

# Bridges

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News from the Marriott Foundation's Atlanta Bridges Program Spring 2011

## REFLECTING ON 20 YEARS: BRIDGES AND MARRIOTT INTERNATIONAL

**W**hen the Marriott family decided to concentrate some of its philanthropic efforts on improving opportunities for persons with disabilities, they established the Marriott Foundation for People with Disabilities (MFPD) and launched a school-to-work transition program that became known as Bridges from school to work. Not a corporate foundation but a family foundation, MFPD was established in 1989, and began by providing services to youth with disabilities in Montgomery County, MD, where the program continues to operate today. Initial planning discussions for the Foundation and Bridges began among a small group of Marriott corporate executives in a Marriott headquarters conference room, and experts from Virginia Commonwealth University and Milt Wright and Associates were consulted as details for the Bridges model materialized.

When those Marriott executives and consultants conceptualized Bridges twenty years ago, they were not using e-mail to communicate with each other, and they weren't using Google to search for information about employment rates of youth with disabilities. E-mail and the Internet in 1989 corporate America were still in their infancy. What's more, Twitter, Facebook, smartphones or other technologies we take for granted today did not exist.

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Marriott's corporate profile also looked very different 20 years ago. In 1989, Marriott had only 500 lodging properties, with a significant portion of its operations comprised of an airline catering division, restaurant chains, toll road and airport concessions, corporate and university food and facilities management. Today, Marriott is a global company that manages and franchises more than 3500 lodging products worldwide with brand names such as Ritz-Carlton, Renaissance, J.W. Marriott, SpringHill Suites, and Edition, among others.

Twenty years ago, just like today, Bridges representatives helped youth land competitive employment. Two decades ago, however, the labor market was somewhat different, both in terms of the jobs available and the way that applicants competed for them. Twenty years ago, Bridges youth completed paper applications at the employer's job site, and managers often granted on-the-spot interviews. Today, however, most major employers have shifted to online applications, many of which include assessments designed to screen applicants and determine their suitability for the job. The advantage today is that applicants can search for and apply for jobs without leaving home. The disadvantage is that it's harder to meet employers face-to-face. Rather than reviewing handwritten applications and screening applicants in person, most managers today rely on software to assess, sort, and prioritize the applicants—all without meeting them in person.

As Bridges begins its third decade, with expansion to seven cities and more than 12,000 job placements, two core tenets remain constant. First, the program is employer-driven, meaning that its goal is to meet the employment needs of local business with an under-utilized talent source, youth with disabilities. Second, youth in special education need transition services as much today as they did 20 years ago, especially when navigating an ever-evolving economy and a technology-driven labor market. ↪

## BRIDGES STAFF PROFILE



**S**enior Employer Representative Tony Singleton graduated from Douglass High School in Atlanta, a city he has called home for most of his life. Tony's first stint away from his beloved hometown was when he attended Saint Augustine's College in Raleigh, N.C. on an academic scholarship. After earning his bachelor's degree in mathematics there, he spent five years as a U.S. Army missile officer in Texas and Germany.

After his college and military careers, Tony returned to Atlanta and followed in his father's footsteps, becoming an educator in the Atlanta Public School system where he taught middle and high school math for three years. Realizing that being a classroom teacher

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was not his calling, Tony entered the human services field and became a work adjustment instructor for mentally ill adults at Community Friendship, where he worked for eight years.

In 1997 Tony married his wife, Robin, and shortly thereafter joined the Bridges team, where he continued to serve students in the Atlanta Public School System, but in a different capacity. During the almost thirteen years that he has been with Bridges, he has been instrumental in placing students in nearly 300 jobs with various employers throughout the Atlanta area.

For pleasure, Tony enjoys a good yarn—and satisfies his craving for an interesting story by watching the history channel or getting hooked on a page turner. A music lover, Tony enjoys listening to the radio and sometimes participates in contests for give-a-ways. He has a knack for it, because he has won more than ten times, the latest being a pair of tickets to an Earth, Wind, and Fire concert at Verizon Park Amphitheatre.

With Tony his family always comes first, so when Tony's son Antonio, Jr. gave him and Robin their first grandchild, Tony was elated. Tony's eyes light up when he talks about his precious granddaughter, Kori, who turns two in June.

It's no surprise that Tony gets much of his inspiration to serve his community from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who from his home base here in Atlanta, dedicated his life to civil rights and the betterment of humanity. With plans to continue his work with disadvantaged youth for the remainder of his career, Tony's legacy might be on a smaller scale than Dr. King's, but he will no doubt play an important role in improving the lives of hundreds of Atlanta's young people. ↵

#### CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT: NATIONAL YOUTH EMPLOYMENT COALITION'S PEPNET

**B**ridges is collaborating with the National Youth Employment Coalition and its Promising and Effective Practices Network (PEPNet) to conduct a quality self assessment. In October of 2010 Bridges hosted a kick-off meeting with local stakeholders to share information about the 175-question survey and how results from it would be used to make the program stronger.

In the weeks following the kick-off meeting, 35 stakeholders from Atlanta, including local Bridges staff, joined 255 other national Bridges stakeholders to complete the online survey, designed to assess the program's strengths and weaknesses in areas such as management for quality, programmatic approach, youth development, and program outcomes related to youth services.

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Stakeholders reconvened in March 2011 to review and discuss the survey results, identify trends and prioritize areas of improvement. Survey results indicated that the Atlanta Bridges program's strengths include its reputation for helping youth become productive members of the workforce, and its ongoing collaboration with school districts and local employers to help the program achieve its mission. As for the lowest survey scores, it came as no surprise that academic achievement was not the program's strong suit. While Bridges certainly encourages youth to maximize their academic potential, the program itself does not include an academic component. Therefore, low scores in this area of the survey were not identified during the debrief as priorities for improvement.

Stakeholders at the debrief session, after some brainstorming and discussion, decided that the area with the greatest potential for improvement included visibility and awareness of the Bridges program among all stakeholder groups, including employers, school districts, parents, and other community partners.

Several stakeholders from the debrief meeting volunteered to form an improvement action team that will suggest steps that Bridges can take in coming months to increase awareness and visibility. Those stakeholders who volunteered include Mae Faison, retired from Vocational Rehabilitation, James Winkler, a Sodexo general manager, Karla Wade, transition coordinator for Cobb County Schools, Marchantnita Huff, career technology instruction coordinator with Atlanta Public Schools, and Cherokee McKenzie, employer representative with Bridges. ↵