

BridgeBuilders is proof ‘Love can build a bridge’

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It was a cold morning at the farm with frost on the ground and steam rising from the compost mounds. I arrived early at [Bonton Farms](#) to get the lay of the land and found myself in awe of the bright and colorful produce ready for harvesting.

Bonton Farms is quickly becoming famous for [The Market at Bonton Farms](#) that serves breakfast and lunch and sells locally produced honey.

Jonathan Fechner, executive director of BridgeBuilders—out of which Bonton Farms grew, walked into The Market as I was finishing a cup of locally roasted coffee.

Fechner is a man on a mission who is passionate about God’s call to the Bonton community in south Dallas.

Life in a forgotten place

Bonton is one of those communities the big city likes to pretend doesn’t exist. It’s tucked away south of Fair Park in Dallas, bounded by the Trinity River levee on the south and east, Highways 175 on the north and 310 on the west, and is bisected by the railroad. It’s known for its poverty and a past of rampant crime, drugs and violence.

Until the opening of The Market at Bonton, the neighborhood was classified as a [food desert](#), a community in which “at least 500 people and/or at least 33 percent of the census tract’s population [resides] more than one mile from a supermarket or large grocery store.” One mile is not far for people

with cars and good public transportation, but it is a long way for those who have to walk.

Something else to keep in mind: Food deserts don't lack for liquor and convenience stores—where food is expensive and unhealthy—and tend to exist in impoverished areas.

Fechner's role at BridgeBuilders begins over 25 years ago when his father's life was changed by Velma Mitchell, a Bonton resident.

Love for a forgotten place

As Fechner tells the story, his father, Mike, was very affluent and the owner of a prosperous alarm system company. He was a faithful churchgoer who cared only about himself, his money and his reputation.



Mike's life changed dramatically when he encountered Mitchell at a City of Dallas event where she was advocating for her community—Bonton. He took note of her circumstances as a South Dallas single mother and her joy, confidence and faith in Christ despite those circumstances.

Mike began mentoring Mitchell's son, Romon, who called him "Uncle Mike," and their relationship became like father and son. Then tragedy struck. On Sept. 5, 1992, Romon was killed in a drive-by shooting. He wasn't the intended target, but it didn't matter.

Romon's death set Mike and Mitchell's resolve to see Bonton transformed. As a result, BridgeBuilders was born in 1993.

BridgeBuilders started simply with prayer walks, home Bible studies and food hand-outs and grew into an organization providing health programs, youth services and job training in seven cities around the United States. Today, a few of those locations continue to operate as separate 501(c)3 organizations.

The original BridgeBuilders location in Bonton now is more narrowly focused on youth programs, working with [Dallas Afterschool](#) to provide after school tutoring and a summer program to help students [retain learning](#) in preparation for the next school year.

Other partners include [CitySquare](#), [Momentous Institute](#) and [Anthem Strong Families](#), who provide job training, health services (physical, social and mental) and family empowerment.

BridgeBuilders also partners with churches—like [Prestonwood Baptist Church](#) in Plano and [Koinonia Christian Church](#) in Arlington—who come alongside the Bonton community to provide education and a local church.

These many partnerships demonstrate the intent of BridgeBuilders to bring people together across racial, economic, social and cultural lines.

As we stand in the heart of the Bonton community—the gym inside the Buckeye



Commons, managed by the Dallas Housing Authority—he shows me

classrooms where the after school and summer programs meet. He also shows me the words every child served by these programs learns: “I am a child of God, created in his image. I have the wisdom, power and authority to be all that he purposed me to be and do all that he called me to do.” That’s a life-transforming message in a place like Bonton, where people have been told for ages they would not amount to anything.

In 2009, Mike was diagnosed with Stage 4 lung cancer and given six to 18 months to live. Mike determined to exhibit “Velma’s faith” in his remaining time and poured more of himself into BridgeBuilders. Defying the doctor’s prognosis, he lived four years, dying in April 2014.

Calling to a place no longer forgotten

Jonathan spent a year away after graduating from Prestonwood Christian Academy, serving at the BridgeBuilders location in Buffalo, N.Y. He returned to Dallas to start college at Dallas Baptist University. Before the school year began, he asked God for two things—a godly mentor and a loyal and faithful friend, the latter to help him as he mourned his father’s death. God gave him both.

During his freshman year, Fechner met Adam Wright, then a vice president at DBU who hired Fechner to be his assistant. The two formed a strong and lasting bond. Fechner said his father taught him the heart of service, and Wright taught him how to be a Christian professional who exhibits excellence in the workplace and possesses drive mixed with compassion, qualities Fechner says apply in his day-to-day work with BridgeBuilders.

After graduating from DBU in May 2018, Fechner was encouraged by donors and Bonton community residents to submit his resumé for the open executive director position at BridgeBuilders. He prayed about the opportunity and believed God confirmed his encouragers’ sentiments.

In Sept. 2018, Fechner became the leader of the organization his father co-founded.

His father once said, “We can’t mourn with those who mourn and weep with those who weep if we don’t know them.” So, not only does Fechner serve the Bonton community, he is proud and excited to be a resident.

And because he’s there, he gets to rejoice with those who rejoice when God transforms their lives.

See a related story [here](#).