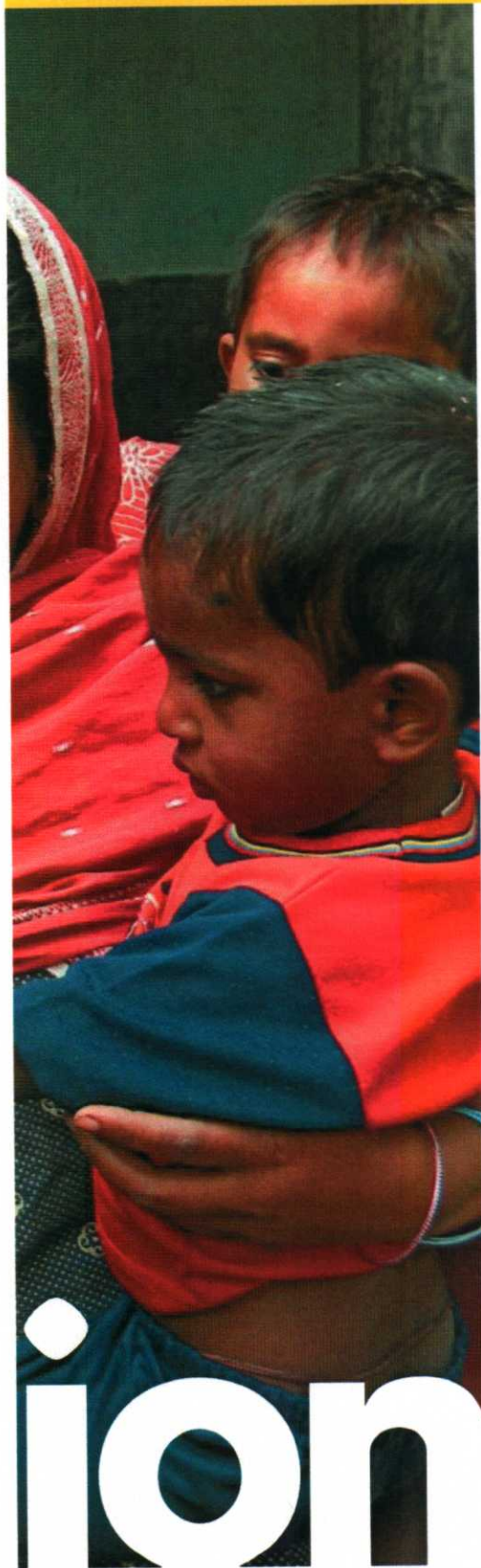


A woman in a blue cap with a Rotary logo and a yellow vest with "END POLIO" and a Rotary logo is applying white paint to the hand of a woman in a red sari. Another woman in a green sari with a clipboard is in the background.

South Carolina co-op

# On a miss

members are making a difference in far-flung corners of the world



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PHOTOS COURTESY OF MILOŠZ RETERSKI

## Building bridges to a better world

MIKE McCORMICK  
AND THOMAS BLACK,  
Fairfield Electric Cooperative



WALTER ALLREAD

Mike, left, and Thomas display a plaque commemorating the bridge-building project. At the bottom is a length of the heavy steel cable used to span the river.

Whenever thunderous downpours threaten South Carolina, weather advisories warn locals to avoid travel. During the rainy season in Matiguas, Nicaragua—when destitute villagers are cut off from markets, schools, family, farmland and medical care—some have no choice but to attempt crossing the swollen, unpredictable rivers.

“Drowning is No. 1 cause of accidental death in Nicaragua,” says Mike McCormick, a Fairfield

Electric Cooperative member who has been smitten with Nicaraguan people since his first school-building mission trip in 1999. The mission team leader at Sandy Level Baptist Church in Blythewood couldn’t shake their predicament out of his heart. His passion quickly spread through the 150-member church.

Parishioners have been answering McCormick’s call for at least a decade, providing food ministries, sending youth teams, pouring concrete floors for homes and sheltering orphans. But no one had a clue how to approach his next challenge. During the rainy season, villagers outside Matiguas lacked a safe way to cross the river each day. Young and old would attempt the crossing with their wares stacked on their heads. The alternative—going around the



**Riding, walking or driving across an often-swollen river was the only way two Nicaraguan communities could access one another before a 200-foot-long walking bridge was built by members of Sandy Level Baptist Church in Blythewood.**

river by horse or mule when the river becomes impossible to cross—would take six or seven hours.

“Mike’s Nicaraguan friend wanted our mission team to come and build the Gavilan and Patastule communities a walking bridge,” says Thomas Black, vice president of engineering for Fairfield Electric Cooperative. “He told us the story of a whole family who were crossing the Bul Bul River in a small truck, when suddenly a wall of water hit the truck, causing it to turn over several times. The whole family drowned.”

Black, an electrical engineer, volunteered to approach some of his civil engineering contacts for help designing the bridge. “They must have thought I was crazy for asking them to help design a 200-foot walking bridge over a raging river in Nicaragua,” he says.

The first answer to his prayers arrived in March 2010, when a friend emailed him a story about Bridges to Prosperity, also known as B2P. The nonprofit organization, founded by Ken Frantz in 2001, helps communities in third world countries build footbridges over impassable rivers to access healthcare, education and economic opportunities. The organization’s mission is to “end poverty caused by rural isolation.”

Two days after Black sent a request for design assistance, B2P agreed to partner with the church. The following month, Black, 42, took his first mission trip to Nicaragua to survey the proposed site, and returned to South Carolina inspired to raise the \$25,000 needed for materials. With the help of the community, myriad fundraisers and several generous church congregations, Black met his goal within five months and by February 2011 he was back in Matiguas helping to lay the first tier of stones for the bridge foundation.

Building the bridge required the entire community’s help and months of hard labor. With no machinery available, volunteers and villagers carried tons of stones from

the river, dug foundations, mixed concrete and placed the foundation by hand. Black returned in May to help pull the first of seven steel cables across the river, another back-breaking task.

“Handling those heavy cables was very hard work, but thankfully there were 12 men there to help,” says Black, who didn’t mind the long hours and physically exhausting work. “If you’re called, you’ll enjoy it. When I swing a golf club, I’m sore.”

The Gavilan-Patastule Suspended Pedestrian Footbridge opened in September, but Black’s work with B2P is far from finished. He gave Matiguas town officials his word that he’d return next year to help build two more bridges. He’s currently seeking \$50,000 in donations to fulfill that promise, and has complete faith the funding will come through.

“I’m inspired by the challenges posed by working on a seemingly impossible project, like building the bridge in Nicaragua, and looking back and seeing how God provided all the answers,” he says.