



Across The Divide

Architectural engineering graduate Chris Rollins left the security of a corporate job to build pedestrian bridges in impoverished countries. He discovered that the cultural gap between America and the Third World can be as daunting as any geographical barrier.

by David Eisenhauer



There are three pedestrian bridges in Ethiopia that weren't there when Chris Rollins arrived in the country in September 2003. Located in the village of Kerranio near Addis Ababa and in the villages of Dessie, and Marye in South Welo, the bridges span gorges that are otherwise impassable in the rainy season, allowing farmers and merchants to more efficiently transport their goods to market and providing reliable access to schools and hospitals. They are pathways to a better life for Ethiopians, who have endured years of civil war, drought, and famine. But for Rollins, who graduated from UW in 2000 with a degree in Architectural Engineering, the bridges also are monuments to frustration and hopelessness.

For nearly two years, Rollins has worked as Director of Engineering and Construction for Bridges to Prosperity (BtP), a nonprofit organization that designs and builds pedestrian bridges in impoverished countries worldwide. After a five-month internship in Nepal in 2003, he had planned to spend two years Ethiopia supervising construction of eight pedestrian bridge projects. Nine months of aggressive begging, verbal abuse, and physical threats from Ethiopian people, however, soured his idealistic mission and convinced Rollins to cut his trip short.

Throughout his work with BtP, Rollins, a prolific journal writer and photographer, documented his overseas experiences. In both Nepal and Ethiopia, he expressed frustration in procuring materials, keeping schedules, and training the local workforce. But while the Nepali villagers largely were appreciative of his efforts, Rollins wrote that many Ethiopians derided him as a wealthy western imperialist:

I went on another ride with my friend Addis, the former national cycling champion of Ethiopia, on Saturday, up the less steep Bahir Dar Road to the north. Along the way a guy in a bus gave me the finger. Here I am in Africa, cycling with a local hero, and I get this? Sure, it is a small gesture, but it means so much. At a religious festival in Mescal Square someone hit me with a towel or something last week, over the head, from behind. A small act, but cumulative, indeed. Here's the rub: I am neither a religious zealot, nor a United Nations flunky pulling six figures. With neither the reward of eternal salvation or financial windfall, I ask WHAT AM I DOING HERE?' It is quite simple: I am here for the simple satisfaction of helping people—nothing more, or less. ... I decided to do this, and I will. I will do it as an exercise in faith and commitment and pride.

Rollins repeatedly vowed to stick out his assignment in Ethiopia, even after he received a death threat for harassing a imposing female beggar on the street while trying to talk to his Ethiopian cycling partner. "I will shoot you in the back of the head if you ever do that again!" said the anonymous note he received from the waiter while sitting in a café later. But when Rollins was mugged and beaten during a March vacation in Zanzibar—an incident that was unrelated to his previous encounters with Ethiopian villagers—he had had enough.

"I have lost the compassion I started with, and now I don't really like the person I've become," he e-mailed a friend in May 2004. "All the depression I've been harboring has switched to rage. I realize the only way to fix it is to leave."

Several months later, sitting in a downtown Laramie coffee house, Rollins' rage has abated. He returned to the United States in July and spent a few weeks with family in North Carolina and Mississippi and went on a long mountain biking trip through the Rockies. Time and distance have healed his heart and mind, and he is ready for a new challenge.

"When I came back to America, it was amazing to see how much free time people have and how easy living is. It's almost inconceivable that there are these two types of existence on this planet, immense wealth here in the West and utter poverty everywhere else" he says. "I love hanging out with my friends, drinking beer, mountain biking. Sometimes I just want to get a job here in Laramie and settle down. But that existence is too self-serving. My passion is still to build pedestrian bridges and help people."

Since childhood, Rollins has been something of a loner, isolated by his philosophical nature and a persistent desire to right the injustices of the world. A native of Washington D.C., Rollins was in first grade when his father, an FBI agent, moved the family to his home state of Mississippi. For the first of many times in his life, Chris felt "different," and recoiled from the sting of exclusion and ridicule.

"For a long time I was stigmatized as a Yankee and an outsider, so it turned me into a reader," he says. "I really focused on my education because that's all you have when you don't have many friends."

Rollins majored in history at the University of Pennsylvania but didn't complete his degree. Instead he left school to travel through Europe, buy a motorcycle, work as a journeyman carpenter, and even pick fruit and plant trees in migrant labor camps. His wanderlust allowed him to discover a range of places, from Jackson Hole, Wyo., to Toyohashi, Japan, and eventually determined his choice of career.

"I realized I wasn't the smartest guy in the world but I could make up for it with experience," he says.

By the late 1990s, Rollins was ready to settle into his life's work. He decided on architectural engineering because his carpentry experience had given him an appreciation for building. And he chose the University of Wyoming because his days living in Jackson Hole had given him a love for the Rocky Mountain West, especially the Cowboy State. Rollins hit the books with a vengeance, taking up to five engineering classes a semester. "I had 34 months of school without a break," he says. "But I chose to do it so I could get back in the world and do something."

Around the Engineering Building, Rollins was known as a brooding young man who asked endless questions. "He was extremely detail oriented and liked to see things in black and white," says one colleague. "He was a big picture person."

Professor Dick Schmidt, still one of Rollins' mentors, says his former student "was one of the more bold and inquisitive people I had in class. He liked to challenge concepts and notions and take them a little farther than the norm. He was never afraid to ask a question—and he was pretty bold."

Rollins' first job after graduation combined his twin passions of the outdoors and engineering. He worked for a Columbus, Ohio, engineering consultant using rock climbing techniques rather than conventional machinery to inspect highway bridges and other civil structures, enabling them to do the job faster and cheaper without disrupting the flow of traffic.

"I was making good money, I had a lot of time off, and I loved my job. But after 9/11, I wanted to be part of making the world a better place through peaceful means. There was so much talk of war and retribution. That prompted me to say, 'If there ever was a time to go somewhere to help people out as a volunteer, this is it.' I

wanted to focus on the similarities between our country and other countries, not the differences, find positive solutions instead of destructive ones."

Rollins left his job in January 2003 after reading an article in National Geographic about BtP founder Ken Frantz (www.bridgestoprosperty.org), who had recently rebuilt a broken bridge in Ethiopia. Frantz had picked up the magazine a year earlier and saw a photo of Ethiopians being hauled on a rope across the Blue Nile, instead of being able to cross a 360-year-old bridge that was destroyed during the Italian occupation in the 1940s. "I looked at the photograph once, twice, three times," Frantz said, "and it came to me. What I want to do is repair that bridge."

Rollins was eager to share in Frantz's dream. Using money saved from his corporate job, Rollins traveled to Kathmandu later in January. For the next five months he stayed on a tourist visa, studying pedestrian bridge building from Helvetas, a Swiss humanitarian organization that had worked in the country for four decades. Rollins' mission was to learn as much as he could from Helvetas so he could start a similar project in Ethiopia.

"The Bridges to Prosperity philosophy can be boiled down to this: low budget, grass roots projects involving local people from the very beginning so that it is indeed their program, and not ours," he says. "But there were many reasons why the Nepal program was different. Helvetas had 200 projects underway and a strong tradition of bridge building in that country, using refined indigenous technology from the Himalayas. That wasn't the case with us in Ethiopia. I found out that you can't take something that works in one culture and plop it down in another, even if all the numbers and facts are the same on paper."

After returning from Nepal in the summer of 2003, Rollins stopped off at UW to give a slide presentation on his internship to the College of Engineering. Afterward, he spoke about experiencing a kind of spiritual enlightenment from the impoverished but hopeful villagers he had encountered studying bridges in Nepal and war-ravaged Cambodia.

"Something has changed in me," he said. "I feel like I have a lot more compassion for humanity, and that I am a much better person than I was a year ago. I can only hope I go farther in this direction."

By October, after he had spent a month in his new assignment in Ethiopia, his hopefulness began to unravel. In both Nepal and Ethiopia, Rollins had to cope with a novice and often reluctant workforce, poor quality materials, and fabrication costs that were twice as high as predicted. Nepal had easily dressable limestone, which worked well in building masonry structures, while Ethiopia had basalt, a hard and brittle rock that would fragment unreliably. Rollins found that it was difficult to teach local workers how to dress the rock, so he ended up using more cement, which cost more to purchase and transport to the bridge sites. He rode his bike to save money on truck rentals and cab fare, and he did his best to jump through the hoops of government bureaucracy to get his materials and keep his projects on schedule.

These were problems Rollins had anticipated. But he was utterly unprepared for the torrent of begging and hate directed at him from some of the Ethiopian city folk and villagers, mostly young males. Rollins says even children ordered him to "Give the money!" as he rode his bicycle around town, while others derogatorily dismissed him as a "faranje," or foreigner. After being pelted with fruit and rocks several times, he stopped riding his bike altogether. At night, he escaped into Harry Potter books or documented his gathering anger and cynicism in his journal:

In theory, Bridges to Prosperity is a beautiful concept. We merely create a network, and provide some technical skill and some foreign parts, and soon enough the local Ethiopians are trained in the system and the local foreigners pull out. Right? In theory. The reality is that Ethiopia, like Nepal, enjoys a long history of aid from abroad, and the people here expect that any foreign group has cash pouring out of the cab of the shiny new trucks they drive.

Rollins didn't have the cash or the shiny truck. And by late spring 2004, he had run out of patience. He vowed to complete the three bridges, but his sense of empathy had left him. Rollins couldn't understand the villagers' contempt for him. Maybe it was the constant threat of poverty or that, as an American, he was viewed as a wealthy western imperialist on an arrogant mission to show the locals how to take care of themselves. Maybe it was decades of dependence on foreign aid. He had no answers. Rollins only knew that the Nepali villagers' appreciation for his work and BtP's mission did not transfer to Ethiopia. Though his bridges—tied together with wire rope, steel walkways, rock, rebar, and cement—would survive, inside Rollins was crumbling:

I know now that I am not made out for this kind of work. I do not have the patience, the psychological strength, or the compassion. I miss rock climbing and good beer and my truck and so many other things that define my generation but are so utterly shallow and unnecessary for human life. Just helping poor people is not enough for me. I am no saint at all.

It took several months back in the United States before Rollins could think about Ethiopia without setting his jaw. Now, sitting in the climate-controlled coffee house, he manages a smile. He had forgotten about the looks on the faces of village children when he gave them money to buy schoolbooks. Or Azeb, the 12-year-old girl who visited him at Dessie bridge every day to talk in her faulting English and ask him questions about his work. Or drinking tella, the Ethiopian village-brewed beer, with his crew after a long day on the job.

"There is nothing like the satisfaction of finishing the piers on a bridge and setting the cables between them, with a bunch of villagers who never went to school," he says.

When he left Ethiopia, Rollins doubted himself and his future. He wasn't sure whether he would seek another project overseas or settle down to a life of comfort in the Rocky Mountains, far from the harsh words and threats of Addis Ababa. But it didn't take long for Rollins' conscience to remind him who he is. He is, and always will be, a bridge builder. He speaks excitedly about a new construction project in Suriname, where he plans to serve as a consultant to Conservation International, a nonprofit organization that is working with the Suriname government to establish a nature reserve and help the country build a national park infrastructure. The memory of Ethiopia still stings, Rollins says, but it is tempered by the knowledge that, somewhere in the world, life is better because of something he helped build.

"Those three bridges in Ethiopia are monuments to something. People will use them, hopefully, for the next 100 years," Rollins says. "I can't just dedicate myself to making money and having fun. I still feel obligated to help people in the world who don't have what we have. I want to close that disparity."

