

By Teresa Wippel - Photography by Zoe Keone
© 2002 by Bridges to Prosperity, Inc.

Ken Frantz enthusiastically recalls the day in March 2001 that transformed his life forever. Waiting for an oil change at a car dealership in Virginia, he picked up a *National Geographic* magazine, which fell open to a dramatic photograph: a man dangling from a rope strung between two arches of a broken stone bridge spanning the Blue Nile River in Ethiopia.



Built 360 years ago, the Second Portuguese Bridge had been partially destroyed during World War II by Ethiopian patriots desperate to keep Italian dictator Mussolini's troops from entering their territory. But Ethiopia, one of the world's poorest countries, had not been able to repair the bridge, a lifeline for moving everything from grain to live animals from one side to the other. For 65 years, crossing the river over the broken span required a group of men standing on either side with a rope, pulling the person across inch by inch.

When Frantz saw the photo, the semi-retired construction executive had an immediate thought:

"Here's something that I can do. There's a tremendous need, and it wouldn't be that hard." Thinking about the photograph as he drove home from the car dealership, Frantz had another idea: "Not only could I fix this bridge, I could see if there are opportunities to fix other bridges." After talking with his wife, Cheri, and his two pre-teen sons, and after establishing a non-profit organization, Bridges to Prosperity, Frantz began writing letters and making phone calls to family members and friends, requesting their support.

That the magazine had fallen open to that page "was quite strange," said the 1971 political science graduate of Washington State University. "I had been thinking about what is going to be my legacy, beyond family and beyond succeeding in business. Personally, for me it was a calling."

Another twist of fate was the fact that his brother, Forrest Frantz ('74 General Studies, '78 M.B.A.), had seen the same photograph and had the identical thought of rebuilding the bridge—a coincidence the pair discovered when they talked a couple of weeks later. Forrest, who lives in Snoqualmie Pass with his wife, Pat King Frantz ('77 Office Administration), and their two daughters, became a founding director of Bridges to Prosperity and played a key role in overseeing the design and engineering of Second Portuguese Bridge.

Ken Frantz is no stranger to construction projects and bridges, or to completing them quickly. Growing up in Burien, he, Forrest, and their three brothers—Jim ('70 Electrical Engineering), Lawrence ('72 Chemical Engineering), and Marty (x'73 Business Administration)—helped their father, a Boeing engineer, build summer vacation homes. Then the homes were sold to fund the boys' tuition at WSU.



Frantz recalls building a 120-unit apartment complex with Marty in 56 days, setting a national record. And when Frantz relocated his family from California's Silicon Valley to Gloucester County, Virginia, in 1992, he fulfilled a longtime dream of buying an island—Cuba Island on the York River. Of course, while building a home on the 17-acre island, he needed to get to the mainland, which required construction of a bridge.

**"I had been thinking about what is going to be my legacy, beyond family and beyond succeeding in business."
– Ken Frantz**



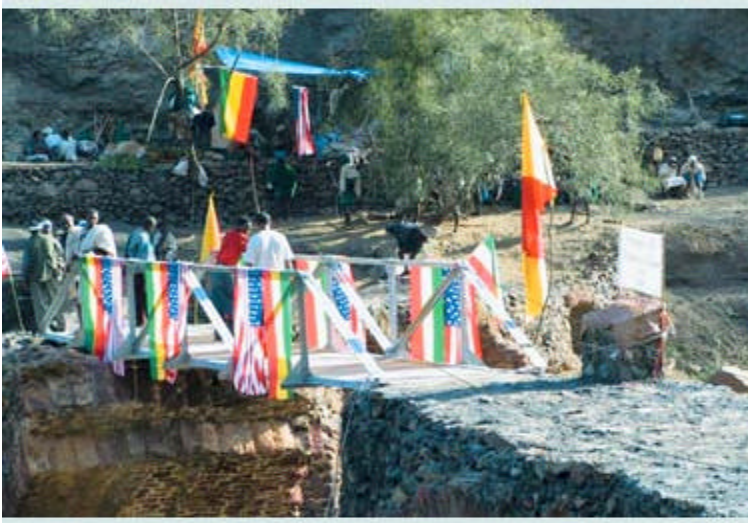
Top, l. to r.: Randy Stacey, volunteer; Hussein, nurse at free clinic; Burre, camp security chief; Ken Frantz, project leader; Amar, camp aide. Bottom, l. to r.: Dr. Mengistu Mekonnen of the free clinic; Zoe Keone, logistics and photography; and Gary Bunch, volunteer.

But repairing a bridge in another country - especially a country with few resources and many needs - was a new challenge. Frantz first contacted the Ethiopian embassy, where he shared his plan for rebuilding the bridge with Brook Hailu. The second ambassador to the U.S. expressed his enthusiastic support for the proposal and offered to provide letters of introduction to local and national Ethiopian officials.

While conducting research on the bridge, Frantz also received some valuable advice from Paul Henze, one of the world's foremost experts on Ethiopian history. "He said, 'When dealing with people in Ethiopia, start with local people and work your way up,' " Frantz recalled. "In the U.S., our tendency is to work from the top down."

Three months after Ken Frantz first saw the *National Geographic* photo, he was on his way to Ethiopia. Forrest, a systems engineer for the Boeing Co., traveled with him to survey the bridge and determine what it would take to repair the structure. "Ken's job was to handle the politics. My job was to handle the engineering," said Forrest.

Other family members and friends rallied around Frantz's idea, offering their support. Brett Hargrave, a nephew and former U.S. Army survival instructor, volunteered to serve as the party's medic. Two other acquaintances with construction backgrounds, Randy Stacey and Gary Bunch, also offered to accompany the group and help. All of the men paid their own expenses, including airfare.



In the early morning of inauguration day, villagers prepare the bridge, decorated in American and Ethiopian flags, for the ceremonial opening.

Because the bridge site was a considerable distance from the Addis Ababa airport, Frantz hired an expedition firm to help them reach their destination. The 25-member party traveled in jeeps to the trailhead at Mot'a, then began the toughest part of the journey: a 26-mile trip on foot, packing their gear in by donkey.

Once they arrived at the site, they planned to follow the "bottom up" strategy recommended earlier: approach the respected elders of villages on both sides of the broken bridge to seek their permission and blessing. However, before they had an opportunity to travel anywhere, a delegation of 16 elders appeared at the river to talk about the bridge. They offered their overwhelming support, a trend that continued during three different meetings with more than 60 leaders at villages on both sides of the Blue Nile.

The results were nothing short of amazing in an area where the only means of "fast" communication are telegraph wires and human messengers who serve as runners from one village to the next. Village elders flooded the state capital with messages urging the government to approve the bridge repair project. "We had the permit in hand within two weeks after returning to the U.S.," Frantz said.

Through the Internet, Ken and Forrest discovered Sahale, a Seattle company that specializes in the design, engineering, construction and repair of remote pedestrian bridges like those found on mountain hiking trails. Sahale did the design at cost, to meet two main requirements. The bridge would have to be strong, as Bridges to Prosperity would have no control over how many people and animals used the span at once. "At the same time, it would have to be transportable - something that could be broken down and be thrown on the back of donkeys," Forrest explained.

After the design was complete, the bridge's lightweight steel trusses were fabricated in Turin, Italy. Then, early last February, they were shipped via boat to the nearest seaport, located in the country of Djibouti, from there by train to Addis Ababa, and finally by truck and jeep to the trailhead.



Ken Frantz, his nephew, Brett, and friends Randy and Gary returned to the site to supervise the bridge construction. The movement of 25,000 pounds of concrete, steel, and gear required that 25 donkeys and 50 porters make several trips between the trailhead and the bridge site.

Bridges to Prosperity hired local villagers to work on various aspects of the construction project, distributing the work equally between villages. All of this was coordinated by another key volunteer, Zoe Keone. She served as photographer, videographer, payroll master, menu coordinator, and dispute resolution manager, along with many other tasks.

Against the backdrop of a banner made by local villagers, reading "Long Live to [sic] Bridges to Prosperity," Ethiopian Orthodox priests celebrate during the bridge inauguration with drums and centuries-old biblical songs of joy.

Keone also oversaw the start-up and operation of a free medical clinic staffed by an Ethiopian doctor and a nurse originally hired to handle construction injuries. During construction, the clinic treated 1,000 people from nearby villages, with the waiting line at times growing to more than 500.

The bulk of the bridge repair involved masonry work, followed by assembly of the bridge, which was pulled manually by ropes into place over the broken section. The entire project, scheduled to take two weeks, was completed in 10 days.

Once the bridge was finished, Frantz held an inauguration ceremony that drew 1,000 people who celebrated the moment with dances, singing, and speeches. In a touching display of affection, villagers brought him gifts of eggs - a precious commodity in a land where many suffer from malnutrition.



Ken Frantz thanks a little girl for a gift of eggs she has brought for the Ferenji, the foreigners.

Frantz originally estimated that reopening the bridge would increase trade in the region from \$300,000 per year to \$3 million annually. He now believes that total is likely to be much greater. Such economic benefit is at the heart of the Bridges to Prosperity mission statement, which reads, in part: "We believe improved access to markets brings about more trade, and more trade improves economic prosperity."

As the construction party hiked out of the area, Frantz noted some interesting traffic moving in the opposite direction: Porters carrying sheet metal headed for villages across the bridge to modernize old grass huts, and a large caravan of mules loaded with goods to be sold on the other side.

This is the true story of the bridge, Frantz said - the resulting increase in trade between villages and the economic benefit for people who so desperately needed to transport their goods easily from one place to another.

Many people want to aid poor countries and are often moved by images of starving children, Frantz added. But Bridges to Prosperity is "doing something that has long-lasting benefit for those starving children, that allows them to help themselves inside their own country."

Bridges to Prosperity has completed three other small pedestrian bridge projects, including two in Nepal and one in Indonesia. A second Ethiopian bridge, across another portion of the Blue Nile River, is in the design stage.

And to come full circle on the magazine photo that started it all, *National Geographic* featured Frantz's work to repair the Second Portuguese Bridge in its October 2002 issue.

Teresa Wippel is a Seattle free lance writer. Zoe Keone is a professional photographer based in Gig Harbor Washington. For more information on Bridges to Prosperity, see <http://www.bridgestoprosperty.org/>.

Contact us: wsm@wsu.edu 509-335-7628 | [Accessibility](#) | [Copyright](#) | [Policies](#)
Washington State Magazine, PO Box 641040, [Washington State University](#), Pullman, WA, 99164-1040 USA