

137039

# BRIDGE

OVER TROUBLED WATERS, INC.

47 West Street, Boston, MA 02111 • (617) 423-9575

Testimony Before the United States House of Representatives  
Subcommittee on Human Resources

by Christine Corella

Bridge Client

February 11, 1992

137039

U.S. Department of Justice  
National Institute of Justice

This document has been reproduced exactly as received from the person or organization originating it. Points of view or opinions stated in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the National Institute of Justice.

Permission to reproduce this ~~copyrighted~~ material has been granted by

Public Domain

U.S. House of Representatives

to the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS).

Further reproduction outside of the NCJRS system requires permission of the ~~copyright~~ owner.

THIS AGENCY IS  
SUPPORTED BY



United Way

Mr. Chairman, my name is Christine Corella. I am 24 years old, and I am a client at Bridge Over Troubled Waters, Inc. in Boston, MA. I am here today to tell you my story.

First, I would like to tell you a little about Bridge. Bridge Over Troubled Waters was started 21 years ago to respond to runaway and homeless youth on the streets of Boston, and was one of the original members of the National Network of Runaway and Youth Services. Bridge was on the forefront of the movement to create alternative youth services, separate from government agencies, the criminal justice system, and the courts, a movement which led to the passage of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act. Like the goals of The Act, the goals of Bridge are to: 1) Alleviate the problems of runaway and homeless youth; 2) Reunite youth and their families and encourage the resolution of intrafamily problems through counseling and other services; 3) Strengthen family relationships and encourage stable living situations for all youth; and 4) Help youth decide upon constructive courses of action.

Bridge is a comprehensive multi-service agency serving over 4,000 youth annually. Bridge began its services on the streets and continues to make street outreach a key agency component. A team of streetworkers and the Bridge Free Medical Van make regularly scheduled nightly stops in areas where runaways and homeless youth congregate. The Medical Van, which is the oldest existing free clinic in Boston, is staffed by volunteer physicians and nurses from local hospitals. The three streetworkers are part of the professional full-time staff of forty who administer the agency and deliver Bridge services.

Once a young person makes contact with Bridge, the full range of comprehensive agency services is available to him or her including:

**Counseling and Runaway Services** which provide family intervention, substance abuse treatment, AIDS education, basic survival aid, and emergency shelter for runaways.

**Medical/Dental Services** which, in addition to the Free Medical Van, include an in-house Nurse Clinic and a free Dental Clinic.

**The Family Life Center for Pregnant and Parenting Adolescents** which provides counseling, workshops, parenting skills education, and child care while young parents attend other Bridge programs.

**The Education/Pre-Employment Program** which offers basic education, tutoring, GED preparation, job counseling and training to out-of-school youth.

**The Residential Component** which includes a transitional living residence, a single parent house, and cooperative aftercare apartments for homeless young people who cannot return home.

As my story shows, these comprehensive multi-services offered by Bridge have been crucial to my survival.

When I was very young, I lived with both my parents. I watched my father beat my mother. I never knew what the fights were about, but I can remember my mother complaining about my father's drinking. I don't remember my father ever being sober. One day, when I was six years old, my mother said she couldn't take it any more. I watched her pack a suitcase and leave.

For the next five years, I lived with my grandparents and my father. My father continued to drink every day, and I spent those years living in fear of him. He beat me up a lot and it felt like no matter where I was, he always found me. No place felt safe, not even school. From the first grade on, I didn't know why, but I never stayed in the same school for more than a year, though my family stayed at the same address. I always saw counselors at school, and it seemed like every time I started to feel close to a counselor, I had to change schools. Looking back, I think my father wanted to protect himself and was scared that if I got too close to the school counselors, I would reveal what was going on at home.

At ten years old, I began visiting with my mother on a regular basis. During those visits, I was sexually abused by her boyfriend, who was using drugs. When I was 12 years old, my parents went to court to decide who would have custody. I can remember the Judge asking me who I would rather live with, and my saying that I didn't care. I really didn't. My mother won custody, and I went to live with her.

It was then that I began running away. Her boyfriend continued to sexually abuse me, and I didn't feel like anybody cared about me. I started drinking, and staying out all night with my friends. I missed a lot of school. All I can remember about that time is that I wanted to go far away and live a peaceful life. Being with my friends and drinking was the closest I could get to escaping my problems.

Because I was missing so much school, the Department of Social Services (DSS) became involved. From the ages of 13 to 15, I was in and out of foster homes. Living with these normal families not only reminded me of what I was missing, but made me feel out of place. These families' lives seemed so nice, I thought they must be acting. I didn't know how to fit in because I couldn't relate. I continued drinking and staying out way past curfew time. I broke a lot of rules and was transferred from one foster home to another.

At 15 years of age, I ran away from my 10th foster home, and I began living on the streets in Boston. I collected cans for food, and washed in restaurant bathrooms. I slept in parks by day, and protected myself at night. It was the summertime, and I got to know a lot of people from hanging out at night and partying. It seemed like I could trust the people I met on the streets more than I could trust my own parents. The fact was, I was 16 years old and gullible. I was ready to fall into anybody's hands.

As it got colder out, I decided to get off the streets. A 23 year old man I had met partying, offered me a place to stay. I moved into his place, and a relationship started 2 months later. Soon after, he began

beating me. For 2 years, I stayed with him and put up with his abuse. One day, I realized there was a pattern. My father had beaten me, and now my boyfriend was beating me. My father drank every day, and my boyfriend got high every day. I was also drinking a lot. I knew I needed help. I wanted the abuse to stop. I called his mother who encouraged me to call a shelter for battered women. None of those shelters could house me because they were either too full, or unable to house someone under 18. One of those shelters gave me the number of Bridge Over Troubled Waters. I called Bridge and explained my situation. One of the Runaway Counselors came and picked me up at my boyfriend's house. We talked and she put me in host homes for a couple of nights. She asked if I wanted to live in Bridge's Transitional Living Program. She said that if I wasn't sure, that Bridge would still be there for me if I needed them. I ended up going back to my boyfriend for 2 months. Then I decided it would be a good idea to live with Bridge.

At 17 years old, I moved into Bridge's transitional living program. There were a lot of rules, but I didn't mind them. My favorite rule was that there was no violent behavior allowed. That made me feel safe. Other rules were about getting things taken care of. During that time, I went to Bridge for my medical needs and dental care. I went to GED classes at Bridge and finished school. I started going to counseling on a weekly basis at Bridge. As time went on, I began to feel comfortable with the residents and the staff, because we spent time doing things together. Often volunteers would come and take us to an activity. I started making happy memories.

Another rule of the house that I wasn't so sure I liked, was that it was drug and alcohol free. When I started to repeat my pattern of falling into the wrong crowd and drinking, the staff talked to me. They made me see that my drinking friends didn't care too much about me, and I began to wonder what I liked about drinking. I started going to AA meetings, and talking about my drinking in counseling.

After eight months of living in the program, I decided to try living on my own. I moved out with one of my friends from the house, and we shared an apartment for a while. I spent the next few years moving around a lot and managing to support myself. Throughout those years, I stayed in counseling at Bridge. I think counseling is the steadiest thing I had in my life. During that time, I did support myself with different jobs but wasn't able to keep one job for very long. I moved from job to job, as I did house to house. Though I had my GED, was living drug and alcohol free, and was in counseling, I was still running away from myself. Just like going from foster home to foster home, and from school to school, I was more comfortable moving around a lot than staying in the same place. This way, I could keep people at a distance. I live in 9 places and worked at over 9 jobs in a four-year period. I was going so fast, I couldn't handle it. All the jumping around caught up with me and I lost my job and my home. Since my relationship with Bridge seemed like the only thing that was stable in my life, I asked them for help. Two weeks later, I moved back into the Transitional Living Program.

It was different this time around because I knew I was in for a lot of hard work. I knew Bridge expected me to really work on myself, mainly my

fear of getting too close to people. My first few months back I can remember trying to get kicked out. I used my anger as a way to keep people at a distance. I kept waiting to be asked to leave, and when I wasn't, I didn't understand why Bridge still wanted to keep me. During that time, the staff and residents were very supportive of me. They pointed out that if I didn't stop trying to push people away that I really would end up alone and angry. That made sense. From then on, I worked on my issues. It was then that I started developing my sense of self.

While living in the program, I found a good job which challenged me and offered growth opportunities. I budgetted my checks and saved enough money to ensure that I wouldn't end up on the street. I spent time getting to know myself, letting go, and finally having fun. I started being able to laugh and feel happy. I built memories and relationships so that instead of looking back and only seeing bad experiences, I could look back and see good experiences and move on. For the first time, I recognized when I felt like running away. Recognizing it allowed me to slow down so that I could talk to people and change the feeling.

After nine months, I was ready to move on, but not run away. I moved into Bridge's aftercare apartments with other residents from the program. I have been living there for almost 2 years now. Living there is a big part of my life. Sharing a house with people who have individual issues and concerns has called upon me to develop sensitivity and a sense of caring for others. The aftercare apartments are next to Bridge's Transitional Living Program for young mothers and their babies. Living near them creates a sense of community and family. We have a back yard and a garden



that we all help take care of. I often babysit for the babies. We have a weekly group meeting which I am often asked to run. As an adult survivor of sexual abuse, I have had a hard time trusting adults. Now that I have learned how to trust people, I am in a position to be trusted. I think that I am seen as a leader to other residents, and am consciously trying to develop leadership qualities. With all the help that I have received from Bridge, I have learned how to give back. I do public speaking about youth issues. I am one of Bridge's volunteer host homes, and house runaways who, like myself at one point, need help.

I am still at the same job I got when I moved back into the program. I'm going on my third year there. I still go to counseling every week with a therapist that Bridge helped me find. Though I have come a long way, I realize that stabilizing my life is a long process. I am still working on my trust issues and my relationships.

Now my life is so much easier. I have a lot fewer worries on my mind. I feel very fortunate to be where I am today. I know that my life could have turned out very differently if I had followed the patterns that I was born into. I could be an active alcoholic, or in an abusive relationship. I would still be running from place to place. Worse still, I could be dead. But those things aren't true about me today. I believe that what saved me was my determination not to do to future generations what my parents had done to me. Thank God I came into contact with Bridge. Over the past seven years, they have always known what I have needed and have never given up on me. Whenever I needed something, whether it was physical, emotional or financial, Bridge, like a family,

was there to provide it for me. You know, a lot of people have the option of going home if they need to; people in my situation don't.

Every day I am reminded of how far I have come, grateful for the fact that I care so much more about myself. When I was younger, I didn't have dreams or wishes. I think I was just surviving. Now I have goals and wishes. I'd like to start my own business someday. I want to have a family and raise my children the way I wish I had been raised. Most of all, I want to break the cycle of abuse and alcoholism in my family. I believe I can do this now.

On behalf of Bridge, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you, Chairman Martinez, and the committee, for the opportunity to provide this testimony and for your concern for the needs of runaway and homeless youth.