

Bridges to Life

By [Kathryn Haueisen \(Kathy\)](#)

Website: [HowWiseThen.com](https://howwisethen.com)

<https://howwisethen.com/bridges-to-life/>

March is “Make A Difference” month at HowWiseThen. This week I focus on Bridges to Life. Bridges to Life offers a program that transforms lives inside and outside prisons. I’m hardly an expert on prison reform issues, but I’m fairly confident we focus more on punishment and revenge than rehabilitation and redemption. This does a disservice to the guilty, their victims, and society when convicted felons return to public life worse than when they began their prison sentences.

I don’t advocate being soft on crime; but neither do I believe that locking people up for decades is making us safer. Too often we lock up young people just learning how to function in the adult world. I’m not convinced the prison system teaches young adults what they need to know to be productive citizens. Bridges to Life offers a highly successful program to change that.

From Tragedy to Prison Ministry

John Sage started Bridges to Life in 1998, five years after his sister, Marilyn Sage Meagher, was brutally murdered. Her murderers, a young man and a young woman, murdered someone they did not know in a robbery gone horribly wrong. Both received death sentences. The young man died in prison; the woman is still on death row.

After five years of struggling to recover from the shock, anger, and grief of his sister’s murder, John felt called to do something productive to help the victims move on in a healthy way and offer a chance at rehabilitation for the offenders. He developed a program that connects communities to prisons in order to reduce repeat violations, especially violent crimes. The program is both simple and profound. The imprisoned meet in small groups for fourteen weeks. Each participant is required to tell the story of their life that led them to prison. Their stories are heart-wrenching.

The Power of Small Groups

Participants meet weekly in groups of eight to ten prisoners and two Bridges to Life trained volunteers. The program goal is to get participants to take responsibility for what they did, listen to crime victims talk about what impact violent crimes had on them and their families, and to the extent possible, make amends. Through its 22 year history, the non-profit has had 55,000 program graduates in 185 prisons and rehab facilities, and has impacted over 3,100 volunteers. Currently, there are 17 staff members overseeing the program.

A Bridges to Life Report, assisted by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, documents that over 83% of those who complete a Bridges to Life program had not returned to prison within three years after release. A 2020 National Police Foundation Independent research study compared the recidivism rate of those who go through the program to those who do not. Program participants decreased the chances of recidivism by 30%; with a 62% reduction in people returning to prison for a violent crime.

While the program has documented great success, those who participate in it do not have their sentences reduced for going through the program. They do get a certification of completion, which becomes part of their permanent file. Founder Sage noted, “Parole officers look favorably on that because it verifies they’ve admitted to the crime they committed and have taken responsibility for their actions.”

Close a Door, Open a Window

The program depends on volunteers to lead the small group discussions. Of the 3,100 people who have volunteered, some 265 active volunteers have been with the program five years; 90 for ten years, and 50 for fifteen to twenty years. About a third of the volunteers have been impacted directly by crime. Sage explained that the volunteers typically get as much from the program as they give. “They are grateful for the life they have and it helps them understand what happened to others that they end up in prison. We don’t excuse their behavior because of their rough life, but it does generate a more empathetic approach to how we treat people in prison and those with criminal records.”

In March 2020 COVID-19 led prisons stopping all in-prison programs. “We’ve been busy raising funds, doing strategic planning, and providing a new self-study guide,” explained Sage. “The self-study guide consists of 140 questions and the prisoner is required to answer all of them. These are then reviewed by Bridges to Life staff and volunteers. Those who successfully finish the self-study earn a certificate of completion, which becomes part of their permanent file. There is a high demand for this because of the total lack of programs in prisons right now. It is also allowing us to expand to new places.”

While the self-study has proven helpful, it is not as effective as the in-person small group process that was paused due to COVID-19. Sage observed, “The self-study program has had more impact on the inmates than we anticipated, but the attrition rate is much higher than we expected. Of those who drop out, about 20% never hand in the assignment, another 20% did not comply with the requirements, and around 10% got an early release or transfer before completing the work.” There will be over 6,000 inmates participating in the self-study program this spring.

One Life Transformed

As health officials work to reduce the number of new COVID-19 infections and increase the number of vaccinated people, Sage is hopeful Bridges to Life can resume in-prison programming, perhaps later in 2021. He anticipates that the self-study option will continue to be available to supplement the small group process.

You can read about one success story from the program in T. Carlos Anderson’s *There Is a Balm in Huntsville*. It is the true story about a young man who ignored the many adults and friends who tried to dissuade him from driving after consuming large quantities of beer. His decision to ignore the advice cost two other young people their lives and him his freedom. Because Bridges to Life and a core group of people encouraged him, he transformed from an arrogant ‘you-can’t-tell-me-what-to-do’ young man into a mature adult who’s devoting his life to do his best to prevent others from making his fatal mistake.

Learn. Care. Share.

Bridges to Life’s tag line is, “Healing Crime victims. Rehabilitating offenders. Making our Communities Safer.” You can help by learning more about the program and making a contribution to the cause through their website. They’ve been successfully doing this for twenty-two years now. For more information about the transforming power of Bridges to Life or to help support this effort visit: www.bridgestolife.org. To read a compelling success story about the reform of one prisoner, read [Balm in Huntsville](#). Pastor Anderson is available to speak to your book club or Adult Education group. Contact him at <https://tcarlosanderson.com/>

Thanks for taking time to read about this remarkable prison program that benefits crime victims, criminals, and prison personnel, making a safer community for us all.