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Orlando Bridge Transitional Center Participating in Graduation Season With Different Kind of Celebration

***~ 91 Men Completing GEDs, Culinary Training, Career Readiness and Other Training in
Preparation for Return to Community ~***

ORLANDO – The Orlando Bridge Transitional Center will be the site of a different kind of “graduation” ceremony on Friday, as 91 participants celebrate the completion of educational, professional and life skills programs that will put them one step closer to becoming successful members of the community.

The men are non-violent inmates currently serving time at the Transitional Center, a re-entry program that helps them learn to be productive, law-abiding citizens when they are released. The completion ceremony – **to be held on Friday, June 1, at 10:30 a.m. at the Cathedral of St. Dismas, 2017 Mercy Drive, Orlando** – marks a dramatic change for the men, most of whom were incarcerated for drug offenses but are now receiving a total of 171 certificates ranging from high school equivalency diplomas (GEDs) to parenting skills.

“We are so thrilled at the progress these men have made to turn their lives around, and we are delighted that we can be a part of it,” said Bridges of America CEO Lori Brown. “Our goal is to help these men gain the professional and life skills they need to ensure that they never return to prison.”

Typical of the successes that happen frequently at the Orlando Bridge Transitional Center is the story of Kelly Hart, a 36-year-old father who will be receiving certificates of completion for Money Sense and Coping Skills courses at this week’s ceremony. Hart is serving a five-year drug sentence, but is now determined to turn things around after spending more than half his life involved with drugs as a dealer and “social” user. Hart says the Bridge program has changed his life, and fellow inmates chose him for a peer leadership position in which he must lead by example and hold others accountable.

Hart is determined to never return to prison because he now sees that hard work and dedication can get him to a better place. After his release in August 2013, he plans to go to school for social work in order to work with juvenile delinquents – if he had a mentor or someone to look up to when he was younger, Hart believes, he wouldn't have fallen into the reckless drug lifestyle. "I'm a changed man," he says. "I'm honest, dependable, loyal, and I want to do things the right way. I show people with my actions that I'm a changed man."

The 171 certificates to be awarded at Friday's ceremony include:

- Culinary Arts – 8
- GED – 2
- Coping Skills, Infinite Possibilities, and Life Transitions (part of a substance abuse treatment program) – 49
- Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program – 21
- Florida Ready to Work/National Career Readiness Certificate – 15
- Money Sense – 43
- Occupational Safety and Health Administration – 20
- Parenting – 7
- Toastmasters – 6

The Orlando Bridge Transitional Center opened its doors in 2009 as part of Bridges of America, a non-profit corporation working in partnership with the Florida Department of Corrections to rehabilitate prisoners and reduce recidivism. The Transitional Center is an innovative therapeutic community that provides intensive substance abuse counseling and life skills classes so non-violent offenders can successfully re-enter society and become productive citizens.

Bridges programs serve participants for significantly less than it would cost to incarcerate those same inmates in a regular prison, and with better results – two-thirds of inmates leaving prisons are rearrested within three years, but 90 percent of Bridges graduates remain law-abiding during the same three-year period. The result is increased public safety at a lower cost to the taxpayers.

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