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The Bridge

**An Outreach to Boston's
Street Youth**

The Bridge

Running away is a common motif in popular folk tales and rags-to-riches legends, but in our case it is as basic to the American Dream as Ben Franklin and Davy Crockett, who both ran away from home in their youth. In the last several decades, however, runaway behavior has become a major national social problem, and our modern legends about runaways are less and less the celebration of ingenuity and courage, and more often reflect the horrible nightmares of violence we read in our daily newspapers. This change in attitude occurred in the late 1960s, when urban neighborhoods such as Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco and the East Village in New York City became havens for alienated youths. Youth culture in the 60's celebrated rebellion against the established order, but the youths who tried to emulate popular heroes such as James Dean soon discovered that dropping out of society had its dangers. Life on the streets was harsh. In addition to getting themselves strung out on drugs, many youths found themselves in crisis situations where their lives were in danger, or they had nothing to eat and no place to go.

Out of the need to reach these youths and care for them, storefront drop-in centers, emergency youth shelters, hot lines, and other crisis intervention-type services began appearing in large American cities. The following article is a description of one of the earliest programs in the country to focus its services solely on chronic runaways and homeless street youth.

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An Outreach to Boston's Street Youth

Patti (not her real name) started drinking at age twelve and ran away from home for the first time when she was thirteen. She was tired of the beatings her parents were giving her, and of the noise and chaos in a household with eight children in it. Her mother was bitter and her father was a drunk—she didn't think they'd miss her.

For the next three months she drifted between friends' houses and began to drink and use drugs regularly. Gradually she forgot why she had left home in the first place, and let herself imagine that if she tried harder, she might make things work out at home. She envied her girlfriends who had warm and supportive relationships with their parents. But her reunion with her family lasted only six months. Nothing had changed. The beatings, the arguments, her father's drinking—it was the same bad scene, so she ran away again, this time for two years.

During all this time Patti had no stable place to live, no place of her own where she truly felt safe. She no longer bothered with school; she just "hung out" during the day and partied at night. She stayed with numerous friends, with boyfriends, or drifted back and forth between several crash pads in the Boston area. She also became an alcoholic, got herself strung out on coke, and discovered that boyfriends could beat her just like her father.

One night, while she was coming down from a two-week binge of coke, mescaline, and alcohol, it occurred to her that she had hit rock bottom, and she decided to go home. But her parents had moved and left no forwarding address. Standing in front of what used to be her home, at midnight, she realized that she had absolutely no place to go where she might be wanted. A neighbor referred her to Bridge; a worker came immediately and placed her in a shelter for the evening.

Today, one year later, Patti is one of ten youngsters who live at the Bridge House, an "independent living" residence in Boston. Bridge House is one of several programs administered by Bridge Over Troubled Waters, a multi-service agency for runaways, throwa-

ways, and homeless youth. Although her formal education ended at ninth grade, Patti received her GED through the Bridge's educational program and is now enrolled part-time at a local college. She also works full-time as a receptionist in downtown Boston. Although she hasn't had a drink in nine months, Patti readily admits that she's an alcoholic and must attend weekly AA meetings for support. And while she's still struggling with rejection from her parents and bouts of depression, she proudly talks of her recent accomplishments, her goals, and her future.

The Bridge: A Brief History

The Bridge first started when Father Paul Shanley began working with Boston street kids in 1967. The Archbishop of Boston had released him from parish duty and designated him as the "Chaplain to Alienated Youth." Father Shanley spent most of his time at the Boston Common, a favorite hangout for street youth, doing some counseling and looking for ways to help. By 1970, he needed assistance; a group of seven volunteers joined him, and together they formed Bridge Over Troubled Waters (Bridge, Inc.). Three of the original volunteers, all nuns, are still with the agency—Barbara Whelan, Executive Director since 1973; Barbara Scanlon, Family Life Coordinator; and Marie Keough, Assistant Director and Fiscal Manager. From 1970-1973, Bridge operated as a collective, with no executive director.

From the agency's inception, one of its major daily activities has been "streetwork." Bridge was one of the first programs in the country to send its counselors out on the streets to make contact with troubled youths. A spin-off of the streetwork concept, the Medical Van, staffed by medical volunteers from Massachusetts General Hospital, provided medical services to street youth. Also instituted in 1970, it was another important component of the original program. In addition to these core street outreach services, two "host homes" for runaways were available in 1970 as well, and soon afterwards the agency received funding for drug and alcohol dependency counseling services, a dental clinic, and an "alternative education" classroom. Today, Bridge's annual budget is \$1 million, and the agency employs thirty full-time staff, two part-time staff, and coordinates the activities of 158 volunteers. Each year over 4,000 youths are served through Bridge's outreach, which now includes streetwork services, medical and dental services, shelter care, drug and alcohol counseling, runaway services, parenting skills training, alternative education programs, employment and job skills training, and the Bridge House, where Patti lives.

Bridge Clients

Bridge accepts several types of youths whose special needs cannot be met in traditional youth service programs. According to agency literature, its primary mission is to reach out to runaways, homeless youth, and other alienated young people. Bridge's clients include "eleven to twenty-four year old runaways, throwaways, street youth, street flirts who live at home, drug and alcohol abusers, high school drop-outs, prostitutes, gay hustlers, formerly institutionalized disturbed youth, and delinquent young people with and without court involvement."

In 1983 Bridge commissioned an independent evaluation of the agency's programs and services. Two hundred youths selected from a sample of 2,000 Bridge clients were asked to complete questionnaires on their backgrounds and problems. The results of the evaluation were released in a report titled *Bridge Over Troubled Waters/Runaways and Youth on the Streets of Boston: One Agency's Response*. This report, which was written by Margaret Saltonstall, gathered some basic information about the types of youths Bridge was serving.

The data showed that, contrary to popular misconceptions about runaway youth, most of Bridge's clients (64%) were male. Also, although Bridge is located near areas where there are large urban minority populations, most of Bridge's clients (74%) were white. (Twenty percent were Black and the rest were mostly Hispanic and Native American). Bridge is also somewhat unique among runaway and homeless youth programs in that it gives older youths and young adults access to its services. According to Saltonstall's report, 40% of its clients were under the age of 18, 20% were either 18 or 19, and 40% were between the ages of 20 and 25. Bridge's services are not limited to youths who are under the legal jurisdiction of the juvenile court or below the age of majority for sound reasons: since runaway and homeless youth are generally not well qualified to assume adult responsibilities, once they reach their eighteenth birthdays, Bridge allows them a few extra years before they "age out" of its programs.

Perhaps the most significant finding of Saltonstall's study was the fact that a large number of these youths come from troubled families. This finding corroborates with other research on homeless youth and chronic runaways. Saltonstall reported that "a sizeable majority of the youths said that their parents simply did not have time for them, could not or would not talk with them, and displayed no interest in them whatsoever even when the young person perceived him or herself to be in a state of crisis." One fourth of the youths stated that one or both of their parents had severe alcohol or drug-related problems, and sixty-nine percent reported being

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physically abused. Often, the result of such family dysfunction was running away: eighty-four percent of the youths had left home prior to their eighteenth birthdays.

Most of these youths had no stable place of residence after running away. Seventy-five percent reported being placed in a foster home, group home, residential school or an institution prior to becoming involved with Bridge. Often they were ill-equipped to face their uncertain futures, or were beginning their adult lives with severe handicaps. Sixty-four percent of Bridge's clients had dropped out of school at the tenth grade level or sooner, and ninety-one percent reported using and/or abusing alcohol or drugs.

According to interviews with Bridge staff and Saltonstall's research, loneliness, low self-esteem, and depression are characteristics most of these youngsters share when they come off the streets. They also tend to distrust adults, and will resent authority figures, especially authority figures from within the courts and social service agencies. It's primarily for this reason that the main feature of Bridge's outreach has been streetwork.

Streetwork

Through Bridge's street outreach, counselors are able to make contact with troubled youths who might want help. Each day from 3 p.m. until 11 p.m., five streetworkers cover the areas where young people hang out: the Boston Common, Park Square, Kenmore Square, and the "Combat Zone" (the city's primary locale for adult theaters and massage parlors) in Boston, and Harvard Square in Cambridge. The streetworkers offer Bridge's services to young people who don't know where to turn for help, or who might refuse help from

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traditional social service agencies. Because Bridge counselors work on the streets, they have a better chance of learning what these youths really want and need. On the average, each streetworker contacts between thirty



and forty youths daily—that makes at least 500 contacts per month.

According to Barbara Whelan, streetworkers are selected for their ability to relate to people, and they must have a genuine interest in adolescents. Specific social work experience is not a prerequisite, and consequently, their backgrounds may include such diverse qualifying experiences as camp counseling or even college jobs as a bartender or waitress. The training of streetworkers is extremely important; before venturing out on their own, streetworkers must complete three or four weeks of full-time training, both in the classroom and on the streets with another worker. Training workshops are presented on such topics as streetwork methods, drugs, alcohol, runaways, crisis intervention, sexually transmitted diseases, hustling and prostitution, and depression.

"On the streets," says Ellen Maling, a Bridge streetworker for two years, "you deal with kids on their own turf. You try to establish some trust with them, especially with the new faces or the younger kids. Some kids don't want anything to do with Bridge. But we let them know we are available to meet their needs when a crisis occurs." The success of this type of outreach, according to Ellen and other staff, depends on the streetworker's non-judgmental and non-threatening approach.

Years of working with street youth has revealed that they are generally more amenable to help either when they first hit the streets, or when a crisis occurs after having been on the streets for some time. Knowing this, streetworkers watch for new faces, hoping to intervene before a runaway is absorbed into the street subculture,

a way of life that is characterized by violence, stealing, drug and alcohol abuse, hustling, and prostitution. Generally speaking, novice runaways are easy to spot because they look several years younger than most street youth. Once they get acclimated to street life, however, they become increasingly unresponsive to Bridge services. But when a crisis occurs, like a drug overdose or pregnancy, or when many months of the harshness of street life become unbearable, a youth may turn to a streetworker for help. By this time, the streetworker may have had many brief contacts with the youth, and the Medical Van may have provided medical services on several occasions. In this situation, a street contact may become a Bridge client, entering the Bridge central facility to have his or her problems addressed in a more in-depth manner with a staff counselor.

Medical and Dental Services

Closely linked to streetwork is Bridge's medical outreach through the Bridge Medical Van, which is staffed by a volunteer pool of twenty doctors, thirty-nine nurses, seven nurse practitioners, and Bridge streetworkers. It is the oldest existing free medical clinic in Boston and the first mobile medical facility of its type in New England. It operates five nights each week in the major areas frequented by street youth. At least 2,500 persons receive medical services, ranging from pregnancy testing to V.D. screening and treatment for minor injuries and illnesses, on the van each year. Streetworkers assigned to the Medical Van counsel clients, lessen their



fear about medical practices, and provide referrals to both Bridge and numerous outside agencies.

The Bridge Free Dental Clinic—like the Medical Van—is unique as well. It is the only free dental clinic on the East Coast and one of three such free clinics in the country. Located at the agency's central office, it is staffed by a volunteer pool of twenty-seven dentists, twelve hygienists, and nine dental assistants. This fully equipped clinic, which is open four nights a week, provides a complete range of dental services to approximately 400 youths each year.

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Bridge Central Office

It's no coincidence that the central office for Bridge is located on Tremont Street, across from the Boston Common and Park Street Subway Station. This is the heart of the area where street youth congregate in Boston. Through the streetwork program and runaway outreach services, youths are encouraged to make use of Bridge's many services.

Youths who drop in at the Bridge out of curiosity learn quickly, however, that the center is not a crash pad or soup kitchen. Food is indeed available, as well as showers, clothing, and hygiene supplies. But if a youngster wants to eat lunch, s/he must eat it in the presence of a counselor, and youths are not allowed to "hang out" at the center for more than 20 minutes a day. A sign on the wall of the waiting room also requests that certain limits be respected in order to help keep the Bridge a safe place to stay: "Welcome to Bridge. May we remind you: No drugs, no alcohol, no violence or weapons, and no abusive language. Thank you."

According to Genny Price, the Counseling Coordinator at Bridge, street youth will rarely come in off the street to discuss their drug or alcohol problems. They want something tangible, like food or clothing. But over lunch

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with a counselor, youths may begin to talk about their alcohol problems. And that's the hook. Genny says that as an agency "we're very aware that in providing the services we offer the street kid, we're walking a fine line between what's enabling them to live on the streets and what's helping them get off the streets. Consequently, we don't want to offer things like showers, clothing, and food without accountability." In citing the cautious "give away" of things like food and clothing, Genny is in essence describing the key difference between Bridge and emergency shelter programs for homeless adults.

In addition to these drop-in services, Bridge's central office, which occupies three and one-half floors of a six-story building, is the headquarters for all Bridge operations, excluding streetwork, the Medical Van, and the Bridge House. The building also houses the dental clinic, classrooms, the Family Life Center, and administrative and counseling offices.

The day-to-day operations of Bridge are headed by Sister Barbara Whelan, Executive Director since 1973. Her enthusiasm, accessibility to both staff and clients, and genuine concern for youths seem to set the tone for the agency. While she discounts her role as a major contributor to Bridge's success, she will admit to having good judgment in hiring new staff members who share her concern for the welfare of street youth.

Referrals and Intake

Most of Bridge's clients are self referred, or referred by friends—a clear sign that Bridge's street-based outreach is effective. But Bridge has also been very effective in its community and public relations activities. Barbara Whelan and other Bridge staff take advantage of frequent opportunities to explain Bridge's programs in the context of issues such as adolescent suicide, runaways, and missing children, when featured on local television and radio shows and in local newspapers. In addition, Bridge staff conduct about twelve speaking engagements a month before various high schools, colleges, social service agencies, hospitals, and corporations in the Boston area. Bridge also operates a twenty-four hour hotline, which not only takes referrals, but gives information on Bridge programs as well.

These activities provide Bridge with a steady supply of clients from a variety of sources. Besides self referrals and referrals from friends, youths hear about Bridge from family members, churches, social service agencies, courts, police, schools, and hospitals. Since youths can participate only on a voluntary basis, however, Bridge will not accept cases from the court that are referred as alternatives to incarceration. But, according to Joseph O'Reilly, the First Assistant Chief Probation Officer for

the Boston Juvenile Court, "Bridge does an excellent job for kids who don't belong in the court system." For many of these youths, according to O'Reilly, there is no need for the court to be involved, because Bridge will provide all the necessary services.

Before a youth is assigned to one of the many Bridge services, s/he must complete an intake assessment, which may take from one to five sessions. Intake procedures help Bridge staff members exclude certain types of youths who are inappropriate for their programs. Children who are under the age of eleven and adults over twenty-four, for example, should not be using Bridge's services. Severe psychiatric cases which require

The Bridge, Inc. Runaway Statistics for 1986

Ages of Runaways Referred to Bridge

Age Bracket	Number of Referrals
10-11	1
12-13	29
14-15	106
16-17	285
18	26
Total	447

Referral Source

Self	156
Friend	99
Streetworker	73
National Hotline	17
Other Program	60
Police	13
Court	6
Parents	15
School	8
Total	447

Referral Outcome

Returned Home	228
Back to Streets	45
Foster Home	52
Independent Living (Bridge House)	45
Transitional Living Program	27
Group Home	32
Hospital	18
Total	447

intense therapy and serious criminal cases are also not accepted.

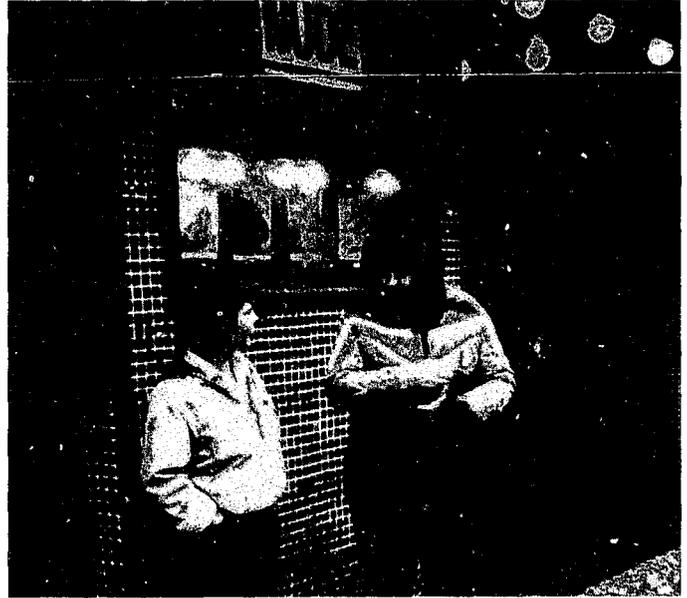
Since most of Bridge's referrals are runaways, they are referred to a runaway counselor. Bridge also provides drug and alcohol counseling, career and family counseling, and medical and dental services, after intake. Those youths who seem ready to begin an exit from street life may be assigned to the Bridge GED Program, Family Life Program, or Bridge House. Bridge works closely with numerous social service agencies in the Boston area as well: youths may be referred to one of these agencies in addition to Bridge services, or in lieu of them.

Runaway Services

While it may be the case, in our culture's favorite legends about runaways, that runaways leave home to seek their fortunes, Bridge's runaway clients were not driven from their homes by wanderlust, but rather by abuse. The runaways at Bridge have generally left their homes for good reasons. More than half have been physically or sexually abused by someone in their families, and many are thrown out and told not to return. Also—a fact which further discredits some popular myths about runaways—Bridge sees very few runaways from out of state. Of the 447 runaways using Bridge's runaway services in 1986, 89% ran from homes in Massachusetts.

Runaways requiring shelter services are placed in one of twenty emergency foster homes located in Boston and surrounding areas. In 1986, Bridge made use of thirteen of these homes. The maximum stay at a home is three days, but if a youth requires longer-term shelter care, a group shelter home is available in Boston, the Place Runaway House. Of the 447 runaways using Bridge in 1986, 181 were placed in emergency foster homes for a total of 408 days. The foster parents in these homes, which are regulated and licensed by the state child welfare agency, are unpaid volunteers who have been recruited because of their unusual sensitivity to adolescents. Several of the foster parents are parents of former runaways helped by Bridge, or are former runaways themselves.

Barbara Whelan has resisted developing a group shelter care facility because she feels it conflicts with Bridge's treatment philosophy. "Our theory is that you have to make kids really look at themselves," says Barbara, "and decide how they are going to move out of where they're at right now. But the more comfortable kids get at runaway shelters, the harder it is for them to look at themselves."



The process of helping youths look at themselves begins immediately. At the time of placement, a "purpose of stay" contract is made between the runaway and the counselor regarding some goals that must be met within a one to three day period. The counselor emphasizes that the home is not simply a bed and a roof, but a place to begin doing something about one's life.

When a youth stays at a shelter foster home for several evenings, during the day he or she must come to the Bridge for counseling. In these sessions, the youth establishes some goals and plans of action, including plans to make use of resources such as school, job training, legal aid, and permanent foster placements if necessary. At first, efforts are made to reunite the child with his or her family through counseling sessions and follow-up. For younger runaways and first-time run-

Our theory is that you have to make kids really look at themselves, and decide how they are going to move out of where they're at right now. But the more comfortable kids get at runaway shelters, the harder it is for them to look at themselves.

ways this process is often successful. Of the 447 runaways served by Bridge during 1986, 228 were returned home.

However, in more recent times many of Bridge's runaways have been "system" kids—throwaways who cannot return home and have run away from child

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welfare system placements. After living for years in unstructured, dysfunctional households, they often cannot deal with the structure and routines of typical middle-class American families. Nor are they able to deal with routines in a more impersonal, institutionalized, group home type setting. Saltonstall's report revealed that seventy-five percent of the juveniles in the representative sample of Bridge's clients had been placed in a foster home, group home, residential school, or an institution after leaving their homes. These are the youths who exhaust child welfare agency options at age seventeen or eighteen, who fall through the cracks of the system, and risk becoming homeless adults.

Counseling Services

The goal of Bridge counseling, according to agency literature, is "to initiate and maintain positive relationships with street youth, empowering them to change their lives and become independent of street life and helping them to move into the mainstream of society." Specific types of counseling that are available at Bridge include drug counseling, alcohol counseling, employment and career counseling, runaway and family counseling, and in-depth psychological counseling for a variety of issues that trouble alienated youths. Close to

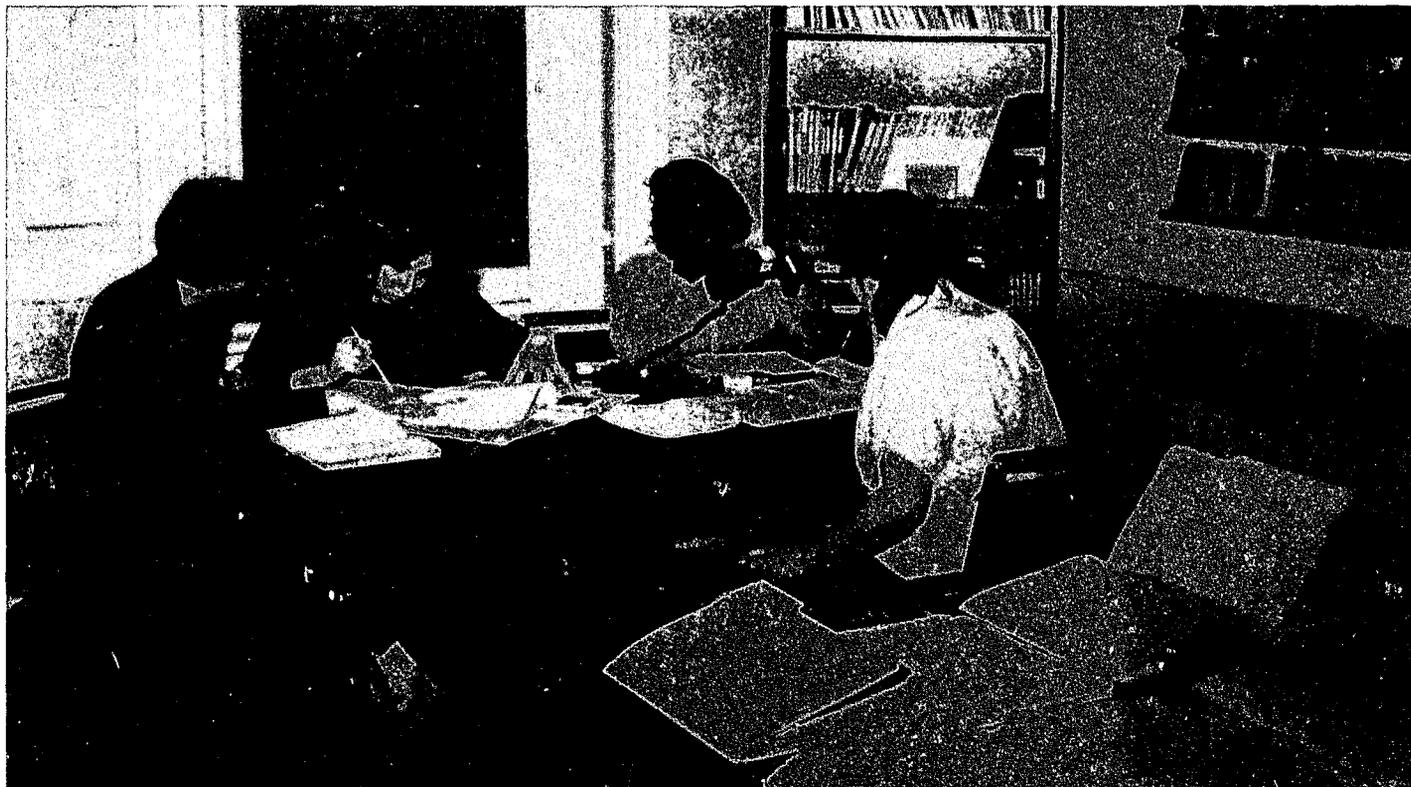
1,000 youths per year avail themselves of formal counseling through Bridge, and many more receive informal counseling from workers on the streets.

Of the twelve counseling staff, four have master's degrees and three are studying for master's degrees. Since most street youth have problems with drug and alcohol abuse, this type of counseling is used most frequently. Bridge's drug and alcohol counseling is funded by the Massachusetts Division of Drug Rehabilitation and Alcoholism. Ideally, long-term counseling lasts from eight to twelve months, and youths are usually scheduled to see a counselor on a weekly basis.

Because street youth often have serious problems in many areas of their lives, Bridge's counseling staff base their treatment models upon the notion that comprehensive services must be provided in order to address a youth's problems. A client's alcoholism, for example, will contribute to medical and dental problems, unemployment, mental health issues, or even grooming and hygiene needs. Given this treatment philosophy, it was natural for Bridge to evolve into a comprehensive multi-service agency.

Family Life Center

The Bridge Family Life Center offers support to pregnant teenagers and young single parents who need



help in raising their children. In 1986, ninety-one young adult females, two young adult males, and sixty-five children received support from this program. In order to qualify for services these youths must be considered at risk—i.e., they are former runaways or throwaways, substance abusers, school drop-outs, unemployed or unemployable, or court involved because of serious or potentially serious parenting problems. Since most have dropped out of high school—females often leaving after becoming pregnant—they are encouraged to enroll in the Bridge GED tutoring program. Child care is provided for them during class time.

The Center offers young single mothers individual and group instruction on prenatal care, child development, health and nutrition needs, and demonstrates techniques for such things as bathing an infant or getting a child to sleep. Family life staff also visit the parent and child in their homes, which aids in counseling.

Single parents are supported each step of the way toward independence: passing the GED, getting their children into day care, finding a job (usually with the assistance of the job developer), finding and furnishing their own apartments, and budgeting. Through their work, Family Life Center staff seek to give these youths a deeper awareness of what it means to be a parent and to build their confidence in themselves.

Education and Pre-Employment Services

Most of the youths involved with Bridge have serious educational deficiencies and few job skills. According to Saltonstall's research, eighty-four percent of Bridge's clients dropped out of high school; to redress this, the Bridge offers GED tutoring. In Bridge's classroom area, staff and volunteers help students through flexible, individualized programs which prepare them for the GED exam. In 1986, 163 students prepared for their GED, and fifty students received their diplomas.

Bridge's job developer assists those youths who have begun preparing for their GED to develop job readiness skills and find jobs. Through contacts with the business community, he keeps track of job openings in a wide number of businesses, and can recommend appropriate places for clients to request interviews. In 1986 the job developer worked with 102 youths, finding jobs for forty of them.

The Bridge guidance counselor works with youths interested in entering college or a vocational training program after passing their GED exams, especially during the application process. Bridge also provides

word-processing instruction, thanks to a local corporation that donated a number of personal computers and printers to the Bridge. Nine students made use of this type of training in 1986.

The Bridge House

Like many other services at Bridge, the Bridge House, an independent living residence for sixteen and seventeen-year-old homeless youth, evolved out of a clearly identified need. Many of Bridge's clients were throwaways who had exhausted several child welfare placements before coming to Bridge's attention, and outside of short-term shelter, there was no place else to house them. To provide a place for these youths to stay, Bridge applied for a grant in 1983 from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to start an independent living program. Clients who were homeless, who had no available means of support, and who were willing and motivated enough to commit themselves to the program, were accepted into the Bridge House. The three-story, ten-bedroom facility (each youth has his or her own bedroom), which is located in a residential/commercial neighborhood of Boston, is staffed by a coordinator and four house counselors who provide twenty-four hour supervision.

According to Buddy Henderson, the Director of the Bridge House, "the kids we take have a history of failing in a lot of other programs, and are totally alienated from their communities. Many of these kids have come from the streets." Those who have options for housing through the existing social service system are not eligible for the program, since the House is designed primarily for homeless youth. Of twenty-seven youths (eleven male, sixteen female) served by the program in 1986, fifteen were throwaways and twelve were runaways. Because placement in Bridge House is often the end of the line or a last resort for these youths, residents tend to participate more fully in the program.

A youth must have a true desire to make the transition from street life to productive independence in order to be accepted into this program. They are required to attend school or GED tutoring, and must work part-time and pay \$20 per week in rent. After the typical nine to twelve month stay, however, this money is refunded in order to give the youth an apartment security deposit. Youths are also required to participate in a weekly resident group session in order to resolve conflicts which emerge in communal living.

"Structure is important," says Buddy. "Kids need to know what you expect from them, and we expect a lot. They know they have to work, go to school, and pay

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rent. So they're invested. It's the structure that really makes it work, and the expectations. Kids are not here just to be here; they're here to work on things."

In addition to learning valuable vocational skills, these youths are taught how to live and participate in a family-style setting. Most of them have come from disorganized families and thus have little or no idea of what it takes to make a household run smoothly. In order to learn some basic household management skills, everyone at Bridge House takes turns cooking and cleaning. Usually several teenage parents live in the house with their babies; as a result, all residents learn the demands of parenting. During free time and weekends the youngsters can either stay at the house or go out, as long as they observe curfew—10:45 p.m. on week nights and 12:15 p.m. on weekends. Volunteers from the Junior League visit regularly and take the teenagers on various outings.

When youths are ready to leave the Bridge House, staff help them secure employment and find a permanent residence. Of the fifteen youths who left Bridge House in 1986, nine moved out on their own, three moved back in with their families by mutual agreement, and three went back to the streets.

Teaching street youth that work and education are the basic requirements for making it in society apparently has a payoff at Bridge House. In her report on a two-year research project, Dr. Carole E. Upshur, a research consultant to Bridge, noted that "for both years, groups

of youths who entered the project achieved statistically significant behavioral gains at follow-up. In addition, these gains in education, employment and living status were achieved by youths who were for the large part school dropouts, unemployed, and victims of a wide variety of abusive and neglectful family histories." The report concludes that the Bridge model provides difficult-to-treat youths with an opportunity to achieve remarkable gains, not by dwelling on their past failures and inadequacies, but by focusing on the basic skills needed to survive without resorting to street life or returning to abusive home situations."

Such evaluations can measure significant gains in education or employment, but the essence of the Bridge House and why it works—a caring and trusting environment—cannot be measured empirically. Jennifer, a former Bridge House resident who ran away from home ten times and was subsequently placed in various foster and group homes, says that there is a "total difference between Bridge and the other programs I've been involved with over the years. There is something about the atmosphere. I think it's because you feel wanted." Patti, the young girl introduced at the beginning of this article, noted that when she first came to the Bridge House she "packed her bags lots of times" because she wanted to leave. When asked why she stuck it out, she responded that "there was love there. There was a lot of love. I grew up lonely and isolated and there was a lot of love and understanding at Bridge House. It was what I had been wanting for a long time."

The Key to Bridge's Success

Over a period of seventeen years, Bridge has evolved from a loosely-knit collective of enthusiastic volunteers to a well-managed, nationally recognized agency which provides comprehensive services to youths. From the very beginning, Bridge's philosophy on growth has been to expand slowly, developing new programs only in response to a clearly documented need.

At present, Bridge is involved with two new ventures, both of which will start in 1987. The first is a twelve-bed transitional living facility which will provide temporary housing for up to three months for older homeless youth while they work with a counselor at Bridge on a long-term treatment plan that uses Bridge services and outside agencies. This program evolved out of the recognition that placing young adults in short-term shelter does nothing to help them with their larger problems. In order to prevent the facility from being used as a crash pad, the shelter will open only at night; during the day the residents must be involved with Bridge or other programs.

Bridge's other venture for 1987 involves the purchase of three adjacent homes in Boston. One will be the relocated Bridge House, another will be divided into low-rent apartments for youths leaving Bridge House, and the third will be for single parents with infant children. These projects will help youths who find it difficult to make it on their own because of high rents in the Boston area.

Bridge is unique in that it is able to maintain a low-key atmosphere which feels comfortable to street youth, yet it expects a great deal of accountability and responsibility. Bridge will meet them halfway. The agency will provide staff who show genuine warmth and concern and are willing to accept street kids on their own terms. This helps win their trust. Bridge will also provide for their immediate needs. But the next step is up to the youths—they must want to work on their problems and prepare for their future. According to Barbara Whelan, the voluntary nature of the program is the key to its success.

Some of Bridge's accomplishments can be measured easily, such as the number of runaways who return home, or on GED graduation night. The graduates, most of whom are former street youth, are congratulated by family, friends, and staff in a very tear-filled, emotional ceremony. But these diplomas weren't earned in one giant leap from the streets to the stage. They were earned one step at a time. At Bridge, success is measured in little steps, such as keeping a counseling or dental appointment or staying in a placement longer than before. Even taking showers regularly or cutting one's hair may be viewed as a small triumph. But Bridge staff is well aware that over time, little steps may become giant leaps.



For further information about Bridge's programs, contact:

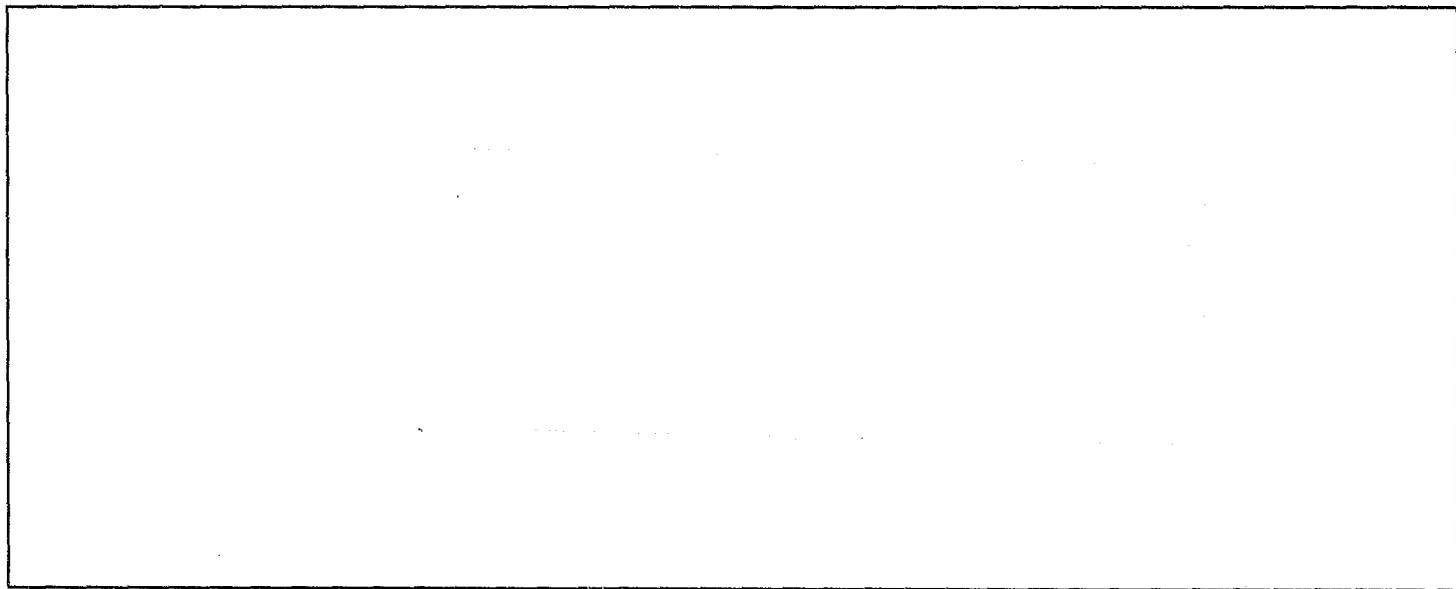
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