



Ken Frantz

Bridging the Gap

Ken Frantz is helping people pull themselves out of poverty, one footbridge at a time. *By Jim Morrison*

Ken Frantz has a high-definition satellite view of western Zambia pulled up on his computer screen. He zooms in on a riverbed in a floodplain. He's able to tell, he says, that there was once a man-made footbridge that linked villages on either side and that washed away during a rainy-season flood. He zooms in on each side of the river and counts the village huts, which gives him a rough estimate of the population. He can graph, too, that a new footbridge to span the gap would need to be about 62 meters long.

On a second monitor, Frantz pulls up images from his recent trip to Zambia's

Kaoma province. Frantz, the founder and driving force behind the nonprofit group Bridges to Prosperity, was there just days ago to meet with local leaders and volunteers about building a new footbridge at this very spot, among others. Since founding the organization in 2001, Frantz and Bridges to Prosperity have overseen the construction of more than 50 bridges in 13 developing nations, including Honduras, Guatemala, Afghanistan and Ethiopia. Each footbridge, Frantz says, is a path out of poverty, providing villagers with essential access to education, jobs and medical care.

Popping over to Zambia, of course, is neither quick nor easy. But new technologies like Google Earth have helped Frantz speed up the pace of his work, as he and his team identify desired build sites from afar, thus reducing the number of trips needed to complete a project. However, the technology has its limits: For example, only about 15 percent of Zambia is currently available in high definition via Google Earth. Once Frantz can see the entire country from his office in Yorktown, Va., his job will be transformed. For now, he and his team — which includes student volunteers from universities such as Notre Dame and the University of Iowa — can only estimate that Zambia needs 1,000 to 1,500 footbridges. Worldwide, the team estimates the need could be as high as 500,000.

Facing a figure that staggering, Frantz has had to be smart with his time and money in order to make the biggest impact he can.

While other organizations spend money on consultants and feasibility studies, Frantz prefers to take action, building “demonstration bridges” that cost anywhere from \$30,000 to \$60,000 in an effort to provide incentive for communities to build more.

“Why spend money on feasibility when you get a lot more accurate information by just going in and building a demonstration bridge and in the process start collecting the partners you need?” he asks. “Instead of spending money on consultants, you actually do something that’s a tremendous benefit to the community.”

That’s how Ken Frantz works: He identifies the problem and gets straight to work. In 2001, he was waiting for his pickup truck at a repair shop when he picked up an old copy of *National Geographic* and saw a picture of the Sebara Dildiy, a 400-year-old stone bridge over the Blue Nile in Ethiopia; its center span was missing.

“It struck me like a lightning bolt,” he says. “This was what I was here for. I was supposed to go fix this bridge.”

Frantz grew up in California and had worked on the Alaska pipeline after graduating from Washington State University with a pre-law degree. He eventually returned to his home state, where he earned a master’s degree in public administration from Golden Gate University and became a residential builder and developer. In 1992, he and his wife moved to Virginia to be closer to her family. When he opened the issue of *National Geographic*, he was finishing a major development in Gloucester, Va., and had started thinking about what he would do next. Looking at the picture, he knew. It was that bridge, half a world away.

The 230-foot-long bridge had linked the regions of Gonder and Gojjam in the remote northwest corner of Ethiopia until it was intentionally collapsed in 1936 in an effort to prevent Benito Mussolini’s Italian army from invading. With the bridge remaining inoperable nearly 70 years later, villagers who needed to cross the river were forced to make a 93-mile round-trip hike on foot to the next nearest crossing point or take their chances being pulled across the gap by a rope, a method that had at times proved fatal. Those living on the side of the river isolated by the missing span were poorer and had difficulty accessing health care and

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getting to the market, both of which were located across the river.

Frantz’s solution was to build a light-weight steel truss to straddle the open span between the arches. He financed the trip largely with his own savings and spent six months organizing the transport of 25,000 pounds of gear — 250 mule-loads — for the eight-hour trek into the gorge. After 10 days of construction, villagers were finally able to safely and quickly cross the river.

But Frantz learned a valuable lesson on that initial trip: Dropping in and building a single bridge wasn’t the answer. At that rate, he couldn’t possibly raise enough money or manpower to meet the worldwide need. Instead, he realized, the key was to teach local villagers the skills — both manual and administrative — to continue the work on their own. “When I started, I did not see this as a mission to teach people to build bridges. I saw it as going and building bridges,” he says. “It only took one bridge to learn that lesson.”

Now, through the bridge-building ventures, villagers are taught not only the mechanics of footbridge construction but also how to write a contract, how to work in cooperation with villagers in neighboring communities and how to go to the local government to request funding for materials. These villagers are so well trained, in fact, that some in Ethiopia were even hired by Helvetas, a large Swiss-based charity that has partnered with Bridges to Prosperity and is undertaking a million-dollar, multiyear bridge-building program in the African nation.

Bridges has benefited from other partnerships as well, notably with engineering firms that commit design expertise as well as manpower, such as Parsons Brinckerhoff of New York City and Flatiron Construction of Denver. Various sponsor companies, including Rotary International, have also been vital in funding the organization’s work.

Frantz hopes to be in more than 20 countries by 2020. The goal of his organization, he notes, isn’t just to leave behind footbridges. “If your primary goal is to eliminate extreme poverty — and that’s what we’re truly about — then building a single bridge just isn’t going to get it done,” he says. That’s why Bridges aims to have 200 “local lead engineers” who can continue to independently build bridges in their home countries. Frantz’s goal is to eventually turn the programs over entirely to locals; he touts the importance of self-sufficiency. “They have to want this really bad,” he says.

In order for locals to continue the good work Frantz has started, however, it’s crucial for Bridges to come up with sustainable designs that can be replicated in any environment with readily available materials. Frantz recognizes that in most cases, shipping in a steel truss the way he did with the Sebara Dildiy project is not feasible in terms of time, money or skills. That’s why he and his engineering and construction partners have begun to use more cost-effective methods and regional materials in their recent projects, even looking to historical techniques for ideas to reinvent modern footbridge design. Frantz is set to try new prototypes on projects in Guatemala and Zambia this year. “The only interest we have is whether or not we can do a design that can be replicated elsewhere,” he says.

That’s because Bridges to Prosperity ultimately isn’t just about spanning gorges and floodplains. It’s about uplifting people.

“What you’re doing is you’re doing a heck of a lot more than building a footbridge,” he says. “You’re really building a whole local infrastructure development model that works.” **AW**

Stories by longtime *American Way* contributor **JIM MORRISON** have appeared in *Smithsonian*, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *National Wildlife* and numerous other publications. He’s crossed a few nerve-racking footbridges in countries like Zambia, Mexico and Costa Rica during his travels.



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