



# Connections

*Connecting homeless families to a better future.*

LaShawna: “It’s not how you start that matters, it’s how you finish.”

LaShawna, who spent her early years as one of six kids in Chicago, didn’t have an easy start. While her parents loved her very much, they became embattled with drug abuse, gang involvement, and health issues. After a period during which she remembers being hungry and having no electricity, she and her siblings were separated and placed in foster care.

“I dreamed for a long time about my life at age four when everything seemed really good,” she explains.

Although an excellent high school student, LaShawna wasn’t able to complete graduation after her father died, a blow that she says left her depressed and hopeless. But her employer encouraged her to get a GED, which she did. From there, she enrolled in college courses but had to withdraw due to financial reasons. She continued working and carefully began to save money.

Years later she became involved in an abusive relationship in which her daughter was conceived. She tried to make it work but the relationship was irreconcilable, so she bravely left and became a single mom.

Being a single parent was very difficult. She worked two jobs. When her full-time position was eliminated, she continued to work her part-time delivery job. She was able to bring her daughter along with her, but it

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“It’s not how you start that matters, it’s how you finish.” *continued*

wasn’t enough. When her car broke down one night and she had nowhere to stay, she searched the internet for emergency shelter.

Safely at a nearby PADS shelter, LaShawna learned about the transformative impact

of Bridge Communities. She remembers getting a call back from Rachel at Bridge and feeling hope return. In 2019, she was accepted into the Bridge program and gladly pushed her life’s ‘reset’ button.

She was amazed by the help she received. Right away, her program partner, Families Helping Families, gave her a reliable vehicle that had been driven only 18,000 miles. Next, her mentors, Dalina and Sue, whom she describes as “sisters,” really went to work helping her with furniture, tax issues, and enrolling back in school. Bridge staffer Michelle helped connect her to excellent childcare services so LaShawna’s daughter was safe and cared for during the day.

LaShawna admits that being in the Bridge program is hard. “I didn’t want to let anyone down,” she

**“I dreamed for a long time about my life at age four when everything seemed really good.”**

explains. “The budgeting and accountability are not easy, but just what I needed.”

Today, LaShawna is excelling at a local university as a full-time computer science student and STEM scholar with just five more classes until graduation. She is excited to pursue a job in software engineering, artificial intelligence, or cyber security. She also looks forward to owning her home. But most of all, she is excited about the opportunity to provide her daughter a happy, stable environment and to prove that it’s not how you start that matters, it’s how you finish. 🏡



**You can make an impact! When you support Bridge Communities, you give a new beginning for families like LaShawna’s. Please make a donation in honor of the 100+ families that will be served this year with this QR code or at [www.bridgecommunities.org](http://www.bridgecommunities.org).**



## Tax Smart Giving

There are many ways you can creatively give to support Bridge’s mission and the families we are honored to serve. Please consider giving through:

### **IRA Charitable Rollover:**

If you or your spouse are 70 ½ years old, you can make a significant gift to help families without using cash from other sources of income. You can contribute all or a portion of your required minimum distributions from your IRA directly to Bridge and reduce your taxable income.

## 2022: Progress and Resilience



Dear Friends,  
Here at Bridge, we are welcoming spring and embracing the hope and newness that it brings. In that spirit, we have launched our three-year strategic plan which drives specific

organizational goals to improve client family outcomes. One of our new plan's initiatives is to evolve programs to meet the changing needs of clients while providing additional support to mentors and Program Partners.

With today's significant increases in gas, food, utility, and housing, the pressure on housing-burdened families in DuPage County has only been exacerbated. Data shows us that many families are experiencing more complex financial, mental health, and educational barriers to stabilizing their family before they can begin their journey to self-sufficiency. Families facing homelessness need Bridge expertise and programs now more than ever.

As a part of our plan to evolve our Transitional Housing Program (THP), we are excited to pilot the Stability Program. This initiative is designed to house and case manage families that have more complex challenges, but will ultimately be well suited for the THP. This extra programming will give parents and children additional support and time to successfully transition into the THP within 6-12 months. We believe this will successfully address

the complex needs of some families facing homelessness. We have already welcomed a few families and will keep you posted on what we learn from this new initiative.

Feedback we received when developing our strategic plan indicated an opportunity to increase support of Program Partners, volunteer, and client peer-to-peer support. Given this, we have hired an Associate Director of Program Partnerships dedicated to stewarding the relationships and communication with our Program Partners. We have also shifted resources, adding a Volunteer Coordinator to centralize our volunteer support and grow that base. And finally, we are developing client and alumni peer-to-peer support to improve community and learning while in Bridge THP.

You can access our 2022 – 2024 Strategic Plan via the QR code below, or by visiting our website.

So far, 2022 has truly been a year of great progress and amazing resilience. But our mission is made possible only because of you. I thank you for your unwavering support to the courageous families we humbly serve.

Sincerely,

Karen S. Wells  
CEO, Bridge Communities



### Donor Advised Fund:

Creating your own Donor Advised Fund (DAF) is an easy way for you to make a great impact on the lives of families today and forever. You can make a large contribution to your DAF in one year to maximize your charitable deductions and provide loyal support to Bridge Communities through subsequent years' giving.

To discuss how your giving will impact Bridge families and accomplish your giving goals, contact Amy Van Polen at 630-545-0610, ext. 12 or [amy.vanpolen@bridgecommunities.org](mailto:amy.vanpolen@bridgecommunities.org).

## Improving Lives through Education

In Illinois today, the minimum wage is \$12 per hour. In DuPage County, a single parent must earn more than twice that to support her family's basic needs. When most Bridge families enter the Transitional Housing Program, they are working for a median hourly wage of \$11.25.

At Bridge, we know that successful clients are those who can increase their earnings and save money. That's why most Bridge clients participate in education and employment counseling, often the key ingredients to developing the tools they need to achieve their income and savings goals.

"For many clients, earning more means going back to school for a career certificate, or secondary degree," explain Jodi Fegter, Bridge Communities Director of Employment and Adult Education. "Most were on that path before life's challenges took them off course. When needed, our team is here to help clients figure out the education piece by providing them with the proper forms, filling out scholarship and grant applications, and assisting them with course selection. After that, we regularly check in to monitor progress along the way."

When going back to school seems unattainable to clients, Fegter and her team, Zhavonne Morse and Kris Martinez, work one-on-one with them to problem solve. "We really get to know our clients and help navigate what they need to succeed," Fegter says.

But balancing school, a job, and being a single parent is difficult, especially financially. Fegter's team works to identify all available financial aid in order to avoid student loans if possible. Fegter oversees the Bridge scholarship program which provides up to \$1,000 per year to eligible clients. In some cases, Fegter's team works to identify 'angel donors' who wish to offset the cost of a client's needs.



*Jodi Fegter, Zhavonne Morse and Kris Martinez*

Jasmine, a current Bridge client, currently has an angel donor, someone she has never met. This donor helps fund her expenses while she works full time and takes online classes at Arizona State University. "My donor is truly a blessing," Jasmine explains. "I don't have to take out expensive loans or reduce my status to part-time. I will be able to graduate debt-free which is super important in my future."

Another client, Stacy, has an anonymous angel donor who covers her living expenses while she goes to nursing school full time. "Putting into words what my angel donor has done for me is not possible," Stacy says. "Pursuing my educational goals and laying the foundation for a better future for me and my son is all thanks to them. This journey will not only gravely impact my life and my son's, but many more generations to come."

**If you would like to volunteer with Bridge Communities' employment and/or education program, or if you would like to become an angel donor, please contact Jodi Fegter at 630-403-5111 or [jodi.fegter@bridgecommunities.org](mailto:jodi.fegter@bridgecommunities.org).**

# Thank you for your support!

Our friends in the community make a world of difference to families served by Bridge. Thank you all for your generosity and compassion to Bridge families!

Hinsdale Central High School boys tennis team held a fundraiser in with proceeds of \$3,610 benefiting Bridge programs. Thank you!



Thank you, Hinsdale Central Boys Tennis



Thank you, St. Petronille School, 6th-8th graders



Thank you, Congressman Casten

We are so grateful to Congressman Sean Casten who helped to secure \$197,000 in capital improvement funding that will be used to remodel apartments in Glendale Heights.

St. Petronille Catholic School 6th – 8th graders adopted Bridge as their service-learning project. Through multiple fundraisers they recently donated \$21,000 and provided dozens of personal care, household, and school supply kits! You all are an inspiration!



Thank you, Wheaton Park District!

Wheaton Park District staff and the Wheaton community donated a literal truckload of cleaning and household products for families housed by Bridge. You are all amazing – thank you!



Thank you, Steppin' Stones!

After 18 years of supporting women escaping domestic violence, Steppin' Stones graduated their last client and ended the mentoring program. Thank you for your generous donation of \$12,000. You will be forever treasured!

Downers Grove Junior Women's Club donated \$2,500 to support the mental health needs of children in the Bridge program. Thank you!



Thank you, Downers Grove Junior Women's Club

## GetInvolved!



Would your faith community, workplace, service or social club like to make difference for families housed and mentored by Bridge Communities? Check out our Get Involved!

Check out our Get Involved! Guide for opportunities.



## Q&A with Muffin Long | Volunteer

### Q. How did you first learn about Bridge?

A. As a member of River Glen Church in Naperville, I heard about training sessions the church was hosting for parents in the Bridge program. They needed volunteers to supervise and feed the children dinner and I knew I could do that! I signed up and loved it. I didn't know it would open a door to doing so much more.



### Q. How has your Bridge volunteering grown?

A. I knew that I wanted to do more with Bridge, which is the only not-for-profit I volunteer with now. Initially, I volunteered in Glendale Heights during evening enrichment classes for the Bridge children which included fun ways to learn about science, cooking, art, and sometimes we just played games. Then, I did the same at Crab Apple Court in Naperville. Now, once a month I work at the supply closet (personal care, laundry, and cleaning products) at Crab Apple Court where Bridge families can select what they need for their family. I also really enjoyed working as a 'Sole Mate' at the 2021 and 2022

Wine, Women & Shoes fundraiser. I took photos of the attendees and did whatever else was needed. It's a wonderful event.

### Q. Why do you continue to choose Bridge as a volunteer?

A. Over the years, I have learned so much about all the services Bridge offers families: professional development and employment coaching, mentoring, financial responsibility, nutrition – and am so very impressed with all of it. I also just love watching the Bridge kids grow up! It's such an amazing thing to witness. It fills my heart to see parents and kids thriving and I'm happy to play a small part. 🏡

**You, too, can volunteer with Bridge Communities! Would you like to tutor, help at an event, babysit, or choose from many other options? To learn more please contact Mary at [mary.slade@bridgecommunities.org](mailto:mary.slade@bridgecommunities.org).**

## The Bridge Communities Classic | Cantigny Golf Club, Thursday, August 18th

On August 18th, The Bridge Communities Classic will welcome golfers and guests for exclusive 18- and 9-hole access to one of Chicagoland's finest golf venues, Cantigny's championship course is repeatedly rated amongst the best in Illinois.

Golfers will enjoy lunch followed by an afternoon of 18-holes of friendly competition and on-course games. Or, if you're only free later in the day, join us in the late afternoon for a quick 9-holes. Afterward, continue the par-tee with an entertaining



reception, to include gourmet dinner, drinks, awards, auctions, and more! While on the course, golfers will enjoy many contests with a chance to win fabulous prizes.

**Purchase your single, twosome or foursome today! Tickets are available at [www.bridgecommunities.org](http://www.bridgecommunities.org).**

The Bridge Communities Classic is presented by Becker Logistics.



**Choose one of our win-win sponsor packages or suggest your own custom sponsorship. To become a sponsor, reach out to Jen Bystry at [jennifer.bystry@bridgecommunities.org](mailto:jennifer.bystry@bridgecommunities.org) or 630-403-5095.**

# Mentor Engagement Survey

Since its founding in 1988, Bridge Communities has been set apart by its service model, which is led by volunteer mentors. More than 250 volunteer mentors are the primary deliverers of Bridge's services.

The mentors enter into a close relationship with their client — a relationship that demands serious commitment from both sides. Meetings are weekly, either virtually or in the client's home. The volunteer nature of the team allows mentors to achieve an impact that paid staff could never achieve. Moreover, it makes a profound difference on how their advice is received — and acted upon.

Knowing that the pandemic dramatically changed how mentors engage with client families — moving from in-person to primarily virtual — Bridge conducted a comprehensive Mentor Engagement Survey exploring factors affecting working families experiencing trauma, retention, and challenges resulting from the pandemic. Survey results showed:

- Mentors are united (100%) in their passion to serve Bridge families and empower families in making long-term change.
- 78% reported they became mentors as a way to give back to their communities.
- 99% reported they have a passion for helping families with young children and a passion for families in need of permanent affordable housing.

Because volunteer mentors are the essential heart of Bridge Communities, their feelings of effectiveness and satisfaction are critical.

- Mentors had an overwhelming positive response to the training and support they receive from case management and service coordinators.
- 86% reported they felt effective in their role as a mentor.
- 84% reported they had a meaningful and trusting connection with their client.

Mentors also value the diversity learnings that take place through their service. Eight-two percent of mentors shared that understanding people from different backgrounds and helping others were benefits of mentoring. However, mentors also acknowledged a lack of diversity in the Bridge cadre of mentors, which Bridge is actively working to change through intentional networking and outreach.

Mentors create a close relationship with their client family — a relationship that cannot be replicated through the singular use of paid staff. The commitment made by Bridge mentors makes a profound difference in the lives of the family, one that is deeply valued and appreciated.

**How would you like to make a positive difference in the life of a family experiencing homelessness? Please reach out to Marti Deuter at [marti.deuter@bridgecommunities.org](mailto:marti.deuter@bridgecommunities.org) to learn more.**

## Board of Directors

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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](http://www.bridgecommunities.org)

We want to share all the latest and greatest news from Bridge Communities with you. Keep in touch with us by connecting with us on our social networks:

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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

With your generous support, the families of Bridge Communities recently reached these milestones:

- **Beatrice** saved \$20,000 in just 9 months and paid off most of her debt
- **Jasmine** received a promotion at work and now qualifies for regular bonuses
- **Maria** was approved for a Habitat for Humanity home
- **Sherry** earned a promotion and is now making \$60,000 annually
- **Lawrence** has earned all A's in his junior year (high school) classes, he is excited to apply to colleges
- **Veronica** graduated after rebuilding her credit score and paid off almost all her debt
- **Doris and Sheila** both graduated into stable housing
- **Allison** saved \$23,000 in less than 12 months
- **Zahra** earned all A's in her career certification classes
- **Tanisha** graduated and purchased her first home, becoming the first-ever homeowner in her family
- **Shannon** landed a new job earning over \$21 per hour
- **Claudia**, our first Stability Program client moved into her new apartment!



When you journey alongside the families of Bridge Communities, you empower families as they work toward self-sufficiency, permanent housing and a lifetime of security and success. Please make a gift in honor of Bridge Communities at [www.bridgecommunities.org](http://www.bridgecommunities.org).

