HOPE journey of

An in-depth report by Chronicle assistant managing editor Karin Ronnow and chief photographer Deirdre Eitel based on their summer 2007 trip to Pakistan and Afghanistan to document the work of Bozeman resident Greg Mortenson and his nonprofit Central Asia Institute.
In July 2007, photographer Deirdre Eitel and I traveled from Montana to Pakistan and Afghanistan to document Bozeman, Mont., resident Greg Mortenson's efforts to build schools and promote education and literacy, especially for girls, in remote and sometimes volatile regions of those countries.

It was an exhausting, exhilarating, enlightening and, frankly, life-changing experience.

We arrived in Islamabad, Pakistan, in the midst of the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) standoff, a bracing introduction to the threat of Muslim extremism in that part of the world.

We spent a month traversing the region where Mortenson has worked with his grassroots nonprofit, the Central Asia Institute, for 14 years. We visited places where the devastation of war, natural disaster and desperate poverty stood in stark contrast to intense natural beauty and local hospitality. We wound up in villages accessible only by steep trails, where illiteracy and subsistence farming and herding have been the reality for centuries.

At times the road was rough, the cigarette and toilet breaks few and far between and sleep a distant dream.

At other times, the dramatic mountainous landscape – the Karakoram and Hindu Kush mountains contain more peaks over 22,000 feet than anywhere else in the world – and the sheer endurance of people faced with tremendous challenges were so invigorating that sleep didn't matter.

Throughout, Mortenson and his dedicated staff kept us going at a fast clip, eager to share their accomplishments. They juggled travel logistics – never easy in that part of the world – and introduced us to teachers, students, community elders, military commanders and Muslim clerics. They arranged dinners with senior government officials and tea with the poorest of the poor. They showed us madrassas and mosques, some virtuous and peaceful, others set up by radical Muslim militants who seek domination over enlightenment.

And they gave us a chance to see for ourselves that in 10 or 20 years, the world will be a different place because the children attending CAI’s schools will be educated.

In a part of the world now considered the front lines of the war on terror, Mortenson has spread his dream of hope through education.

The result of our journey was a seven-article, five-part series, “Journey of Hope,” featured in the Chronicle’s Sunday newspapers in September and October 2007.

Due to the overwhelming response to and interest in the series, the Chronicle and CAI have compiled those articles here.

In a time of much fear and uncertainty, when the world seems to have lost its sense of direction on the road to peace, we hope these stories give you hope for a new direction.

This is our report. We welcome your feedback (contact information is on the inside back cover). Thanks for your interest.

-- Karin Ronnow
ALTISTAN, PAKISTAN — Whenever Greg Mortenson arrives at one of the schools he helped to build, he gets the biggest grin on his face. He greets nearly every adult with a bear hug. He looks every child in the eye, and, smiling, gently shakes his or her hand. With the patience of Job and a childlike giddiness, Mortenson makes his way through every crowd that inevitably forms wherever he goes.

As a result, everything surrounding Mortenson in Pakistan and Afghanistan takes much longer than anyone has planned. He always is running behind. He never has enough time for all of those who want to speak to him. And someone is always checking their watch, tapping a foot, revving a motor.

But amid the children who will in many cases grow up as the first literate generation of these remote villages, Mortenson is in his element. Years of hard work, paltry remuneration and time away from his wife and kids have taken a toll. But being here, he said, in the schools, seeing the bright faces and imagining their brighter futures makes it all worthwhile.

“I hear the song ‘Oh Happy Day’ in my head every time I do this,” he said as he walked into a new girls’ school in the village of Chunda.

It’s vintage Mortenson.

Building schools
Things could have turned out differently. When Mortenson was growing up in Tanzania in the 1960s, he wanted to become a doctor and provide health care to people in rural Africa. He pursued health care for awhile, becoming a trauma nurse. He also fed his passion for mountain climbing.

In his mid-30s, after a failed attempt at climbing K2, he stumbled out of the high Karakoram Mountains in northern Pakistan and into the tiny village of Korphe, where the local Balti people embraced him like family and helped him get back on his feet.

To reciprocate, he could have built a hospital; he was already applying his nursing skills in the village — setting broken bones, treating infected sores and wounds, and displaying enough medical knowledge to earn the nickname “Dr. Greg.”

Instead, he built a school.

“When I saw the 84 children sitting in the dirt behind Korphe village on a crisp autumn morning ... writing with sticks in the sand, that was all it took — eureka moment — for me to decide to build a school,” he said.

The village had no teacher and no school building. The area’s literacy rate was less than 4 percent.

The first school turned out to be far more work than Mortenson had bargained for. Along the way he learned a lot about himself, the work ethic and community spirit in those remote mountain villages, and the enormous
flaws in Pakistan's public education system.

In the 14 years since, one school has turned into two, then four, multiplying exponentially until the nonprofit he founded, the Bozeman-based Central Asia Institute, now has 64 schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

"People here, they have put much hope on Dr. Greg," said Sakhawat Husain Jahangir, a teacher at the Central Asia Institute school in Kande, in the Hushe Valley in far northeastern Pakistan. "The Hushe Valley is a very remote area, with few educated people; mostly, men work as porters and mountain guides and wives work in the fields."

Until recently, "when anybody wanted to write a letter, they had to walk eight hours" to find someone who could read and write, Jahangir said. "All that depends on education. Dr. Greg has brought that."

Public schools not enough

Most people trying to put a dent in the region's illiteracy wind up frustrated, exasperated and more than a little cynical. After all, even the government hasn't been able to pull it off.

"Education is not compulsory in Pakistan, it is 'encouraged' by the government," said Lt. Col. (Ret.) Ilyas Ahmad Mirza, a longtime friend and supporter of Mortenson and the Central Asia Institute. "There are just so many people in the country, 160 million population is just too large, the public schools are not enough."

After the British drew the line dividing India and Pakistan in 1947, some public schools were established by the government and private schools were started to offer alternatives.

In the early 1970s, all schools, primary through higher education, were nationalized by the country's leader, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. But that didn't work, either.

A decade later, the educational reality — not enough schools, not enough girls enrolled, a lack of adequate books, supplies, teachers and money — prompted a government commission to conclude that the national system was failing.

Private schools once more were allowed — as long as they complied with government-recognized standards.

The Central Asia Institute's schools mostly fall into that private category. What sets them apart, Mirza said, is that "Greg goes to very difficult places, really remote places that are very difficult to reach."

"The areas where Greg is working, they have nothing — no agriculture, no industry, no natural resources," Mirza said. "Baltistan is very poor. There is six months of snow. The only business is mountaineering and during that season many people work as porters. But the season is only about four, maybe six months. ... He just goes places where you and I would not go."

Mortenson goes there because he believes education is the only way forward in this increasingly polarized, violent world.

"I don't really care about fighting terror," he said. "The biggest issues in the world we need to address today are poverty, illiteracy and ignorance, which breeds hatred."

Poverty prompts parents to keep children at home, to help with younger children and chores, or send them out to work because the family needs the money.

"The problem in this society is bread, food," Mirza said. "People blame (Pakistan) for using child labor, but you have to earn your food. A Baltistan porter works only four months, on average, 24 hours a day for $10 a day. So he wants more children. He needs help."

It's a slippery slope. Growing up in large, illiterate families with few options can breed frustration and anger, and make young men easy targets for extremist groups.

Hearts and minds

By ignoring the connection between education and the battle to win hearts and minds in the Muslim world, the Western world has repeatedly missed the mark in its efforts to eradicate terrorism, Mortenson said.

Mortenson points to the Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, when complete anarchy ensued.

U.S. aid to Afghanistan, which had been about $1 billion in mostly military assistance, dropped almost immediately to roughly $150 million.

"And within three years, the Saudis were supplying about $1 billion a year in aid to Afghanistan," building roads, irrigation channels and schools, Mortenson said. "In its greatest hour of need, the international community abandoned Afghanistan and, in that void, jihadi and terrorist groups set up shop."

Afghans fleeing the Soviets had been living in refugee camps in Pakistan. Because there were no schools, extremist groups set up madrassas, religious schools, where they preached a virulent, extremist form of Islam, he said.

So when the Taliban, al-Qaeda and the Islamic global recruiting network emerged, they were able to recruit foot soldiers from those madrassas.

Mortenson stressed that not every madrassa is training radicals.

"There’s a madrassa in every single hamlet, every village in the Islamic world, but they’re not all guerrilla training camps," he said. "Ninety-nine percent of them are like Sunday school."

The problem is that the Western world keeps making the same mistake, he said.

"So now we have this big earthquake," in Azad Kashmir in 2005, he said. "Initially, there was significant aid in the aftermath."

The United States sent Chinook helicopters and conducted "the greatest helicopter airlift of aid in the history of mankind that kept about 600,000 people alive for a year." The United States also helped open the two main roads and sent a MASH unit. Dozens of other countries and charities — the United Nations, the Red Cross and Oxfam, to name a few — came to the rescue.

"But then, within a year, the aid dropped 70 percent. And in the wake of that, similar to Afghanistan, who comes and sets up shop? The jihadi," Mortenson said.

In addition to providing temporary shelter and building new mosques, those radical Islamic groups built madrassas. Before the quake, 18,000 children were enrolled in the region's 9,000 public and private schools. "In many cases, it was the first wave of literate children," Mortenson said.

But thus far, fewer than 400 schools have been rebuilt.

So the parents of children who want to send their children to school turn to the one affordable option — the madrassas, which usually offer free tuition, room and board.

"And in those jihadi madrassas, they’ll put a very extreme mullah, propagating militant ideology," he said. "And those kids sit in there for 10 to 12 hours a day. Within one year you can take a kid who is full of hope and pride in learning how to read and write and turn them into a hardened, U.S.-hating militant. It doesn’t take very long, as long as you are feeding and clothing and sheltering that kid."

It's interesting, Mortenson said, that "in many cases, terrorist groups recognize the value of education, and how they can use education to win hearts and minds — much more than the international community."

Education offers hope

At the dedication of the girls' school in Chunda this summer, Mortenson said he wanted to name the school Hope. It's an emotion he sees as central to all that the Central Asia Institute does.

"When you girls finish school and become mothers, doctors, engineers and political leaders, always remember that ... with education you have hope, and with hope you can do anything," he told the schoolchildren. "When you girls finish school and become mothers, doctors, engineers and political leaders, always remember that."

So many people in the world, he said later, spend 100 percent of their resources and time just keeping themselves and their families alive. Education opens other doors. It gives people access to life's greatest joys — music, art and literature. But it's a luxury one-quarter of the people on the planet don't have.

"We have five students (at an institute school in Afghanistan) who walk three hours every single day to get to school. They get up in the morning, do their chores, get kindling for fire, make breakfast, milk the goat and then walk three hours to school, often in flip flops or rubber Chinese boots, although some of them are barefoot," he said.

"But they do that every single day, rain or shine, for the privilege of learning how to read and write. And that's pretty powerful."
A ZAD KASHMIR — On an October morning in the Himalayan mountain villages along the India-Pakistan border, it was business as usual. The first call to prayer at the Islamic mosques had passed, and the Ramadan day of fasting had begun. Children were in school, shops were open for business and the women were settling into their routines.

Suddenly, at 8:50 a.m. Oct. 8, 2005, the earth shook violently. A powerful 7.6-magnitude earthquake centered outside Muzafarrabad, the capital of a war-torn and impoverished Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, transformed the 30,000-square-mile region into a disaster zone.

Entire villages in the narrow river gorges north of the capital were “finished,” as the locals say, wiped off the mountains.

Schools, businesses and homes — many ramshackle to begin with — collapsed or were crushed in landslides. Roads were demolished or filled with rubble from landslides, blocking rescue workers and desperately needed aid.

More than 9,000 schools were demolished.

Families lost everything. Their crops were ruined. Their livestock killed. Their homes were gone.

Children were left without parents.

“There was only open sky above these people — no house, no food, nothing,” said Suleman Minhas, a staff member of the Bozeman-based nonprofit Central Asia Institute.

It took rescuers weeks to find all of the dead; many had been buried in debris or washed away in the river.

When the quake and 140 aftershocks stopped, there were 73,000 dead, another 70,000 injured and about 3 million homeless.

Patika

Classes were well under way that morning when the girls in Gundi Piran School in the tiny village of Patika felt the rumbling.

“When the earthquake start, we were reading English,” recalled Sadaf Tarneer, 18.

The concrete masonry school at the bottom of a steep mountain beside the Neelum River swayed, cracked and collapsed. Many children died instantly.

Tarneer’s teacher, Shaukat Ali, 28, recalling the devastation and the fear: “The building collapsed while I was teaching and I thought, ‘I will die inside.’ ”

Ali and dozens of students leapt from the building’s second floor. They landed in the rubble, many of them injured, but alive.

That morning, 103 Patika students...
Shaukat Ali, a former Taliban soldier who now teaches at the Patika girls school, spent the three days burying bodies after the earthquake.

“People were sending their children out begging,” he said. “If students stop going to school, it’s the fault of the government, but it’s also the fault of the teacher and the community.”

Those who had money “moved after the quake or sent their children abroad or to large Pakistani cities for schools,” he said. “But if only the higher classes can do that, the mental power, the thinking power of the poor is limited. Who will help these people?”

“I want a real school”

The following spring, Khan traveled from his northern Pakistan village to Kashmir at the urging of Greg Mortenson, the Central Asia Institute’s founder and executive director, who wanted to know how his organization could help.

In Patika, Khan told the headmistress the institute would help put up tents. But she rolled her eyes and said, “OK, welcome to the club.”

Really, Khan said, we want to help.

And the determined headmistress said, “Then I want a real school.”

Khan got the message, but was waylaid. While working on the institute’s schools in northern Afghanistan, he became violently ill. He was in such a remote area it took four days on horseback to get him to a doctor, who diagnosed an infected gall bladder. Then Khan had to get to a hospital. Three days and one wretched bus ride later, Khan arrived at a hospital in Islamabad, Pakistan.

“All the while he had a raging fever and was in septic shock,” Mortenson said.

After two surgeries, Khan was released.

“I told him to go home and rest for a month,” Mortenson said. “He had worked for 17 months without a day off. He said, ‘I need an order! So I ordered him to go home and rest.’

Khan did — for two days.

“Then he went to China to see some seismic engineers and put together the whole process of how to get schools built in an earthquake area,” Mortenson said, shaking his head at Khan’s determination. “Then he went back to Azad Kashmir and found some masons who had worked in earthquake areas. Then he sent me a fax and asked for $54,000 to build three schools.

“And all this time I thought he was at home, resting.”

So Mortenson queried him: Have you consulted the Pakistani government? Yes. Did you talk to the village elders? Yes. Did you talk to the teachers? Yes. What about moving materials? Yes, the U.S. military would airlift building supplies with helicopters.

“He had done everything,” Mortenson said. “So I contacted the board. It wasn’t a budgeted item. The board said, ‘Well, if he’s ready, we have donors who want to help.’ So we wired him the money and within five weeks the schools were built. I was pretty proud.”

The Central Asia Institute has since replaced seven government schools destroyed in the quake. The schools are still run by the Pakistani government, teachers are employed by the government and all other expenses are paid by the government. But the prefabricated metal buildings mean children in those villages will learn to read and write.

“They’re not the greatest buildings, but they are doing the job,” Mortenson said. “They’ll be there for five or 10 years, until bigger aid can come or the government renews. But right now it’s a good solution. Our main thing was just to show that it can be done.”

Cut off from the world

The earthquake was only the latest horror in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. War is the long-term reality here, go-
ing back to partition, when the British divided India and Pakistan in 1947, and both fledgling countries claimed the area known as Kashmir.

War broke out right off the bat, and, despite a steady string of battles and cease fires over 60 years, the dispute remains unresolved. At this point about one-third of Kashmir — a narrow strip of land about 250 miles long and 10 to 40 miles wide — is administered by Pakistan and two-thirds by India. The Line of Control marks the division.

The years of war have meant generations who’ve lived with displacement, civilian injuries and deaths. Military camps, checkpoints and soldiers are ubiquitous.

The people in the area are, Khan said, “mostly poor. There’s no good land on the mountain for agriculture, maybe some animals.”

Mortenson said “most people make money either joining jihadi groups, or they go abroad and work as dishwashers and servants, doing menial labor in Kuwait and Yemen and the Emirates, then send what money they make home.”

Although Kashmir doesn’t have the tribal lawlessness of other areas in Pakistan, it does have its share of militants, the result of a previous military dictator, Pakistan’s Gen. Zia-ul-Haq, recruiting radicals to fight the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and in the ongoing war with India over Kashmir.

Many of those soldiers were recruited with the help of extremist mosques and religious schools, called madrassas, that continue to nurture a generation of terrorists now turning their wrath on Pakistan.

Shaukat Ali, the Patika school teacher, was recruited to fight with the Taliban in Afghanistan in the late 1990s. He stayed that course until Sept. 11, 2001, when the Al Qaeda attacks on the United States triggered a fundamental change in his thinking. He returned home and started teaching.

He knows that other young men are angry, frustrated and vulnerable to the radicals’ rhetoric. Plus, the madrassas often lure recruits by offering poor families free tuition, room and board for their children.

Ali said modern, secular education is the only way to counter that temptation. “We need in this time doctors and teachers, skillful people. Modern education is a must,” Ali said. “Religious people, they are already working on the next generation. Many religious people are signing up their children to go to madrassas. And the terrorists (there), they are brainwashing the students.”

He also is convinced of the importance of educating girls. Female literacy in Kashmir’s villages runs about 3 percent. But one educated mother can, he said, “change the whole family.”

“If there are 60,000 people here, and only five or six women are educated, you can’t expect that in the next 50 years we will change the country,” he said. “Pakistan is 52 percent female and 48 percent male. If you are not sending (girls) to school, you will have 52 percent of the country illiterate.”

‘Finished’

The quake also “finished” Nouseri, a remote village farther up the Neelum River. Homes were wiped off the steep mountain face. A girls’ middle school was destroyed.

“One student at Nouseri, her father lost both legs,” Mortenson said. “It took four days to dig him out and then four days to get a helicopter.”

Now, nearly two years later, people

**PAKISTAN’S EDUCATION SYSTEM**

Formal education in Pakistan usually starts around age 5 and is divided into five levels, listed below. Academic and technical-education institutions are the responsibility of the federal Ministry of Education, which coordinates instruction through the higher-secondary level. However, education is still largely a provincial matter with each province having its own board of education.

**Primary:** Grades one through five.

**Middle:** Grades six through eight.

**High:** Grades nine and 10; upon completion, students take board-administered tests, referred to as Secondary School Certificate exams.

**Higher secondary:** A college or intermediate school offers grades 11 and 12. Students normally read about five subjects in a chosen course, such as pre-medical, science, humanities or pre-engineering. Upon comple-

Then there are master’s and doctoral programs in selected areas.

*Source: Pakistan Ministry of Education*
The Ishhtiaq refugee camp in Azad Kashmir sits below a glaring scar left by a landslide during an Oct. 8, 2005, earthquake. Two years after the disaster that killed 73,000 people and left 3.5 million homeless, thousands still have no permanent home.

...are still living in United Nations tents and temporary homes cobbled together from sheet metal, wood, canvas and plastic tarps. There is no road in the village; everyone uses dirt foot paths that wind through small garden patches, around irrigation ditches and through narrow passageways between homes.

The new seven-classroom institute-built girls’ school stands out amid the makeshift buildings. So does the water pipe running through the village, installed by the institute to release women from the dangerous, arduous climb down a steep, scree-covered bank to the river for water.

The government helped a little with rebuilding, Khan said. “Government brought electricity and (temporary) housing here, but not schools.”

The Pakistan Army provided a tent for the school and a nonprofit charity provided some steel sheets for shelter, said teacher Gulrash Noor, a local woman who has taught for about 20 years and lost a daughter in the quake. But she agreed with Khan. “Government is no help to schools.”

She’s pleased with the new school, completed in 2006, and said the students are slowly returning, which is good for the village.

“Learning is good for the future,” Noor said.

Nevertheless, girls’ options are limited. Once they finish middle school, their only option for further education is in Muzafarrabad, a two- to three-day walk from the village.

Elders’ meeting

One young woman who persevered beyond her village’s educational limits is Fozia Naseer, 24. She earned a bachelor’s degree in education in Muzafarrabad and is now a teacher at Balsari Girls’ Primary and Middle School in the Neelum valley.

“But I am continuing my education. I am a student of law, too,” she said.

That is possible largely due to the support of her family, particularly her uncle, himself a teacher and lifelong scholar. That’s unusual, she conceded.

In this area, she said, “Ladies are housewives, gents are laborers.”

“”The culture is not so good here. They think that women are something to be kept in the home. But our family is good. They think education is a must for women.”

Similar-thinking families also organized an appeal to the Central Asia Institute after the girls’ school was demolished in the quake. A blue-roofed school was finished this summer.

As construction was winding up, the village elders gathered for an evening meeting with Khan. Three of the schools’ teachers took the opportunity to convey their wish list: a second window in every classroom to increase ventilation; fans; screens on the windows to keep the flies out; a generator; and exhaust fans for the bathrooms.

But as the list grew, Khan pointed out that the institute was able to address only basic needs. Then one of the elders interjected with a smile and a nod of the head.

Naseer translated: “The community says thank you for the school. This is better than the tents.”
Hope is an emotional state, a belief in a positive outcome even in the face of contrary evidence. Hope often opposes despair, such as a village plagued by poverty that invests in a school.

Junid, 8, blows bubbles for his friends in the village of Patika. Some survivors of the 2005 earthquake have been able to find moments of joy in their lives despite the devastation of the earthquake.

A mason carries a bucket of water to mix cement while finishing the Noora Seri girls high school.

Sarfraz Khan, operations director for the Central Asia Institute, inspects the interior of Noora Seri school in July, accompanied by two construction workers. Khan, who also oversees projects in northern Afghanistan, spearheaded the building of schools in the earthquake-stricken areas of Azad Kashmir.
KARDO, BALTISTAN, PAKISTAN — Muhammad Nazir arrives about 7 a.m. to draw back the curtains, start the ceiling fans and open the front door of his family's Indus Motel.

On the road outside, shopkeepers walk toward the bazaar. A boy prods a few pokey goats with a long stick. Jeeps and trucks dodge the skinny men pushing and pulling two-wheeled carts piled high with cement, potatoes and grain. Students walk past on their way to school.

Inside, as Nazir orders tea from the kitchen for his early rising guests, the hotel's lobby-dining room fills with a steady stream of people. They are willing to wait as long as it takes to get a little time with Greg Mortenson, the tall American famous in this area for building schools.

The body guard assigned to Mortenson and his family arrives at the motel, greets Nazir and sits down at a table. A local sign printer, a politician and a couple of teachers who've traveled long distances from their remote village schools soon join the crowd.

Tea is served. Cigarettes are lit. Someone turns on the television for the morning newscast.

By 8 a.m., Mortenson is holding court. He takes his familiar position at the front desk, ignores the green tea someone set near his elbow and reaches for a sheet of paper. He and Mehdi Ali, who spearheaded efforts to get a girls' school built in a conservative village in the Shigar Valley, draft a list of things to buy or rent for the school's inauguration the next day.

The Indus Motel serves as the unofficial in-country headquarters for the Bozeman-based Central Asia Institute — and as Mortenson's second home. When he's in Baltistan, Mortenson always stays here. He keeps a stash of clothes and school supplies upstairs in a storage room.

Due to a combination of shared goals and proximity over the years, Nazir has become one of Mortenson's most dedicated supporters, volunteering untold hours of his own time as well as personal connections and business acumen.

“Greg has offered me much money, but I say no,” Nazir said.

After all, Nazir said, while Mortenson talks about education bringing hope to this isolated, poor and often-ignored area, the local people see Mortenson as that hope personified.

“Who wouldn't help such a man?”

Old friends

One of the first to arrive at the Indus every morning is Twaha Ali, son of the former chief in Korphe, a tiny village at the end of the road in the Karakoram Mountains and the site of Mortenson's first school.
Twaha Ali is built like a Balti, short and strong, and always wears a round, wool hat, even in the hot summer months. He speaks little English, but with his near-constant smile, ready laugh and gracious willingness to help, he's at Mortenson's side during his entire visit. Twaha is a grateful man. His daughter, Jahan, was the first girl from Korphe to complete high school — ever. Until Mortenson stumbled into Korphe 14 years ago, there was no school.

"Until I met Dr. Greg, my life was a very bad life because there was not real education in my village," Jahan said. "For centuries, Korphe's subsistence farmers have raised crops and livestock under harsh alpine conditions. The men now make some cash during warmer months as porters for mountain-climbing expeditions or by taking low-wage seasonal jobs in far-off cities. The women work in the fields, care for the children, haul the water, cook the food and run their households. They all are poor and for the most part, illiterate."

Twaha's wife died shortly after Jahan was born. The motherless girl was raised by her father and grandparents. "But even though she was the village chief's granddaughter, she grew up in a simple earthen house, " Mortenson said. "She had no electricity, no phone, no plumbing, no hot water, no TV, no nothing growing up. Her father was often gone, minding the village communal herd of goats, yak and sheep and traveling to different village elder meetings."

For five months of the year the family lives in the home's basement, a dark, windowless room thick with smoke from the yak-dung fire, Mortenson said. "They have shelves where they sleep with these coarse, brown, itchy yak blankets. They often bring the (livestock) down there, too. He said, 'I spent several months there in 1994 in the winter and months there in 1995 in the winter and it's a constant dilemma whether to stay in the basement where your eyes are burning from the smoke or get out and be shivering cold, but have clean air to breathe.'"

"And the thing is, you could never quite get warm. There's no heater, no hot water. So after two or three months your body starts to deteriorate," Mortenson said. "But they spend every single winter like that."

"When Jahan was young, school for the 79 boys and five girls was held outside, no matter the weather, and with or without the teacher it shared with another village. The teacher it shared with another village..."

"Then one day, one tall man come to..."

"A young woman and child peer from a window in Chunda village, Baltistan, where girls' education is in its infancy. Most women marry young, start families and work in the fields..."
Isolation and Hope / cont.

my house,” Jahan recalled. “The poor people were very happy to see the tall man. His name is Dr. Greg Mortenson. He built a school building and I began to study in this nice building.”

After she completed eighth grade, Mortenson’s Central Asia Institute gave her a stipend to spend the school year in Skardu and complete two more years. She finished 10th grade first in her class. This summer she completed the government-run Lady Health Workers’ Program, which qualifies her to administer first aid, distribute basic medicine and educate people in her village about health and nutrition.

“Next, the idea is to go to college in Lahore,” she said. “My difficult life is past. My good life is thanks to Prophet Muhammad, Greg Mortenson and Central Asia Institute.”

Jahan’s story is repeated thousands of times across this high-mountain region of northern Pakistan. She has become a sort of poster child for the institute. She was the focus of a 2003 Parade magazine article and is featured prominently in “Three Cups of Tea,” the book Mortenson cowrote with David Relin about his work.

“People respond to stories. But there is a price to be paid by focusing on individuals,” Mortenson said. “CAI has received hundreds upon hundreds of requests to sponsor Jahan, and no one else. And when they find out that Jahan is ‘taken care of’ (they) refuse to donate to help anyone else. But her story is only symbolic of hundreds more determined girls and women.”

Dynamite and patience

One big hurdle to getting anything done for those students is Baltistan’s political, geographic, logistical and religious isolation.

Baltistan is part of the Northern Areas, a “disputed area” on the Indo-Pakistan Line of Control. Although Pakistan assumed control of the area, and maintains that control with military installations and security checkpoints, the region doesn’t fall under auspices of the Pakistan central government.

Baltis don’t get to vote in national elections; they pay little in taxes and see little other than military investment in their infrastructure.

Even getting around the region, also known as “Little Tibet,” is tedious. “Until an air route was opened from Islamabad in the 1960s, Baltistan remained almost medieval in its isolation,” one guidebook states.

Even now, the Pakistan International Airlines service into the region is spotty, completely dependent on the weather.

“They have some radar, but pilots won’t take risks landing if there are any clouds,” Nazir said. “That’s why we call PIA, ‘Perhaps, Inshallah’, or Please Inform Allah’ and then we just wait to see if the plane comes each day.”

The region’s Karakoram Mountains, a subrange of the Himalayas, contain the densest mass of glaciers and high mountains on the planet. Despite their stunning beauty, the Karakorams pose an enormous natural barrier to travel.

In the 1970s, Pakistan army engineers began a 10-year project cutting a road from the Karakoram Highway (the old Silk Road) east to Skardu along the Indus River gorge. Yet the 170-kilometer stretch is still a bumpy, twisting, nerve-wracking drive, taking six hours minimum, even with a seasoned driver. When landslides block the road, the trip can take days.

On smaller roads out of Skardu, “you’re often no more than a hand’s width away from plunging 2,000 feet into the canyons and ravines,” Mortenson said. “Plus they often have hills in them, so when you’re driving a jeep you can’t see ahead and you just have to trust that there is a road on the other side. Sometimes we have to have someone walk in front of the jeep.”

In anticipation of the frequent landslides, the institute’s 26-year-old jeep is always stocked with a box of dynamite and blasting caps “so if the road is blocked, we can blast away the rock and then clear the road ourselves,” Mortenson said.

Another barrier Baltis face is that most of them are Shiite Muslim in a Sunni Muslim-dominated country. The Shias are free to practice their faith, but get their marching orders from Qom, Iran, Mortenson said.

“So not only is Baltistan not under the central government, but it is looked at with some trepidation by the central, mostly Sunni government,” he said.

In recent years, Sunnis and Shias have waged violent battles over their differing religious practices. They don’t understand each other and wind up venting their anger in deadly ways, Mortenson said.

“It comes back to that old adage that the reason for most hatred is ignorance,” he said. And the only antidote to ignorance is education.

Pakhora

Religion has posed problems for the institute more than once.

Nisar Hussain, like Jahan, is one of the Braldu Valley’s stars. He was the first person to earn a college degree, and after graduation returned to his home village of Pakhora to teach — without pay and without a school building.

“It is a very poor valley, with people working as porters, but no teachers or educated people,” Hussain said. “We had a difficult time, with no money, but we never gave up.”

In part due to Hussain’s efforts, the World Bank selected Pakhora for its Social Action Program, a 1990s-era effort to bring education to Pakistan’s rural areas, Mortenson said.

The World Bank would pay half of the costs for a school if Pakistan would pay the other half. The World Bank held up its side of the bargain, but Pakistan reneged.

Mortenson saw an opportunity, and the institute covered Pakistan’s half.

“In 1995, Dr. Greg accepted our application, provided teaching materials and books for the children” and started working toward building a school, Hussain said.

Not everyone in Pakhora thought a
Jafarabad

A little farther south, in the Shigar Valley, Mehdi Ali was fighting his own battle to get a girls’ school built in his conservative village. At first, classes were held in Ali’s home. “Without Mehdi’s help there would be no school” in that village, Mortenson said. “The girls would be in the fields, with the sheep, working.”

The classes quickly outgrew Ali’s home and the village approached the Central Asia Institute for help. But a raja, or landholder, named Imran Nadeen wanted control over the school, Mortenson said.

When he didn’t get his way, Nadeen got a local mullah to issue a fatwa, or religious order, against the school. The community immediately contested, and after years of making its way through the Shariah, or Islamic, court system, the fatwa was rescinded in 2004. A year later, the Jafarabad School was completed.

At the school’s inauguration this summer, Nadeen was given a chance to speak. “Dr. Greg must be thinking that I have something against his project. But I am not against his project,” he said, speaking in English. “It’s just that ... I’m a little bit not agreeing with the way your program is implemented. I’m not against the project, just the way some things are being implemented. But we can have dialogue. We will remain your friends.”

Mortenson responded a few minutes later in his own speech, with his typical diplomacy.

“I am touched and honored that we can sit together and pray and discuss and debate so our children can all have a future through education,” he said. “I ask that all children not follow the path of illiteracy, ignorance and hatred.”

A meeting was called after the inauguration to try to smooth things over. Mortenson brought along two Northern Areas politicians, religious leaders and the regional chief of police.

“Nadeen still wants the contract for the school,” Mortenson said later. “But we do the contract with the community. The community has to give the land and the labor.”

“So we had tea, a blessing and then he said, ‘I didn’t know these high-level officials were going to be here. I need to go home.’ So I pushed him. He said, ‘Tomorrow, this isn’t the place. We should talk in private.’ And then he apologized for whatever he had done in the past.”

Saidullah Baig, who runs the institute since its inception in 1996. Here are remarks from one on how and why he got involved.

Bozeman community helps make a difference

Hundreds of thousands of Southwest Montana residents have supported the Central Asia Institute since its inception in 1996. Here are remarks from one on how and why he got involved.

JACK TACKLE
JAFARABAD SCHOOL, BALTI斯坦:

Montana native and renowned alpinist Jack Tackle met Greg Mortenson through Bozeman’s mountain-climbing community in the late 1990s. Tackle had climbed in the Karakoram Mountains in northern Pakistan a number of times and saw the institute as a way to give something back to the region.

He talked to Mortenson in 1999 about sponsoring a school. Mortenson suggested the Jafarabad School, in a conservative area of the Shigar Valley, on the road from Skardu to the Karakoram Range. Tackle wrote a check for $20,000.

A year later, while on an expedition with fellow climber Doug Chabot of Bozeman, Tackle visited the school. The students were still meeting in a private home. “But at that point they did have the first teacher and the 25 girls in the first-grade class, which was very cool,” Tackle said in a telephone interview from his home in Victor, Idaho.

Since then, Tackle has stayed in touch, frequently calling the institute ask whether the students and teachers have everything they need. As a member of the board of directors of the American Alpine Club, Tackle also channeled additional money to build two more schools in Azad Kashmir.

“I know that this is a way that people’s lives can get better, in a place that’s especially tough for women,” Tackle said. “And beyond that, I think it’s just one of the key ways that things are going to change.”
ABUL, AFGHANISTAN — Just past dawn on a Sunday, a group of boys ditch their bicycles at the edge of a dusty field below Afghanistan’s old Defense Ministry building and kick off a game of soccer.

Hollering and sweating as they run up and down the field, the boys are oblivious to the convoy of soldiers on the road behind them, the military helicopters flying overhead and even the burka-clad women walking by on their way to the market.

The kids have spent their entire lives in a world dominated by war and oppression. Yet the sight of them playing — with the gutted remains of the ministry building behind them — epitomizes the contrast between Afghanistan’s war-torn past and its hope for the future.

“Many bad things have happened here,” Wakil Karimi, 32, an Afghan who runs schools in the Kabul area for the Bozeman-based Central Asia Institute, said as he watched the boys on the field. “But maybe now we are living in a new age. We have to start with the children.”

Hope amid ruins

Nearly 45 percent of Afghans are under the age of 15.

Growing up in a country scarred by 30 years of civil war and foreign occupation, they consider it normal to play on old Soviet tanks half buried on the roadsides. They become adept at dodging land mines as they herd their families’ livestock. And they will be lucky if they ever go to school or learn to read, let alone have a book to call their own.

“I suspect things will get worse in Afghanistan before they get better, but I still have hope and am optimistic,” said Greg Mortenson, Karimi’s boss and the institute’s founder. “The biggest reason for that is that during the Taliban’s heyday in 2000, there were only 800,000 kids in school in Afghanistan; today there are over 5 million kids going to school, and 1.8 million of them are girls.

“And it’s not because of foreign aid or U.S. intervention. It’s coming from a fierce desire for education,” Mortenson said. “They see a window of opportunity. And that to me is the single most inspiring news that has come out of that country since 9-11.”

Mortenson isn’t bragging, although he could be. His Central Asia Institute has built 14 schools and helped with four others since beginning work here in 2001. In a country where an estimated 85 percent of the people have never been in a classroom, institute schools are helping to educate the next generation of Afghan leaders, doctors, engineers, teachers — and voters.

“Ultimately, to me, hope means … the opportunity for people to realize their dreams, to be empowered and
not be dependent on or exploited by other people," Mortenson said. "The real lack of concern for those people, the lack of compassion and caring, the lack of aid — that's what has made room for the rise of hatred and violent, militant ideology."

**Taliban attack**
That hatred and violent ideology reared its ugly head this past summer at the institute's school in Lalander, a remote village southwest of Kabul. The school was targeted because it allows girls to attend.

"CAI was lucky they didn't fire a rocket launcher on the school," Karimi said.

Trouble had been brewing for months.

All over Afghanistan, the Taliban had shot, bombed, beheaded and set people on fire for allowing girls to attend school.

In late 2006, the Taliban started sending "night letters" — delivered under the cover of darkness — to the Lalander community, threatening to harm Karimi, the school teachers, female students and their families.

The threats did not go unnoticed. The valley's powerful commandant, sometimes called a "warlord," assigned four officers to protect the school from harm. But that wasn't enough.

At 10 o'clock one dark June night, 15 Taliban soldiers arrived at the school and started shooting.

"The headmaster of the school heard the shooting and rode his bicycle down the muddy, bumpy road, in the dark, all the way to the commandant's home," Mortenson said. "The commandant was furious (about the attack), because he has daughters going to school, too."

So he rounded up his militia, 150 of them, and they came to the school in double-cab Toyotas. They killed one Taliban, hurt another who died later, and arrested the rest.

The militiamen were able to extract some information from the Taliban fighters, including that a local mullah paid them 200,000 Afghan rupees, about $3,200, to attack the school, Mortenson said. Even split 15 ways, that's a lot of money here.

"So they went to the mullah's house and basically started working on him, but he wouldn't reveal where he got the money," he said.

Either way, the community was undeterred. The school reopened three days later, "minus 18 girls," Mortenson said.

"The community is very disturbed about the Taliban coming in and they are putting a lot of pressure on the commandant," to keep the students safe, Mortenson said. "Most people in Afghanistan loathe the Taliban because they bring more fear than hope."

"Wakil's risking his life by keeping that school open," Mortenson said.

**Refugees and reinvestment**
In late July, a month after the attack, Karimi is eager to show off the school. But getting to Lalander is not easy. Whenever he travels with foreigners, Karimi stops first at a police station on Kabul's western edge, to hire an armed guard.

After the young soldier climbed into the car, leaned his AK47 against the dash and lit a cigarette, the hired driver turned the car onto a dirt road, turned up the radio and began the climb into the mountains.

Lalander, or "Sky Village" is in the Char Asiab Valley, a fertile valley by Afghan standards, where locals grow fruit trees and root crops.

"Onions are the big cash crop," Mortenson said. "The farmers have a huge contract with Bagram (airfield). All the coalition forces eat onions from the Char Asiab Valley."

But just beyond the intricate web of irrigation ditches, the valley is bone dry. The mud houses melt in to the dusty landscape. A flash flood had washed out the road recently, Karimi said, but none of the water remained — not even a puddle.

As the car bumped along, women in colorful shalwar kameez, the traditional tunic and baggy pants, worked in the fields. People walked along the road, big piles of grass or kindling balanced on their heads. An old man redirected the flow of water through a ditch.

The guard scanned the hillsides for possible trouble, but Karimi had his eyes open, too. No one was taking any chances.

Karimi was born in Lalander. His father was a mujahiden, one of hundreds
The valley also was the home of Hikmetyar — a renowned mujahidin recruited by the United States to fight the Soviets. “For those reasons, every time Russian soldiers would get killed, (the Soviets) would send helicopters and bomb the valley,” Mortenson said. Then they would come back and ‘kill the land’ with land mines.

Three-quarters of the area’s residents eventually fled. When Karimi’s father died in a Soviet air raid, his mother took her children and fled across the border to a refugee camp in Peshawar, Pakistan. “It was very difficult for him,” Mortenson said. “He’s a very bright young man.”

With tremendous support from

A police guard smokes a cigarette on his way back to Kabul from Lander School. After an attack by the Taliban, extra guards have been posted to protect the school.

Saida Jan, a promising student who would like to become a doctor, studies at the Central Asia Institute’s “displaced girls” school in Kabul.
For religious and safety reasons, these girls take classes in a private home in Kabul. Fear of attack or the social taboo of being seen in public keep many older girls away from school.

his mother, he worked hard, learned to speak English, finished high school and earned a college degree in education and computer science. He taught school for eight years in Peshawar until 2001, when the United States invaded Afghanistan and overthrew the Taliban.

After 20 years living as refugees, Karimi’s family returned to Lalander and reclaimed their land.

A few years later, while working in a guest house in Kabul, Karimi met Mortenson. The two were talking about Mortenson’s work building schools in northern Afghanistan, when Karimi said, “I have a village near here that needs a school,” Mortenson recalled.

“I said, ‘But it’s near a city and we don’t usually build near cities.’ So he took me there. And by the time we got there, I realized how remote it was.”

Mortenson was sold on building a school in Lalander. The institute’s formula calls for complete community involvement and enrollment of girls. Karimi agreed to the ground rules, and “worked fastidiously,” Mortenson said.

“He was even more fiercely driven than me to get that school built,” Mortenson said. “We had to have many, many meetings with the three mullahs in the village, meetings that went way into the night. Usually in one or two jirgas (community meetings) you can solve something. But in this case, the mullahs couldn’t agree whether to allow a school at all. Then they couldn’t agree on where the school should be built.

“Finally Wakil said, ‘We’re going to build on my land.’ And we got a school built in 2004,” he said.

The bright-blue Lalander School is built on the side of a mountain, surrounded by a wall. It has six classrooms and an office, a small playground with a swing set and a drinking-water well.

Bullet holes from the Taliban attack pock the front of the school and the walls inside the office, but government-provided police now guard the school 24-7.

Girls ‘Home’ School
Several of the 18 girls who didn’t return to Lalander after the Taliban attack now live in Kabul and attend the institute’s school for “displaced girls.” Students at the Kabul school include conservative parents who would never allow their daughters to attend a public school, Karimi said.

Saida Jan’s story is a little different. Her brother, Gulmar, was a student at Lalander School. One day after school in 2004, he was herding goats in the cemetery, 100 yards from the school, when an old Soviet land mine exploded. No one saw it, so no one is sure how he triggered it.

“There was no vehicle in Lalander at the time, so they tried to carry him to Kabul,” Mortenson said. “But he was losing blood and he was in shock. Then they tried to put him on a bicycle. He died 10 hours after he was hit while they were still trying to get him to Kabul.”

Gulmar, who was buried where he fell, was the last surviving boy in the Jan family. His two older brothers had already died, one in a car wreck, another from typhoid, Mortenson said. Saida and her two younger sisters had not been allowed to attend school because they were needed to work at home and in the field.

“I got there three weeks after that,” Mortenson said. “I was standing at his grave when this girl started tugging on my clothes. She said, in Pashoto, that she didn’t have any more brothers and she really wanted to go to school, so would I please ask her father. Her father is a conservative and said his daughters must work.

“Then we went and had tea at (the Jans’) house, to offer condolences, and Saida — she’s really earnest, really determined — said, ‘Did you talk to my dad?’”

Eventually Saida and Mortenson wore the father down and he allowed her to enter school. Meanwhile, the father spent a year training with a nonprofit demining agency, learning to defuse the land mines that litter the country.

“He was working with Omar demining organization and his family stayed in the village — until the threats from the Taliban last fall,” Mortenson said.

“Then he moved his wife and two of his daughters to Kabul. Saida stayed with cousins so she could go to Lalander School. But eventually, he moved Saida to Kabul, too. He said he had to look out for his family.”

The displaced-girls school’s classes are held in a second-floor room of a house. The space is donated. The Central Asia Institute pays the teacher’s salary and buys supplies. The girls don’t wear uniforms because they don’t want to call attention to themselves, Karimi said.

Saida is studying hard and would like to go on to university and become a doctor, Karimi said.

“It is very important to learn, and to know things,” Saida said. “It helps have to know how to read the signs, go to school, understand what we are told at the medical clinic. If we don’t have knowledge, we have nothing. But if we get knowledge, then we will have something.”

The teacher has a college degree and taught in Iran for several years before returning home to Kabul.

“Teaching students means that I bring them light,” she said. “It is important for them to learn, to know about writing and reading. And if they know, maybe they’ll teach others.”

The girls have ambitions — English teacher, computer operator, newspaper journalist, doctor, engineer — but all seem well aware that their role will be, as one girl put it, “in service to the country’s people.”

“I know that all Afghanistan suffers and is destroyed and I want to make it better, stronger,” said one girl who wants to be an engineer.

Then she displayed a little self interest. “Also, now we are poor and I would like to be rich.”

Keyboards and generators
In another part of Kabul, the institute has helped Karimi realize a dream to set up a computer and basic-skills tutoring center for all ages. About 100 students attend classes, which start before dawn.

A group of nine 10- to 12-year-old boys in an early morning math class in July sat on a carpet on the floor of a small room in the center. They took
“Some of them go to school, others work in shops, so they don’t have time to go to school,” Karimi said.

In an adjacent room are 11 computers, all different models, that Karimi assembled for the school. Boys and men sit at the desks, having paid a fee for instruction.

“English is the key of knowledge, that’s a fact, but computers are important for everyone, too, especially office workers,” said Zakir Ishan, 18, a teacher and the center’s office manager.

Karimi noted that many of the adults in Afghanistan who managed to get an education over the years, “still don’t know about computers.”

The students this morning include doctors who want to be able to better communicate with their peers around the world, and young boys learning basic keyboard and word-processing skills.

“For the computer section, we have a fee,” but the language and math classes are free, Ishan said. “All programs are being taught here, at different levels, according to their talent. We have two instructors here, actually, we’re rejoicing for having such teachers here.”

The center has no electricity — less than half the city has power — so Karimi has also collected a bank of generators to power the computers and fans. Internet access is still a dream.

“Inshallah (God willing), we will have Internet someday,” said Abdul Raouf, 23, an English and computer instructor. “We need more things for the betterment of the course. In Afghanistan now, our needs are so high.”

**Next generation**

At Gulmar Jan’s grave in Lalander, the family has erected colorful flags and left small offerings. Like most grave sites in Afghanistan — and they dot the countryside — the stone marking Gulmar’s grave is just a plain stone.

At least eight institute schoolchildren have been killed by land mines in Afghanistan, Mortenson said. The number of injuries is much harder to tally.

UNICEF land-mine-explainer boards — easy-to-read information about mines, artillery, mortars and grenades — are posted on the Lalander School’s walls. “One girl last year found a small mine and lost three fingers,” Karimi said. “After that, I try to bring more information to teach them not to touch them.”

The Taliban threat, meanwhile, is being kept at bay by police and Canadian Army soldiers who patrol the area. Predator drones fly overhead; they are unmanned airborne security pods controlled and monitored by U.S. forces in Florida, Mortenson said.

When the drones come by, the kids go outside and wave or give a thumbs up,” he said. “They say, ‘We have (police) here, but the real (police) are in the sky.’”

The police on the ground now take turns spending the night at the top of the steep hill across the road from the school, a place that gives them a 360-degree view of the area.

“The school here is very good,” one of the officers said. “The children get knowledge there. If it is possible for us, maybe CAI should make another, high-level school here?”

The population of Kabul has exploded since 2001, and homes of mud brick cover the steep hillsides surrounding the city. Despite its status as an urban center, only about half of the city has electricity. 

A path from Lalander School leads to this memorial for Gulmar Jan, who was killed by a land mine 100 yards from the school in 2004.
KARDU, BALTISTAN — The jeep driver scans the barren stretch of sand, looking for the "road" into the Kargil War refugee camp. It's a barely visible track, around a few scraggly trees, past some children herding goats and a couple of mud-brick homes seemingly built in the middle of nowhere.

The camp has been home to thousands of refugees for eight years, but there are no signs, no ruts, no pavement.

Then, over a sand dune, it comes into view and the jeep bumps along, finally pulling into the camp and navigating the narrow passageway that leads to the Gultori Girls Refugee School.

The elders of the refugee camp are gathered in the dirt schoolyard to greet Greg Mortenson, 49, whose Bozeman-based Central Asia Institute helped build the school.

In large letters on an outside blackboard behind them are the words “Welcome to our honorable guests.”

Mortenson’s entourage on this July day includes his wife, Tara Bishop, their children, Amira, 10, and Khyber, 7, institute staff, drivers and the handful of loyal supporters who follow him everywhere.

As their parents handle the formal greetings, Amira and Khyber make a beeline for the students, passing out new pencils, erasers, blank notebooks and pencil sharpeners.

“Shukria,” thank you, the girls respond quietly while accepting their gifts. Curious onlookers peer over the school wall. A few women and children have climbed onto nearby rooftops for a better view. Mortenson turns to wave at them.
He explains that some of those girls outside the wall would like to go to school, but their families need them at home.

“Usually a family will pick one or two daughters” to go to school, he says. “It’s brutal, but as more and more of their moms go to work, trying to scratch out enough money to feed the family, “some girls are needed at home to watch the younger children, get the water and help” with other chores.

The camp, home to more than 150 families, has developed a sort of ramshackle permanence since it was hastily built in 1999.

Still, it is a bleak place, perched on the sand dunes south of the Indus River.

Mortenson says some of the men found work as day laborers, earning $1 to $1.30 a day for sweeping, road work, unloading trucks or picking fruit. Some of the women have taken jobs as domestic helpers.

For many of the refugees, the relocation still feels strange and tenuous.

“It is not a good situation, but it is OK,” one woman says.

Yet for the generation of girls growing up in the camp, relocating to Skardu created an opportunity, in the form of the school. They will be their families’ first generation of educated girls.

And that makes a bitter pill a little easier to swallow.

Leaving everything behind

Mortenson quickly gets to work visiting the students. Many of the older children remember their village, Brolmo, in the Gultori Valley, he said. But “these kids were born here,” gesturing to the 27 girls in the first-grade class.

Gripping their new pencils and notebooks, the girls give the tall American in his Pakistani clothes their full attention. He introduces his own children and then starts teaching the English words for finger, eye, nose, head, knees, toes.

Then he teaches them a song.

“Head, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes,” he sings, gesturing to the corresponding body part.

The girls sing along in English, giggling shyly when they get confused or miss a word.

If the war had not run their families out of their village, these girls would have grown up in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, right on the Line of Control, the man-made, much-disputed delineation between Northern Pakistan and India. It is part of the greater Himalayas, a “cold desert” filled with 18,000-foot peaks. It is rugged country.

A group of Brolmo men headed east to seek other options. They walked for days through inhospitable, high-mountain terrain to Skardu. Upon arriving, they were directed, with other Kargil War refugees, to government land next to the airport.

“These people came with nothing,” Mortenson said. “We tried to get the United Nations to help,” but because the refugees were considered “internally displaced” — still within the confines of war in a conflict that has ebbed and flared since Britain divided the two countries 60 years ago.

When the Pakistani infiltrators were discovered, India’s response was unrelenting, pounding Kashmir with heavy artillery from the ground and the sky. Pakistan forces returned fire with a vengeance. For two months, artillery fire reached levels not seen anywhere since World War II.

In Brolmo, the farming families were forced to flee their homes, said Fatima Batool, now 18 and just finishing her education at the girls’ school.

“I was small, so I was taken to a cave with my parents and the village people,” she said. “I was very, very afraid because many times they used big bullets that were like bombs breaking out around the cave.

“There were crops in the field so we’d go to the fields (for food) at night time. But then the big shelling would start and we’d escape to the cave again. Eventually, we had no food,” she said.

Her family joined the exodus of villagers. “But again there was shelling and all the families were in the caves. I was terrified. I kept thinking, ‘I will die.’”

Fatima Batool ducks into her dupatta for security when recalling memories of the brutal shelling of her village.
Pakistan — the U.N. wouldn’t help. Neither would the government. And Skardu hardly had the resources to accommodate this sudden influx of 8,000 refugees.

Syed Abbas, the supreme leader of Northern Pakistan’s Shia, was outraged over the camp’s conditions. One day, Abbas picked up Mortenson at his hotel in Skardu and took him to the camp. Within hours, Abbas and Mortenson had committed to helping with the most immediate need — water.

Using $6,000 from the institute, donated labor and equipment, a well was dug and a communal pump installed. By then it was clear the refugees weren’t going home soon. So the men sent for their families and the camp filled with once-self-sufficient rural families now reliant on the kindness of strangers.

To give them hope, Mortenson agreed to do what he does best — help build a girls’ school. The boys attend a government primary school within walking distance of the camp.

The community agreed to do its part. And Abbas got the government to donate the land.

The yellow primary school was finished in 2000. The students are testing at or above national standards, said Ghulam Parvi, the institute’s operations manager in Skardu. The school already has been expanded to accommodate an enrollment of 282 girls. And a women’s vocational and literacy center has been added.

Youthful enthusiasm

Although some of the refugees have gone home or moved on to bigger cities in Pakistan, those who remain are evidence that years in a refugee camp takes its toll.

“Our ages are small, but we are like old women,” one woman said as she and eight others sat down in front of Parvi. Animated and outspoken, the women had a list of concerns about the camp, from rotten wooden power poles to the need for another drinking-water well.

“They think Dr. Greg is the only man who can help them, so when he comes, they have demands,” Parvi said.

The women have figured out that when they need help, they have to ask for it. And they’ve figured out that if Mortenson can’t do it, he will at least listen and find someone who can.

So they state their case to Parvi and leave.

The children seem more content with their circumstances.

“Here is good,” said Fatima, who lives in a tiny house with her mother, father, three sisters, and her brother, his wife and two children. “My home is here and my family is here. We can’t go back because the government has put small bombs in the ground.”

Plus, her village had no school, and she has grown to like school, she said. One reason is that when she and her friends are in school “our mothers do not ask us to fetch water,” she said.

“Also, the teachers are clean and punctual and that teaches us to be clean and punctual. And before we couldn’t

Kabul has absorbed a large number of the Afghans returning from refugee camps in Pakistan since 2001. The influx has caused overcrowding, high unemployment, and leaves many to try to scratch out a living doing manual labor or hawking goods on the street.
further. Mortenson and his staff arranged for her to attend ninth and 10th grade at a Skardu public school.

Then, this summer, she completed a three-month training program in Skardu to become a “lady health worker.”

In Korphe, the village school only provides primary education. In the past, students from outlying villages who desire more schooling must continue their education. For more a more hopeful reason — to change the behavior of the whole family. “If you change the behavior of women about health, automatically she will change the behavior of the whole family.”

As for Jahan, she said, “I hope to work in this job for a few years and then go to study at college in Lahore.” She would like to be a teacher, she said, or maybe a doctor.

Skardu hostel
Arranging for Jahan or any student to live in Skardu can be expensive. Finding a safe place for a young Muslim woman, in particular, to live in the city can be complicated. Plus there is the cost of food, transportation, books and tuition. “It’s hard for families to send children to places far, far away, pay food and expenses,” Parvi said.

But many institute schoolchildren are demonstrating an interest in continuing their education beyond primary school, Parvi said. “So CAI will build a hostel in Skardu for 80 to 100 boys and girls who want to attend school here.”

The institute held a “stone-breaking” ceremony in July for the Tibbet Students Hostel Skardu. On an empty lot, amid piles of sand and rocks, a colorful tent was erected. Children from institute schools throughout the region were brought in for the event, and to see what their future holds.

“It costs a family about $250 or $200 a year for room and board, and that works out to about 60 percent of the average salary,” Mortenson said. “Some do stay with relatives, but often that’s pretty difficult.”

“So CAI, the board, decided that 10 percent of our resources would go to helping our brightest young students go on, that we would not let them fall through the cracks. Our primary goal is basic literacy, especially for girls. But we don’t feel it’s our job nor do we have the resources to set up high schools in every valley.”

Work will begin on the hostel after the mountain-climbing season ends, Parvi said, because at that point the cost of transporting materials, such as wood and cement, drops significantly. The institute also is planning to build hostels in Gilgit and Baharak.

The local mullahs had a few concerns about a co-ed hostel, Mortenson said, and set a few ground rules for the Skardu project.

“The mullahs want at least 12-inch walls dividing the boys and girls. And there will be no joint dining or studying.”

But, as Mortenson told the children under the tent that day, he has high hopes for all of them. “If you go into a dark room with just one candle, there is light, and that light is you, my dear children, the girls and boys with us today. That light is hope,” he said. “From this group will come doctors and police.”

The future prime minister of Pakistan is in this group of students today.

“Always remember that if you have no hope, there is nothing. If you have hope, you can do anything.”

A colorful tent marks the location of a future hostel in Skardu that will house students from outlying villages who want to continue their education past primary school.
With every new school, comes request for another

Greg Mortenson never thought that by building one small school in gratitude to people who saved his life, he’d become director of a nongovernment organization in far-reaching remote areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

But the need was so great.

Requests for Mortenson to build schools began piling up before the first was finished and still haven’t stopped.

“In this country if I put up a school, my neighbor, he would want a school in his area, too,” said retired Lt. Col. Ilyas Ahmad Mirza, a longtime friend of Mortenson and supporter of his work in Pakistan. “It is not good. Greg cannot afford to put up schools everywhere.”

But government schools are few and far between in this part of the world. And most emphasize educating boys; with fewer opportunities for girls. Private schools are often prohibitively expensive. And religious schools may be more affordable — sometimes even free — but many teach a particularly virulent form of Islam.

The Central Asia Institute has developed a sort of formula for building schools. Mortenson and his four-member board of directors insist on community involvement — from getting the land and organizing construction to ongoing operation. They insist girls be allowed to attend. And they begin working with possible opponents in the community — usually religious or political leaders — on day one.

Mortenson’s ability to prevail has fueled the requests.

“It’s hard because we don’t have the capacity or the resources to put schools everywhere,” Mortenson said.

In July, a letter was hand-delivered to Mortenson in Skardu.

“Respected Sir,

With due respect, it is stated that Thongal Baraldo Shigar is very remote and back area. As you know there is no such school available in this backward area for the poor population. Therefore, it is requested to your honor, kindly establish a school for the poor children of the village Thongal so that the poor children of this area can get a facility of education.

We the committee of the Tanzeen-E-Falah-O-Behbood, Braldo, will pray for your long life”

Not all of the institute’s growth is in remote villages. Calls for schools in and around Skardu have increased, creating a bit of tension over the institute’s limited resources. Ghulam Parvi, the institute’s program manager for the region, lives and works in Skardu and is most comfortable there, Mortenson said. And in response to interest and enthusiasm on the part of the institute’s Afghanistan program manager, Wajid Karimi, the institute helped to open a computer and tutoring center in Kabul.

But Mortenson’s theory has always been “we start from the mountains and go to the city side,” said Sarfraz Khan, another institute staffer.

And that’s not changing, Mortenson said.

“It’s (in the remote areas) where I feel most invigorated, innovative and challenged,” Mortenson said. “I always want to find a more extreme place to start literacy, education and schools, whether it is because of physical isolation, remoteness, conflict or religious extremism. When someone tells me it is not possible, that is when my engines get revved up.”

Big picture

Put another way, “Allah is happy with you when you help poor children far from the city,” said the institute’s Islamabad staffer Suleman Minhas.

As of September, the Central Asia Institute had roughly 21,760 students in 61 schools, with three more being built in Afghanistan, which would bring the total to 64, perhaps by the end of the year, Mortenson said.

The schools, mostly primary and middle-school level, are in:

• Baltistan, Pakistan, in the villages around Korphe and Skardu in the Karakoram Mountains;
• Pakistan-controlled Kashmir;
• Afghan refugee camps in Peshawar, Pakistan;
• Kabul and Lander, Afghanistan;
• Afghanistan’s Wakhan Corridor;
• and Punjab, a province of Pakistan where the institute is working to improve its relationship with the central government.

“Put a few schools in the Punjab province because all of our schools in Azad Kashmir and Baltistan are in nonprovincial areas that fall under the Ministry of Kashmiri Affairs,” Mortenson said. “So until then, none of our schools fell under the central government and we wanted a better relationship with the central government.”

Private, not public

The institute’s schools are considered private, Mortenson said, although “we do make sure that we comply with all the government regulations and curriculum.”

About 15 percent charge tuition.

“We do that in areas where they are able to pay about 10 to 50 rupees per month, which is about 25 cents to a dollar per month,” he said. “But even in those schools, there are still about 30 percent who don’t pay tuition.

“People aren’t opposed to it. It establishes value in education. Basically we do it to help the school raise enough money to add another teacher or two. So as the school grows, the village is participating in hiring or adding teachers.”

Some of the schools in Baltistan and Peshawar fall outside the institute’s basic formula.

“In some areas, the government has appointed teachers, but have no buildings, so we put up buildings and use those teachers,” Mortenson said. “But we make sure the teachers go through our teacher-training programs and meet the same standards as any CAI teacher.”

Eight of the schools in Baltistan are part of the World Bank’s Social Action Program, which was designed to pay for 100,000 teachers all over Pakistan, half with World Bank money, and half with Continued on page 22
With every new school / cont.

Pakistan government money. But the Pakistan government never met its half, Mortenson said. So the institute stepped in to help in with eight schools.

And in the Afghan refugee camps in Peshawar, the institute contributes to the budget for teachers and supplies in an existing building.

Teacher pay
Teacher pay is a bit of a sore spot with Mortenson.

“I’ve always thought we should pay our teachers more, but a lot of our staff and the board have thought that we should have teachers who want to teach in part because they love to teach,” he said. “And lots of teachers want to work in CAI schools. I don’t know what it is. It’s obviously not the pay. But they can work in their home village, which is a big bonus.

“I think a lot of it is the enthusiasm, the community interest, being a part of the community.”

The institute pays teachers between 2,500 and 4,000 rupees a month, depending on their education and experience. Government teachers make about 6,000 rupees a month.

One reason for the discrepancy is that government teachers often don’t work where they live, so the additional money helps compensate for transportation costs and housing, he said.

In addition to paying the teachers, the institute gives each school and each community education committee — composed of the village leaders who run things — a stipend, “for whatever they want to spend the money on.”

Curriculum
School is generally in session for 240 to 260 days a year, with kids in class five-and-a-half to six days a week, including Saturday, Mortenson said.

Every institute school in Pakistan complies with that country’s curriculum guidelines, Mortenson said. Classes include: math, English, Pakistan studies-history, Urdu (Pakistan’s most-spoken language), Islamic studies and science.

The institute added hygiene and nutrition, and developed what it calls “the workbook,” which varies by region, but covers local culture, tradition and folklore. “With the workbook we do storytelling, too, which is part of the curriculum.”

Mortenson sees lots of room for growth.

“We are at a basic, level curriculum now, but we need to go to the next level, get some help from people who know about curriculum development in rural schools,” Mortenson said. “The next two or three years we plan to focus on more master teacher training. We need to shift and slow down new schools and develop good curriculum and help bright students get whatever they need.

“We’ve come a long way, but we’ve got a long way to go.”

Other focuses
Over time — by virtue of the extreme poverty and lack of government investment in areas where Mortenson winds up working — the organization’s project list has expanded to include such things as a bridge over the Broladu River, women’s vocational training, health care training and clean drinking-water wells.

Khan said the women’s centers were added when women started asking for them.

“Before the centers, the women were all inside,” he said. “Now they come outside for working and to make money.”

The focus varies, but at the center in Pakistan’s Charpursan Valley, Khan said, the women take wool from yak, sheep, goats and camel, make it into yarn and then weave or knit clothes to sell.

Rubina, 40, was living in a cave in the mountainous Wakhan Corridor in northern Afghanistan with her seven children when Greg Mortenson first met her.

Her husband, a nomadic sheep herder, had killed himself shortly after their seventh child was born, said Mortenson, founder of the Bozeman-based Central Asia Institute.

“Rubina’s husband became so distraught that he couldn’t provide for his family that he went down to the river, tied a rope around his legs, attached a weight and drowned himself,” Mortenson said.

Mortenson met Rubina in 2002, on his first trip to that remote corner of the world. Because she is a widow, she has no last name. When a woman marries in Afghan-istan, she drops her father’s name. When her husband dies, she loses his name.

Mortenson was in the Wakhan to follow up on a request from a local warlord to build a school.

“It’s kind of like driving somewhere out near Broadus, Montana,” he said. “It is a high, windswept, barren plateau, alkaline earth, with a few grasses blowing in the winds.”

Just outside a village, “we rounded a bend and I saw this woman sitting just on the edge of a cave with her kids, kind of watching us.”

She had less than nothing, but invited Mortenson and his staff, including institute operations director Sarfraz Kahn, into the cave where she and her children had been living since her husband’s death.

She heated some water and made her guests grass tea.

Mortenson noticed her children had symptoms of starvation — distended bellies, fluid retention from liver problems, swollen knees from rickets, partial blindness from vitamin deficiencies.

“She didn’t say, ‘Can you help me?’ “ Mortenson said. “When she found out what we were doing in the area, she said, ‘What can I do to help you? Can I come to cook for you? I can pray for you every day.’ So we talked for awhile and then left a couple of bags of flour there.”

Then Kahn put out the word, Mortenson said. He talked to all the truck drivers who use the road by the cave, all the warlords and the Afghan-Tajikistan border security. He talked to the governor.

“He would wave a Quran and say, ‘How can you allow this woman to live in such extreme poverty? The Quran says we must help the widows, refugees and orphans,’” Mortenson recalled.

“So now all the trucks that go up there, anyone who goes by, they give her some flour. And the men who helped us build the (institute) schools in the Wakhan built her a small house. It’s still in the same place as the cave, looking south to the Hindu Kush mountains.”

One of Rubina’s sons, now eating leaves, said he could make money. “There are several boys up there — composed of the village leaders who run things — a stipend, “for whatever they want to spend the money on.”

One of Rubina’s sons, now eating leaves, said he could make money. “There are several boys up there — composed of the village leaders who run things — a stipend, “for whatever they want to spend the money on.”

Karin Ronnow
Poverty and Hope
Central Asia Institute schools bring the promise of an end to generations of poverty and illiteracy

Sabida Bibi and her five boys live in this single room in Chundra, in a house owned by a man in her village. Since her husband died working as a porter three years ago, Sabida and her boys have survived by working a small plot of land.

CHUNDA, PAKISTAN

— A steep wooden ladder leads to a small doorway on the second floor of the house where Sabida Bibi and her five young boys live in a single room.

Widowed three years ago Sabida, 30, has few resources — personal or material. Her two older boys — Inaya, 8, and Kazim, 6 — attend school, but she is illiterate.

“I have no power of reading, no power of writing,” she said, seated on the rug on the floor of her room, her boys crowding in close.

The house is owned by a local man who loans her the room above the ground-floor barn, as well as a small plot of land.

“I grow vegetables for my family and a small quantity to store and sell,” she said. “My father and brothers give me some small help also.”

Their only belongings are some dirty rugs and blankets and some cooking pots and platters. She cooks over a small fire in the room attached to a stovepipe chimney.

Sabida and her boys are just barely scraping by.

“In large swaths of rural, impoverished society, when a woman is married, the maternal ties are severed and they have no network of support,” said Greg Mortenson, founder of the Bozeman-based Central Asia Institute, which recently built a girls’ school in Chundra.

Then, if a woman’s husband dies, Islamic law “says that the widow should receive inheritance of her deceased husband’s property,” he said. “But without literacy and education, often that does not happen.”

Pakistan is an Islamic society, but it also is a patriarchal, tribal society, where property traditionally reverts to the husband’s family. Women who cannot read or write don’t have the resources to wage a legal battle for what is rightfully theirs.

“So widows are left in a very difficult position,” Mortenson said.

Sabida’s husband was one of five porters who died while hauling gear and supplies for an Italian expedition to K2. Mortenson is doing his part to ensure that people remember and take care of the widows of Chundra.

But the bottom line is that these women would have more options if they were educated.

So he named the just-completed institute school in the village the Porters Memorial School. He also gave it another name.

“I wish to honor the widows and children of the five porters of Chunda,” Mortenson said at the school’s dedication in July. “This school is the light of Chundra.

“But also remember this: In America and Pakistan we have only one enemy, that enemy is ignorance. To defeat ignorance we must have education, especially for girls. So from the sorrow and loss, and in memory of the porters, we have hope. I would like to give this school a name. This is the Hope School.”

Vulnerability of poor
Nearly one-fourth of Pakistan’s people are classified as poor, and most of them live in the country’s remote rural areas, working as subsistence farmers and herders.

They have inadequate access to food, clean drinking water, health care, education and jobs. They are even more vulnerable than others to natural disaster, political upheaval, religious coercion or even changes in weather.

“In the many mountainous parts of (Pakistan) where communities are small, scattered and isolated, and where there are few major urban centers, poverty is widely and evenly distributed,” a United Nations’ International Fund for Agricultural Development report on Pakistan noted. “The rugged terrain and fragile ecosystems make cultivation difficult. Lack of access to markets and services has made poverty chronic in these areas.”

Government investment in public services and infrastructure outside Pakistan’s big cities is nominal. In addition, the predominance of tribal rule in some places leads to lawlessness, and then, because those areas are unstable, businesses are reluctant to invest there.

“The slightest run of bad luck,” John
Poverty and Hope / cont.

Noor Hussain would like to send his daughter Farsana to boarding school, but doesn’t have the money.

Wall, the World Bank’s country director for Pakistan, wrote in 2006, “a drought or bad agricultural year, an illness of a breadwinner, rises in prices of basic commodities not compensated by rises in income — all of these can cause families to fall into poverty.”

Farsana

About 130 miles southwest of Chunda, in Azad Kashmir, Farsana Hussain is caught in a different kind of poverty trap.

She lives in Nouseri, a steep mountain village in the remote upper Neelum River Valley. The Himalayan gorge is green, but flat land suitable for farming is scarce and the region has little industrial development. Also, the village is not far from the Line of Control, where fierce battles have been fought between Pakistan and India over control of Kashmir since the line was drawn in 1947.

Two years ago, in October 2005, a 7.6-magnitude earthquake rocked the region, killing at least 73,000 people and demolishing Nouseri. Farsana, 14, lost her mother, three sisters and a brother that day.

But she was a dedicated student who wanted to learn, said Sarfraz Khan, the institute’s operations director.

“Right after the earthquake, she was the first student in the tent school,” Khan said. “She wanted to learn. Despite losing everything, she went to the school.”

The Central Asia Institute has since replaced the tent school with a prefabricated metal building, one of seven it has erected in Kashmir since the earthquake, and Farsana has gone as far as she can go at the Nouseri Government Girls Middle School.

The nearest girls’ high school that will accept girls is simply too far to walk and transportation costs money their families don’t have. So Farsana’s options at this point are to move elsewhere to continue her education, or get married and start having babies.

“They’re finished,” Khan said. “For girls, it is too far to go after that.”

But Farsana has dreams of attending high school, then college and medical school.

“I want to be a doctor and help the village people,” she said.

But she knows, she said, that going to school in the city would be “a problem for my father. We have no money.”

Her father, Noor Hussain, sat nearby, holding a younger daughter and listening to Farsana talk about her dreams. A tall, thin man, Noor Hussain had a good life. He was in the army, fought against India, and became a member of the Ex-Servicemen’s Society. He had a house and a wife and a growing family.

But the quake took it all away. His family now lives in a small makeshift structure of plywood, canvas United Nations tents and mud bricks. Plus, in addition to his own family, he is caring for his brother’s wife and family.

He wants things for his daughter, but “I can’t do it,” he said, his shoulders sagging.

Khan estimated it would cost 2,000 to 3,000 rupees a month — $40 to $50 U.S. — to send Farsana to school, cover the cost of her books, uniform, room and board.

Farsana has only a small window of opportunity. If too much time goes by, marriage becomes inevitable.

“We want them to get an education, but the problem is money,” her teacher, Gulrash Noor, said. “So they stay in the home, making a marriage and making children.”

Poverty and gender

Farsana and the Chunda widows, like girls and women throughout the region, are victims not only of poverty and inheritance discrimination, but of a society that has neglected their promise since birth, simply because they are female.

A combination of Islam, conservative, rural and tribal traditions contribute to the gender disparity. The result is that most women spend their lives as homemakers — particularly in rural areas, women who work outside the home are the extreme exception — and men as breadwinners.

Women’s days are filled with cooking, child care, cleaning, fetching water and firewood and care giving. And as more men leave home for work in the cities, women are bearing a greater brunt of subsistence farming.

Girls are expected to help with those chores, too, which contributes to Pakistan having one of the lowest rates of girls enrolled in primary school.

The literacy rate is even more shocking — over 70 percent of females in Pakistan are illiterate.

There is growing recognition that female education is an integral part of any development work. In Pakistan, the national “enlightened moderation” policy includes female education as a central tenet, the idea being that educated women will help reduce infant mortality, increase family health, raise female incomes and even help defeat religious extremism.

Mortenson said that last possibility is based on a fundamental aspect of Islam.

“When a young man goes on jihad, he has to get permission and blessings from his mother,” Mortenson said. “If he doesn’t do that, this is spelled out in the Holy Quran, it’s shameful and disgraceful. And an educated woman is not likely...
to condone her son getting into violence.

“I hear criticism that the 9-11 hijackers were educated. But what isn’t brought out is that most of their mothers were illiterate and uneducated.”

The Taliban and leaders of other violent religious movements know that educated women are their nemesis, he said.

“After 9-11, the core Taliban went around looking for foot soldiers,” he said. “They targeted large swaths of illiterate society, because they knew that educated women wouldn’t send their sons.”

Educated women are also less likely to wind up in dire straits, like Sabida Bibi, if widowed.

“When women are aware of inheritance law, and they can read and write, they can understand their rights and read and sign legal documents to own or sell land,” Mortenson said. “When women get land, it empowers them tremendously. They are not subject to exploitation. Education first, then land ownership — that’s how you build democracy.”

The Chunda widows are just an example of a more widespread problem in neighboring Afghanistan.

“In Afghanistan, there are more than 1 million widows,” Mortenson said.

Many of them fled the country during various wars over the past 30 years and spent decades in refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan.

“These women are coming back now and their land has either been squatted on or mined and they have no way to reclaim it,” he said. “Then they go to Kabul, or Herat or Mazar-i-sharif, but the prices have skyrocketed so much that they can’t afford it. So they stay there and live in squalor, working as indentured servants or just living impoverished, subsistence lives, right on the edge. Or they go back to the refugee camps.

“If they have education, they can fill out a form, they could write a letter. There is actually some good work being done now to rebuild the whole judicial process, and one of the main focuses is rights of land ownership and inheritance laws. If women have the right to own land, that would significantly empower them.”

Chunda

Baltistan is home to the Karakoram Mountains, a world-class climbing destination that includes K2, “the deadliest mountain on earth.” In 1954, that 28,250-foot peak on the Pakistan-China border was summited for the first time by two Italians, Achille Compagnoni and Lino Lacedelli.

Fifty years later, the climbing world threw a party to commemorate the summit.

“The anniversary was huge, thousands of climbers and trekkers,” came to participate in a commemorative climb, Mortenson said. Because each climber needs six to eight porters, the supply of experienced, union porters quickly ran out. “There weren’t enough to go around.”

Pakistani travel agencies wound up subcontracting porters with little or no experience, paying them four times the average daily wage.

“They hired inexperienced men and said, ‘Take this load to K2 base camp and we’ll pay you. We don’t care how you get it there,’” he said.

Bibi said her husband had been doing labor in the village when “people said if he would go with the group, he would earn good money,” she recalled.

He and four other men from Chunda joined the eight-porter group. Some of them were carrying double loads, plus their personal gear.

“So they were carrying about 100 pounds over 50 miles up the mountainous Baltoro Glacier,” Mortenson said.

“On the second day of the six-day trek to base camp, they were crossing the Panmah River. It’s glacier melt, so in July the water was really high, with a strong current and melon-size stones bouncing along in the water.

“They put their arms around each other’s shoulders, but the line broke in half on the river and five of them were swept away to their death. Their bodies were never recovered.”

The widows were informed of their husbands’ deaths only when “some friends from the village who were on the same trip sent a message,” Sabina said.

“No one else came back here to bring us help or anything. No one came.”

The porters have a union, which is required by the government to provide 100,000 rupees, roughly $1,600, in life insurance if a porter dies on the job. But since the Chunda porters were subcontracted, Mortenson said, “their families didn’t get the life insurance.”

But more troubling to Mortenson was the lack of attention paid to the men’s widows.

“Nobody went to Chunda to see the women, not the police, no one from the expedition, or the tour agency, the porters’ union, no one. It was insulting.”

Apo Razak, a former climbing expedition cook who was on the 1954 K2 climb, now works for the institute. At the time of the porters’ deaths, he had spent years trying to get a girls’ school built in Chunda. He told Mortenson that no one had gone to the village to pay their respects to the widows.

So Mortenson, Razak and Ghulam Parvi, the institute’s program manager, made the one-hour trek up a narrow,
dirt, jeep track to the village.

“We went to Chunda and it was just one tragic story after another,” Mortenson said. “The kids were starving. One of the women was living with her father, who was blind, and she had one of those big tin trunks and she opened it and there was nothing in it. ‘I had to sell everything I own,’ she told us. ‘I don’t even care if the government gives me money. But I’d like to get paid for the work my husband did.’ So we filed a report with the police, with the government Ministry of Tourism. We put pressure on the tour group and the expedition.”

Most of their efforts were to no avail, although the regional government did pass a law requiring expeditions that hire nonunion porters to provide something to survivors in the event of a death.

“So at least if someone is widowed they can eat,” he said.

And a year later, the village mullahs who had protested construction of a girls’ school saw the light.

“For six years the two mullahs there would not allow the girls to go to school. Then the porters’ deaths happened. Then finally they agreed. Now they are huge proponents of the girls’ school. So many girls had enrolled before the building was even done that we had to add a second story.”

“If you talk about winning hearts and minds, Chunda village is our greatest success. A lot of that had to do with Apo. He kept going back there. He even apologized on behalf of climbers and guides, even though we had nothing to do with it.”

At the dedication of the school in July, Mortenson, his staff, some high-ranking regional government officials and dozens of villagers made the 10-minute walk from the road to the school.

They passed two-story, mud-brick homes with thatched roofs, children herding goats, cows and yaks, and made their way across the irrigated potato fields.

The path up to the school’s entrance was lined with girls, wearing their uniforms, throwing flower petals and singing, “Welcome to Chunda.”

One of the dignitaries who attended the event was Aleem Adil Sheikh, convener of the Pakistan Muslim League’s Youth Wing.

“People are poor in the Northern Areas,” Sheikh said. “Thirteen, 14 years ago, they didn’t encourage girls to go to school. That is why I welcome the great contribution of CAI and why I think we have a moral duty to support the work of Dr. Greg. We are thankful to him that he helps the government in the villages. People are grateful for this girls’ school. It’s very good. So it’s a very happy day today.”

One of the village elders spoke next.

“Dr. Greg and his team light a candle of hope in this remote area,” he said. “It would have been impossible for us to build the school without CAI’s help. We hope for your kind cooperation in the future.”

In rural areas of Pakistan, where less than 25 percent of girls complete primary school, women spend their days raising children, hauling water, cooking, collecting firewood and raising crops.

With little level land for farming, and industrial development virtually non-existent, Azad Kashmir was poor before the 2005 earthquake. Many of the quake survivors lost their homes as well as loved ones. Now, they live in tents supplied by aid organizations, and cook in communal outdoor kitchens.
Mortenson: Destined to help
‘Regular guy’ gets extraordinary results bringing education to central Asia

When Greg Mortenson was 3 months old, his parents packed him up in Minnesota and took him halfway around the world, to the East African country of Tanzania, where they would spend the next 13 years as Lutheran missionaries in the foothills of Mount Kilimanjaro.

In many ways, growing up in a Third World country, surrounded by people trying to help alleviate, or at least lessen, the ravages of poverty, set the stage for Mortenson’s life.

“When he was 2 or 3 years old, one day I couldn’t find him,” said his mother, Jerene Mortenson. “And I looked outside and there he sat in the pathway with an old beggar and the cookie jar.

“Greg was handing the old beggar cookies and the two of them were having this conversation. He didn’t just give him something, they were talking. And that just sums up how Greg has been all his life,” she said.

Now, at 49, Greg Mortenson heads the Bozeman-based Central Asia Institute, a nonprofit organization he founded. Instead of cookies, he’s delivering education to children, especially girls, in some of the most isolated villages of northern Pakistan and Afghanistan.

His success and a bestselling book about his life, “Three Cups of Tea,” has made him a bit of a celebrity — both at home and in the areas where he works — and that takes a toll on him and on his family. But it hasn’t changed who he is at heart. He’s one of those rare birds, driven by a sincere compassion for disenfranchised people about whom few others know or care.

“Even as a child I was deeply affected and disturbed by seeing really impoverished people starving or dying,” Mortenson said. “If I had extra food, I always wanted to share it. And now it’s hard to keep my balance because I see so much poverty and hurting and suffering. It really takes a concerted effort, stamina and sometimes courage to remove yourself a little bit.

“But I always think it’s important that you touch and smell and feel poverty, extreme poverty. You have to do that to understand it. You can’t do it from a think tank in Washington, D.C.”

And he really means that, said retired Lt. Col. Ilyas Ahmad Mirza of Pakistan, a longtime friend of Mortenson’s.

“He loves those people, he listens to them, he lives with them,” Mirza said.
"Their houses are dirty and smelly, but it doesn't matter. Greg goes and stays with them for days. He's a different breed."

**Regular guy**

One thing Mortenson is not is vain. He's about as humble as they come. All of the attention he's getting, the success of "Three Cups of Tea," the speaking engagements, newspaper and magazine articles, TV interviews, are seen by him solely as opportunities to build more schools.

He is not a man on whom the mantle of celebrity and greatness rest weightlessly. Rather, Mortenson is far more at ease with his self perception as "a regular guy."

He comes from truly humble beginnings. His family never had much money. After Tanzania, he went to high school in Minnesota, then volunteered for the U.S. Army and served as a medic in Germany for two years. "I joined in 1975, after Vietnam, when it was not cool."

When he got back, he attended Concordia College in Moorhead, Minn., where he played football on an NAIA II national championship team. He later transferred to the University of South Dakota, and earned degrees in chemistry and nursing.

He was a trauma nurse and a mountain climber before he started the Central Asia Institute. In 1995, he married Tara Bishop, a psychologist, and they now have two children, Amira, 10, and Khyber, 7.

Mortenson has some quirks, just like everyone else. He is constantly running late. He sometimes forgets appointments.

"I'm still not very socially adept at the wining and dining" part of fundraising, he said. "Often I show up late and I don't even have socks on."

Perhaps it goes back to growing up in Africa; perhaps it is something more organic, something temperamental. Either way, he's not wired like most Americans.

It is one of his "maddening aspects," Bishop agreed.

In his own defense, Mortenson said, "To me, the world is an oyster. I am very curious about a lot of things, so I take time to do everything, and now I am perpetually late. I'm just so busy," he said.

He is that. He is on the road at least six months a year, overseas and crisscrossing the United States. After his book, "Three Cups of Tea," was published in 2006, life became increasingly hectic. The phone rings off the hook with people wanting him to come and speak. He gets hundreds of e-mails each day. People stop him on the street, in the coffee shop or at the airport.

"Our lives have really changed since the book was published, as far as the level of demand for his time," Bishop said. "It was already building its own momentum, but until then, if they didn't go to a talk, people didn't know about him. Then all of the sudden it just geometrically took off."

Mortenson's perpetual lateness is less of an issue overseas.

"In Baltistan, in the language, there is no sense of time," Mortenson said. "You can say, 'I go to Korphe,' which could mean you will be there tomorrow, or you were there yesterday, or you were there 10 years ago. Time is irrelevant. They don't have watches over there. I enjoy working like that, things work well and we get things done."

**Over there**

Nevertheless, when he gets to Pakistan, he still can't enter a room without great fanfare. A steady stream of people come to see him as soon as he arrives at the Indus Motel in Skardu.

"It's like he's a rock star or something," Doug Chabot, a mountain climber and friend of Mortenson's from Bozeman, said of the scene at the Indus. "People will do anything for him. They just love being around him. It's like, I'll just be standing over here in the corner trying to anticipate your needs."

In July, some of the teachers at remote institute schools had traveled long distances to visit Mortenson during his week in Skardu. Although he has staff in country to make decisions and keep the ball rolling, they often defer to him. Besides, Mortenson is the one who people want to see and talk to.

"He has this incredibly busy schedule when he goes over there, because not only is he checking on schools, but he has all these relationships with people," Chabot said. "He doesn't sleep much when he's over there. When he's in work mode, it's pretty impressive."

**Retreat**

When he isn't working, Mortenson is often hunkered down in his basement office at home. The small space has, over the years, become his sanctuary. The 8-by-10-foot room is cluttered with photos, satellite phones, old Texas Instrument calculators, camera parts and books, lots of books, on all four walls up to the ceiling. They are organized into sections on terrorism, poverty, nonprofits, fundraising, Pakistan, Afghanistan and history.

"I don't drink much or smoke," he said. "The one vice I have is I am a voracious reader and I buy a lot of books."

Over the years he has developed a nearly encyclopedic knowledge of the history, culture and religion of Afghan and Pakistan. He also has learned the languages spoken in the areas where he works — Balti, Urdu and Farsi.

As a kid, his mom said, "Greg's strongest areas were language, math and science."

A few minutes later, she went back to that thought. "He does have a particular facility with languages. When he was 8 or 9 years old, we were in Rome and the maid came into the hotel room and said something. My husband and I couldn't understand her.

"But Greg said, 'She's asking are we leaving today and should she change the sheets or just make the beds.' It amazed me. That was what she was asking us."

Mortenson attended an international school his parents started in Tanzania, and that might have contributed to his ear for language. But his appetite for knowledge is just a part of who he is.

"We had a set of children's encyclopedias and he started with A and read through the whole set," Jerene Mortenson said. "We didn't have a television. Greg liked facts. I remember he got a 'Guinness Book of World Records' that really intrigued him."

These days, he prefers nonfiction to fiction. And he prefers reading to television, music or even parties.

"He doesn't watch movies," Bishop said. "He doesn't have a pulse at all on popular media."

He also doesn't, at this point, have a lot of friends he socializes with at home, Bishop said.

"He doesn't have time for it. His friends are his staff. They get him, his quirkiness," she said. "He's a little cynical about western, American culture, the power stuff that's such a big part of how we interact here, the teasing, the one-upmanship and the humor around bêtîlîngit. It baffles him."

**Relationships**

Instead, he focuses on relationships he needs overseas to accomplish his goals of literacy and peace — a lesson he said he learned from his dad, Dempsey.

"My dad worked closely with the Tanzanians, especially his handyman, John Moshe," Mortenson said. "The expats often scoffed at him, saying he should have the upper hand and be the boss. But he believed everybody was part of the team."

Mortenson has integrated that philosophy into his own work in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

"If anything happens to me, everything will be taken care of over there," he said. "We have amazing staff and we have amazing community support."

That staff, his central team, is largely a result of serendipity, composed of people that Mortenson tripped over in his work and later hired. But the team is devoted to Mortenson. And the feeling is mutual.

"I consider my staff to be family," Mortenson said. "They are prepared to give up everything they have to help CAI. They are all family men who have kids and wives. But they are willing to be gone from their families even more than me, for months at a time."

"They are the ones who go to the village with the hardened mullah, trying to convince them to send girls to school, who really push the envelope in working with different ethnic groups, Sunni and Shia, and different politicians, bringing the hardest opponents together with the proponents and work until they come up with some solution."

Most of the staff are not highly educated, either, he said, "yet they are willing to work very hard to learn difficult skills."

They have flaws, he said. Sometimes they push too hard when it might be better to give people time.

"I love them dearly as my family, but sometimes I have to remind them that to do business, sometimes it takes time," he said.

**Time unplugged**

While a lot of the village work might be handled by the in-country staff, the fundraising and public speaking is exclusively Mortenson's job. And it takes a toll.

"The success of all this has forced me to become a much more public person," he said. "I'm rather shy and reserved by nature, and at first it was really hard on me. But the more I do this, the more comfortable it is. And I really want to do this because I want to promote education and promote peace. But I have to raise money."

"The hard part is that I've been married for 12 years and more than 65 months of that time, I haven't been with my family."

"It's a tricky thing for Greg," Bishop said. "I think he would like to do it all. I don't think can't is in his vocabulary. … He really is committed to those little kids over there. And he has a huge heart."

"But I miss him, that's the biggest thing. I'd like more time with him. That's the part that makes me kind of sad."

The other thing Bishop would like her husband to do is take a little better care of himself; he's paying a price for the pace he keeps.

"I get frustrated because his life is so overwhelming," she said. "I'm happy for his success and what it means for the world and for him. But I wish he could have some more time to catch up with himself, to be able to slow down a little bit and fully think. He's truly an introvert and he's not getting what all introverts need, which is time unplugged."
Central Asia Institute is a registered 501(C) 3 nonprofit organization, federal IRS EIN # 51-0376237. Since 1996, CAI’s mission has been to promote education and literacy, especially for girls, in remote regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan. As of late 2007, CAI has established 61 schools, educating over 25,000 students, including 14,000 girls.

Karin Ronnow

Karin Ronnow, 45, is the assistant managing editor of the Bozeman Daily Chronicle, where she has worked for 11 years. A Chicago native, she earned her undergraduate degree in urban studies and journalism from Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn., and her master’s degree in journalism from Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism. Prior to joining the Chronicle, she was a reporter for daily newspapers in Maine and Georgia; an international business reporter for Lafferty Publications in Dublin, Ireland; and the managing editor of the Livingston Enterprise.

Deirdre Eitel

Deirdre Eitel, 44, has worked as a photographer at the Bozeman Daily Chronicle since 1995. She has a journalism degree from the University of Montana, and took a ridiculous number of photojournalism courses during her one year at Western Kentucky University.

Pennies for Peace

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Pennies for Peace (or P4P) was conceived by the students and teachers at Westside Elementary School, in River Falls, Wis. Originally called “Pennies For Pakistan”, it became Pennies For Peace in 1996. Since then, over 16 million pennies have been raised by over 700 schools in all 50 states, including over 10 million pennies in the past year.

P4P is designed to educate children about the world beyond their experience and show them that they can make a positive impact on a global scale, one penny at a time. Through cross-cultural understanding and a solution-oriented approach, P4P encourages children, ultimately our future leaders, to be active participants in global peace.

“Three Cups of Tea: One Man’s Mission To Promote Peace...One School At A Time”

by Greg Mortenson & David Oliver Relin

Penguin 2007
www.threecupsoftea.com

“Three Cups of Tea” is the New York Times bestseller biography of Greg Mortenson, co-founder of Central Asia Institute. The book has been on the Times’ bestseller for more than nine months as of October 2007. It has also been named Time Magazine Asia Book of The Year, Kireyama Prize Award, Pacific Northwest Booksellers Assoc. Nonfiction Book of The Year, a Border’s Book “Original Voices” selection, People Magazine Critic’s Choice and received the Montana Honor Book Award.

To get extra copies of the Chronicle’s “Journey of Hope” or the Central Asia Institute 2008 calendar contact CAI 406-585-7841 or cai@ikat.org.
Hope is an emotional state, a belief in a positive outcome even in the face of contrary evidence. Hope often opposes despair, such as a village plagued by poverty that invests in a school. -KR