

Hi, my name is Ellie Mae Cagle. I am a single mom of a seven-year-old boy. Before starting bridges, I was living in a low-income apartment. I was getting food assistance, free health coverage, and help with child care expenses. As working at a team-staffing agency (at Winegard) so it was a temporary position. Some months I was not sure how I was going to pay my bills. I felt alone and did not feel I had much people that really cared. Then, in 2016 I participated in the first building bridges class. We all started out as a group of people who did not know each other and did not know anything about Bridges of how important it is for our community. We all started out as acquaintances then we grew to be friends and now we grew as a family. Not only do they say they care but they show it. A few months ago, I had a seizure and diagnosed with epilepsy. I was not able to drive for six months; I was not sure how I would get to work. Some amazing women from bridges offered to pick me up, take my son to daycare, and then me to work. This was an answer to my prayer, without them, I probably would not have a job. I never knew how much Bridges would really have an impact on my life.

Now, it has been a few years later and I have grown so much. I have a permanent job; I do not get food assistance, health insurance or help with childcare. I bought my first home in 2017. I did this all as a single mom.

For the new class, if I would give you a word of encouragement, I would say make the most of it, keep in contact with your getting ahead partner. Let people in, and if you need help-ask. So many people here will be willing to help you and want to help. They are here to walk beside you and be your cheerleader in life. I am so proud of you guys and can't wait to see where you guys go from here.

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Hi everybody...first I would like to thank everyone for coming here tonight. For those of you that do not know me already my name is Jared Oliver. I was asked to talk a little bit about my journey and how Building Bridges has helped me in my life.

I grew up in poverty with my family. Although I was in and out of different foster homes that were in the middle class area. But, I switched back and forth from foster care, back to my mother more times than I can think about it.

I bounced from foster family to foster family, boy's homes, Christamore and detention centers. I acted out a lot, getting in trouble in schools, using drugs and fighting. After, I got out of Christamore, I was yet again put in another foster home and decided to run away. The police picked me up about six months later in Missouri and sent to detention. After a while, they had me sent back to Iowa and I became emancipated at the age of 16. My caseworker thought it was best because it raised many problems for me. I turned to selling meth, along with using it. I felt like I had nothing in my life and it is the one thing I had to get me the things I was missing in my life...life friends and money. I felt like people needed me since I had what I wanted. I kept that life up for quite a while. I was in and out of jail repeatedly for paraphernalia charges and finally they sent me to prison. I was charged with my third subsequent possession of paraphernalia and sentenced to five years in prison. That was September 17<sup>th</sup> of 2017.

While I was there I had my first "A-Ha moment". I decided I had to change my ways if I didn't want to spend the rest of my life in and out of lock up. About fifteen months later, what I like to call a little Christmas miracle, I was released on Christmas Eve 2018.

When I was released, I was sent to Burlington residential Facility. This, in my case was not a bad ordeal. I got my family back (well that is my sister Chanelle and my nephew Reece). The first job I got: in God knows how many years, I was at Bateys sawmill in Mt. Pleasant. I worked there for just over five months until the flooding happened. Then I was laid off. But, I didn't let that discourage me. I went and found what was as I saw it a better job opportunity working at Gregory's in Ft. Madison.

I renewed my faith and started going back to Harmony Bible. I bumped back into Miss Mona who told me about my sister graduating from the Getting ahead Class and how she thought I might be an amazing addition to the class. As we, all know it was my best interest not to deny Mona what she wants. So, I decided to try it out and I'm so glad that I did. I found out about so many resources, that I knew nothing about. To top it all off I made so many new friendships. I also learned a great deal about families in poverty and ways to improve on certain aspects of my life to get out of poverty. My favorite

thing that I learned would have to be code switching, which basically is just saying that people speak different economical classes. That is something I am able to do. From living in poverty, to middle class homes and also dealing with bosses I've had over the years, I can easily switch back and forth.

I'm hoping that with all the different resources I have found out about from Mona and the Building Bridges association, I won't have any problems in my future. With, taking this class, I have learned that I don't have to deal with my problems alone anymore. If, I need help with anything it is no more than a phone call away.

I would like to say one more thing to my friends in our class. I know all of us have our obstacles we deal with but, I know how strong we all are. If we put our minds to it, and use resources that are available we can get past the roadblocks in our paths.

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Good evening Bridges! My name is Amanda Ballou and I am part of the first, Getting Ahead graduating class of 2016. I am an only child and come from divorced middle class working parents. I have my high school diploma and my Associated Arts degree.

Many people know me as the loud sarcastic, confident woman you see standing here today. But, don't let my appearance fool you. I have not always lived this awesome version of myself. Three and a half years ago, right before starting Bridges, I was a mess. I suffered from manic depression and extreme anxiety. I was diagnosed as agoraphobic, which is an irrational fear of people and being in public. I was newly single, unemployed and lacked any self-esteem or confidence. I was on section eight housing and FIP and had three kids completely depending on me to "get it together"

Looking back, I can almost pin point the moment my life started its downward spiral. Five years prior to starting Bridges, I had just lost my long time job, my apartment, and suffered a miscarriage. Those things along with many other's led to a point of hopelessness lasting several years. That is when I heard about Bridges!

I won't lie, the initial draw was the lucrative gift card at the end of each class. Who would have known that this class and this group of people would be the stepping-stone I needed to become myself again. I'll tell you the good Lord knew! During my first few weeks in Bridges, I struggled to pay bills, find childcare, and find a job...partly due to my background but mostly my agoraphobia. Eventually I got a break and was offered the perfect job for me at that time. A position at PAW Animal Shelter taking care of cats and dogs...minimal human interaction. I would never have been able to get and keep that job without the support and knowledge I gained from my getting ahead class. Although it has been three years, I still remember what I learned in that class. The most important thing I took away from "Getting Ahead" was the concept of concrete vs abstract thinking. For those of you that do not know what that means:

Concrete is thinking in the here and now. It is physical problems and objects. It is the crisis you are facing today. Abstract thinking is the ability to think about things that are not actually present. You look at the broader significance of ideas and information rather than concrete details. Being able to utilize abstract thinking allows you to be able to plan.

I have become a huge planner and am always looking toward the future. I know my resources and how and when to utilize them. All of these things have gotten me to where I am today. I have zero mental health issues. I have a wonderful job with the school district working in special education as well as working the pieces after school program. I have my debt managed and in the process of buying my first house...set to close at the end of the month. However, most importantly I like myself. I know me and I trust me. I'm sure that wouldn't of happened without this program and the support and encouragement from my fellow graduates and most importantly Miss Mona.

If I could give this newest group of graduates any advice, it would be to make those connections. Be confident and brave... You got this! Make friends with people that have qualities that you do not yet possess, and I warn them! Never stop becoming the person you want to be, and when life seems too hard to handle on your own, reach out to others and give it up to the Lord! You are

capable, you are important and you are loved! I am going to close with my favorite saying. We may not have it all together but together we have it all.

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Anne: She is a single momma of 4, who came to us unable to find a job. Through Bridges, she was able to find work and maintained that position for a long period of time. Then, she was able to find a better paying job - one that worked better with her schedule. We were able to help her overcome barriers in employment, because she had a background from when she was younger that kept her from finding work. We helped her to find services for her kiddos through counseling and BHS. Her kids are doing so well. She is thriving. She has gotten off housing assistance and recently just purchased her own home.

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Chris: "Getting Ahead has been a total game changer for me. Before I started the class, I was living in a site house for people with disabilities. I suffer from severe social anxiety and horrible depression. I was jobless and had a failing relationship with my kids. After attending and graduating the class, I have a fulltime job, am renting my own place. My relationship with my kids are thriving. Getting Ahead has not only taught me how to get out of poverty, it has lifted my self-esteem, taught me about world poverty, social stigmas, and just general knowledge of people who struggle with poverty. My support systems have never been stronger. I'm making new friends. I was always the one asking for help, but now people are coming to me for it. I can't stress the importance and power of Getting Ahead. I now have hope for the future instead of fear of it."