Destiny was born and raised in Paw Paw. Her mom struggled with addiction and wasn’t able to provide stable housing. Her dad wasn’t in the picture. “We were doing things we shouldn’t have,” Destiny says of herself and her sisters. “But we didn’t have people to show us what to do.” Shortly after Destiny was put in foster care, she found out she was pregnant. She quit school in eighth grade.

Not long after Remi was born, Destiny learned about Bridge Academy, where her son’s father was taking classes, and she started going there too. “My son matured me a lot,” she says—and it made her want more for herself and for him. “Remi was the motivator to come back and get my education.”

**Kick-start studies**

Bridge Academy, a United Way-funded partner, is an alternative public high school where students can earn their GED or high school diploma. Bridge Academy also offers vocational training in certified nurse assistant, pre-apprentice construction, and retail.

“Traditional school didn’t work out for me,” Destiny says. “When you’re a teen parent, you can’t really do traditional hours. And the classes there are big, but here at Bridge Academy, teachers can focus on you more when you need help because there are not as many kids.”

Destiny has been enrolled at Bridge Academy for three years, but has only been going consistently for the last year. “Before, I was having trouble getting transportation and babysitters,” she explains.

Through a program for foster kids at the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, Destiny was able to qualify for a grant to buy a car. Then, with the help of child care assistance from the state, she was able to enroll her son in daycare at Lake Michigan College.

Now, with those issues resolved, Destiny is on a roll. “Once I got this stability, there was nothing holding me back and I could focus on school,” she says. She has passed three of the four tests to receive her GED. With the help of interview preparation with a success coach at Bridge Academy, she recently landed her first job as a cook and cashier at Sonic Drive-In in Benton Harbor. The income will enable her to move out of the home of family friends and into subsidized housing for herself and her son.

On track to complete her GED this winter, Destiny plans to immediately start a certified nurse assistant program at Bridge Academy. After finishing this accelerated four-week course, she hopes to get a job in that field and then likely go on to Lake Michigan College to continue studies in nursing—a field that has interested her since she was a little kid. Her end goal is to become a nurse anesthetist—a smart choice since that medical specialty is experiencing strong employment growth.

**Stay the course**

The Bridge Academy is run by Michigan Works! Berrien, Cass, Van Buren—a subsidiary of Kinexus Group—and in partnership with Berrien Springs Public Schools. Kinexus is a Benton Harbor-based nonprofit that promotes solutions to economic challenges and seeks to create thriving businesses and competitive workforce talent. Michigan Works! is part of a statewide network of workforce development boards that specializes in educating, training, and employing individuals of all ages by working with local businesses to help them attract and retain talent.

Students at Bridge Academy work closely with a Kinexus specialist who supports them throughout the vocational training process and helps them learn more about potential employment options in the community. Students have the opportunity to apply their studies and training through working with employers in the community.

“This community has so much to offer when it comes to education, but some students get left behind,” says Allie Knapp, Bridge Academy’s director. “We want Bridge Academy to be the in-between, the safety net that supports students who have fallen off the radar in a traditional school sense. Our typical student wasn’t thriving in a traditional setting because of certain barriers in their lives—kids who are trying to find their place in the midst of a lot of chaos. With the resources we have at Bridge Academy and in the surrounding community, those barriers are all manageable.”

Change doesn’t happen alone, and for Destiny and other students at Bridge Academy, having multiple forms of academic and job support—and even other agency offices, such as Department of Health and Human Services—in the same Kinexus building makes a big difference. “There are so many touchpoints to leverage here,” Allie says. “Destiny never lost sight of her goal, and we kept showing up and reaching out to her. Once she was able to commit, we were here for her,” Allie says. “Nothing is too big a challenge for Destiny. I’m so excited to watch where she’ll go from here.”

Had Destiny stayed in a traditional school, she would have graduated in 2020. With the help of Bridge Academy, she’s still on schedule to reach where she deserves to be.

Learn more about the work UW3M is doing in INCOME at uwsm.org/income.
SUE ULAM

IS A DOTING 74-YEAR-OLD GRANDMOTHER WHO WAS THRILLED WHEN HER DAUGHTER AND SIX GRANDCHILDREN—AGES 3 TO 15—MOVED INTO HER BANGOR HOME. SUE’S HUSBAND DIED A YEAR AGO, AND SHE WAS EAGER TO SURROUND HERSELF WITH THE LOVING COMPANY OF HER FAMILY.

“The kids are, needless to say, a handful, but I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Sue says. “It’s not quiet, but it’s nice.”

But crisis struck just a few months into this transition when Sue’s water service was cut off because she was behind on paying her water bill. The recent loss of her husband’s income was putting a big strain on Sue’s budget and she owed $1,450, including late fees and penalties, for water service. Their household of eight went without water for a month and a half—and they were also struggling to afford groceries. Sue was desperate and didn’t know what to do. So she called Senior Services of Van Buren County.

Ray of help

Based in South Haven, Senior Services of Van Buren County provides professional services and caring support for seniors in Van Buren to enhance their quality of life and living situations.

“We match seniors up with necessary services, assess their needs, make sure their home is safe,” says Diane Rigozzi, executive director. “If we don’t offer the exact service, we refer them to the organization that does and follow up to make sure they get it.”

Its Care Watch program, funded by United Way, sends trained, professional care managers to home-bound seniors to help with anything they need—calling, visiting, figuring out Medicare and Medicaid, connecting them with food assistance and medical equipment, assessing mental health issues, and arranging for handicap ramps and medical transportation.

“We do as much as we can,” says Care Watch care manager Jami Branson. “Once I went to a woman’s house and set up her cable for her. So it can be something like that to ‘I have no electricity tomorrow.’”

In addition to Care Watch, Senior Services of Van Buren County also offers an affordable, private-pay, in-home care service, which is not skilled nursing but rather assistance with housework and errands as well as companionship—at a low rate per hour since the service is partially subsidized. The organization also sends out one food truck a month that rotates to different spots throughout the county and provides emergency assistance for utilities in cases such as Sue’s.

Jami worked to get water service restored to Sue’s home—but it wasn’t so simple. After all, change doesn’t happen alone.

Beacon of hope

Sue had first reached out for help to St. Vincent de Paul Sacred Heart Church in Bangor. The church was able to contribute $350 to the outstanding balance on Sue’s water bill—and put some hot meals on Sue’s table. But she still owed $1,100.

Jami from Care Watch worked with Sue to fill out a State Emergency Relief application through the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, which offered to pay $175 toward the bill. However, DHHS would not make that payment until only that portion remained on the bill. Senior Services of Van Buren County contributed $350 to the bill. Jami got the City of Bangor to remove most of the fees from Sue’s bill, and United Christian Services, another United Way-funded organization, to pay the remainder of a little over $250. Sue’s water service was restored in time for Thanksgiving. Jami also got Sue approved for SNAP benefits to address their food insecurity.

“There’s a light at the end of the tunnel,” says Sue. “Somebody out there really does care.”

Sue’s problems aren’t over, however. She suffered a stroke this winter, is using a wheelchair and an oxygen tank, and needs 24-hour home healthcare. Her daughter lost her job and is now Sue’s full-time caregiver. “I know how hard it is,” Sue says of her daughter’s responsibility for her. “I was my husband’s caregiver, so I know.”

“I’ve reached out to Area Agency on Aging [also a United Way-funded partner] about a program that pays a family member to be your care provider,” Jami says, which would make a big difference for the Ulams who are all living on Sue’s social security income. Because of the poor condition of their house, Jami is applying for USDA rural housing grants for repairs. Jami is also working with Sue to connect her with additional food and clothes for the kids.

“Everything we ask of Jami—she’s just been a darling,” Sue says. “If she doesn’t know the answer, she’ll find out. She’s getting us where we need to be, thankfully. She gives us hope.”

“There’s a light at the end of the tunnel,” says Sue. “Somebody out there really does care.”

Learn more about the work UWSM is doing in BASIC NEEDS at uwsm.org/basic-needs.
56% of third graders in Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren Counties are not meeting reading proficiency.

42% of households struggle to meet their basic needs.

Nearly 1 in 5 adults struggle with poor health.

More than 1,500 children experience homelessness, OR don’t know where they’re going to sleep at night.

Every day, together, with hundreds of corporate partners and thousands of donors and volunteers, United Way fights for the health, education, and financial stability of every person in every community.

Together, in a year, we help get more than 100,000 books into the hands of children... 

...and over 1,400 people on the path to financial stability.

We help more than 9,000 students with in- and out-of-school programs and individualized support.

... and over 16,000 people get healthcare services and support.
For these young shipwreck aficionados, there aren’t a lot of books at their reading level about their beloved topic. No matter, says Kristin Ausra, the other kindergartener’s teacher at Justus Gage. There’s more than one way to learn how to read a book—through pictures, identifying sight words, and memorization from being read to—and that’s perfectly okay, she says. In fact, it should be encouraged, because it gets kids aiming high and reading—as best they’re able—beyond their level. It pushes them, through sheer enjoyment, to advance their reading skills.

For these and all kids, reading success starts early. It’s essential that kids in early grades are offered a plethora of options to satisfy their myriad interests—and that means well-stocked libraries in the classrooms.

“It’s an equity issue, to have tons of choices,” Kristin says. “Students love options and deciding for themselves, rather than what a teacher says they have to do. This gives them control over what they’re learning.”

Joining forces

The Reading Now Network classroom libraries project is a collective impact initiative funded by United Way of Southwest Michigan. Reading Now Network is a collective effort of school superintendents, school boards, and school districts throughout West Michigan that works to improve early literacy and student achievement.

Through this project, United Way of Southwest Michigan partnered with Lewis Cass Intermediate School District in Cass County that works to improve early literacy and student achievement. Classroom libraries grew by about 300 texts each during the first year, adding genres spanning five grade levels of text within each classroom. “You should always have books that are a range of levels, above and below. Kids never all fall at their grade level,” explains Corey.

Book bonanza

Now, with upwards of 800 books total per classroom, the libraries are becoming “like Barnes & Noble,” Kristin says. “We want the books to look nice and new so the kids will think they’re cool and interesting.”

There was a major focus on adding nonfiction and informational genres last year. This year, there’s been more emphasis on adding books that teach social and emotional skills. For example, the teachers are ordering books on mindfulness, kindness, tolerance and acceptance, that everyone makes mistakes, habits of happy kids.

“The reality is that schools—teachers—are addressing not only academic needs but increasingly, also social and emotional needs,” Kristin says. “We’re seeing kids who are struggling with empathy. We’re looking for books that help teach how to be a good person.”

Books that reflect diversity will also be a priority because it’s important for kids to identify with the people they see in their books. “Not all of my students are Caucasian girls with blond hair and blue eyes. The characters should look like different children to keep all kids engaged in the reading,” Kristin says. “I’m also passionate about books that show women in math and science roles so girls will be able to picture themselves doing those things.”

Call to action

Books should be considered ongoing consumables, not infrequent capital investments, and without this project, teachers would be stocking their own classroom libraries out of their own pockets, according to Lauren Sheeley, assistant principal and response-to-intervention coordinator at Sam Adams. So Lewis Cass ISD is exploring options to keep the program ongoing.

Lauren says their students are thriving because they have new relevant books. “Everything changes quickly nowadays and the future will be very different for these kids, so we need to stay on top of that and be up-to-date to prepare them,” she says. “We want to help them achieve their dreams and we need the right books to do that.”

Learn more about what UWSM is doing in EDUCATION at uwsm.org/education.
But tremendous good eventually came out of their horrible experience. The prosecutor on that case fought for change in the way child sex abuse victims are treated by the system—and a new model developed nationwide, one that reduces the trauma of criminal investigations and compassionately meets the needs of children in a child-oriented, neutral environment.

The United Way-funded Children’s Advocacy Center of Southwest Michigan is an example of this vastly improved model. It facilitates and coordinates the work of organizations responsible for the investigation of sexual abuse of children between the ages of 3 and 18 in Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren Counties. The need is great: One in 10 children will experience sexual abuse or exploitation before age 18.

The St. Joseph-based Children’s Advocacy Center provides consistent and timely response to abuse reports, dramatically reducing the number of interviews a victim must undergo while ensuring the child obtains medical and mental health services or referrals immediately. Because of its multidisciplinary approach, the nonprofit has increased successful prosecutions. More important, the Children’s Advocacy Center delivers critical hope and healing for children and their non-offending family members to move forward with their lives.

Prevention
The center has also developed age-appropriate prevention programs for children—to teach them how to reduce the risk of abuse and assault—and for adults—to prevent, recognize, and react responsibly to child sexual abuse.

Allie Kibler-Campbell, the center’s prevention and outreach specialist, spends most of her time in classrooms in six school districts, including Bridgman, Brandywine, New Buffalo, Niles, River Valley, and St. Joseph, as well as at Lake Michigan Catholic Middle and High Schools. She visits every classroom once a year, talking to about 5,000 students annually.

“All kids have a right to feel safe,” Allie says. “If someone is making them feel unsafe or uncomfortable, they have the right to tell them that and to get away and talk to someone else about it. We teach kids they don’t have to keep secrets.”

Some parents have expressed concern about what exactly Allie is teaching, but she explains to them, “It’s not sex ed, it’s safety ed.” She’s teaching kids about healthy and appropriate personal boundaries, both physical and emotional. “We have a K-12 curriculum about body ownership, that they can tell people no. When we get to older grades, we talk about healthy relationships versus the cycle of abusive relationships, which follow a predictable, recognizable pattern, and we talk about what harassment and bullying look like, and Internet and cell phone safety,” Allie says.

The kids find Allie’s lessons empowering. “The kids surprise me,” she says. “They’re really smart and catch on fast. They like someone telling them that they have rights.”

One unexpected result of the prevention program is that some kids have used it as an opportunity to disclose sex abuse. In the last school year, 22 kids have come up to Allie after lessons and made disclosures of abuse that were then reported to law enforcement. Eleven of those came to the center, and eight of them participated rigorously in its free therapeutic services. Because of those disclosures, two perpetrators have had criminal charges filed against them. “Those kids may have never said anything if it wasn’t for us being in the classroom talking about prevention,” Allie says.

Forensic interviewing
When a child is referred to the Children’s Advocacy Center by law enforcement or the Department of Health and Human Services, a highly trained staff interviewer, who has knowledge of the child’s developmental and emotional stage, conducts legally sound, non-leading and neutral interviews. 

"IF I’D KNOWN WHAT MY CHILD WAS GOING TO GO THROUGH, I NEVER WOULD HAVE REPORTED IT.”

"IF I’D KNOWN WHAT MY CHILD WAS GOING TO GO THROUGH, I NEVER WOULD HAVE REPORTED IT.”
THAT WAS THE SENTIMENT OF ONE MOTHER IN ALABAMA, DECADES AGO, AFTER HER CHILD WAS THE VICTIM OF SEXUAL ABUSE—AND WAS RE-TRAUMATIZED BY THE SYSTEM THAT WAS SUPPOSED TO PROTECT HER.
interviews. The group uses an unbiased approach to seek the truth and to support fair decision-making in the criminal and child protective services system. The forensic interviewer interviews the child one-on-one in a room separated by one-way glass, following strict protocols. The multidisciplinary investigation team meets in the observation room, unseen by the child. This approach dramatically reduces the number of times the child has to tell the story, therefore reducing the trauma to the child.

“The way it used to be—and still is in some places—there would be several interviews: first Child Protective Services did one, then law enforcement, then a nurse, then the prosecutor,” says Brook Thomas, a forensic interviewer and licensed clinical social worker at the center. “The process was oriented around the professionals involved, not what was best for the child.”

Retelling their story is obviously painful for children, and can result in inconsistencies in the story—not because the child is lying, but perhaps because the interviewers are asking about different incidents or because the interviewers are recording the details differently,” Brook says. Another problem with the old model was that the interviewers often had no training in how to interview children. “You interview children who are 3 differently than children who are 6 or 16,” Brook explains.

To further reduce trauma, the Children’s Advocacy Center provides medical examinations of sexual assault victims onsite in collaboration with Spectrum Health-Lakeland’s Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners.

The center’s canine advocate, Pawnee, provides support to children and caregivers waiting for forensic interviews and is available to go to therapy sessions with children. Pawnee loves to play with kids and provides distraction and comfort.

Therapy

The center also provides crisis counseling services and ongoing therapy to victims of child sexual abuse, their non-offending family members, and to adult survivors of child sexual abuse.

Kaitlin Sieber, LMSW, a therapist at the center, says they use a type of treatment model called trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, which is heavily based on play therapy and art therapy. Children meet with a therapist weekly for an hour session for 12 weeks on average, and their caregivers are involved in the sessions. Therapists also help with preparing children to testify in a mock courtroom that looks exactly like the county courtrooms.

Non-offending family members need therapeutic help too. “About 90% of perpetrators are known to the victim. They are often a relative or partner of a caregiver, so family relationships are very challenged by this experience,” Kaitlin says.

According to executive director Jamie Rossow, the center’s goal is to expand the reach of its services and increase its staff to meet needs they know exist in every community of Southwest Michigan. As much as people don’t want to believe child sexual abuse occurs in their midst, Rossow says they help victims in all types of families, in all socio-economic groups, from all racial and ethnic backgrounds, in all kinds of neighborhoods.

“We are the only children’s advocacy center in our tri-county area,” Jamie says. “We want to make sure all children are able to receive the services they need and deserve. ”

Learn more about what UWSM is doing in HEALTH at uwsm.org/health.