

# Crossing the Bridge to Community

## Heather Dextrateur, Bridges To Faith Crossing the Bridge to Community

When I first met Sharon, she was living with a Shared Living Provider in Fall River. She had been living there for one year. Sharon was referred to me through Bridges to Faith to help her meet her spiritual needs. Like most referrals, I received a packet of need to know information, such as: medications, allergies, a list of doctors and basic history. The piece that often seems to be missing is the information that makes a person who they are.

When I met Sharon, there were two things she wanted to be sure I knew, 1. She was of Cape Verdean descent and 2. She was a Christian. She also felt it was important for me to know how proud she was that she had a bible and read it every night. Soon after that I discovered Sharon could not read but I understood how significant it was for her to look at the pages and the strength that gave to her.

Due to medical issues with her caregiver, Sharon was transferred to a new shared living home in New Bedford. Sharon had lived in various homes through multiple agencies for the past ten years. Now residing in New Bedford, Sharon inquired about a local church where she attended a Bridges to Faith Christmas event. Sharon said she enjoyed the church very much because it had lively Christian music, singing, dancing and she recognized many of the members as there was a large Cape Verdean population. She said she “knew them when she lived with her parents”. Sharon began to attend the new church and the agency helped to support the change. Her respite provider would drive twenty minutes each way to bring her each Sunday. The Program Manger would also provide transportation as this became the highlight of Sharon’s week. Sharon developed many natural friendships at church and before long she met a new friend Christina. Christina not only became her “faith companion”, she became so much more. Christina was an active member of the church. She was part of the choir, the coordinator of events and missions for the church and leader of Woman’s Group. Sharon wanted to participate in religious activities offered by the church and not just attend Sunday Service. Sharon asked if she Christina could take her to bible study and Christina agreed. Sharon started to go to Bible study every Thursday. The pastor would often have someone read the verses out loud as he understood that Sharon could not read. When I asked Sharon how she was reading the bible every night, she explained she was holding it and looking at it. “God made the words clear for me” she replied.

The next thing Sharon wanted to do at her church was become part of the choir. The church took their choir very seriously and only the most devoted church members were allowed to even audition. Sharon was DETERMINED to be on the choir. She asked if she could attend the practice as she knew that would be the only way she could learn the dances and the words to the songs. Christina picked up Sharon every Wednesday to attend choir practice. For six months Sharon NEVER missed a practice. Any time there was a new song, Christina would “you tube” the song for Sharon so she could learn the words as she knew she could not read. Sharon practiced day and night listening to the videos. The day had come where Sharon became an official member of the choir. Sharon extended an invitation to all she knew to watch her sing on stage for the first

time. Sharon filled the church with all her friends she invited to see her sing. It is a very small church and the pastor joked that he would invite his friends and family but it wouldn't pack the chairs like she did.

Sharon now has a new family. This is not a "paid family", it is not paid staff support but people who embrace her for who she is. Sharon attends all the parties, cook outs and birthday parties. Sharon has never missed a Sunday, a bible study or choir practice. She rang in the New Year attending a party on New Year's Eve with all her new friends. Sharon no longer has to say, "I want you to know I am a Christian". She has forever marked her identity, made her religious preferences known, paved her own way and she is a Christian fully embraced by her church community.