

## BRIDGING TO CARING ECONOMICS AND A CHANGED WORLD

Donald Gault

**Abstract:**

Bridging is a furniture bank located in Minnesota's Twin Cities. Since 1987, Bridging has helped make the homes of close to 350,000 people places of dignity and hope. The work of Bridging is built around a remarkable series of partnerships that strongly aligns with Riane Eisler's concept of caring economics, and Bryan Stevenson's challenge to us all to take action to change the world. This paper will outline the origins of Bridging, how it operates, and how it represents an inspiring, tangible example of the power of partnership to transform individuals and communities.

**Keywords:**

furniture banks, poverty, partnership, caring economy, dignity, respect, transformation, justice

Copyright: ©2024 Gault. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Noncommercial Attribution license (CC BY - NC 4.0), which allows for unrestricted noncommercial use, distribution, and adaptation, provided that the original author and source are credited.

The Call for Papers for the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary issue of *The Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies* poses the question, "What will a partnership-based future mean for our children, our elders, for currently marginalized peoples, and for the rest of nature?"

In my 40+ years of working in local public health, community building, and violence prevention, perhaps the most clear, comprehensive, and hopeful answer that I have

experienced to this question has been in my role as a volunteer shopper at Bridging, a local furniture bank with locations in Roseville and Bloomington, Minnesota (US Furniture Banks, 2024). At Bridging, people who are transitioning to housing stability in the midst of experiencing the social and racial inequities so prevalent in America today, come to a place of caring and mutuality, to use the words of Riane Eisler.

I will provide a brief description of how Bridging works, with information from the Bridging website and 2024 Annual Report. We will then look at how and why the Bridging experience is so impactful for everyone involved, from individuals and organizational donors and volunteers, to the people who come to Bridging to furnish their homes, through the lenses of Riane Eisler's concept of *Caring Economics and Real Wealth*, and Bryan Stevenson's *Four Ways to Change the World*. I will then provide reflection on my own experience having met, "shopped," and connected with roughly 150 people and families to date, as a volunteer shopper at Bridging since January, 2023.

### **An Introduction to Bridging**

The Bridging website includes the organization's Origin Story:

In 1987 Fran Heitzman, a former business owner and entrepreneur, was the custodian at Pax Christi Church in Eden Prairie, Minnesota.

On a whim, a woman brought a piece of furniture to the church and asked Fran if it could be used in the children's nursery. Fran said the church didn't need it, but he was sure he could find a home for it. He then started making phone calls and found a social service agency that said they would be thrilled to receive the furniture.

That was the moment Bridging was born. Fran thought that if he could find a home for that piece of furniture, then he should be able to find a home for even more furniture, bridging the gap between those who have and those who have not. (<https://bridging.org/about-us/our-story/>)

Since this chance encounter in 1987, Bridging has provided furniture, essential household goods, beauty, and hope to almost 115,000 households and 345,000 people. Bridging presently operates through two Twin Cities warehouse locations, with 42,800 operational sq. ft. in Roseville, MN and 26,000 sq. ft. in Bloomington, MN. In 2023 alone, over 5,000 households and over 13,000 people were served (Bridging, 2024).

Clients (referred to in this paper as guest shoppers) at Bridging are given the opportunity to select a foundational home setup of furniture and essential household items. Each person is invited to tour a vast warehouse filled with a wide array of furniture, small kitchen and home electric appliances, linens, dishes, assorted kitchen and home implements, wall art, and related items that can transform a new home to a place of comfort and hope.

Shopping guests are referred to Bridging by local community partners including social service, resettlement, domestic violence, and public health agencies. In 2023, over 2,400 individual caseworkers from 270 partner agencies referred people they worked with to Bridging. Bridging's website provides an up-to-date list of partner agencies. (<https://bridging.org/services/agencyfinder/>)

As a volunteer shopper, our role is to guide guest shoppers through the warehouse so they can choose items, according to their needs and preferences, that they can use to help furnish and beautify their home. For many of the people I have met and shopped with, it may be the first time in a long time, if ever, that they have been given the opportunity and agency to make their own choices about how they wish to furnish their homes.

It has been my experience that staff and volunteers truly embrace and live out Bridging's mission and values, which help to create the layers of authentic partnership for everyone touched by this remarkable organization.

*Bridging's Mission:* Bridging empowers people to thrive in their homes by providing quality furniture and household goods for those pursuing housing stability.

*Bridging's Values: Dignity, Service, Partnership, Stewardship, Excellence, and Gratitude* (<https://bridging.org/about-us/>)

I believe that the clarity and tangibility of Bridging's mission is a big part of what appeals to many of the individuals and organizations who join in as partners in this important work. When at Bridging, everyone including guest shoppers, donors and other volunteers, and staff is able to experience Bridging's mission and values. Guest shoppers leave Bridging with furniture and household goods they have chosen, and a sense of dignity and hope.

We see firsthand each day that the items donated to Bridging, and the caring, dignity, and respect offered to our guest shoppers, combine to fulfill the mission of empowering people to thrive in their homes.

Bridging is intentional about receiving feedback from guest shoppers, volunteers, community partners, and staff to assure that its mission and values are strived for every day. The following quote from a guest shopper illustrates what these words mean in practice, and also, I believe strongly aligns almost verbatim with Riane Eisler's vision of a new economics discussed in the next section:

You all are there when it matters. You are soft and subtle for people. You are very uplifting. You let people know that there is someone who cares. That matters the most. I felt that no one cared, but when I came to Bridging, I found out there is someone who cares. The people were down to earth. We had a connection. I'm one of the people who needed you. You had my front, back, and middle. (Bridging Founders Week mailer, July, 2024)

The following quote from a Bridging volunteer captures the experience of the hundreds of individuals and organizations who proudly partner to bring Bridging's

mission and values to life: “With dignity and respect and without judgment, we try to know (someone and) their style, so we can help them look for pieces (furnishings) that will bring them joy” (Bridging Founders Week mailer, July, 2024)

### **Riane Eisler’s Caring Economics, Real Wealth, and A New Economics**

Riane Eisler (2021) compares and contrasts the attributes of a partnership-based economy to our current economic system, outlining visions of a New, Caring Economics:

Study after study shows that what people truly find most valuable are relationships, meaning, service, and a sense of purpose. But the current economic system does not support or give value to caring for people, starting in early childhood, and caring for our Mother Earth. We can, and must, change this! We can have an economic system that meets everyone’s material needs and makes it possible for us to have time and energy for our children, our communities, and ourselves.

A nation’s real wealth consists of the contributions of people and of nature. Therefore, we need what we have not had—economic measurements, policies, and practices that give visibility and adequate value to the most important human work: the work of caring for people, starting in early childhood, and caring for our natural environment. <https://rianeeisler.com/partnership-101/#7>

I believe that Riane Eisler’s economic vision and principles help to explain how and why Bridging operates so successfully. It is only through the lens of a new, caring economics that we can begin to explain and understand the magnitude of volunteerism and community partnership that plays out every day and year at Bridging.

### **Environmental Impacts of Bridging Partnership Model**

Bridging staff report that roughly 15 semi-loads of materials are needed to provide for the 120 families served by the two locations each week; Bridging estimates that

donations of goods to Bridging translate into diverting roughly 14 million pounds of materials from going into landfills each year, which instead is used to furnish people's homes and hearts.

All of the 14 tons per year and 15 semi-loads per week of household goods and furnishings made available to shopping guests at Bridging are donated, by individuals and organizations.

### **Social Connection Impacts of Bridging Partnership Model**

According to the 2023 Annual Report, in 2023 Bridging had roughly 38 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff positions across its two locations, and close to 30 FTE volunteers, including 660 individual volunteers and over 3,200 group volunteers (<https://bridging.org/about-us/>)

One example of how this works on an organizational level is Bridging's partnership with a local real estate company which started in 2012. Each year, individual local offices challenge one another to a "pillow fight," designed to collect and provide bed pillows to guest shoppers at both Bridging locations. Since its inception, this partnership has resulted in over 80,000 pillows being provided to Bridging for distribution to individuals and families, including more than 7,000 pillows to date in 2024. This example is but one of over 270 companies and organizations that partner with Bridging, including among others, hotels, furniture and bed stores, energy companies, moving companies, senior living facilities, moving companies, and waste haulers. The Bridging website provides a detailed list of its community partners. (<https://bridging.org/services/agencyfinder/>)

I believe that Bridging represents a living example of Riane Eisler's vision of an economy that is built to care for people and our environment. The companies and individuals that volunteer and donate to Bridging do this for the betterment of families and people in our community, which I believe provides a glimpse of what a vital, sustainable caring partnership economy looks like in practice.

## Bryan Stevenson's Four Ways to Change the World

Bryan Stevenson is the author of the book *Just Mercy*, describing his work as an attorney representing people on death row, who were often unjustly convicted yet sentenced to death. He is the founder of The Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama. A centerpiece of his work in Montgomery is the creation of three Legacy Sites: The Legacy Museum, The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, and Freedom Monument Sculpture Park, that document in stark detail the progression in this country from chattel slavery and the domestic slave trade, through to the Jim Crow era, to present day mass incarceration (*Equal Justice Initiative*, 2024).

In a speech at the Obama Foundation Summit in 2017, Stevenson suggested, in a talk of the same name, *Four Things to Change the World*:

1. Get proximate to those who you want serve.
2. Change the narratives underneath the issues.
3. Stay hopeful: don't let anyone make you hopeless.
4. Be willing to do uncomfortable things. (Stevenson, *How to Change the World*, 2017).

I believe that part of the reason that I, and hundreds of other people and organizations, are drawn to volunteer and partner with Bridging is described perfectly by Stevenson's proposition.

Each time another individual (and by extension their family) is welcomed to the Bridging warehouse, we quickly become authentically *proximate*, connecting to find the furniture and home goods that will best help fill our guest shopper's home with hope and beauty.

The *narrative* quickly shifts from the power and domination model that many guest shoppers regularly experience in their lives, to an experience of dignity, empathy, and empowerment as they make choices about how to furnish their homes.

Many guest shoppers report experiencing a sense of *hope* in feedback received during, and following, their visits.

Bridging strives to foster belonging for everyone from a diversity of cultures, races, ages, and gender identities. Furnishing homes with hope and joy provides authentic, caring connections and *comfort*, that replace the existing social narrative of disconnect and discomfort.

### **Bridging Volunteers**

I became a volunteer shopper at Bridging in January, 2023, having first learned about the organization by seeing one of their delivery trucks with the tagline *Furnishing Homes with Hope* written on its side. I initially committed to volunteering one morning a week; that commitment quickly became two mornings a week, while often filling in for another volunteer at least one additional morning per week.

Each morning Monday through Friday, at both the Roseville and Bloomington locations, volunteers guide shopping guests through the vast Bridging warehouses, providing information about the quantity of each item available to them based on their family/household size. There are two “shopping shifts” each morning, from roughly 9:00-10:30 AM, and 10:30 AM-noon. These numbers translate to 120 weekly shopping appointments, and over 5,000 households and 13,000 family/household members served by the two sites in 2023 alone.

In addition to being shoppers, volunteers fulfill the following functions on a daily basis at each location: warehouse assistant, office support, product sorter, and electrical and woodworking repair. As previously noted, the depth and breadth of partnership and community engagement at Bridging is reflected by the fact that Full-Time Equivalents of staff and daily volunteers are nearly equal. In addition, thousands of volunteers take part in group projects, including dresser builds and collections of pillows and other home essentials, as well as participating in numerous fundraising efforts each year.



One major challenge currently facing Bridging is that community demand for its resources is so great that, at present, people and families referred for an appointment typically have to wait one to two months, or more, for a shopping appointment. Bridging is working to decrease wait times by pursuing the opening of a new, third warehouse in a different part of the Twin Cities metro area, that would accept additional donations to be distributed through the two existing sites, thereby enhancing inventory and dignity of choice for guest shoppers.

### **The Shopping Experience**

On a typical shopping morning at Bridging, volunteer shoppers arrive around 8:45 AM. Each shopping team signs up to work with the individual(s) they will be shopping alongside in the warehouse. The only information we receive is the person's first name, size of their family, and whether their furniture and household items will be delivered by Bridging or will be picked up through an alternate arrangement.

Volunteer and guest shoppers meet in the bright and well-appointed Bridging entrance area, where we greet and welcome the guest shopper and, if present, their support person and/or translator. Guest shoppers are provided a brief explanation of the shopping process, including a description of the size and scope of the warehouse. Volunteer shoppers explain our role, which is to guide guest shoppers to each section of the warehouse and let them know how many/which items are available to them based on their household size. Guest shoppers are invited to discern and choose which items are right for them, their homes, and their families.

Items available for people to choose for their homes include:

- Mattresses, box springs, and bed frames;
- Storage bins, waste baskets and laundry hampers (which will be used later for packing household goods) and household cleaning tools and supplies;
- Upholstered furniture, including sofas, love seats, and upholstered chairs and ottomans;

- Wood furniture, including dressers, book/storage shelves, coffee tables, end tables, bedside tables, and kitchen tables and chairs;
- Dishes, glassware and silverware, including unbreakable plastic dishes, bowls and cups for children;
- Small electric appliances -- all tested and working -- including coffee makers, toasters, toaster ovens, microwaves, blenders, mixers, vacuum cleaners, fans, floor and table lamps, light bulbs, and, when available, television sets;
- Pots, pans, sharp knives, and baking and cooking essentials including measuring cups and spoons, and hand assembled “kitchen packs” with whisks, can openers, serving spoons, spatulas, and a variety of other kitchen tools;
- Water pitchers, mixing bowls, baking dishes, and serving trays;
- Linens, including kitchen towels; towel sets, including bath and hand towels and wash cloths; and bedding, including pillows and sheet sets with bottom and top sheets and pillow cases for every size bed;
- Small to room-size rugs, and clothes hangers; and
- Framed wall art and mirrors. (List based on personal shopping experiences.)

With the exception of television sets, most of the items listed above are available daily to guest shoppers and their families. As each guest shopper selects their foundational home setup, they select items they want and need, and, maintaining their dignity of choice, may also decline items they do not want or need.

There are occasional shortages of specific items, but the depth of community partnership and commitment to Bridging’s mission and vision is demonstrated by the fact that everything offered to guest shoppers has been donated by individuals and local companies and agencies, and caringly inspected and prepared for use in the homes of guest shoppers.

On each end of the warehouse are areas that I feel deserve special attention. On one end is the “bonus furniture” area, where we look through a variety of miscellaneous items that may include extra chairs, folding card tables, small dressers and cabinets,

and desks. The bonus furniture area often feels like a treasure hunt, and allows guest shoppers to fill in items that may not have been found in other areas of the warehouse.

My personal favorite area is at the other end of the warehouse: artwork and mirrors. Bridging does an amazing job of providing what we usually think of as household essentials. However, it has been my experience that wall artwork and small decorative items, including flower vases and seasonal decorations, are often equally as essential as beds and dishes for truly building a space and home graced with dignity and beauty, as are the items we more often think of as essential based on their utility and function.

### **Stories of Bridging**

I will briefly share the stories of three remarkable people I have had the honor to meet and shop with.

Early in my time at Bridging, we were shopping with a young man who had arrived in the U.S. from Afghanistan literally the day before we met him at Bridging. He spoke no English and was being assisted by a translator. He was very sparing in the items he wanted for his home, and when we got to the artwork section, I was not sure what, if anything, would be of interest or resonate with him. He carefully studied the wall, covered with hundreds of paintings and posters, and selected a framed poster, with a classic Minnesota scene -- a dock stretching out into a beautiful, tree-lined lake. In that moment I wondered if he had ever been to such a scene in person. That moment was unforgettable, as was the lesson that he taught me, that I can never guess or assume what item(s) might speak to any individual, nor is it my place to try, unless asked.

Months later, a young woman came in to shop. We never ask people for details of their stories and lives, beyond trying to get a sense of what kinds of things they are most interested in and hoping to find. During the course of our time together, she chose to share with us that she needed “everything,” as she and her children had recently fled a domestic violence situation in the middle of the night. During our visit, she was able to select most all of the furniture and housewares she and her children needed. However, the items that perhaps meant the most to her were three unique figurines

that she noticed tucked away high on a cabinet close to the artwork section. She said that they had left behind similar pieces, along with most of their belongings, in the home that they had had to flee. Tears came to her (and our) eyes as she spoke about how essential and symbolic the figurines would be for her healing journey.

The third story happened during the spring of 2024. A man came in looking for items for the apartment he lived in by himself. As we walked through the upholstered furniture aisles, he asked where our patio furniture section was. I told him that we really didn't have such a section, and that I had rarely if ever seen patio furniture at Bridging. Almost as soon as those words crossed my lips, we turned the corner and found a beautiful wicker patio loveseat. He said that he needed a regular loveseat for his living room, and that he needed the wicker loveseat for his outdoor patio. I tried to explain that he could have one or the other, but not both, as we needed to be sure to have sufficient items for everyone. My explanation did not seem to make sense to him, so I suggested that we go to another section to select housewares and related items, and that we'd come back to look at furniture afterward.

As we stood in front of shelves of pots and pans and other kitchen items, he turned to me and said he wanted to tell me why he needed both the indoor and patio loveseats: he had only recently moved into his apartment, after having been homeless and living on the streets for the past 5 years. He said that it was the greatest blessing that his new apartment had an outdoor patio area, as he found it difficult to be inside for extended periods, after having spent so much time on the streets.

I asked him to wait, and went to find the Volunteer Coordinator for guidance. I shared with her what he had told me, and she said that yes, of course, we must allow him to have both the indoor and outdoor loveseats. She reassured me that while there are good reasons for the guidelines, which are in place to assure adequate furniture options for all Bridging shopping guests, there are also times to make exceptions out of compassion and empathy, and that this was a clear example of one of those times.

This final story I think illustrates the depth of what we can all learn when, in Bryan Stevenson’s words, we are proximate, and when we design and operate systems and organizations based on Riane Eisler’s principles of caring, partnership economies.

## **Reflection**

The time I have spent and the people I have met at Bridging represent some of the most impactful and hopeful work I have experienced in my life and career. I regret that I was not able to meet and directly experience Bridging’s founder, Fran Heitzman, who died in 2020 at the age of 94, but I see and feel his dream in the amazing staff, volunteers, and guest shoppers that it is my privilege to meet and share some part of this life with each time I am there.

I believe that the vision and work he left behind truly provide living examples of the calls to action of Riane Eisler and Bryan Stevenson.

In Fran Heitzman’s own words, “I believe that with all of us just doing what we can, we can change the world. And if everybody practices that, what a beautiful world it would be.” (Bridging Founders Week mailer, July, 2024)

Returning again to the question posed in the Call for Papers for this 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of *The Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*, I believe that Bridging represents a tangible and inspiring example of the power we have, individually and collectively through partnership, to change this beautiful and challenged world for the better. Based on the transformative experiences I see each day at Bridging, I believe that a partnership-based future in which our children, elders, currently marginalized peoples, and our earth are cared for, is still possible. It is in our hands now to take these lessons and apply them to the continuing work of protecting, nurturing, and healing our families, communities, and world.

## **Acknowledgements**

The author wishes to thank the following Bridging staff for their guidance and assistance in writing this article: Jennifer Nielsen, Jennifer Baker, Beth Schultz-Smith, and Joel

Bisser; Wendy Erickson, the Volunteer Coordinator at the Roseville, MN warehouse; and all of the remarkable staff, volunteers, and guest shoppers who make Bridging such a remarkable place and experience each day.

## References

- Bridging: Furnishing Homes with Hope. (2024). Retrieved September 8, 2024, from <https://bridging.org/>
- Eisler, R. (2021). *Partnership 101*. Retrieved September 8, 2024, from <https://rianeeisler.com/partnership-101/>
- Equal Justice Initiative. (2024). Retrieved September 8, 2024, from <https://eji.org/about/>
- Furniture Bank Network. (2024). Retrieved September 8, 2024, from <https://furniturebanks.org/>
- Stevenson, B. (2017). *How to change the world, 2017 Obama Foundation Summit*. Retrieved September 8, 2024, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MB4VQYaT4bA&t=5s>
- 

Donald Gault is the founder of Building Peaceful Community, a consulting practice started in 2016 dedicated to reconnecting humanity with humane, providing training, consultation, and planning facilitation in the Twin Cities, Minnesota, and nationwide on building healthy, productive workplaces and peaceful and healthy lives for individuals, families, and communities. ([www.buildingpeacefulcommunity.org](http://www.buildingpeacefulcommunity.org)). He worked at Saint Paul - Ramsey County Public Health Department from 1987 to 2016, managing the department's Healthy Communities Section and co-founding the Initiative for Peaceful Families and Communities in Ramsey County. He has a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science from Northeastern Illinois University and a Master of Arts degree from the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota.

Correspondence about this article should be addressed to Donald Gault at [dosgault@gmail.com](mailto:dosgault@gmail.com)