

Love in La Crosse, Wisconsin

FSPA: helping build Bridges, LEAD young women to succeed

Three years ago, three strong women crossed paths in La Crosse, Wisconsin. Taylor was traveling from high school to adulthood, unsure of her footing, the route she should take. Tracie reached out, ready to guide her. She invited her to “Walk this way.” And Madalene was there, backing them up.

The path led to Bridges, one of two teen service programs of the Coulee Region YWCA designed to “create future leaders by empowering women at a young, pivotal age,” built to bolster the belief that every girl has “unique gifts and the potential to succeed, no matter what background she is from or what challenges she may face.” The programs employ intervention for risky behavior, positive relationships, role

models and mentors, peer fellowship, educational support and life-skills lessons that not only provide direction, but give young women keys to community leadership. Girls get to Bridges by way of referrals from schools, human and mental health services, parents and even friends. The other, Teen LEAD, is a scholarship program for disadvantaged teens nominated by their schools that challenges critical thinking skills, builds work ethic and gives tutelage by women who are beacons of light in the community.

“My experience at Bridges was amazing,” expresses Taylor, who learned about the opportunity from her high school guidance counselor in 2012. “I didn’t have many friends and was always left out of things.”



Taylor holds her most precious achievement—her daughter.

The very next day Tracie Stinson, the YWCA teen services director, showed up at school to meet with her. Soon she found herself in Bridges, forging relationships with other teen girls she still holds dear and engaging in a one-on-one relationship with a college mentor, discovering the many paths she could take. It was an “awesome” time in her life, as were the trips to college campuses,

movies and outdoor activities; she also raves about the influential yet welcoming women who spoke to Taylor and her friends about a spectrum of issues from domestic abuse to self-sufficiency. But the power she felt most pivotal at Bridges “was acceptance. When I found out I was pregnant, everyone was nothing but helpful. Tracie was very good with making sure I had what I needed to stay healthy.”

And now, as a mother of a 16-month-old daughter and a full-time cosmetology student with a part-time job in the industry, Taylor has exactly what she needs to succeed.

“The cycle of poor self-esteem that often leads to an unproductive adulthood can be broken,” says Tracie, “through the Bridges and Teen LEAD programs.” Since instituting the programs in 2009 the YWCA has served over 150 young women in the community. Yet they’re not all cast from the same mold with the same problems and the same



Sightseeing and a summer-time college visit, funded in part by an FSPA ministry grant, excite and inspire these future leaders.

Photos courtesy of YWCA

Continued on page 5

Bridges

continued from page 3

outlook on life. “I think the really great thing about both programs is that there isn’t just one type of girl that attends either group. It’s truly a mix of various backgrounds and personalities that all come together and form positive relationships with one another.” And just like Taylor, Tracie is thankful for the awesomeness of Bridges and Teen LEAD. “We are lucky to have such great volunteer mentors for our ladies as well as some pretty amazing and resilient girls who participate.”

“I think the difference in this program is the goal to make leaders out of girls who have potential,” says FSPA affiliate Madalene Buelow (who sponsors a ministry grant that helps to fund college visits and scholarships

and travel costs), “but possibly no voice because of their economic situation, their color and perhaps their grades. They are not the girls who get all the attention and opportunities for success. They are not the ones who join church groups or other extracurricular activities that would give them the opportunity to become confident young women.” The Orange Door Prom Store, a re-sale fundraiser managed by Teen LEAD girls, giving them hands-on experience in a business setting, is one of Madalene’s favorite annual functions. “It’s a joy to see the girls help other girls pick out that fabulous dress [many new, donated by area formal dress shops] that is going to make them feel good about themselves and being part of the high school rite of passage that is prom. Bridges and Team LEAD are about knowing who you are and,” she says, “becoming comfortable with it.” ■