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## \$3.4 million gift to support Bridges' expanded efforts

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## \$3.4 million gift to support Bridges' expanded efforts

WHEN CASEY CRISP was a student at Travelers Rest High School earlier this decade, Furman's Bridges to a Brighter Future program opened new worlds for her.

"My experience with Bridges undoubtedly changed my life," she says. "I was a first-generation college student, and the support and encouragement I received from the program were essential parts of making college a reality for me."

Crisp, a 2009 Furman graduate, is now in her second year of teaching social studies at Mauldin (S.C.) High School. She says, "While Bridges certainly prepared me for the college admissions process, I found that it better prepared me for life. Bridges helped me become an open-minded, resilient and confident leader who could look beyond my circumstances and imagine a better future for myself."

Which is exactly what it is meant to do: provide encouragement, support and academic enrichment opportunities to students in Greenville County high schools whose personal circumstances might otherwise prevent them from fulfilling their potential.

Bridges was launched in 1997 by a founding gift from Greenville Mamie Jolley Bruce, who received an honorary degree from Furman earlier this year. Now, thanks to a \$3.4 million commitment from an anonymous donor, the program will expand its support beyond high school and provide its graduates with an array of services after they enroll in college. The commitment includes \$400,000 to be paid over the next three years, and \$3 million in the form of a bequest.

Tobi Swartz, director of Bridges, says, "While 100 percent of the program's students graduate from high school and more than 93 percent enroll in college, our college retention and graduation rates are not as strong. To fully realize our mission, we must continue to support these students into their college years."

The \$3.4 million gift will allow Bridges to introduce an intensive, one-week summer program called "Crossing the Bridge," which Bridges graduates will attend before they enroll in college. "Crossing" will also provide advising and support for the students throughout their first year in college.

Mike Gatchell, Furman's vice president for development, says, "The donor's late husband received the sort of special attention in high school that changed the direction of his life and led to a highly successful career. Because Bridges is dedicated to recognizing students' talents and encouraging them to pursue their dreams, she felt it was a worthwhile program to support."



Bridges students are from homes where the average income is less than \$35,000. Many are also struggling to overcome personal and family issues. They are nominated for the program as ninth-graders by teachers and counselors, and once selected they remain in the program throughout their high school years. They participate in an annual four-week summer residential experience on the Furman campus and receive year-round tutoring and assistance through a "Saturday College" program.

In addition to Furman, members of the 2010 Bridges graduating class were accepted to such institutions as Harvard, Wake Forest, New York University, Oxford College at Emory University, and Ohio State. Seventy-five students are participating in Bridges this academic year.

Casey Crisp is just one of many Bridges success stories. After graduating from high school and enrolling at Furman, she chose to give back by spending her summers as a counselor to Bridges students. It was then, she says, that she realized the program's true value.

"I watched students change from shy, insecure teenagers to confident, well-spoken and driven young people," she says. "I've seen the joy on their faces after helping to deliver their college admissions letters. I've watched them cry and hug each other at the end of the summer because they didn't want to leave the only place that allowed them to completely be themselves. Bridges is a haven for its students, a place where they begin to discover who they are and who they want to become."

When Crisp graduated from Furman, she stood even taller because her fellow graduates had designated their senior class gift of \$43,650 to support a scholarship for a Bridges student. "It was incredibly rewarding to be able to share the program and my experience with classmates as they began to see what an impact Bridges has on the young people in our community," she says. "The scholarship will allow a very deserving student the chance to learn, grow and take charge of their future."

Just as she did.

*Photo: The 2010 Bridges graduating class, with director Tobi Swartz (front left). Story compiled from reports by Vince Moore and Jim Stewart.*