



Connections

Connecting homeless families to a better future.

Michelle: “Because of you, I’m not a statistic”

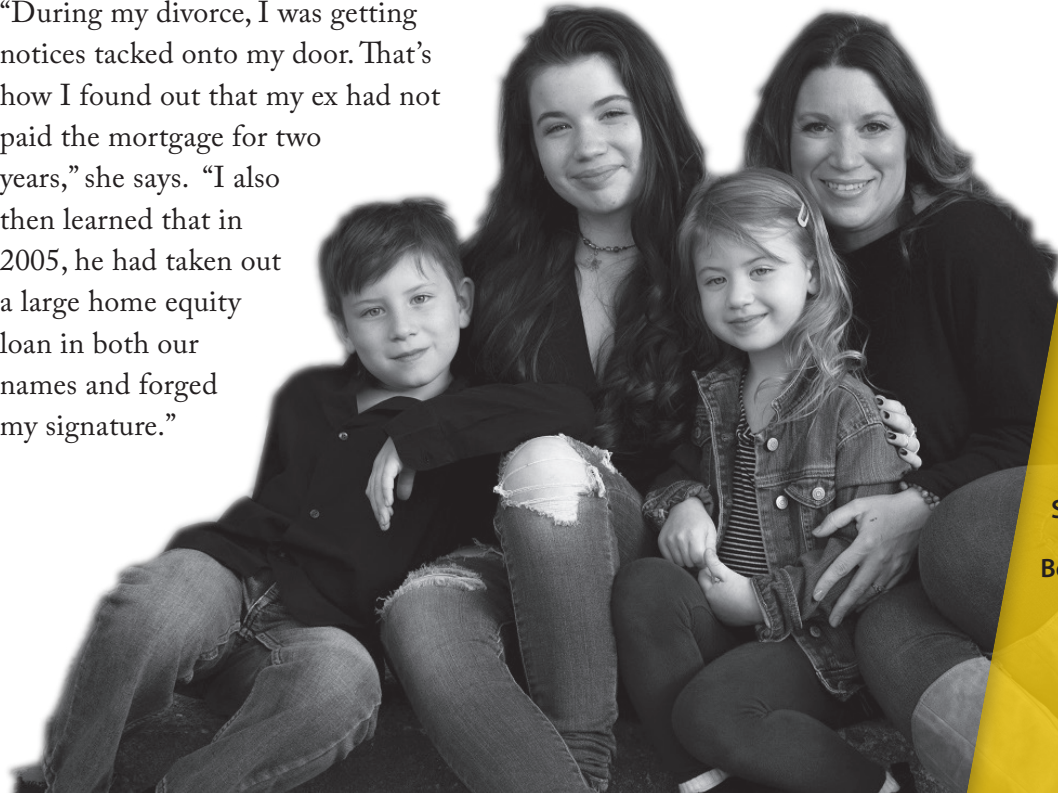
Back in 2015, one summer day started out like any other for Michelle. A stay-at-home mom, she was out and about, running errands, ferrying her children to their activities. She’d been married for 20 years by then, and had no reason to think her life would change.

But when they came home that evening, her house was empty. Her husband had taken all of his possessions and abandoned the family. “That’s how I found out he wanted a divorce,” Michelle remembers.

What he left her with was a large pile of unpaid bills, a mountain of debt, and a house that was on the verge of foreclosure. “During my divorce, I was getting notices tacked onto my door. That’s how I found out that my ex had not paid the mortgage for two years,” she says. “I also then learned that in 2005, he had taken out a large home equity loan in both our names and forged my signature.”

Michelle felt devastated and lost. She’d never managed her finances before—she used to have to ask her husband for permission to buy groceries or fill the car with gas—and she was paralyzed by fear. She eventually found a part-time job, but she was still short on money and options. And with the foreclosure looming, she was running out of time before they were left homeless. “It’s hard to find someone who will take you in with three kids,” she says. “As a single mom with no money, it was very scary.”

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Her new boss suggested she look into Bridge Communities, and soon after, she started the intake process. “That was a bit overwhelming,” Michelle admits. “I was very vulnerable and to disclose all my personal information was very hard for me.” But before long, she and her three children were welcomed into the program. “When I got into Bridge, I was relieved and I was honored,” she says. “I felt a weight off my shoulders, knowing that my kids would have a safe roof over their heads, and I was very grateful for that.”

Once she moved in, she began meeting with her mentors from St. Scholastica Catholic Church, Marianne and Karen. “They immediately took me under their wing, and I really took to heart everything they told me,” she says. “They were pretty strict, and sometimes it ran parallel of how I’d felt with my ex telling me what I could and couldn’t do. But I had to realize that they were there to help me, not there to knock me down. You have to really embrace the

program and know that their guidance is going to make you successful—but you have to put in that work as well.”

And put in the work she did. Michelle and her kids all entered therapy to recover from the trauma they’d all endured. “[Before Bridge] I had been very depressed, and I just didn’t have any direction,” says Michelle. “I had been very sad and scared and not feeling I could do things, because of everything he had done.” But through the support of their mentors and Bridge staff, Michelle’s family found the strength to forge ahead.

The family also took part in the nutrition workshops, parenting classes, summer camps, carseat education and activities at their LRC. “You’re only going to get out of the program what you put into it. Anything Bridge offered, I did because I figured it would make me a better mom. My kids loved all the activities, and I love how Bridge embraces the children in the program, to make the transition as easy as possible,” says Michelle. “And Jill

[Garbaliuskas], who was my children’s case manager—she is an angel. I love her so much, and she really invested in me

“I felt a weight off my shoulders, knowing that my kids would have a safe roof over their heads, and I was very grateful for that.”

and my kids. Without her and her dedication to my children, I don’t think I would have been able to navigate everything as well as I did.”

She also obtained a better-paying job, and put her newfound budgeting knowledge to work. She negotiated and paid off her debts, and saved enough money for a sizeable nest egg. And after two years in the program, Michelle graduated from Bridge and now rents the apartment for her family. She’s planning to stay at least through next year, when her oldest graduates 8th grade.

And, Michelle is soon embarking on the next chapter of her life as well. After a 13-year absence, she is returning to nursing school in January. “I didn’t finish nursing school because my ex’s career was always more important, and he didn’t want our kids in daycare,” she says. “I had always sacrificed things I wanted for myself. But finally, I have the confidence to do the things that I need to do to better my family. I feel



You are the Reason



Dear Friends,

I've always known Bridge Communities to be special. And since starting in my new role as Bridge Communities' CEO and getting to know all you

better—it's evident that you are the reason for Bridge's extraordinary reputation.

Over the past 90 days, I have had the honor to speak with all our staff, over half of our Program Partners, many of our mentors, several of our donors and board members, and quite a few of our client families. It has been so humbling to feel the passion, see the commitment, and witness the compassionate focus everyone has in helping our families reach self-sufficiency. It is especially moving in these unprecedented times as we all have had to "pivot" and help our families navigate through unemployment, uncertainty and social unrest. It is times like these that you see how strong the Bridge community is, and what an honor it is to be a part of an amazing community of service. Your support and dedication to Bridge families is unparalleled.

It is because of your commitment that we are able to continue to support our clients throughout these chaotic times. Read more on page 4 about the ways you've continued to help Bridge parents and children thrive despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

My virtual door is always open, and I encourage you to contact me at karen.wells@bridgecommunities.org. I look forward to exchanging thoughts with you and continuing to build bridges in our community.

Finally, as he embarks upon his retirement, I would like to thank John Hayner for his extraordinary leadership and contribution to Bridge Communities over the last nine years. He has been an advocate, a changemaker, a true colleague, and a friend. John will always have a place in the Bridge Communities family.



Sincerely,
Karen S. Wells
CEO
Bridge Communities

like I am almost at the top of the mountain, and I am very excited for my future."

"Michelle did a great job overall, she was dedicated to paying off her debts and did a wonderful job of saving money," says Paul Matthews, her case manager. "She was great at being involved with LRC events and parenting classes, and she had a close relationship with her mentors, who were just awesome."

In fact, her mentors—who Michelle's kids lovingly call "the Bridge Ladies"—are still a big

part of her life today. "They are like my family, and I love them. I definitely called them a lot for advice, as well as Paul," says Michelle. "They are still very present, and I know I am not alone."

Michelle says that her time in Bridge not only built her family's resilience—it also inspired them to become more community-minded. "I will be a volunteer for the rest of my capable life, and my children will as well," says Michelle. "My oldest was really touched by the generosity. She led a coat drive at

school for Bridge families. And she helped collect toothbrushes, toothpaste and essentials to stock the resource closet. Bridge has inspired us to be better and to give back."

Michelle is eternally grateful to you for supporting Bridge in her family's time of need. "Thank you for giving families the opportunity to feel safe," she says. "Without you, families like mine wouldn't be able to function in society, to have the knowledge to be successful. Because of you, I'm not a statistic. And I can't say thank you enough." 🟡

Thank you for your support!

Our donors and grantors make safety and support possible for Bridge families. Here's how you've helped us meet our clients' needs in these turbulent times. Thank you for being there for homeless families when they need you the most!



Anura Energy



Jessica Jasko



Thank you to The Driskill Foundation

You've got us covered! Thank you to Anura Energy, United Way, and Bridge supporter Jessica Jasko. Because of their generosity, we have received more than 1,600 cloth and disposable masks for Bridge families, staff and volunteers. Thanks for keeping us safe!

Tailor-Made Activities A big thank-you to The Driskill Foundation! Because of their generosity, Bridge kids were provided with 75 personalized summer activity boxes, filled with sports and enrichment items to keep them busy and active this summer. Bridge teen J loved his box, complete with a basketball, book, air pump and water bottle!

Providing essential childcare

Many Bridge parents are essential workers and need childcare for their children. We're grateful for our local YMCAs—B.R. Ryall, Tri-Town, Fry Family and Indian Boundary—for taking great care of Bridge kids while their parents are on the front lines. Thank you, YMCAs!



YMCA

Tech 2.0 The community rallied to ensure Bridge families had all the tech necessary to work and attend school from home—and we couldn't be more grateful! A huge thank-you to the Wheaton Franciscans, the Regional Office of Education, Gerald A. and Karen A. Kolschowsky Foundation and the DuPage Foundation for providing Bridge families with computers, printers and improved internet access in Bridge buildings.



Employment Services: Bridge's Employment team has worked tirelessly to help Bridge families navigate furloughs, layoffs, educational hurdles and more brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Bridge's Job Readiness workshop has successfully switched to a virtual format, with lots of positive feedback from Bridge clients. And, everyone's hard work is beginning to pay off: Bridge families are now at an 18% unemployment rate, down from a high of 43% in May.

Children's Services: The children's team has continued to deliver much-needed services for Bridge kids and parents, including connecting families to safe childcare and day camps, remote support groups, parenting classes, summer activity boxes and more. This summer, friends like you made sure kids received all the needed school supplies to start off the school year—thank you!

Nutrition Program: The nutrition team has continued to partner with The GardenWorks Project to provide at-home organic gardens for Bridge families, and the West Suburban Community Pantry has increased Bridge families' access to healthy, fresh food via its mobile pantry. Plus, Green Earth Harvest and The Conservation Foundation have granted 10 families with biweekly produce boxes! Our team is also providing families with recipes based on the outputs of the gardens and the food available from the pantry deliveries!





Nutrition Boost Thank you to the Wheaton Lions, for providing a grant to help supplement our Nutrition Program. Good health and self-care for Bridge families has never been more important—thank you for your support!

Keeping it Clean Many thanks to the DuPage Foundation and Blue Cross Blue Shield of Illinois for the grants from the COVID-19 Response Fund! This essential funding has covered the costs of additional cleaning and disinfecting services in Bridge apartment buildings, and has boosted our internet access in our buildings, allowing clients to work and attend school remotely. Thank you!

Happy Homes We are thankful for our partnership with the Home 2 Home Project! They have provided several new Bridge families with not only furniture, but decoration and finishing touches for their new apartments as well. Thank you for making them feel at home!



DuPage
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of Illinois

Better Biking Thank you to Northwestern Medicine's ThinkFirst for Kids Program for providing 23 bike helmets and 17 bike locks to Bridge kids—you helped them have a much safer summer!



Going the (Social) Distance

We are appreciative of our mentors and families for taking precautions to meet safely! The Daybreak of Elmhurst group opts to meet outside, in masks and safely spaced apart to keep each other healthy. Thank you to our mentors for using safe and creative ways to connect with Bridge families!



Back to Nature We appreciate the Morton Arboretum for generously granting 31 memberships to Bridge families this year! Getting into nature has been priceless for Bridge families and kids this year!

The Morton
Arboretum

As Bridge families continue to navigate life during the COVID-19 pandemic, your support is vital to their success! Families will continue to face challenges of remote learning, underemployment, and the traumas of homelessness. To learn how you can improve the life of a homeless family during COVID-19, please contact Amy Van Polen at amy.vanpolen@bridgecommunities.org or make a donation today on www.bridgecommunities.org.

Thank You, SAGE Private Wealth Group

This year, Bridge has been honored to become a recipient of the SAGE Private Wealth Group Foundation Fund at The Chicago Community Foundation. Thanks to this generous funding that supports Bridge's Employment Services Program, our job-seeking clients have had the support and training they need in these uncertain times.

SPWG Foundation's core philosophy is that education can act as a vital medium to empower women by teaching the tools necessary to create change. Women who have access to better

SAGE
PRIVATE WEALTH GROUP

education have been shown to have lower rates of vulnerability to gender-based violence, abuse, mistreatment, trafficking, and disease. As a result, well-educated women are enabled to work to bring both social development and economic growth to their communities.

The team from SPWG Foundation is also partnering with Bridge to develop education opportunities for Bridge families in the future. We are thankful for our growing relationship with this wonderful team. Thank you!

Q&A with Jen McDonnell | Children's Program Volunteer

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

A. The moment I learned about Bridge Communities mission and the work they do, I knew I needed to be involved. I love how they wrap their arms around families. Bridge provides the perfect combination of tools, resources, mentorship and community to help people succeed. I own an Art Subscription Company, Orange Art Box, so I was immediately drawn to the opportunities of volunteering within the Children's department.

Q. What do you do as a children's program volunteer?

A. We host special nights for the kids that include art, science, movies, games, reading and FUN! We talk about everything – what's going on at school, things they love, fun times with their families, their favorite music, their least favorite food. Everything! I love the connection I have with the kids. We are always learning something and we make time for a little goofing around, too.

Q. What's your favorite Bridge memory?

A. In 2019, Orange Art Box sponsored a chair for the kids to paint and decorate for A Chair Affair. The chair was a gift from my late father to my mother when I was born. The

kids transformed the vintage Bentwood Rocker into a bright, colorful, garden-themed chair.

They had planning meetings, worked on it for weeks, and put so much love into it. It was so amazing to see their creativity, ideas and teamwork. They were so proud of their beautiful creation. And so was I! John Hayner bought the chair and donated it to a school. A feel-good story all around!



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

A. The kids! They are so funny and loving! I love their hugs, their stories and spending time with them. Except for the time they told me I needed to work on my dance moves...I've had a lot of time to work on them lately. Watch out, kiddos! I can't wait to be in person with you again and pump up the jam (they are rolling their eyes right now)! 📌

Do you love helping kids as much as Jen? You could be a volunteer with our children's team! Contact Mary Slade at mary.slade@bridgecommunities.org to learn more.

Let's Talk About It

Bridge Communities has always believed and acted in a manner that welcomed and included voices of all community members. And we are committed to improving our understanding and leadership role to help build justice and equity in our community.

Towards that end, Bridge Communities has recently launched a new educational series for staff, Let's Talk About It, addressing diversity, equity and inclusion, and how race relations have impacted our community. In upcoming months, we will be hosting virtual "town hall meetings," and look forward to expanding the conversation soon beyond the staff to join us in the conversation.

For more information, please contact Susan Espino at susan.espino@bridgecommunities.org. We look forward to exchanging thoughts with you and continuing to build bridges in our community.

Join us at the 17th Annual Sleep Out Saturday!

Take to your yard, driveway or basement to raise awareness and funds for homeless families this fall.

Join us and hundreds of Bridge supporters this fall for Sleep Out Saturday on November 7, as we spend a night in tents, boxes and cars in honor of the homeless families served by Bridge Communities. When you sleep out, donate or fundraise for Sleep Out Saturday, you'll build a brighter tomorrow for Bridge families striving toward a better future.

Register today at www.sleepoutsaturday.org!



Gold Sponsors: Bank of America, BMO, Harris Bank

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Bronze Sponsors: Wheaton Bank & Trust, Bolingbrook Bank & Trust, Naperville Bank & Trust, Glen Ellyn Bank & Trust, Oxford Bank & Trust, BeaksCo



You Pick the Date! The countywide sleep out will be held on Saturday, November 7, but you can also participate for any night convenient to you between October 9-December 5! When you register your date on www.sleepoutsaturday.org, simply select "Other" and select the date that's best for you.

How will Sleep Out Saturday take place this year? Your Sleep Out Saturday experience may be different due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether you opt for smaller groups or to experience it from home, Bridge Communities is there to help you to make it an unforgettable event! We offer complete Sleep Out Saturday toolkits with socially distanced activities, movies and more, to make your experience memorable and life-changing. We'll also offer tips to help groups participating virtually feel more connected and experience the event "remotely together."

Sleep out or sleep in! Nervous about sleeping outside in November? We also offer tips on how to "sleep in," by setting up your home or site similar to a homeless shelter. Many Bridge families have experienced homelessness by staying at a shelter or "doubled up" with friends and family, and our guide will provide details on how to transform your environment and create an empathy-building experience.

Register or donate to support a participant at www.sleepoutsaturday.org, and for more info, contact Margo Matthew at margo.matthew@bridgecommunities.org or 630-403-5091.

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

Please help us save on printing and postage.

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

Because of your help

Because of you and your support, Bridge families reached the following achievements:

- Since April 1, Bridge has welcomed the families of **Dana, Maria, Ashanti, Keevia, Diana, Jovanna, Ashley, Marcus, Preanna, Jasmine, Alex, Jose, Mariana, Brandy** and **Victoria**
- **Jessica** started a full-time job as a middle school teacher
- **Maribel, Isaamar** and **Sonia** each graduated and purchased a house
- **Angie** and **Manuel** paid off their family's cars
- **Hailey** began a new job paying \$22/hour
- **Josie** was promoted from part-time to full-time at work
- **Tonesha** saved more than \$20,000
- **Hosanna** and **LaShawna** earned straight As last semester
- Bridge teen **David** got his first job
- **Diana** paid off all her debt
- **Gloria** made the honor roll in college
- **Julie** paid off her car loan
- **Cynthia** was approved for a mortgage
- **Tiffany** decreased her debt by \$30,000
- **Jalena** passed her certification test to become a dialysis technician
- **Aysha** earned a 25% raise at work
- **Sio** is now working as a registered nurse
- **Breyana** graduated from college with her Bachelors Degree



Three cheers for Breyana, who earned her Bachelors Degree in Psychology with a minor in Biology this summer!