

BRIDGES

TO UNDERSTANDING

CONNECTING YOUTH WORLDWIDE THROUGH
DIGITAL STORYTELLING

WHY WE CREATED BRIDGES TO UNDERSTANDING



BY PHIL BORGES

Our world's great wealth of cultural and ethnic diversity is disappearing at an alarming rate. Every two weeks another grandparent dies carrying the language and culture of their ancestors to the grave. For the most part, this shocking erosion of humanity's rich cultural legacy is going on unnoticed.

I have dedicated most of my photographic work to advocate for the people where this extinction rate is the highest — the remaining small outposts of indigenous people on our planet. Today, our omnipresent media reaches many of them, providing a one-way look at America. Although the view is distorted, it has the ability to dazzle and seduce. Indigenous children turn their backs on their values, traditions and languages as they are drawn to the ephemeral brilliance of our progress. Ironically, the very dominance of our media isolates us by overwhelming the voices of the other cultures in our global community. Our understanding of the world is impoverished as a result.

In a recent survey of 18-26 year-olds in nine industrialized countries, Americans ranked next to last in global geographic literacy. Although we have the most powerful military and media presence on earth, we are becoming the least globally aware.

The question that Bridges asks and attempts to address is: What would happen if we gave indigenous children a voice and connected them to American children on a platform that allowed an equal exchange? What would happen if we gave children a platform where they can learn directly from and with each other, not just about each other? And what if that platform allowed them to share and discuss the daunting issues that face us all: environmental degradation, physical and spiritual poverty and the intolerance that results from not sharing understanding and not being understood?

That is why I started Bridges. Today, seven years after we began, thousands of youth across six countries are connecting with each other through school-based online forums, sharing digital stories and meeting face to face through exchanges throughout the year.

I believe we are changing the future of the world child-by-child, community-by-community.