

# Repaired Bridge Renews Town's Hope and One Man's Faith

by Sherry Hamilton

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Most people don't have an epiphany while flipping through a magazine in a car dealership. But that's exactly what

happened to Ken Frantz. The Gloucester resident was waiting for his new truck to be serviced at Bowditch Ford in Newport News last March when a photo in National Geographic Magazine caught his eye, started him thinking, and prompted him to travel to another continent to help people he didn't even know.

Now, a year and a half later, Frantz is the founder and president of Bridges to Prosperity, a non-profit organization with international connections that's dedicated to restoring trade paths in underdeveloped countries. He and other volunteers have already fully restored one bridge in Ethiopia and have additional projects in three countries lined up. With renewed faith, Frantz gives God credit for his new direction, and with full-circle relevance, his organization is spotlighted in the October 2002, National Geographic, the magazine that led to his epiphany.

Frantz, an engineer and contractor, said that, after finishing the last major development project of his career, Founders Mill Subdivision in Gloucester, he was a man at loose ends. Then in March 2001 he ran across a Virginia Morell article in National Geographic about a rafting expedition down the Blue Nile River in Ethiopia. The article was illustrated with a Nevada Wier photo that showed a group of men standing on each side of the river's steep cliffs holding a rope as one man, suspended by his arms and legs, was pulled across.

The article said the bridge had been destroyed in the 1930s as Ethiopian patriots resisted Mussolini's Italian occupation. The next river crossing required the villagers, whose transportation options were limited to walking or riding a donkey, to travel 150 kilometers along rough footpaths to get across the river to trade their wares. The distance also impeded their ability to access medical help or visit relatives.

Frantz realized what such an obstacle to trade could mean for the residents of the Gonder and Gojjam regions in Ethiopia's state of Amhara. With no way to readily cross the river, the villagers on the Gonder side were almost hopelessly relegated to a life of isolation, poverty, and illness. If only there were a bridge so that the communities on the Gojjam side of the river were accessible to the villagers on the Gonder side, it might mean a whole new world of increased trade and economic prosperity for the residents of Amhara.

Frantz made an immediate, impetuous decision. He would go to Ethiopia and repair the bridge. After talking to his wife, Cheri, and his brother, Forrest, who had also seen the picture and had a similar reaction, Frantz began the research that would underpin the work on the bridge. He contacted Nevada Wier, who put him in touch with other folks at National Geographic, and he and his family established Bridges to Prosperity, contributing

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Staff photo by Sherry Hamilton

*Ken Frantz, left, founded Bridges to Prosperity to repair trade paths in underdeveloped countries and has already completed the repair of one bridge in Ethiopia. Here, he is shown with his wife, Cheri, financial officer, and their sons, Preston and Brendan.*



Photo by Zoe Keone with Bridges to Prosperity

*Bridges to Prosperity finished repairing the Sebara Dildiy (Broken Bridge), over Ethiopia's Blue Nile River in March, and this photo of an Ethiopian youth standing near the bridge appeared in the October 2002 issue of National Geographic Magazine.*

their own money to get the mission underway.

"When you turn 50 you start thinking about things with a little more substance, beyond your work," said Frantz. "You start looking for something that kind of replaces your work in your job. If you're totally consumed in your work, you can't see beyond the immediate crisis - you can't see the openings."



Photo by Zoe Keone with Bridges to Prosperity

*The four Americans who traveled to Ethiopia with Bridges to Prosperity are shown on Broken Bridge with their Ethiopian co-workers. They are, front from left, Dr. Mengistu, Zoe Keone and Gary Bunch; rear, Randy Stacey, nurse Hussein, security chief Burre, Ken Frantz, and camp expediter Amare.*

Having seen the opening, Frantz didn't waste any time. Within three months he and Forrest were in Ethiopia on a scouting expedition to determine exactly what the project would involve. After having a bridge replacement designed, Frantz had it built over a six-month period in Ethiopia's capital city, Addis Ababa. Professional photographer Zoe Keone spent the months of December and January in Ethiopia organizing the trip to Gonder and Gojjam, purchasing 25,000 pounds of construction materials, gear, and supplies, and then having it all moved to the site on donkeys. Frantz and two other volunteers, Gary Bunch of Mathews and Randy Stacey of Poquoson, followed in February.

This past February, the bridge repair was completed over a 10-day period with the help of the four volunteers from Bridges to Prosperity and 300 Ethiopian workers and volunteers. In a journal he kept about the project, Frantz said, "The Inauguration was held on Saturday, February 23, 2002, with over 1,000 people in attendance. The entire day was consumed with speeches, celebration, blessings by priests, slaughtering of cows, feasting, dancing, and pure joy!"

Frantz now readily admits that the entire experience was the result of divine intervention. But

he said that at first he didn't realize that God was acting in his life. His faith had lapsed, and it would take a series of miracles before he could say, "I received this calling from God to repair this bridge and it completed this change in my life."

Now, Frantz refers to the events that led to his epiphany as 'miracles'. He said the expedition by National Geographic correspondents to a place that needed the skills he had, and his chance discovery of the photo in the magazine, were nothing short of miraculous.

"How does someone that sees one broken bridge photo decide to act?" he asked. "There were too many coincidences, too many unusual things, for it to just be happenstance."

Other miracles followed. It was a miracle that the village elders in the provinces of Gonder and Gojjam allowed his group to repair the bridge at all, said Frantz.

"Can you imagine a couple of private individual foreigners with no credentials coming to the USA to volunteer to fix one of our historic bridges?" pondered Frantz. "(This was) a bridge built by one of their greatest emperors, and then destroyed by one of their most well-known patriots. How do the leaders of Ethiopia come to trust these Americans? How do they come to believe their promises? The answer is faith derived from trust. The Ethiopians saw the calling from God in my eyes and my heart. From this came trust, and from trust came faith that I would do as I said".

Other 'miracles' occurred because of Frantz's concern about safety on the trip. During his initial survey visit a Muslim porter named Malcolm who accompanied his group was drowned in the Blue Nile. Frantz heard his 'blood - curdling screams' in the middle of the night, but wasn't told until the next morning what had happened.

"I was crushed, completely in tears, just a mess," said Frantz. "The responsibility was overwhelming".

On the second trip, Frantz hired Ethiopian lifeguards to watch over the work crew. During the dedication ceremony after the bridge was completed, a young family man who couldn't swim fell into the river. Frantz, along with hundreds of villagers attending the ceremony, watched helplessly from the bridge and the cliffs around it as the man was swept downstream. But the lifeguards were able to reach him and pull him from the water.

"All of this happened while I was standing 40 feet above on the new bridge - right in front of my eyes," said Frantz. "Emotionally that just kind of broke down whatever barriers were left in me to break down and let God into my heart." He believes the young man's rescue was his redemption for Malcolm's death.

Frantz's concerns about safety also led to his hiring an Ethiopian physician and a nurse to accompany the work party. This led to yet two more miracles, said Frantz.

Through the generosity of project donor Klaus Viegner of Germany, Frantz was able to purchase the supplies to establish a temporary clinic at the work site, and Dr. Mengistu of Bahir Dar and two nurses together provided free medical treatment to over 1,000 patients during the 10-day period of the project - patients who, for the most part, had never been to a doctor. The medical team treated such illnesses as trachoma, tuberculosis, and wound infections that in some cases had eaten away tissue down to the bone. Trachoma itself is an eye infection caused by fly bites that results in blindness if not treated with antibiotics, said Frantz, and 90 percent of the patients had the condition. Close to 50 of them were beyond the help of antibiotics and required immediate surgery, which Dr. Mengistu performed.

"Trachoma is tragic because it's a hygiene issue that can be handled with minor antibiotic intervention," said Frantz. He considers the free medical clinic a miracle for the people of Amhara, and he considers one of the cases treated at the clinic to be yet another miracle.

During his first visit, Frantz met a 12-year-old girl named Banchamlak who had suffered major burns over her arm, shoulder and breast when she was only six years old. She had been hauled across the Blue Nile chasm in a coffee sack to search in vain for medical help. Six years later, she was scarred so badly that her arm and shoulder were permanently locked in place. On his return trip, Frantz searched for and found Banchamlak, then paid for her to have corrective surgery in a regional hospital. The surgery was a success and the child told Frantz it was "a miracle from God."

The final miracle was the building of the bridge itself, said Frantz, and that miracle was symbolized by the chance landing of a dove on the bridge as it was being pushed across the chasm during installation.

"How does one fix a bridge halfway around the world?" asked Frantz in a written account of the miracles. "It is 26 miles down a 4,000-foot-deep gorge. The area is inhabited by people so remote that they are called the 'Forgottens'. No roads, no electricity, no stores, and no telephones. 25,000 pounds of material, steel, and gear must be hauled down on the backs of 350 donkeys. If one piece of the steel members is lost or damaged, the bridge cannot be repaired. If there is just one detail missed in planning, the project will end in failure. Everything must be ready, and all the work must be completed in two weeks at the river, for the American volunteers must then return home. The instant that we have pulled the steel bridge across the broken opening, and are rejoicing, a dove that we have never seen lands on the middle of the steel bridge. The dove stands on the steel girder just feet away from everyone on both sides. We stare in amazement. We complete the repair ahead of schedule. The gratitude and joy expressed by the 1,000 people attending the inauguration is overwhelming and intoxicating. School children have made up songs about us. Elders promise to pass this story down generation after generation. The Ethiopian Orthodox priests sing and dance for us. They bless us, but we are already blessed more than they can imagine."

Cheri Frantz, who is the financial manager and a director for Bridges to Prosperity, said that throughout her 20 years of marriage to Frantz, she had prayed that "something would soften his heart and accept God". His epiphany was "the answer to a prayer I've had a long, long time," she said.

"Maybe this bridge was God calling him to himself so he could be saved," she said. "Some people just have to go to church and have a friend work with them. He's got to go to Ethiopia and build a bridge."

The Frantzes said they appreciated the support of the local individuals and organizations that helped support the Blue Nile River bridge repair, and continue to support their other projects. Two of the organizations, the Gloucester Rotary Club and the Gloucester Point Rotary Club, were especially helpful in teaming up with the Addis Ababa Rotary Club in Ethiopia to provide funding for all the wood decking on the bridge.

Other Gloucester residents who volunteered their time for the Bridges to Prosperity project were Terri Haynes, publicity; Kay Helm, video editing; and board of directors members Cheryl Nice, fundraising. For more information, visit [www.bridgestoprosperty.org](http://www.bridgestoprosperty.org) call Frantz at (804) 642-3265, or E-Mail him at [frantz@inna.net](mailto:frantz@inna.net).