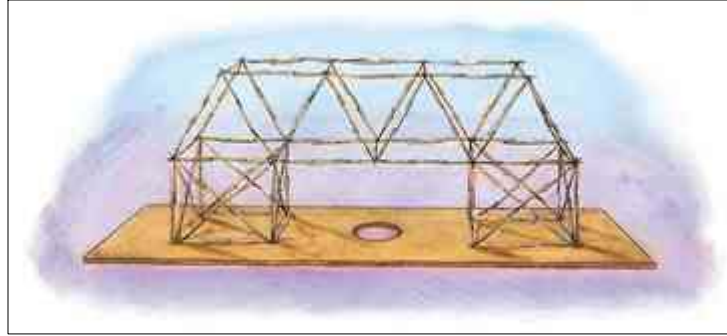


## Building Bridges

By Julie Tozier • Illustrated by Keith R. Neely



I never gave James Foley much thought. He faded into the walls during class, ate lunch alone in the cafeteria, and hardly ever came to after-school games.

I guess I thought of him the way I thought of Mrs. Kramer's globe. When I came to school, it was always sitting on the bookshelf, but I never felt like bothering with it.

Now I was stuck sitting with James, our desks actually touching, for the whole week. We were building toothpick bridges, and Mrs. Kramer had picked partners for us. I thought she'd made a mistake when I saw my name beside James's.

"Hey, Mark!" My best friend Eddie waved from across the room. He pointed to James, laughing like a hyena.

I put my head on my desk. Eddie didn't have to worry. His partner was Ryan Washburn, the smartest kid in fifth grade.

I peeked at James's boots. No laces. He wore them every day. Why couldn't he at least wear sneakers?

"OK, everyone!" Mrs. Kramer yelled cheerfully. Didn't she realize I had nothing to be cheerful about? I lifted my head, but it felt like cement, so I propped it in my hands.

"You and your partner will decide who is the architect and who is the transportation person. When the architect has picked out a truss-bridge design, the transportation person can get the glue and toothpicks at the supply table."

I had to be the transportation person because James wouldn't get out of his seat. He looked at the paper Mrs. Kramer passed out. We had about 10 bridges to choose from, and James got to pick because he was the architect. He pointed to the plain "warren" design and grunted.

Great, I thought. The most boring bridge of all. And to top it off, he was going to grunt at me for a week.

The first day of construction, we built the roadway and piers. James worked pretty fast. He even seemed to know what he was doing.

On the third day, we ran into trouble. We'd used 120 toothpicks and two containers of glue, and the sides wouldn't stay up. I was ready to quit.

"Could you get 20 more toothpicks?"

I was so surprised to hear James actually talk that I forgot to answer.



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"Hurry up before the whole thing caves in," he said.

I jumped from my seat as if my pants were on fire. As James grunted directions, we made the bottom more stable. This made the sides sturdier.

I waited for James to talk again, but he didn't.

On Thursday, the last day of building, Mrs. Kramer announced, "Tomorrow your bridges will be tested for strength by placing a bar across the middle of the bridge, hanging a bucket from the bar, and adding weights slowly to the bucket. As you know, parents and relatives are invited!"

"Who's coming from your family?" I asked James, curious.

I didn't think he was going to answer me. Finally he mumbled, "My dad has to work. My mom died."

I sure wished I hadn't asked.

The next day, parents, grandparents, and little sisters and brothers chattered excitedly. My mom said our bridge looked nice. I thought it looked pretty boring.

Mrs. Kramer blew her whistle. The bridge-breaking ceremony had begun!

Two desks were placed side by side a foot apart. Each bridge was placed across the desks so that the bucket hung between them.

Eddie and Ryan were next to last. James and I would be last. Most of the bridges had held three or four pounds.

Everyone cheered when they saw the bridge Eddie and Ryan built. It looked awesome. They had used twice as many toothpicks as anyone else.

Their bridge held eight pounds before it buckled. My heart sank to my sneakers.

It was our turn. Eddie poked me in the side as we walked by. "What kind of scrawny bridge is that?" he asked, laughing his hyena laugh. He was beginning to bug me.

Then James did something amazing. He stopped, looked at Eddie, and said, "You can't tell something's worth by the way it looks."

Eddie's mouth dropped open. I watched the back of James's head as he walked up front. I sure hoped he was right.

Mrs. Kramer set our bridge up. It did look pretty scrawny.

I held my breath as she started adding weight. Three pounds. Four. I heard a creak and squeezed my eyes shut -- I thought our bridge was breaking. Then I realized it was the classroom door opening.

A man wearing dirty work clothes walked in. He looked a lot like James.

I looked at James. It was the first time I'd ever seen him smile.

Mrs. Kramer had added the fifth pound. Then the sixth.

I stared at James. He glanced proudly at the man standing just inside the door. "My dad builds bridges," he said. "He talks to me about them sometimes."

"How come you never told me before?" I whispered.

"You never asked."

Mrs. Kramer added the seventh pound. Everyone cheered and clapped. The bridge began to sag.

"Wait!" I shouted.

Mrs. Kramer stopped, surprised. "But you and James might win!"

"I don't care," I said. "I don't want it to break."

Mrs. Kramer looked at James. "Well?"

James was smiling again, and this time he was smiling at me. "I don't either," he said.

