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BRIDGING WORLDS

A Virginia Rotarian fights extreme poverty by building footbridges in some of the world's most remote places

by Stephanie Heintz



BAREFOOT AND TIRED FROM A 20-mile trek, the young Ethiopian farmer nimbly descends a line of steep cliffs and jagged black rocks leading to the Blue Nile's edge. ¶ When he finally reaches the base of a bridge nestled deep inside a gorge, he lets out an exhausted sigh. He sets down his heavy basket of fresh bananas, bound for sale at the market, and waits. The Sebara Dildiy looms before him. The historic beauty of the bridge, constructed ingeniously nearly 400 years ago with sand, stone, lime, and egg whites, is barely discernible. In Ethiopia's national Amharic language, *sebara dildiy* means "broken bridge," a moniker earned»

in 1935 when dozens of Ethiopian resistance fighters, armed only with modest farm tools, chiseled away the decking between the center arches in an attempt to slow Italy's invading military. The entire span plummeted to the rushing waters below, killing the men.

Broken it may be, but now, in October 2007, in this remote northern region of Ethiopia bordering Sudan, the bridge remains the fastest route to the market and medical care. The next closest crossing over the Blue Nile adds 100 miles to an already agonizing hike.

Life here, where most families barely survive on less than US\$1 a day, revolves around the market. A good day could bring in enough money to allow a child to go school. But most children stay home to shepherd animals and chase monkeys away from small vegetable plots. Homes are mud huts with dirt floors. Children wear torn clothing; flies circle their mouths and eyes.

Only one person can cross the Blue Nile's broken bridge at a time, making long waits common. Eight men – four on each side of the missing span – tend a yellow rope stretched across the opening. After 20 minutes, the banana merchant slips a loop around his torso. Carefully, he eases himself off the edge of the bridge and for several minutes hangs dangerously, 50 feet above the fast-moving river, as the men pull him across inch by inch. About 50 people cross safely on this day. Falling from the rope – as one man did not long before – means almost certain death.

The merchant gathers his goods, which are pulled across the river after him, and begins hiking the last 26 miles to the market on the other side of the bridge.

PHOTO OPPORTUNITY

In 2001, Ken Frantz, of the Rotary Club of Newport News, Va., USA, was flipping through an issue of *National Geographic* when he saw an image of a man risking his life to cross the Sebara Dildiy. “The magazine

living in extreme poverty,” Frantz continues. “Being a Rotarian made me realize that I could do more. And it made me want to help other Rotarians become engaged in the worldwide effort to eliminate extreme poverty.”

Frantz founded a nonprofit, Bridges to Prosperity, in March of that year and soon traveled to Ethiopia. By 2002, largely with his own funds and the support of several Rotary clubs in Virginia, he managed to bridge the gap of the 230-foot Sebara Dildiy with a lightweight steel truss. About 25,000 pounds of steel, cement, and equipment were packed on the backs of 250 donkeys.

The bridge quickly became the economic engine Frantz had envisioned. People who had refused to cross with the rope made frequent treks to the market. Young women started earning their own money, and some went on to school. Men hiked more frequently to larger cities in search of work to supplement their minimal farming income. And families visited relatives they hadn't seen in years.

After that first bridge repair, Frantz leveraged donations from 31 Rotary clubs, including his own, along with Rotary Foundation Matching Grants, to build 40 more bridges in 11 other countries by the end of 2007. This year, he's leading and funding community footbridge programs in Bolivia, El Salvador, Peru, and Zambia. As in Ethiopia, the bridges don't just improve lives – they save them. In Peru, Rotarians replaced a notoriously treacherous structure where three children died last year alone. His goal is to build 500 footbridges each year by 2020.

Sadly, in 2005 the bridge that had been the genesis of Frantz's mission was at the epicenter of a massive flood. Village elders living nearby reported that rising waters swept away the steel repair work. When he learned of the devastation, Frantz immediately went to work: He had promised to help the rural Ethiopian



Previous spread: villagers rebuilding the Sebara Dildiy bridge. Clockwise, from top: A new steel truss is tested in 2002; a *National Geographic* article about Frantz; a makeshift wooden bridge in 2007; crossing the Nile by rope, after floods destroyed the 2002 steel bridge.

literally fell open to the photo,” he says. “I knew right then and there what I was being called to do: go help repair this bridge.

“As Rotarians, we can build play structures or build to improve lives for those



This Incan rope bridge in Yabina, Peru, could be deadly: In 2006, three girls died while crossing. Rotarians funded a new bridge.



Before this bridge was built in Ethiopia, students braved 3-foot-deep rapids to get to school. In the rainy season, they stayed home.

highlanders on the road to a better life. Though keeping his word meant building a new bridge on higher ground, to Frantz, there was no alternative. The nonprofit he'd started had become his life's calling.

CROSSING OVER TO A NEW LIFE

When he saw the photograph of the broken bridge that day in 2001, Frantz felt his life come into focus. He'd spent years heading in a different direction. After college, he landed a job working on the Alaskan pipeline, then moved on to California, where he started a fast-paced construction company, building an average of 400 apartment units a year. He made a lot of money, but that wasn't enough. Wanting to slow down and spend more time

success, Frantz, now 58, is able to volunteer full-time. His organization has a handful of paid employees in countries with bridge-building programs, and Rotary clubs, along with engineering groups, corporations, churches, private donors, and other nonprofits, have partnered with Bridges to Prosperity to provide labor, funding, and technical aid.

When Frantz learned that he needed to rebuild the broken bridge in Ethiopia, he turned first to Rotary. District 7610 contributed to the project, and the Rotary clubs of Gloucester, Gloucester Point, and Falls Church, Va., and Bahir Dar, Ethiopia, offered donations that were matched by The Rotary Foundation, which earlier had provided six other Matching Grants to build 23 bridges. The seven grants and club contributions totaled \$281,000.

Ethiopia faces a growing HIV/AIDS crisis, a lack of rural education, and poor access to clean water, the Bahir Dar Rotarians are rarely at a loss for service ideas. But the vote on the bridge, Abebe says, was unanimous.

FULFILLING A PROMISE

On this day in October 2007, Frantz has sent Mebratu Abebaw, one of the first Ethiopian engineers trained through the program, to the Sebara Dildiy. Shortly after the banana merchant disappears up the steep cliffs leading to the market, the young engineer from Addis Ababa begins organizing farmers to collect logs and stone from the surrounding woods. For two days, Mebratu, who has brought nails and heavy cable, directs the villagers in building a temporary crossing. Everyone who is able joins the effort; farmers leave their fields, and militiamen lay down their AK-47s. When construction begins on the new bridge – which will be located slightly upriver – workers will need a safe route over the water.

It's a rough and rugged effort, with the railing made of narrow timbers, the decking of eucalyptus logs filled in with small stones. But it works. Shortly after the volunteers finish, two men arrive carrying a woman on a stretcher, handmade out of thin timbers and stretched animal skins. They've trekked for dozens of miles, fearful the entire journey, wondering how they would transport the woman across the broken bridge. To their amazement, it has been fixed.

Abebaw tells the villagers that Frantz will return shortly. In the meantime, they can begin clearing a path to the new bridge site, collecting stone, and excavating the area that will house the structure's base. Their wait for a new bridge, will soon be over, the engineer says. Construction on the new, permanent bridge will be completed by April 2009. ■

Rotarian Stephanie Heinatz is based in Gloucester, Va., USA. She traveled to Ethiopia on a fellowship sponsored by the Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation.



WHAT GOES INTO AN AVERAGE BRIDGE

Local contributions	Program contributions
350-500 laborer days	Three months' management
150-250 mason hours	Transportation
200 chisels	400 m cable
70 m ³ stone masonry	150 bags cement
25 m ³ sand	100 kg reinforced steel
20 m ³ broken stone	Steel saddles
10 m ³ gravel	Tools
Dressed stone	Hardware
Wood beams/decking	Fencing

SOURCE: BRIDGES TO PROSPERITY

with his wife and three children, Frantz moved to rural Virginia, where his wife had grown up. He returned to construction, this time as a developer, and fulfilled a lifelong fantasy by buying a small island for his new home – he even built a bridge to it. But he had begun to seriously question his purpose in life.

The nonprofit he went on to establish aims to eliminate extreme poverty one bridge at a time. Volunteers, who include Rotarians, people living near the bridges, engineers, and engineering students from U.S. colleges, help build the structures and teach local people how to construct and maintain them.

Given his earlier business

The Virginia Rotarians had helped on other bridge projects. But for the members of the Rotary Club of Bahir Dar, Ethiopia, who pledged \$100, this one marked not only their first partnership with Bridges to Prosperity but also their largest community service effort. "Most of our members know about the bridge," says Abebe Yimenu Tessema, 2007-08 club president. "They know how difficult it is for the people."

HOW YOU CAN HELP

LEARN MORE

about Bridges to Prosperity at www.bridgestoprosperty.org or contact Ken Frantz at kfrantz@bridgestoprosperty.org

DONATE

to The Rotary Foundation at www.rotary.org/contribute

The Bahir Dar club, located in the capital city of Ethiopia's Amhara State, is the closest Rotary club to the bridge. Getting there means a three-hour drive followed by a two-day hike.

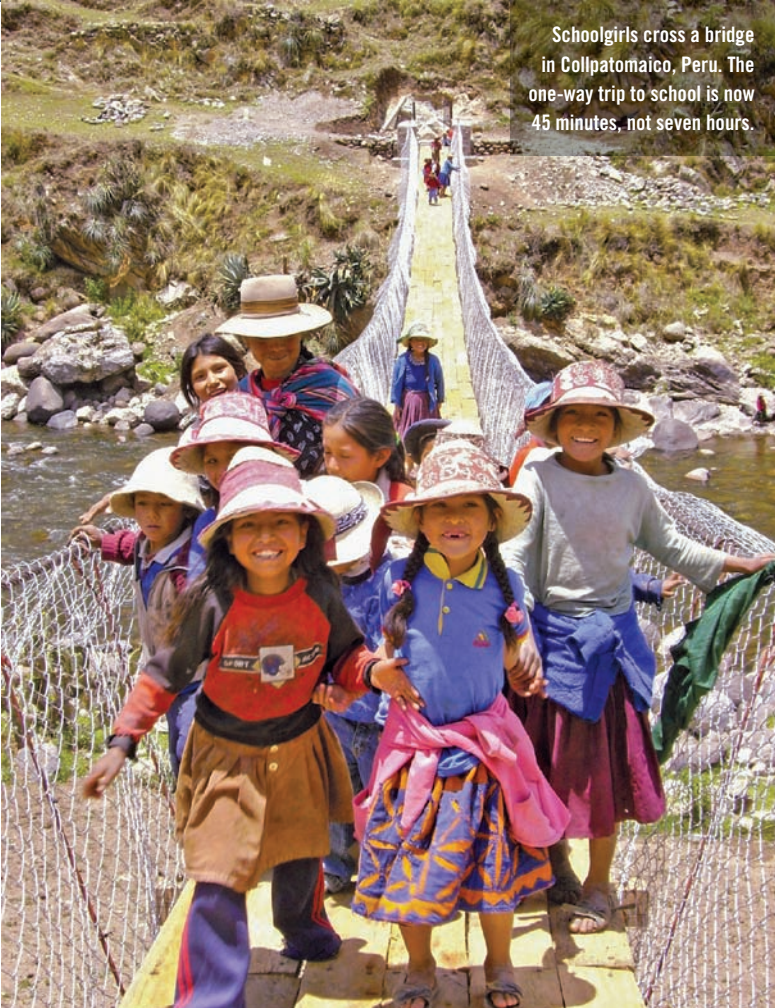
Because the club is small, members look for projects with a big impact. As



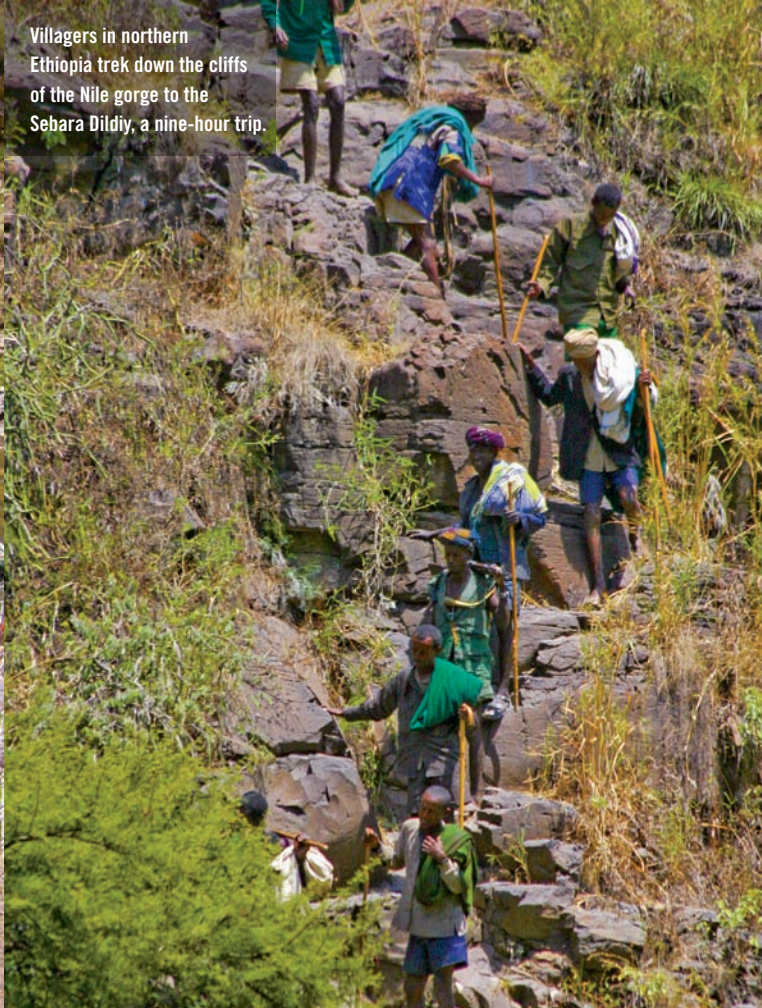
Lhmenh Nibale shows photos that Frantz gave him in 2001. They show the new bridge design and Frantz's family.



Locals in La Borrera, Honduras, lift the cable to the top of the suspension bridge towers.



Schoolgirls cross a bridge in Collpatomaico, Peru. The one-way trip to school is now 45 minutes, not seven hours.



Villagers in northern Ethiopia trek down the cliffs of the Nile gorge to the Sebara Dildiy, a nine-hour trip.