

SUNSTONE GALLERY

BRIDGE BUILDER

SOMETIMES EVEN RANDOM thoughts of youth hint at who we will be and what life might call us to do. A case in point is found in the journey of long-time Sunstone friend and board member, J. Bonner Ritchie.

Shortly after World War II, twelve-year-old Bonner moved with his family from Heber City, Utah, to San Francisco. There, inspired by his first sight of the Golden Gate Bridge, Bonner remembers saying to himself, “Now, if we could only build a bridge to Tokyo, we could be friends!”

So impressed with the bridge was he, he majored in civil engineering at the University of California, Berkeley, to learn to build bridges. However, his interests ultimately shifted toward trying to understand human organizations. It happened while serving an LDS mission to the Eastern States and then four years in the U.S. Army, where he witnessed firsthand the building of the Berlin Wall.

In Germany, Bonner saw the need to build human bridges rather than those of concrete and steel. He returned to Berkeley, earning a doctorate in labor economics/organizational behavior. He moved from there to the University of Michigan, where he taught for six years before joining BYU’s newly-formed organizational behavior department in 1973.

While in Berkeley and Ann Arbor, Michigan, Bonner worked with student organizations, civil rights groups—such as the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), even helping black farmers and other workers in the deep South form labor cooperatives—and the “New Detroit Committee,” formed in the wake of the 1967 Detroit riots.

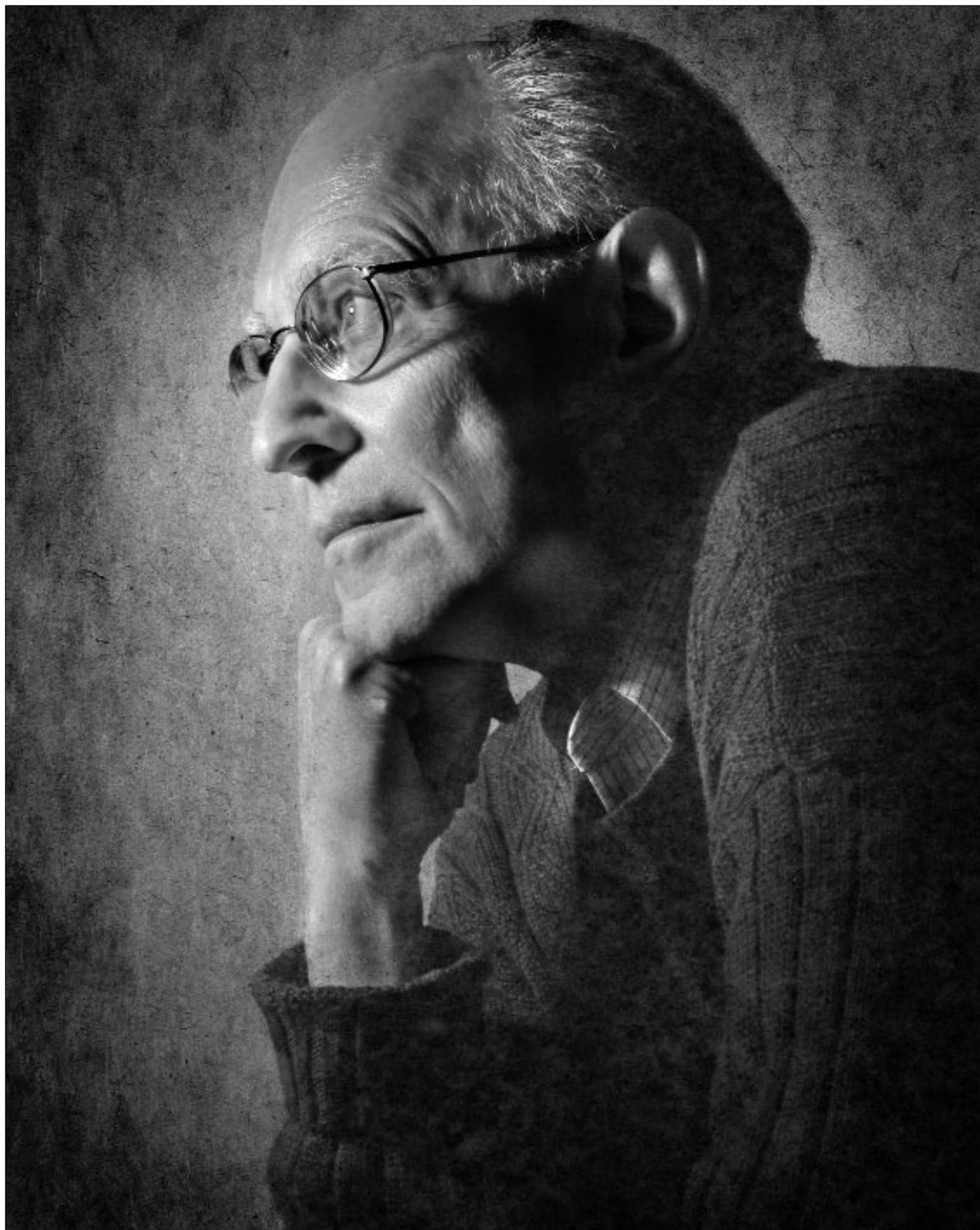
Through what he calls “a series of accidents,” Bonner’s

focus veered toward the world stage, particularly Middle East conflicts. One “accident” occurred shortly after BYU’s Jerusalem Center was completed, when, upon their first encounter, President Howard W. Hunter gave Bonner a charge that resonated deeply with his natural and lifelong inclination: “We need you to build bridges to the Palestinians.”

Other happy accidents have led to a working relationship with Palestinian Liberation Organization leader, Yasser Arafat, to visiting professorships at the University of Jordan and BirZeit University, where he has helped Arab leaders develop leadership competencies and enabled them to expand their perspectives to a more global understanding.

Fulfilling his prescient moment at the Golden Gate Bridge, Bonner has been fortunate to be a part of Israeli-Palestinian economic, educational, and environmental projects and to work with the Church and private humanitarian groups to bring medical and educational supplies and food to impoverished children. Closer to home, he has helped build bridges as a founding member of the Coalition for Utah’s Future, through nearly two decades of service on the Utah State Liquor Commission, and as the longest serving (cumulative) member of Sunstone’s board of trustees.

OPTIMISTIC by nature, and as Michael Schoenfeld’s portrait evinces, Bonner always gazes forward, even in the face of worrisome setbacks, choosing to focus on the long term: “We can’t hold back the future. People will be free. My hope is that I can help, even in a small way, to prepare them to be ready when that day arrives.”



PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL SCHOENFELD