

BUILDING BRIDGES bridges BRIDGES FOR WOMEN SOCIETY

Education and Mentoring programs help women on the road to recovery following abuse or trauma

Jennifer Blyth
Black Press

For many women rebuilding their lives after experiencing abuse or trauma, small successes on the road to bigger and better things are reason to celebrate.

And when those bigger moments arrive, it's time to embrace the opportunities they present.

So it was for Hilary Marks, a graduate of Bridges for Women's Employment program, and participant in its Mentoring program, which matches women with mentors in the community. Through the relationship built with mentor Val Hemminger, from Hemminger Schmid Lawyers and Mediators, and their goal to create positive social change, Marks received a bursary to complete a degree in social work.

"I came into the mentoring program without knowing exactly what was to become of the experience," Marks says. Through it, "I was given a true blessing. The highlight of the short time we have had together – Bridges, mentors and mentees – I have accepted a bursary, through this law firm, and I am now going to go to Camosun College and the University of Victoria to get my Bachelor of Social Work. A four-year term, but a lifetime of experience and the willingness to learn has just sparked me into the next generation! To be offered this is a true gift, and it does good for my role modeling with my 15-year-old daughter."

For more than 20 years, the non-profit Bridges for Women Society has been empowering women with a background of abuse and trauma. The aim is that "every woman affected by violence or abuse will have the economic security to sustain herself and her family, in safety, health and freedom."

Through Bridges' Employment Program, participants work through five main areas, beginning by addressing histories of abuse and its impact on employability. This also allows women to work on self-esteem, values and self-advocacy, communication, assertiveness and conflict resolution skills, explains Laurie MacKenzie, Fund Development Manager for the Bridges for Women Society.

Through individual study, each student develops short-term goals and action steps as they work toward personal and economic independence. The result? "Concrete, measurable successes that support the pre-employment process at Bridges," MacKenzie says.

Through career exploration, students assess their skills, strengths, preferences, learning styles and passions, augmented by resume skills to develop a long-term, sustainable career vision. Throughout, Bridges students learn in a workplace-like setting, offering daily punctual attendance experience, regular per-



Jan Bate, Bridges for Women executive director (middle), is joined by Lola Storry, Mentoring Program manager (right), and Carrie Everett, Mentoring Program coordinator (left) at Bridges' offices.

formance reviews, goal setting and a supportive learning environment that develops students' abilities to function successfully in the workplace. At the same time, women further develop their teamwork, interpersonal and presentation skills.

Many participants also take advantage of Bridges' partnership with Camosun College to gain academic credit for upgrading and introductory computer courses.

MENTOR PROGRAM

Complementing Bridges' employment program is its mentoring program, linking successful women in the community with Bridges mentees. After committing to a nine-month match, the process begins with a thorough eligibility screening and interview process for both mentors and mentees, to ensure a successful match for both.

Who are Bridges' mentors? They are lawyers like Val Hemminger, business women, artists and more – women who are happy and successful in their chosen careers.

"Our matches take place over the course of nine months, and are expected to meet independently for five to six hours each month," MacKenzie says. Additionally, they also receive 36 hours of training over the nine months, broken into three 12-hour phases. Mentor support mentees while they work toward their career or educational goals, introduce them to professional networks, share feedback and provide encouragement as they practice their employability skills.



FAST FACTS:

- Bridges for Women Society was established in 1988 as an employment training program for women facing the impacts of abuse, violence and trauma.
- Professional staff provide women with the tools they need to identify and overcome the effects of abuse, and to connect with the continuum of support agencies in their community.
- Opportunities with Bridges' award-winning employability programs include employment training and career mentoring support in Victoria; and online employment courses for remote clients through the Women's eLearning Centre.
- Women who are looking for ways to give back to their community are welcome to join Bridges' valued team of volunteers and mentors.
- For more information, visit www.bridgesforwomen.ca or call 250-385-7410.

INTERESTED IN MENTORING? DO YOU:

- Love your job?
- Enjoy sharing your knowledge and experience with others?
- Want to learn new skills and develop existing talents?
- Want to commit to a match for nine months and complete all required training?
- Have five to six hours a month to spend with your Mentee?
- Want to create positive social change?
- Like to have fun and enjoy a good laugh?
- Want to volunteer and make a real difference in one woman's life?

Learn more online at bridgesforwomen.ca or call 250-385-7410.

Lunch celebrates International Women's Day

Join Bridges at its International Women's Day Lunch Tuesday, March 8, featuring guest speaker Ma Ellen Turpel-Lafond, B.C. representative for children and youth.

Register at 11 a.m. at John's Hall, 925 Balmor St. A buffet lunch follows 11:45 a.m.

Tickets for the lunch a \$50; contact Laurie MacKenzie at 250-385-7410 or email laurie@bridgesforwomen.ca to reserve your seat.