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Lawyer-engineer builds bridges pro bono

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A construction litigator for Duane Morris LLP does his pro bono work by building bridges the hard way.

This lawyer digs, cuts rebar and mixes and pours concrete to erect bridges in Honduras to help poor communities.

Jeffrey L. Hamera, 47, a former practicing engineer, is a member of the Chicagoland Chapter of Engineers Without Borders (EWB).

The EWB website says it brings practical engineering solutions to developing countries through collaboration with local people.

The on-site part of his pro bono work, Hamera said, "is a little different than sitting in front of a computer screen in an office."

Last year, Hamera said he raised money for and helped to build a 120-foot long, single-lane vehicle bridge in Canchias, Honduras, over the Yure River.

The bridge provides access to agricultural lands and to a dairy that local inhabitants were otherwise cut off from during the rainy season.

Hamera said his part of the physical labor in Canchias lasted a week in April 2011. EWB supplied eight teams of workers to get the final job done in eight weeks.

The bridge cost \$90,000, he said, but in Chicago it would have cost nearly \$1 million.

In 2009, Hamera helped construct a pedestrian bridge for Armenta Lirios, "a kind of shanty town," impoverished neighborhood near the major city of San Pedro Sula, Honduras, he said.

About 3,000 people live in the neighborhood. A steep mountain creek cuts through it and during



Jeffrey L. Hamera

the rainy season, the creek cut off half of the people from their school, clinic and their churches, Hamera said.

He and other members of EWB, along with local people, constructed a bridge for \$25,000 that Hamera said would have cost \$100,000 in Chicago. He spent 10 days on his part.

"Jeff is a tremendously hard worker," said D. Scott Eshleman, project manager for EWB's Chicago chapter on two Honduras bridges.

Hamera "was digging foundations in the river, cutting rebar by hand with a hacksaw — which is incredibly hard work. He mixed and moved concrete by bucket or wheelbarrow," in hot and humid weather, Eshleman said.

Eshleman is a structural engineer for Stanley Consultants Inc. in Chicago.

"If I ever needed a go-to guy to do some rough labor or ... to work out a situation where other folks were timid to go in, I could always rely on Jeff," Eshleman said.

Hamera was a practicing structural engineer from 1987 to 1991. He got his master's degree



Duane Morris LLP attorney Jeffrey L. Hamera (at left) and Chicagoland Chapter of Engineers Without Borders members Tyler Grau, Nancy Holmes, Dan Atkins, Mark Ward and Joti Baruni demonstrated the load-carrying capacity of a 5-inch, precast deck panel, one part of a bridge EWB built in Canchias, Honduras, last year.

in engineering from the University of Illinois.

"I would design power plants and (design) process facilities and that kind of stuff" for two engineering firms in the Chicago area, he said.

Then Hamera was asked to do forensic engineering for lawsuits and insurance claims. He found he "enjoyed the dispute resolution side of the industry."

So he went to Northwestern University School of Law and got his law degree in 1994.

Hamera has been at Duane Morris now for five years. He represents clients in litigation or arbitration arising from construction projects. His work include disputes over contract drafting and negotiation, breaches of contract, construction defects, mechanic's liens, property damage and personal

injury claims due to design errors.

When he joined EWB, he persuaded the Duane Morris Chicago office to allow the group to hold its monthly meetings there for about 60 engineers.

"I know Jeff is passionate about it," said David B. Yelin, managing partner of the Chicago office.

"This is really very consistent with our focus on pro bono. ... We expect all our lawyers to be involved with community and civic organizations."

Hamera is now head of fundraising for the EWB Chicago chapter. He said his next pro bono project is to raise \$80,000 to build a reliable, clean water supply system for Armenta Lirios.

That project could be built next year, he said.