Late August can be hot and uncomfortable, but it also marks new beginnings with the start of school and a welcome change of seasons just around the corner. To celebrate the new school year, we want to feature the work of a Spring 2018 Volunteer Service Award grant recipient who was part of a team going to Uganda hoping to help a community to build a bridge. Though the bridge is still a work in progress, the impact of the grant is undeniable.

**Kieryn Ota**, along with 6 others from **Duke Engineers for International Development** (DEID) went to Uganda to help the community build a vehicular bridge. “The community in Kanyegaramire had expressed the need for a new bridge that did not flood during the rainy season, a request that had gone unfulfilled by the local government for several years. While planning the project, our team was told of a makeshift wooden foot bridge spanning a swamp that was unsuitable for farmers to transport their crops to market and trapped villagers on one side of deep waters during the rainy season. Yearly drownings occurred as women, men, and children attempted to cross the swamp while the bridge was submerged. I looked forward to implementing a solution to a problem that the community had specifically requested.

This new vehicular bridge would benefit not only commerce and safety, but also maternal and child healthcare. After taking a Global Health course, I realized my passion for healthcare and learned of how a simple bridge can have a profound effect on health. The bridge would allow women to utilize the maternity clinic built by DEID in 2017 by increasing its accessibility. Women will not have to travel an extra
two hours to subvert the swamp to reach a hospital, increasing positive outcomes for women and children. Women will also have easier and quicker transportation to their own job worksites so that they can have increased participation economically.

Despite having seen pictures and hearing the previous team’s observations about the bridge, I was stunned. The rickety old foot bridge was hardly even a bridge – it was falling apart, haphazardly repaired with a few old planks and some tree trunks where the bridge had fully collapsed... The plan to start work immediately changed upon our first visit to the worksite. Obstacles seemed to appear every day.

Observational data about water flow into the swamp proved inaccurate, affecting the size and price of culverts needed. To avoid creating a stagnant backwater behind the bridge, the culverts had to be placed below dry season water level creating a new set of issues. Machinery we had expected to use in construction was unfortunately booked until August... I was frustrated with the lagging pace of the project and the slow flow of information based on my Western expectations. Several weeks were spent finalizing paperwork and tracking down government officials for their signatures on certain documents...

I learned to embrace cultural differences and to work hard when the time came, an example set by the Ugandans... Eventually, rocks were delivered to the worksite and construction began. Anywhere between 10 and 20 men from Kanyegaramire would come to the worksite to volunteer to help with construction. Every day, we wheelbarrowed rocks to the edge of the swamp and dumped them in, extending the path of rocks to the other bank so we could move on to the next phase of construction. Work was sometimes slow, especially when the lorries of rocks didn’t get delivered to the correct site or the wrong types of rocks arrived, forcing us to wait.

But the guys from Kanyegaramire worked incredibly hard and were extremely strong. Each time one would pick up a massive rock, we would shout “Kanyama!” which means ‘strong’ in Rutooro. One time, after I wheelbarrowed a load to the edge of the swamp I was proclaimed kanyama, and I couldn’t have felt prouder. The long, boiling hot days became more bearable as we made friends with the men...

I traveled to Uganda with the intent to build a bridge and affect change in the lives of the women, men, and children living in a small, isolated community. Construction on the bridge has been halted due to lack of funds and the approaching wet season floods. At first, I was disappointed that my role in Uganda had been minimal. But as the weeks flew by, I began to realize an important impact of my presence. The DEID team was the international presence that put pressure on the government to pay attention to the needs of its communities. After years of not building a bridge of their own, or at least repairing the old one, it seemed that all it took was initial funding and the DEID team agreeing to lead the project, and the government was willing to help."

Kieryn sent an update after her initial report. “The men from the community have made tremendous progress this past month since our DEID team left. They have widened and completed the rock base, compacted the rocks, completed stone caging, and have poured the first slab of concrete. The plan going forward is to install culverts and continue pouring concrete until all funds are exhausted. I am so excited that so much progress has been made so quickly. The men working on construction are proud of the amazing work they have done. Thank you again for your help in making this project happen and giving me the opportunity to participate.”