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A Bridge to A New Beginning

by [Christie McCollum](#)



On any given Saturday, while the neighborhood kids watch cartoons and their parents lazily shuffle about the house, Jim Piscopo goes to work. As co-founders of the nonprofit Bridging AZ Furniture Bank, Piscopo and his wife, Donna, accepted their personal sacrifice five years ago. They work seven days a week, but not in vain.

What started as a 10x10 storage space filled with couches and tables and grown into a 9,000-sq.-ft. warehouse, already too small to hold all the furniture that donors offer. From this new depot in Mesa, Ariz., the Piscopos provide new and like-new home furnishings for the people who need it most: victims of domestic abuse, men and women escaping homelessness, and those with learning disabilities or chronic diseases. These people come to the organization in transition from shelters to their own homes, and Bridging AZ provides them with the beds, couches and dressers that they need to feel comfortable.

“Imagine an empty house,” said Jim Piscopo. “These people are finally getting back on their own, but they’ve got nothing. Two years ago they could have had a beautiful home and furniture, but due to a series of events, they end up homeless. It’s very powerful.”

It is that powerful image that motivated the Piscopos to start the program five years ago. After completing an “education for ministry” class and listening to the heartbreaking

stories of a caseworker at a domestic violence shelter where he volunteered, Jim Piscopo decided to take action. He and Donna sold their home and used the money to start their nonprofit.

Since that day five years ago, Bridging AZ has slowly increased its capabilities: the foundation currently serves about 300 individuals and families each year. And Jim plans to continue expanding until he distributes his target of 5000 beds in the next five years.

While the numbers certainly speak to the quality of the organization, the most powerful testaments to its success are the simplest: the reactions of the people it helps.

“It’s an overwhelming feeling of gratitude,” said Michelle Kissel, a case manager for Arizona Women’s Education & Employment, which sends clients to Bridging AZ. “When you’re put in a situation and given the opportunity to be blessed with a houseful of furniture...it’s an amazing, amazing thing.”

Jim Piscopo agreed. “This is really something that a volunteer has to experience and see how powerful it is,” he said. “They need to see what the families have gone through and how far they’ve come to rebuild their lives.”

Indeed, Bridging AZ’s clients have made incredible progress in starting over. They come from abusive relationships, homelessness and societal rejection to service organizations like Arizona Women’s Education & Employment. There, they meet case managers and career development specialists like Kissel, who provide social services and then direct them to the Piscopos.

When Bridging AZ’s clients — the vast majority of them low-income single mothers — reach the furniture bank, they’re treated to a shopping trip of sorts.

“When the clients come here we make it a fun process,” Jim Piscopo said. “We go through the paperwork...and then say ‘let’s go shopping!’ Then they come into the warehouse and get whatever is appropriate for a family of that size.”

Unfortunately, the furniture bank must maintain a certain degree of rigidity in the amount of furniture it gives to each client. It gives out the essentials — beds, sofas, tables, chairs and dressers — but only what each family actually needs. Despite incredible interest and proposed furniture donations from community members, Bridging AZ lacks the manpower to effectively redistribute such a high volume of furnishings.

“We need volunteers to help move the furniture, and we don’t have the money to pay the manpower to move it,” Jim Piscopo said.

That’s a common problem for nonprofits, but the Piscopo’s won’t let that set them back. With an ambitious five-year plan and new partnerships with Bed Bath & Beyond, Pottery Barn and Williams-Sonoma, Bridging AZ is making progress. And every bit helps for families in need.