

COLLEGIATE

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A bridge to prosperity



PHOTO COURTESY OF MATT CAPELLI

Children of the villages of Casse and Ti Peligre celebrate the opening of the bridge, which allows access to schools beyond the fourth grade.

STUDENTS GO TO HAITI IN HOPES OF BRIDGING GAP BETWEEN A VILLAGE AND THEIR NECESSITIES

MIA PERRY
features reporter

Imagine living in a place where your options for getting to the nearest hospital, school or market included forging a river and risking drowning or walking four hours on foot.

For the residents of Ti Peligre, Haiti, this was their reality. But a few months ago, the Ti Peligre community finished a project that changed everything. The Virginia Tech student chapter of Bridges to Prosperity teamed up with the community to create a footbridge in Ti Peligre that makes access to necessities we take for granted — like medical care and food — much easier.

They operated with the message, “Step out and share what you’ve been given. Through holistic sustainable empowerment, there can be lasting change.”

While working directly with the people of Ti Peligre in 2009 through Partners in Health, Tech accounting professor Brian Cloyd heard their need for a bridge, as well as a school. Cloyd set about creating a school for the people through connections he had, and then contacted Matt Cappelli, a civil engineering student, to help him with the bridge project.

In November of that year, Cloyd, Cappelli and two fellow students, Nick Mason — who was the project manager — and Katie Masura, went down to Haiti to do an initial survey of the land. They needed to figure out what kind of bridge was needed and how

they were going to construct it.

Using online research, the group — which now also included Chris Cooke and Zach Lawler — found a suspended footbridge design manual from an organization called Bridges to Prosperity that was perfect for what the town needed. Wanting to set up a structure so the bridge could be built and similar projects could continue, the students formed their own chapter of Bridges to Prosperity.

The Tech chapter of Bridges to Prosperity is the first student chapter of its kind.

“There are other university teams, but we are actually the first ones to actually start a chapter,” Cooke, a senior civil engineering major and current president of the club, said.

After the team’s initial visit to Haiti, it spent the next year working diligently on the bridge’s design plan, which included materials, labor and cost estimates among other things.

During this time, the massive earthquake that devastated much of Haiti on Jan. 12, 2010, slowed progress on the bridge’s construction. Although Ti Peligre was not affected as much as other places “the flow of materials essentially stopped in Port Au Prince,” according to Cappelli, also a graduate MBA student.

Then, in November 2010, the group was able to return to Ti Peligre, where it did excavation and discussed in depth with the people how the locals were going to build the bridge.

Masura, Lawler, Mason and a few

January of this year to oversee the technical construction of the bridge, like building the tiers and setting the cables.

Finally, during spring break, the work of Bridges to Prosperity and the people of Ti Peligre paid off. The bridge was completed.

The group is very proud of what it has accomplished in Ti Peligre, but is even more proud of the local people there.

“We were there helping,” Lawler, a senior ocean engineering major, said. This included design work, fundraising, and hiring of local labor. “But pretty much 100 percent of the labor was them.”

“As part of our model for these bridges, the local labor and local input is very important, because we don’t want this to be something where Virginia Tech students go and build a bridge and leave,” Cappelli said. “What we’re really looking for is long-term sustainable development, and more than anything a partnership with the community.”

Bridges to Prosperity would like to think of its project as two parties working together and sharing the talents that they have and putting them together to create something that has more value than could have been created separately.

What may seem like a simple bridge to some will have lasting effects on the community.

“Ti Peligre is surrounded by a river on three sides, so basically if you don’t cross the river, to get to the hospital is a three-hour, four-hour walk,” Lawler said. “To get to schools past the fourth grade is a three-hour walk, and to get to market is even farther than that.”

Ti Peligre are able to trek through the ankle-deep waters, but during the rainy season the river is impassible.

With the bridge, medical and emergency care is now available by taking a 10 to 15 minute walk to an ambulance. The markets are now only 15 minutes walking distance. The students in Bridges to Prosperity are happy the bridge grants these people access to what they believe are basic needs everyone should have, including clean water and the opportunity for economic development.

“On the last trip, we asked one of the locals, ‘What does this bridge mean to you?’” Cappelli said. “And what was translated back was ‘I wish you could open up my heart and see inside, because I can’t describe how happy I am.’”

“Those are the interactions that reach inside and touch you and make you realize that this is something so much more than a bridge. This chapter is a chance to take the blessing that I’ve been given to go to a great school like Virginia Tech and take that education and give back to the world. I always say, and it’s really cheesy, but I think it’s about more than bridging a gap from one side of a bridge to another but about bridging a gap to something more in each others’ lives.

“It’s like the project made a bridge all the way from Ti Peligre to Blacksburg.”

The group also feels like its work is what *Ut Prosim*, Tech’s motto of “That I may serve” is all about.

“The Haitians have taught me so much more than I could have ever expected,” Cooke said.

Haiti: Bridge closes more than one gap

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"I came into this project expecting to just build a bridge and I walked away with really amazing relationships and a whole new perspective on life."

Cooke said going to a place where the lifestyle is in so much contrast to his own helped him realize there is so much in life, that many value, that is actually meaningless.

"They're just livin' life, and it's amazing how simple their lives are, yet how happy they are," Cooke said. "I come back here and there are just so many distractions. You have to get plugged right back in and that's sometimes hard to adjust to. I love that one of the first things I noticed when I was down there was that these people who barely speak English just come up to you and ask you how your family is. One of the first English phrases they learn is 'How is your family?'"

Cooke admires how community and friendship mean so much to the Haitian people he worked with.

"I think all of us would agree that engineering experience is probably at the bottom of the list as far as what this project gave us," Cooke said. "But don't tell our adviser that!"

After proving itself with the Ti Peligre bridge project, the group is now trying to focus on what its relationship with the Parent Bridges to Prosperity organization will be. It has also just received a \$100,000 grant to keep working in Haiti.

"We've got a big commitment to

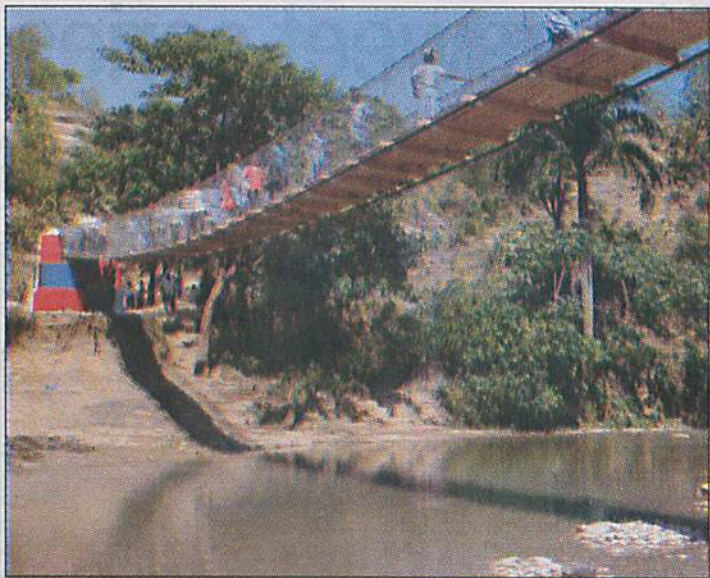


PHOTO COURTESY OF MATT CAPELLI

Residents take their first steps during a day of dedication in March.

Haiti, so we have to sift through how we will interface with Bridges to Prosperity, and how we will gain partnerships," Cooke said.

"Right now we are working very hard to continue a relationship with Partners in Health, who is really a valuable partner in Haiti," Cooke said.

"They have been working in Haiti for over 25 years and they are experts in the needs that Haiti has," Cappelli said.

"They hire locals whenever possible, which is good because then they

can be like 'Hey my cousin lives here and they need this'" Lawler said.

The club also noted there are countless parties outside of the club who deserve thanks.

"There are so many people walking around this campus who allow and make it possible for students to do this type of work, and they'll never even be recognized for it," Cooke said.

"There's people who have been supporting us all along the way, and they are not doing it for the recognition, but for the value of the work," Cappelli said.