



Photo by Sarah Min/Daily Press

Ken Frantz of Gloucester stands on the bridge he built to cross to his home on Cuba Island. Frantz is the founder of Bridges to Prosperity, a charity group dedicated to building lightweight pedestrian bridges in Third-World countries.

# Building bridges

## New spans in 3rd World mean hope for the poor

By Mary Montague Sikes  
Daily Press

### GLOUCESTER

A couple of years ago when Ken Frantz turned 50 years old, he started to wonder about his purpose in life. Then last spring, he found that purpose when he saw a photo in a magazine while waiting for his truck to be fixed.

The picture was in a December 2000 National Geographic article about the Blue Nile River that passes through the heart of Ethiopia. In a compelling image, lines of men stood on opposite banks of the river, pulling a single rope to move a man across the chasm. The human chains were located on the two ends of broken Second Portuguese Bridge, built more than 400 years ago by descendants of Portuguese soldiers. During early World War II, the middle arch of the stone pedestrian bridge was

deliberately destroyed by Ethiopian patriots who hoped to curtail crossing by Italian soldiers.

For Frantz this was what he had been seeking — a meaningful humanitarian project, building pedestrian bridges. Although he does not have an engineering background and actually started out with the idea of “becoming a cop,” Frantz has been in construction work for 30 years. For four of those years he was working on the Alaskan Pipeline. Later he worked for a San Francisco construction company, then his own.

In 1992, he and his wife, Cheryl Nice, decided to move back east near her childhood home in the Denbigh area of Newport News to raise their children. They decided on Gloucester County, found Cuba Island and built a bridge to

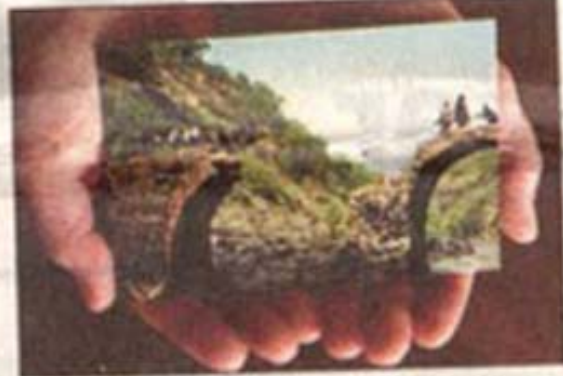
connect their new home with the mainland.

Frantz bought property in the county and developed the Hunters Run and Founders Mill subdivisions. Now he is a semi-retired developer, doing full-time nonprofit work.

### KEN FRANTZ

- **Age:** 52
- **Home:** Gloucester, native of Seattle, Washington
- **Education:** Bachelor's degree in political science from Washington State University, Master's in public administration from Golden Gate University in San Francisco
- **Occupation:** Semi-retired developer doing full-time nonprofit work
- **Interests:** Sailing, skiing, water sports, raising his sons, charity work, and community activities
- **Family:** Wife, Cheryl Nice, sons, Preston, 12, and Brendan, 10

Please see Bridges/D14



Frantz shows a damaged bridge that crosses the Blue Nile River in Ethiopia. His group is helping to fix this and other bridges.

## ■ Bridges

Continued from D1

After learning more about the Second Portuguese Bridge in Ethiopia, Frantz went about creating a new charitable organization dedicated to building lightweight pedestrian bridges in Third-World countries. Thus, Bridges to Prosperity was born.

In his research, Frantz found five other organizations that have built bridges but only because they had to in order to fulfill other needs of their charitable work. He said these bridges have not been built with efficiency — using repetition — but were re-engineered for each project. His idea is to come up with repetitive designs that can be used for projects all over the world.

Last June, Frantz and his brother, Forrest, and another engineer formed a three-man team to travel to Ethiopia to visit the site of the broken Second Portuguese Bridge. During a two-week stay, they got federal and state approval for the bridge building project, met with village elders to obtain their support, performed engineering and surveying assessments and took over a thousand photographs.

While there, they were protected by a group of militiamen carrying AK-47s and other automatic weapons. "The only way you can carry a gun in Ethiopia

### ABOUT THE GROUP

**The mission statement for Bridges to Prosperity ([www.bridgestoprospersity.org](http://www.bridgestoprospersity.org)):**

"By combining western ingenuity, indigenous manpower and the generosity of its contributors, we build bridges worldwide in areas lacking the resources to do so. We design and construct light-duty bridges to cross geographical barriers like rivers/gorges/mountains, thereby allowing people in isolated villages access to markets for their goods. We believe improved access to markets brings more trade and more trade improves economic prosperity."

is if you're in a militia," Frantz says.

Although he says the country is very pretty, there are few trees and the land is facing terrible erosion problems. The party brought its own tents for sleeping. They journeyed first by Jeep, then on foot for 18 miles with donkeys transporting their gear to the bridge site.

The bridge will be a tremen-

dous economic benefit to the country, Frantz says. The broken span is about 40 feet long and will be repaired with a steel truss design. That will enable the passage of grain, other goods and animals as well as people.

Bridges to Prosperity is also engineering other projects, including two in Nepal. The cable bridges there will cost an average of \$7,000 each. Another bridge project will be in Indonesia. Central America will probably be the focus for the next two years, Frantz says.

To qualify as a volunteer for one of these projects, individuals are expected to pay for their own airfare, gear and hotels. Trips "into the bush" are paid for with donor money. The cost to a volunteer will be about \$2,000 and two weeks off from work. Or they can find a sponsor.

Frantz would like to get a bridge building company involved in Bridges to Prosperity. He also wants to build an endowment fund for administration of the organization. "Telephone costs alone in Ethiopia are outrageous," he says. "They are \$5 a minute."

He left Feb. 10 for Ethiopia and will return March 5.

"This is really exciting, really new," Frantz says with a grin. "I love excitement and challenge. Retirement is terribly overrated."

With Bridges to Prosperity, Frantz says he is creating "something that will outlive me."