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A bridge in Haiti

Virginia Tech students joined with residents of Ti Peligre to build a bridge to connect the community with basic needs that rested across a sometimes perilous river. **PAGE 4**

COMING TOMORROW An up-close look at brook trout and the array of valley folks who help maintain this state fish of Virginia.

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Will Collins (holding pen), a Virginia Tech structural engineering doctoral student, reviews building design and construction plans with James Paul (VT hat), a recent Virginia Tech civil engineering intern. Joining the review is the Haitian construction manager (blue hat) and other community leaders.

Photos courtesy of Matt Cape

Building more than a bridge

Virginia Tech students joined with residents of Ti Peligre to build a bridge to connect them with basic needs that rested across a sometimes perilous river.

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BLACKSBURG — “Poverty isn’t just material depravity. It’s broken relationships.”

That’s how Virginia Tech senior Nick Mason sums up a recently completed trip from a country that has endured many hardships.

Mason and other Tech students

have spent the past two years traveling between the university and Ti Peligre, Haiti, where they’ve gained lasting and meaningful relationships with each other and the residents of the small village.

Mason said many people look at Haiti, still recovering from a devastating earthquake that struck more than a year ago, and say: “How can we save them.”

But ultimately, “they have saved us,”

he said.

A group of Tech students have worked side-by-side — often in spirit — with villagers of Ti Peligre — a small, mountainous village about three hours outside of Port au Prince.

There, they built a much-needed foot bridge. A dedication ceremony for the bridge was held during the student’s spring break.

The group, mostly engineering students, were contacted by Virginia Tech accounting professor Bryan Cloyd in the fall of 2009 to see if they’d be interested in building a bridge in Ti Peligre.

Cloyd has been involved in numerous projects in Haiti, including the construction of the Gospel School Garden

of Learning, also in Ti Peligre.

Mason, along with Matt Capelli and Katie Masoero, traveled to the village during their Thanksgiving break to do a feasibility test for the bridge.

Ti Peligre residents were often landlocked by the River Thomonde when it swelled from rainfall, becoming too risky and contaminated to cross.

Across the river rests the village’s basic needs in a market, a school and an American-funded hospital Zanmi Lasante, run by Partners in Health. It used to take residents two-plus hours to reach these destinations on foot.

Students traveled back to Blacksburg to decide what kind of bridge to build and how to fundraise for its construction, which would cost close to \$20,000.

They would return a year later, when a catastrophic earthquake "would kind of change everything," Capelli said.

Back at Tech, the group began searching for a model to build the bridge after.

They came across a design by Bridges to Prosperity, a volunteer-based charity that seeks to empower poor nations through footbridge building.

The group saw the organization as a good opportunity to build more bridges in the future, and together established the first chapter of Bridges to Prosperity at Tech. The chapter is the also the first of its kind in the United States.

When the 7.0-magnitude earthquake hit the country on Jan. 12, 2010, killing tens of thousands, fundraising for the bridge was put on halt and efforts shifted to the more-immediate needs of the country. While helping with university efforts, group members became even more motivated to complete the project. They prayed for guidance, Masoero said.

"The key component was prayer," she said. "We weren't going to continue if God didn't want us to."

He did, and their determination carried on.

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2010 to teach the villagers how to build the bridge, so they could truly call it their own.

"We would never want it to be Virginia Tech's bridge... America's bridge," Capelli said.

"It was a partnership. We have been blessed with talents and gifts, and so have they. When we put the two together, we create something of greater value."

In January the group traveled back for the third phase of the project, the technical phase. The 200-foot-long bridge is made of six steel cables suspended between two foundation of concrete and rock. The teams used river rock, sand, cement, rebar, cable, clamps, tubing wood, fencing and "blood, sweat, tears and prayer" to construct it, Mason said.

Their hard work paid off

March 6, when the bridge was completed and dedicated. No longer is a trip to the hospital a three-hour, five-mile journey. It's now a 10- to 15-minute walk across the bridge to an ambulance.

At the dedication ceremony, the Haitian workers stood on one side of the bridge, the Tech students on the other. The two groups met in the middle embracing.

"I think a bridge is a powerful metaphor for real change," Capelli, said.

"Before I thought 'Is this island ever gonna get better?' But when I saw those people, I have a renewed sense of hope and motivation. I know it will get better."

Many of the students will graduate this spring. All hope to stay involved in Bridges to Prosperity, which just recently held a successful election of new officers.

"I always like to tell people that we hope to not just bridge rivers, but also to 'bridge the gap' in student's lives to a life of service and the ultimate fulfillment of Virginia Tech's Motto: Ut Prosim, 'That I may serve,'" Capelli said.

The group recently received a \$100,000 grant from Rotary International for more bridges to be built and more relationships to be mended in the future.



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Scenes from the bridge project include (below) the Haitian construction manager, right, helping guide construction in January of the Virginia Tech students' design for the Ti Peligre bridge.

