

## Bridges To Prosperity Being Built With Rotary's Help

by Sherry Hamilton

Bridges to Prosperity, a charitable worldwide economic development effort based in Gloucester, has built 12 bridges in remote parts of Ethiopia since its establishment four years ago. Now, with a solid record of success under its belt, the organization will take its program into Peru in August, with the support of Gloucester and Mathews Rotarians. An already-sold-out Charity Wine Auction, to be held at the Williamsburg Winery on June 11, will help provide funding.

The brainchild of Ken Frantz of Gloucester, Bridges to Prosperity initially sought simply to build bridges in remote corners of the world so villagers could have access to schools, hospitals, and markets.

"If you don't have a bridge, it's the one thing you want," said Frantz. "Farmers can't get their crops to market; mothers can't get their children to school."

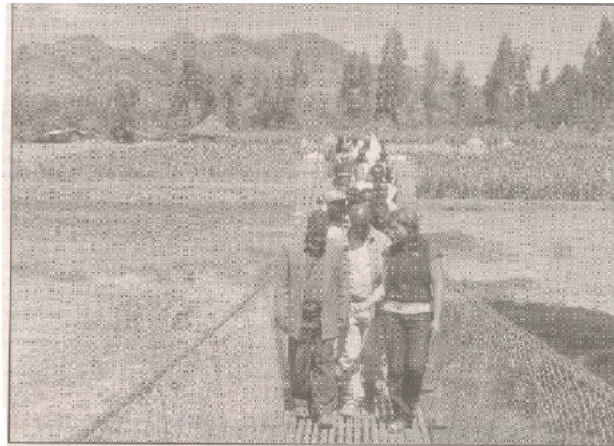


Photo courtesy of Bridges to Prosperity  
*Zoe Keone, front right, leads the elders of the Woreda in Ethiopia on their first trip across the bridge they built with the help of Bridges to Prosperity. This bridge is one of 12 built in the country under the Gloucester-based organization's guidance since 2001.*

Now, however, Frantz is pursuing a loftier ambition—alleviating poverty world-wide—and he believes that the members of Rotary International are the right folks to help him. "We want to teach people to lift their souls from poverty, using the process of building a bridge as a mechanism," said Frantz.

To accomplish this, Bridges to Prosperity, with the financial support of the Rotary and others, works closely with leaders in a particular locality, providing the design and materials for a bridge, then training villagers to build it.

"If you think about the root causes of poverty, picture a rural village where generations of people have always done the same thing—grown enough food to barely feed themselves," said Frantz. "How do you change that climate in the village? The answer is education, but there has to be more—the opportunity to go somewhere with that education."

That opportunity arises when the increased trade made possible by a bridge enables a locality to specialize in the production of a particular good or commodity, said Frantz. He gave an example of two villages separated by a river. While each has, for generations, had to grow a variety of foods to be self-sustaining, once a bridge is built, one village might be able to specialize in growing soybeans while the other might grow corn.

"Specialization is how you come out of poverty," said Frantz. "It's the engine for advancement. The second you put up a bridge, all of a sudden it's a highway creating trade and specialization."

Such specialization can't occur if half the population of a locality is left out of the decision-making process, so the first step in changing the whole dynamic of poverty, said Frantz, is to empower women—to make them part of the workforce and part of the decision-making process.

To achieve such gender balance, Bridges to Prosperity has a secret weapon: operations director Zoe Keone. Keone signed on with the first Bridges to Prosperity project as photographer, but became committed to the organization's cause and soon became its number one emissary. As operations director, Keone is sent to each village to explain the whole bridge-building program to the village elders. Her personality invariably charms the all-male leaders, said Frantz. Then, before she leaves, she hits them with the qualifier: that women will have to be involved in the process from beginning to end.

"She tells them she'll be back, but if they don't have a fourth to a third women decision-makers, she'll turn around and leave," said Frantz. "She gives them reasons why, pointing to other communities where they couldn't do it without women. She gets them thinking that maybe there's a different way to do things."

Building the bridge becomes a primary goal of the village, said Frantz, and achieving success at the highly complex process has an enormous impact, giving the builders a sense of empowerment. Not only does a village now have a new group of trained workers who are skilled in masonry and can begin to demand more than a laborer's salary, but the villagers begin to see that, by pooling their resources and working together—both men and women—they can "really do incredible things."

"When you're talking about a village that has nothing—mud and stick homes with thatched roofs, no well for water, maybe a distant school—there's very little community pride," he said. "When all of a sudden the community produces this bridge, it's just phenomenal."

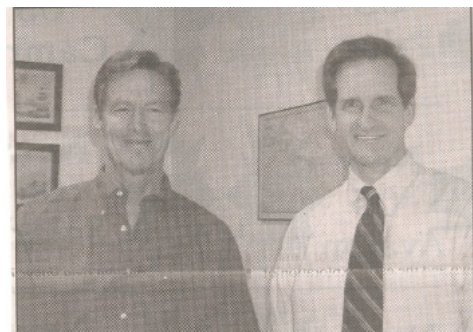
The end of a bridge project is typically marked with a joyful ceremony, said Frantz, and a song is sung that includes the names of everyone who helped with the bridge. He said such songs are passed down for generations, and those who participated in the project will be the next generation's leaders.

The whole concept, said Frantz, is based on "a bottom-up approach" that begins at the village level, rather than a top-heavy approach that relies on federal mandates.

Rotarian involvement has become increasingly important to the Bridges to Prosperity program, said Frantz. In addition to the Gloucester, Gloucester Point, and Mathews Rotary clubs, other Virginia clubs, along with clubs across the United States and around the world, are helping support the project in some way. The mission has been publicized in the Rotarian magazine and is getting a lot of attention from the Rotarian Foundation. With the possibility of involving thousands of Rotarians around the world, success appears to be inevitable.

"When Rotary gets its arms around something like this, it can change the world," said Frantz. "The last time they did something like this, they tackled polio eradication. At that time, there were 700,000 new cases of polio a year internationally. Rotary raised \$500 million over the last two decades and partnered with the World Health Organization, and now there are only 1,000 new cases internationally a year. The Bridge program is one of the new programs in Rotary taking the world quickly by storm."

Gloucester Rotarian Mark Holthaus, owner of the Wild Rabbit Café on Main Street in Gloucester, is charged with recruiting Rotarians to volunteer with bridge projects, and he plans on joining one of the bridge-building projects in Peru himself. Having traveled in Asia and Africa, he said he's seen the "compelling" need for bridges and is excited about the prospect of helping build them.



*BRIDGE BUILDERS Ken Frantz, left, founder of Bridges to Prosperity, and Gloucester Rotarian Mark Holthaus.*

Holthaus said that Ethiopia, with a per capita annual income of only \$125, will need continual help with its bridges because it's such a poor country it can't produce its own steel. However, a country such as Peru, which has a per capita income of \$1,000, will be able to afford its own steel within two years after the program is established there, and will become self-sustaining fairly quickly.

"We're not a permanent welfare shop or a colonizer," he said.

Frantz and Holthaus think there are probably 50 countries world-wide that can benefit from the Bridges to Prosperity program. They've set their sights on starting a new program in a new country every year, so they think it's possible to "blanket the world" within 20 years or so.

"In terms of other transfers of technology, that's lightning fast," said Frantz.

Frantz said that Gloucester Rotary has taken the lead position on the bridge project with Rotary International and is having a "big impact" on the organization as a whole. He believes that Bridges to Prosperity is a "powerful lightning rod" that will help alleviate poverty throughout the world.

"Bridges just have a huge meaning because of their power," he said. "It's not just because a bridge crosses a stream, but because of what it does when it crosses. Bridges will always have that magical quality to them."

For more information about Bridges to Prosperity, visit [www.bridgestoprosperty.org](http://www.bridgestoprosperty.org) or call Frantz at (804) 642-3265.

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