

*Excerpt from Chapter 10, On Our Own, Together*

**BRIDGES in Tennessee:**

**Building Recovery of Individual Dreams and Goals through Education and Support**

*by Louetta Hix*

The original BRIDGES program was started in Tennessee in 1995, and within five years had expanded to eight other states and one Canadian province. The program consists of two parts. The first provides a fifteen-week course on mental illness, mental health treatment, and recovery, taught by consumers to consumers. The second offers ongoing support groups facilitated by consumers who have been trained in the BRIDGES method.

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In the education program, BRIDGES seeks to provide a safe place, that is, a place for validation, where you can gain understanding and acceptance, learn and practice real life skills, exchange information about mental illness—a place to learn strategies for recovery and to build recovery skills. (Nelson 2001)

The primary goal of a BRIDGES course is to help consumers understand mental illness and recovery from mental illness. The courses provide a safe place to discuss feelings and are designed to help consumers understand mental health treatment and how to make it work for us and to give consumers the tools we need to move toward recovery. The course also helps us deal with stigma, both the way we feel about ourselves (internalized sigma) and the attitudes and biases of others.

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In the support group program, BRIDGES seeks to provide a place where individuals can confront their fears, share feelings/experiences and find they are not alone. They find a place to learn and practice skills related to real-life issues and gain understanding through exchange of information about mental illnesses and strategies for recovery. (Nelson 2001) BRIDGES support groups have several goals. Their first goal is to let people know they are not alone. Other goals are to offer hope, to provide information, and to give people a chance to help themselves and an opportunity to help others.

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BRIDGES teachers, facilitators, and administrative staff receive in service training at two annual conferences. The fall BRIDGES Empowerment Conference consists of training workshops providing updates on changes in the program, as well as training in ways to improve various aspects of program implementation. The annual TMHCA [Tennessee Mental Health Consumer's Association] conference held every May includes BRIDGES workshops as well as the BRIDGES Awards Banquet, a big celebration of accomplishments that includes accolades, music, and poetry.