meet thomas tafoya
Stepping into the future

For nearly two decades, Bridges Project for Education has leveraged a small staff and limited resources to help thousands of underserved Taos County students propel themselves into the future. Person by person, meeting by meeting, Bridges has helped students pursue their dreams by unlocking the doors to postsecondary education.

Students like Thomas Tafoya. A thoughtful and well-spoken young man, Thomas is the first of his family to attend college. As eager as they were to offer their children the opportunity, neither of Thomas’s parents had experienced it themselves. Chuby and Amanda Tafoya were both still in their teens when Thomas was born, and “the whole college thing was out of their realm,” Thomas says.

Although his parents supported his ambitions, “we really had no knowledge,” Thomas recalls. “We had no idea what the process entailed, working through essays, deadlines, applications; no idea about what scholarships to apply to, what even existed.” At the urging of a family friend, Thomas called Bridges.

Now a senior at Duke University, Thomas credits Bridges with guiding him through the complex process and helping him locate the funding to realize his dreams. The personalized approach of Bridges kept him on track throughout the application process and gave him the edge he needed to reach his college goals. “When you’re working with Bridges, they get to know you personally, so they’re able to help you tell your story. It’s a really important part of the process,” Thomas says. “Bridge was a great experience for me and my family.”
THOMAS SAYS:

""Bridges kept me on schedule.... I had this preconception that the process was more simple than it actually is, [but] there are a lot of layers for each application. There's a lot of deadlines, a lot of things going on during the process. Bridges really helped keep me on pace, to keep me going."

Preparing for success at post-secondary education starts early and lasts well into the college experience. Bridges shares its expertise with the process and helps students stay on track.
"Working with Bridges really helped me to bring forth the best application that I could."

We caught Thomas by phone during a busy exam week in North Carolina, where he’s pursuing a bachelor’s degree in economics at Duke University. He’s an ardent advocate for higher education—but he’s realistic about the amount of effort students must invest to get there. That’s why he’s so enthusiastic about the guidance Bridges offers to Taos residents who, like himself, have little or no family experience with college.

“If we could get more people like Joleen and Sue who can work with the students more personally, to be able to help them tell their stories, I think it could make a huge difference,” Thomas says. “I just hope that [Bridges] can continue to grow as an organization, continue improving families’ lives and making a difference in the community.”

For himself, Thomas says, working with Bridges “really helped to bring light into the process. I went there with no knowledge about the process, and Joleen was able to explain this is what happens at this time of year, and this is what happens then. These are the deadlines you have to meet. She really worked with me in particular in going over essays, a lot of essays, so I could improve that part of my portfolio.”

Back in Taos, Joleen reflects as well. “What we were able to offer was a kind of intimacy so Thomas could understand his story and tell his story, and it worked so well because he was willing to work so hard. Thomas worked deeply with us and did so much at home on top of maintaining everything at school.”

His family dove in wholeheartedly. Amanda, Thomas’s mom, told us that “working with Bridges was like having architects of the process. They laid out a plan, and they helped us to continue along the way that we wanted our son to go to college.” She added, “Bridges didn’t judge you for not going to college. They made it a very safe and nice environment. You didn’t feel belittled if, as a parent, you didn’t do those things.”

Now in his final year at Duke University, Thomas urges other Taos youth to take advantage of the help Bridges offers to explore their college options. “I’m the eldest of four children, so there’ll be three younger Tafoyas who will be also be going through the process,” Thomas adds with a grin.
COLLEGE BOUND!

ADVICE FOR TAOS STUDENTS CONSIDERING COLLEGE... AND FOR THEIR FAMILIES

Try to take it in stride

"Obviously when you leave Taos and you go to a bigger college or university, there's going to be a change of pace in terms of academics. That can be a little bit tough to adjust to," Thomas says. He adds, "Taos is a beautiful and unique place, but it's much different out here. I've had to adjust to the different people that I've met, the different cultures. And in that sense it's just learning how to live outside your norms. That's something that any student from Taos will have to adjust to, wherever they go to live without the parents. It's just part of growing up and becoming independent."

It's scary -- but worth it

Thomas's mom Amanda acknowledges that "it's scary for parents" to see your children leave home to further their education. "But for me, the happiness that [my kids] show me takes all the pain away. I don't know what I would say to other parents, except... let go, because seeing the happiness their kids feel will bring happiness to them. It's about letting go. Every time I let them do what they want, it only brings me happiness."

Remember where you come from

"Applying to college can be a rite of passage, in a society in which we don't have many rites of passage," says Joleen Montoya-Dye, Director of Bridges Project. "For Thomas to learn about his family's history, the things his parents did to make it possible for him to have opportunities... He could really understand what a gift and privilege it is to be there."

"I love it. It's been a great experience, both socially and academically. It's been quite a challenge, but something that I really appreciate. I'm excited to be here, and very blessed to be here." -- TT