

# Ken Frantz . . .

## The Man and the “Broken Bridge”

By Surafel G.

It seemed like a simple story. One day in March last year, in Gloucester, Virginia, a man by the name Kenneth Frantz- middle aged, soft spoken American-goes to a garage to have his automobile serviced. And while waiting in a small room “just trying to let time go by,” Ken picks up one publication that happened to be the December 2000 issue of the National Geographic magazine. He opened that magazine and “literally the pages fell open to this photo of the *Sebara Dildy*,” (also known by many names depending on where one wants to find himself - The Second Blue Nile Bridge, The Portuguese Bridge, the Broken Bridge) a nearly four centuries old bridge in the Abay river, alias the Blue Nile in Ethiopia’s heartland. Beyond its historic significance, the picture demonstrated what, by western standards, would seem bizarre and utmost exotic: It was the photograph showing how one man was passing over the bridge by a rope. Separated by the bridge that was broken by Ethiopian resistance patriots during the Italian occupation in an attempt to prevent the advancing Fascist troops from entering the hinterland. The people on both sides of the river (Gojam and Gonder provinces) had but to use the rope to cross the river for well over sixty years. “In the subsequent minutes after I saw that dramatic photograph,” Ken told me in his home on Cuba Island Lane, Hayes, Virginia, “I then and there knew that I was meant by God to go and repair that bridge.”

The picture was taken when the magazine sent a crew to cover a rafting expedition on the Abay. Their mission was over with the pictures published; and that was it. But for Ken, the journey began when the magazines’ came to an end. The economics of that bridge pretty much appealed to him. Here are people who wanted to do business, he reasoned, and they have no way of doing it. If they could only be given that chance! It was a picture of people trying to connect with people, make sense in their daily lives; and there were thousand and millions of them on both sides of the Abay in Ethiopia’s massive highlands attempting to cross the river but couldn’t.

For Ken virtually everything began happening almost at the same time. “Within an hour of seeing that photo,” he remembers, “I started driving back home and began thinking about what a challenge it would be if I were to repair this bridge and how I would go about doing it.” Instantly, he decided that he needed to launch a charity organization and the “name Bridges to Prosperity came very, very quickly.” Within two days, he called Nevada Weir, the photographer who took the picture that generated interest in the subject. A couple of days later, he recalls having been on the phone with Dr. Brook Hailu, Deputy Head of Mission of the Ethiopian Embassy in Washington DC “asking for his advice which I got in the form of an incredible encouragement and support.” Everyone, it seemed, was straight away supportive of his vision and project. As if to match his instinct, within two weeks Ken felt repairing the bridge was not some crazy and stupid idea but something that he received a calling for, “something that he needed to

do, something good for the people living on both sides of the river.” When I asked his wife Cheri what she felt about the project after he shared the whole story, her answer was as immediate. “You know,” she told me, “It is a calling for Ken that I felt was very long in the waiting; and when it came, I told him to grab it. I have always insisted that he become a Christian - and that is what he has become.”

. . . . *Ken Frantz and his wife Cheri*

Ken, his wife and their two children live in Gloucester, Virginia where they moved from California twelve years ago. Ken’s involvement in the construction sector that brought him into the business he now manages eventually leading him to his current charity is somewhat tricky but all the more worthwhile, and all the more so, despite the fact that he studied political science and earned a graduate degree in public administration. After a few years with Bechtel and Alyeska Companies in Fairbanks, Alaska as a project manager and chief of staff as well as Vice President and Chief Operating Officer with PBMC, Inc. in San Francisco, Ken in 1984 moved to establish his construction company K. R. Frantz Construction, Inc. now based in Gloucester. Specializing in multi-residential projects, his company started with a first year volume of \$10,000,000 in five years growing into one of the ten largest in San Francisco where he first launched his business. His firm held national record for a 120 unit apartment complex in 56 days. It is currently developing a 325 acre housing project with 325 homes, 3 dams, 3 lakes, 1200 feet wetland bridges, and parks. Driving through his project area where the homes he built were readily picked by customers, I was able to see how deep his entire business acumen was like when it all started. “There are now 30 or so homes remaining to be built,” he told me. I still could see some refined residences on either side of the neighborhood street under construction while he gently markets the ones that are already done. This project, he says, is now around the edge with 90 percent fairly complete. Now that that project is coming to an end soon, Ken seemed eager to take some recess from the multi-million dollar business. Three months after he saw the picture of the Broken Bridge, Ken made arrangements “with lots of friends” to travel to Ethiopia for a small expedition. And in June 2001, he flew to the country and drove to Mota, the nearest town to the location and, from there, trekked the entire 26 kilometers to the bridge. “In what was to be a preliminary survey trip, we met with elders in the area, carried out measurements at the bridge, and hiked from both sides and reviewed the entire area,” he remembers. “The bridge was in such a bad shape that we felt we needed to do something before the rest of it was gone.”

A few months later, Ken and his crew flew to the area again. With a special water resistant steel imported from Turin-Italy and local expertise, the team managed to go ahead with the enterprise that Ken prefers to call “bridge repairing.” And in an operation that took a few weeks, a 100,000 US dollars and a record time, the steel beams were made to fit into the original bridge along the broken section with so much caution involved. Ken says he settled for steel because it was affordable. “Doing it the way Emperor Menelik repaired it last in 1908 would probably have quadrupled the cost of construction,” he says. And as much of the funding was coming from his own personal money (“There wasn’t a bottomless

pit of money to draw from, you know,” he says with a bit of a smile), they had to do it in a way “that would last up to fifty years but at the same time make economic sense.”

Ken also underlines that as they do not carry out restorations, the bridge was repaired not restored, “but, it was done,” he quickly underscores, “in such a way that it would preserve the remaining part of the historic bridge from deteriorating as the case was in the past years so that when the need and time for restoration comes, all the steel work could be removed without affecting the bridge itself”.

Ken insists that his team had designed the bridge to allow restoration at any time in future. That, in fact, he says, has made their work a little harder. “We knew that we had to design something that would sit on top of a bridge and would not touch it except on few places,” he says. “The new steel bridge is only linked in four places so in three to four hours, you can cut the bolts that connect the bridge to the steel structure and simply walk the bridge away.”

The bridge was designed for 400 kgs per square meter - the equivalent of a bunch of people standing shoulder to shoulder. “We had to load test it before we opened it, we had 126 people on the bridge before we let that facility open to the public,” Ken says. It was inaugurated on February 23, 2002. Ken insists that people make a difference. Long before he set his foot at the locality of the Broken Bridge, what Ken thought about was the economic part of the whole exercise which would eventually benefit the people in the area. With the bridge now fixed, people from Gojam and Gonder could trade goods and services like never before. “We estimate that this bridge would increase trade between the two provinces by 20-25 million Birr per year,” Ken says with some air of self-assurance.

With the outcome yet to be seen, Ken looks forward to another project along the Abay River. This time, it is the “Castanio Bridge, (named after the architect who began working on it nearly a hundred years ago) assumed to be the first automobile bridge that Emperor Menelik ordered to be built but was left unfinished. “That bridge would be connecting several provinces,” Ken says of this project that he hopes to start working on in the very near future. “You see, the Nile River is the perfect example of a situation where the country is separated into two pieces by this huge river with a deep gorge while at the same time millions of people on either side are largely left with no way to cross the waterway except on very few spots.” That, he says, is where he wants to cut into the development paradigm.

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