

# Building Bridges for the Future

We all know what bridges are and we have all seen bridges in various forms, sizes, long short and medium length that span across bodies of water. Connecting one area with another.

We also know that a bridge has to be Substantial, by that I mean, it must be constructed to with- stand traffic, heavy loads, the weather and will need constant care. A bridge must be constructed so that those who use will feel safe crossing it.

To Build Bridges, they had to be firm and strong enough to change our lives, man had to do more than build the structure man had to make sure the bridge was safe enough and had time enough to handle the everyday changes, because growth and change takes time and continued focused attention.

Many of our fore-parents were Builders of Bridges in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, they were at the vanguard of the struggle for the rights of man to be able to prosper and grow. They envisioned an era that would cement a spirit of cooperation, and unified efforts among classes of people so they could speak with one voice.

They saw the need to build bridges for the Future, bridges that would be necessary to advance the lives of all Americans. So they were committed to bringing about social and economic change, change that would enhance our lives.

Our fore-parents worked hard building bridges that changed the social and economic fabric of this nation and left a legacy of leadership for contemporary men and women.

We all thirst for more goodness, which comes with change. But until we assume the power to make our personal world, we'll continue to abdicate our power to set things right in the larger world.

An Ashanti proverb tells us “the ruin of a nation begins in the homes of its people. Simply put, making changes and making things work in this world is up to you and me.

Allow me to cite an example of one woman who built a bridge that connected to the lives of more than 24 young Americans. She became tired and distressed by the treatment of minority children in our schools, our homes and the community; she made a strong commitment to build a bridge changing their lives. She went into an elementary school classroom, selected a first grade class, after speaking to them about the importance of education, she made a big promise to the kids in that classroom. She promised 27 young first graders that if they stayed in school made good grades and graduated from high school she would continue the span of her bridge for them to cross to college.

After 11 years she kept that promise. 24 of the 27 students graduated, crossed over the bridge and off to college they went, by now they all have graduated from college. Ora Lee Brown who made it possible for them to cross the bridge to their future, is known as the angel from heaven to those young scholars.

Let's for one moment say that each of us here this afternoon decide we want to create positive change by building a bridge to the future in our communities. A bridge that will make our community a better and safer place to live. In order to do that we must first have a vision of what we want our communities to become. We must envision it and then make detailed plans to bring the vision to fruition.

No one ever invented anything that was not first a vision, a image in the mind, a thought, a concept or a word. They had to have discipline. "Discipline is the bridge between goals and accomplishments," People in Caves Built Bridges by leaving images of their desires on walls. Harriet Tubman had to imagine herself free before she could muster the courage to build a bridge for her escape from slavery.

This organization, the Midwest Association of Housing Corporative, thru bridge building has and still is making dreams come true. Your bridge was first built in the 1800's and you finished constructing the Bridge to the future in the 1960's to make your dreams a reality for many people and make a positive change in housing. You saw the need for housing for low and middle-income families. To made sure your bridge fulfilled their dream of home ownership and also to be able to have a say in how they lived, you opted not to deal with condominiums, or Lofts, which many cities had to legislate a moratorium, because builders and landlords only wanted to build or convert apartments into condos. So you grabbed hold of your dream and your idea to build or buy housing for co-operative housing. Thus your bridge became a reality, for the future of many families and individuals.

Co-op housing was not a popular way for developers or landlords to get rich. But thanks to HUD who shared your dream and made it a reality. I call that positive bridge building for the future that benefited families who would never be able to become homeowners. This was done through a lot of cooperation and hard work, but you persevered and made it happen. You became experts in making change through bridge building.

Your organization showed us what could be done if we cooperate with each other. You showed us that we could no longer draw geographic boundaries around the problems we share.

Dr Asa Hilliard, Professor of Urban Education at Georgia State University, A bridge builder for the future of education, says it best in his book Reawakening of the American Mind, "No matter where we are, our problems and conditions are the same. Many of us are unconscious, unorganized, unfocused, and have lost our purpose."

So we must work together, you and I, if we are to tackle the monumental problems we face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We must work together you and I, if we are to gain victory over poverty, the disease, the anxiety and the anger that continues to mark the daily lives of so many people across this country.

Just as I need to understand your problems in your cities and organization, you must begin to see my problems in my city and organization---and to treat us all as your own.

And particularly the confused, the poor, the ill, the elderly, the children, and the homeless that are drifting because we failed to build their bridges for the future, they now have no place to go. We must find ways to cross imaginary lines because those are the ones who fair worst from the kind of callous disregard for human rights exhibited by the many people's disdain for civil rights.

As I see it the challenge facing us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to unravel all of the complex social and economic forces that channel so many of our brothers and sisters into dead-end lives of wasted potential, despair or violence.

Tony Balis, In his essay, "The Mirror or the Mountain Top, states, "One reason we remain in such environmental, social, financial and political crisis is of course that too many of our leaders over the past 50 years have failed us by forgetting to continue building bridges for the future, they were looking more at the mirror than the mountain top.

Perhaps we have failed ourselves too, because we have not cared enough—or truly noticed- that we are letting our lowest instincts succeed while our highest ones dangerously idle and slide, diminished so often by mere contentment and myopia. All the time the finer sides of our humanity insistently remind us that we ride this home on earth together and that we must take care of each other, no matter who, no matter where, no matter how.

So how do we best come to term with what Hawthorne called the "Marble and mud" of our existence and with severe compound fracturing of our future> One crucial way, of course, is to find and embrace truly visionary leaders." Leaders who will expand the bridge building that will span across many miles of broken promises, contentment and myopia.

He further says, "Then along comes this skinny, half-Kenyan, half-Kansan, with the confidence of a lion, a man as inspiring as the northern lights on a clear Artic midnight, talking about building Bridges for America's future.

But not only does he have the right words and the right instincts, he also has the right judgment. He knows how to listen, how to get things done, how to build consensus, how to handle criticism, how to close the deal. This may be, in fact, his finest skill, to bring opposing sides together and make positive change happen.” That of course is our President, Barack Obama, who had the prestigious Nobel Prize for Peace bestowed upon him.

There has been significant changes in America this past year, Housing market has taken a downward slide many homes are still being foreclosed, unemployment has not seen much improvement, businesses are still closing or merging, education is still taking big hit as well as taxes, and the economy has been hit hard and the same dollars you made 4 years still don't go as far. All of this was swept under the rug by the last administration, because he failed to see the reason for continuous bridge building.

So when change happens there are two things we can do- resist or accept. If we resist there is a tendency to move into a desperate state of mind. In a desperate state of mind we are not as resourceful as we could be, we fail to make appropriate decisions, and lose sight of our need to build bridges for the future, which is truly important.

When life is full of challenges a positive mental attitude can break down even the strongest walls of resistance. There are things we can do to build our positive mental attitude. The most powerful and the simplest are to have an attitude of gratitude.

Remember the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, he said,” the ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.

So what is our challenge to continue building bridges for positive change: We need to use our political strength, our sense of justice and our street smarts to achieve real progress on real issues. Issues such as Housing: Health Care: Education and Opportunity.

To help meet the challenge for positive change, we will need to learn how to bridge the widening gap between the “haves” and “ have-nots” in our communities. We will need to give our children the skills they will need to compete in the global market place of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. How to deal with the aids epidemic and the crisis in our nation's health system. How to provide shelter and housing for the more than 3 million men, women and children who are living on our streets.

So our challenge as role models for building bridges is to rebuild an urban agenda that focuses on the need of our people--- and to rebuild a political imperative behind the issues that cannot be ignored.

Those of us in the various communities who have, because of bridge building, risen to positions of prominence and authority have a special responsibility. It is not enough for us to work and fight all our lives to achieve our own goals. We have got to do more. We have got to build bridges that reach back in our community and pull others along.

We have got to be willing to serve as mentors teachers, and role models for the young men and women who are struggling to build bridges, to realize their dreams. It will be hard and demanding, and that may be the last thing we may want to do after putting in a twelve-hour day fighting our own uphill battles. But it's the only way that we are going to provide hope and opportunity for our young people to build their bridge for the future.

It's the only way we are going to build a society where there's truly a rainbow at every level. It's the only way we are going to create the nation that Dr. King dreamed of, a nation where men women and children will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.

The giants of the past 100 years have built the bridges foundation. Now it's up to us to build the bridge of equality and justice.

It's up to you the Midwest Association of Cooperative Housing, through your expertise in bridge building to continue to push for more cooperative housing throughout this nation. There is a need to fulfill the dream of our citizens who want to join you in living the dream.

If we can do these things, if we can translate our values into a national agenda that hits people where they really live. Then I think, as leaders, we will be able to look back at the past and say we are ready to meet the challenge and continue to build bridges for the future of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.