



**An Interview with Rob Paymer, Executive Director of Bridges**

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**1) What inspired the creation of Bridges?**

Two St. Paul's legends, Bob Hallett and Judd Anderson, founded The Coldstream Project (now Bridges) in the summer of 1993. They had \$5,000 and three major goals: (1) use the School's resources to provide an exciting and enriching summer to nine and ten year olds from Coldstream Park Elementary, a Title I School in NE Baltimore; (2) involve high school students from the St. Paul's Schools as volunteer assistant counselors; and (3) help these students and volunteers - kids from very different parts of a still very segregated town - bond and have a great summer together.

**2) To what extent is leadership development part of the Bridges mission?**

Development of high school volunteers was a hallmark of the program then and has remained a key priority. Between our volunteer orientations and in-program trainings, we help high school students learn how to listen, build trusting and intentional relationships, tutor, and facilitate group activities. We educate high school volunteers on the systems and challenges facing our

students, but are careful to teach in a way that helps them to see students as people and not as data points.

One of the on-going highlights of my 12 years at Bridges has been seeing the ways past volunteers have and continue to apply their Bridges experiences to their adult lives. I have a monthly phone call with a past volunteer who is 26, living in New York, and supporting the success of young people in Harlem. Earlier this year, I had a few planning calls with a long-time volunteer who's in college and going to South Africa to develop a program for kids in under-resourced areas. There are lots of stories like these - they are rewarding and underscore the importance of the volunteer side of Bridges. I went to St. Paul's and volunteered in the program from 1994 to 1998. I still have and wear my red program t-shirt.

### **3) What are two of the unique leadership opportunities for students?**

The two most common ways that high school students lead in Bridges are as after school tutors and as assistant camp counselors.

Each sports season, we form a team of after school tutors to work with Bridges' youngest students. These tutors commit to weekly training and after school sessions that include sports, enrichment activities, and homework help.

In the summer, we form yet another team of high school students to volunteer as assistant counselors with our elementary and middle school aged students. The summer role is particularly intense (45 hours/week for 2 weeks) and includes everything from making breakfast for students to leading assemblies, chaperoning field trips, leading recess, escorting students on trips to the nurse's office, and tutoring.

### **4) What drew you to leading a program like Bridges? How do you stay motivated?**

Around the middle of high school, primarily through readings in English and US History classes, and experiences in Bridges, I started to get the sense that our society was not particularly adept at developing human potential, particularly of people growing up in under-resourced communities. I did not think it was fair, nor did I think it was good.

Continued experiences working with and learning from young people during and immediately following my college years at Northwestern heightened this belief. Ultimately, my decision to leave the for-profit world in Chicago and return to Baltimore 12 years ago to run Bridges was rooted in two things. A frustration with the way things were and an unwavering belief that things could be better.

I was frustrated that success stories were so hard to come by in the under-resourced areas where I had spent time with kids. Just getting through college took a combination of great genius, hard work, and extraordinary luck. To this day, less than 10% of high school freshmen in Baltimore's public school system will have a two- or four-year degree by the age of 24. This is a simple, but jarring fact, not a comment on any one institution.

Did so many things need to be left to chance? I did not think so then and I do not think so now, which speaks to the belief piece. With my frustration came the belief, which I still hold, that we could do a much better job supporting young people. I saw no reason we couldn't create much longer term support systems that nourish potential from a young age, build personal capacity, and provide access to like-minded peers and opportunity.

Being 25 when I took over Bridges, my vision for this system was not 100% clear but I was committed to the idea and knew it was possible. The right resources at the right time, delivered consistently and over many years make for life-changing impact. It's must easier said than done, but it's what fuels our work at Bridges.

We will always be improving our answer to the challenge, but I feel like our work has come a long way over the last 12 years. Most of the nine- and ten- year-olds we recruit stay in the program through high school, graduate high school, and go to college. We are building up a college program to ensure that degrees started are completed and converted to fulfilling careers. We are currently working with 260 Baltimore City youth, ages 9 to 22.

At the same time, we are now working with 165+ high school volunteers per year. This includes students from St. Paul's School, St. Paul's School for Girls, Gilman School, Bryn Mawr School, and Roland Park Country School. These volunteers are using Bridges to learn about themselves and the world around them, much the way that I was as a high school volunteer 20+ years ago. The strong relationships I see being fostered between volunteers and students gives me hope that Baltimore can look different, be more inclusive, and be better for everyone 20 years from now.

Big picture, we are just getting started. I'm excited to finish our program model at Bridges at St. Paul's School, continue to grow Bridges at Gilman School, and to open additional sites throughout the City.