville

At Bridge Communities, we’re grateful for our 40+ faith-based program partners that provide mentors, funding and more for our Bridge families. And, did you know that we also partner with outstanding religious organizations in our community for volunteer projects? One

such church is Grace Pointe in Naperville.

Earlier this year, a team from Grace Pointe came to our newest Learning Resource Center on two occasions to assemble all the furniture, organize and clean the center and prepare it for use of Bridge families. “Everybody in our congregation likes to help out and when we do something like this, we get a chance to participate and build relationships, even within our own membership, and find out more about the good work that Bridge is doing,”

says Dick Hillyard, a deacon at Grace Pointe. “We’re happy to have Bridge as a part of our community outreach and hope to continue a long-term partnership.”

The feeling is mutual—thank you for all you do to help Bridge families!

Would you like for your faith organization get involved with a Bridge Communities volunteer project?

Please contact Vicky Joseph at vicky.joseph@bridgecommunities.org.



Thank you to the tireless team at Grace Pointe Church - Naperville for assembling all the furniture for our newest Learning Resource Center!

Get Ready for Sleep Out Saturday 2017!

Join the Movement Today



Meet Bridge Families

You can learn about the families you've transformed when you hear their inspirational stories at our Sleep Out Saturday Rally! At 6:00 p.m. on November 4, join us outside the Bridge Communities office in downtown Glen Ellyn to hear the stories of Maria's and Tony's families, and how you've helped them move from homelessness to hope for a better future. Plus, the multimedia rally will include music, games, prizes and more to get you ready for a life-changing night of sleeping out!

Sign up to sleep out!

Everyone's invited to sleep out, fundraise, attend the rally and participate in Sleep Out Saturday activities! There are 3 ways you can sign up on www.sleepoutsaturday.org:

- **Groups:** Adults, children or teens from a community organization, faith-based group, or Scout troop, plus the group leaders who will supervise their group's Sleep Out Saturday participation.
- **Sleep Out Stars:** Families or individuals who are participating independently.
- **Business Leaders for Bridge:** Business leaders, networking groups and young professionals looking to make a difference.

November 4, 2017

This November 4, you can join hundreds across Chicagoland by going without a home for one life-changing night. Sleep Out Saturday is the movement that raises money to end family homelessness by sleeping outside in the cold, providing a glimpse into the lives of those without a home. Join the movement and donate or fundraise to help homeless families in the Bridge Communities transitional housing program reach a brighter future.

Visit www.sleepoutsaturday.org today!



Give to Sleep Out Saturday

You will change the life of a homeless family when you give to Sleep Out Saturday. Every gift made in honor of Sleep Out Saturday will provide Bridge Communities families with safe housing, case management, employment search and assistance, education and tutoring, counseling, children's programming and more. **Donate to Sleep Out Saturday at www.sleepoutsaturday.org!**

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Thank YOU!

This community has rallied together in support of Bridge families, and we couldn't be more grateful. Thank you for helping them create a better future!



100+ Women Who Care

At their quarterly meeting in August, the DuPage County chapter of 100+ Women Who Care voted to make their donation to Bridge Communities—an outstanding \$12,025! Thank you so much to the group for your generosity!

Naperville Chamber of Commerce's Women in Business group featured Bridge at their Summer Wine Social at TopGolf in July, raising more than \$1,600 for Bridge families. We are grateful to have such good friends in this group of dedicated, community-minded women!



Naperville Chamber of Commerce's Women in Business

95.9 The River invited Bridge to participate in the "Float Your Boat" cardboard regatta at Centennial Park in Naperville this summer—thank you for helping us spread the word about how you can make a difference for Bridge families!



"Float Your Boat"

Thank you to Bridge friend Beth, who held a bake sale and used the proceeds to buy personal care and cleaning products for Bridge families!



Great job Beth!

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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.

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www.bridgecommunities.org

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Bridge Communities is a non-profit organization that houses and mentors homeless families who live and work in DuPage County.

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If you receive duplicate copies of this newsletter, or no longer wish to receive it, please return your mailing label in the enclosed envelope. *Thank you!*

TIME SENSITIVE MATERIAL
PLEASE DELIVER PROMPTLY

Your support transforms lives

Because you believe in Bridge families, they achieved the following:

- **Raquel** was named Employee of the Month at her office
- **Iwona** and **Liz** each purchased a townhouse
- **Elizabeth** got a new job as an enrollment coordinator
- **Sonia** passed her Advanced ESL class with flying colors
- **Danah** started classes to obtain her GED
- **Buba** graduated her associate's degree program with honors
- **Raven** paid off her car loan
- **Tony's** family moved into their new house through Habitat for Humanity
- **Gloria** purchased a new house
- **Xiomara** started in a nursing program
- **Cashmere** became a reimbursement specialist
- **Xochitl's daughter** graduated from college—a first in their family
- **April** got a job as an office assistant
- **Latanya** started the home purchasing process though NACA
- **Janece** got a raise at work
- **Christina** got a job as a care manager at a retirement facility

■ Bridge kid A has different abilities and uses a wheelchair—but for his whole life, he'd never had one that fit him correctly. Now that he's in Bridge, his mom is connecting to the resources they need and has learned to advocate for her son. Thanks to our friends at Marianjoy and National Seating and Mobility, A now is all smiles in his brand new, custom-fitted wheelchair!

