

LOCAL DEVELOPER ON A MISSION TO BRIDGE GAPS AROUND WORLD

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Kenneth R. Frantz flipped through a magazine, waiting for the mechanic to finish with his pickup. A picture caught his eye in the December 2000 National Geographic: A man dangling from a rope strung between the ruined pylons of a stone bridge in Ethiopia. Frantz turned back to the picture two more times to look at the villagers hauling one another across the river.



Kenneth R. Frantz founded Bridges to Prosperity, which builds bridges in developing nations.

He knew he had to fix the bridge. Frantz hadn't worked on a bridge since he was a Boy Scout. He's a developer who grew up on the West Coast, worked four years on the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, owned a construction company in California and had decided to slow down his life by moving to Virginia, where his wife's family had been among the original Mennonite settlers of Newport News.

Things did slow down, until his truck needed work. Shortly after that, in March 2001, Frantz founded Bridges to Prosperity, a charity dedicated to building bridges to aid commerce in developing nations. Ethiopia was first.

Frantz and a few volunteers and family members hiked 22 miles from the nearest road to survey the ruins of Sebara Dildi, "broken bridge" in the native language. With the approval of village elders, he drew up plans and imported enough steel to span the gap. They went back in February.

"I am headed to fix what I said I would fix, the 360-year-old Broken Bridge on the Blue Nile. I was there eight months ago to perform the survey. But this is the real thing. I am returning to fix it to keep my promise," Frantz wrote in his personal journal.

They loaded 25,000 pounds of construction materials on donkeys for the trek into the Ethiopian highlands, then down several thousand feet into the gorge.

The bridge was built in the 1600s of stone, sand, lime and eggs, for adhesive. In 1936, a group of Ethiopian patriots, trying to block the advancing Italian army, hacked apart the middle arch of the bridge, using the points of farm plows. As it began to fall into the Blue Nile River, 40 of them fell, too, and drowned.

Faced with a round trip of 93 miles - on foot - to reach the next bridge, villagers strung a rope across the 40-foot gap. Both humans and animals dangled from a loop that was pulled from side to side by hand.



In March 2001, Kenneth R. Frantz founded his charity, Bridges to Prosperity, after seeing this picture of a destroyed bridge in the December 2000 National Geographic. The work became his charity's first project.

ZOE KEOME

"When you first see the bridge, coming down from the trail above, it does not look real. How could there be such a thing in such an isolated place? Kind of like seeing a high rise popping up through the polar ice cap."

To fix the bridge, volunteers repaired the masonry, dangled on cables and harnesses to put in supports, then built a fixed truss steel bridge on land. They prepared to pull it by hand across the gap but paused when a procession of priests and village elders arrived with a cow as a gift. The priests chanted a blessing on the workers, then on the bridge. Six inches at a time, the replacement span was tugged and pushed into place.



ZOE KEOME

Bridges to Prosperity's first project was fixing a 40-foot gap between the ruined pylons of Sebara Dildi, a stone bridge in Ethiopia.

"At that exact moment, something really amazing happens. As we are shouting out our joy, a dove alights on the rail in the center of the bridge. It is no accident, but rather a sign of grace."

Frantz believes he was called by God to found Bridges to Prosperity but says it is not run as a religious organization.

The volunteers brought along a doctor to handle any construction injuries and ended up providing a clinic that attracted 1,000 patients in 10 days. Then they came home and looked for the next bridge to build.

The charity has now, by itself and partnered with other groups, constructed or repaired two bridges in Nepal and one in Indonesia. The fifth bridge will again be in Ethiopia, at a site where two previous attempts failed around 1900.

Frantz has bigger plans, too. He wants to establish a presence in Ethiopia and then other countries, to train people and help them build their own bridges. It will take several years of hard work, he said, but it will mean more bridges can be built in less time, for less money.

"We are trying really hard to be models of what is best about America. By the time we leave,

there will be thousands of people that come to know America for what she really is - a kind-hearted friend."

So now Frantz is a semi retired developer and a full-time bridge builder. He has requests for two more bridges in Ethiopia, and he hasn't even advertised the charity yet. When he does, he expects hundreds of applications seeking help.

He'll respond. He has to.

Because Ken Frantz keeps his promises.

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[Color photos]

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Photo by: ZOE KEOME

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