journey of HOPE
vol. III

An in-depth field report by writer Karin Ronnow and photographer Teru Kuwayama documenting the work of Greg Mortenson, his nonprofit Central Asia Institute, and its children’s Pennies For Peace program.

Promoting peace with education, especially for girls, in Pakistan and Afghanistan
Wakhi children stand outside their home in the remote Wakhan Corridor in northern Afghanistan.

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The first time I traveled to Pakistan and Afghanistan with Greg Mortenson to document his work in 2007, it was all new — the language and the culture, the need for armed bodyguards and head scarves. I had traveled in the Third World before, but this was different. I was not a tourist, I was working. And I kept finding myself in situations that might have been dangerous or awkward under other circumstances, but weren’t, because I was with Dr. Greg. People opened their homes and classrooms to me, fed me, told me stories and shared their dreams. I was overwhelmed.

Little did I know I’d still be trucking along behind Dr. Greg two years later, trying to cover just some of the ground and meet some of the people Greg has built relationships with over the past 16 years. At times, my “education expeditions,” as I have come to call them, have taken me so far off the beaten path, to villages so remote, that “the guys” have had to put the pins on the map for me. “The guys” are the CAI staff members in Pakistan and Afghanistan who guide my expeditions; they are my translating, tea-drinking transporters. Because of the intensity of the travel, the experiences we’ve shared and the time we’ve spent sharing our own stories, I now count them among my friends. And I feel lucky beyond words to know them.

Greg calls them “underqualified over-achievers” and I can vouch for the “over-achievers” part. Traveling in these countries is rough. Logistically, it’s a nightmare. CAI’s schools are often built in places where there are no roads or bridges and no way to communicate with the outside world. But when the guys get word that someone wants a school, they manage to get to these outposts, build schools and bring me along later to show me what they’ve accomplished. And every time I think I know what to expect next, we turn a corner, stop for tea and a whole new story unfolds.

Last spring, photographer Teru Kurayama and I tried to get to Korophe, the village high in the Karakoram Mountains where Mortenson built his first school 16 years ago. It was one piece of the CAI-Mortenson tapestry we had yet to see. But it was not to be. Travelling with CAI staffers Ghulam Parvi and Muhammad Nazir, we got about two-thirds of the way up the dirt road before we were turned back at a military post. What had been an “open area” to foreigners was suddenly and inexplicably closed to those without special permission. There was a lot of grumbling and even some yelling that I couldn’t understand. But as the old saying goes, it’s all about the journey, not the destination. So we turned around and bounced back along the rugged road back toward the guest house, traversing rushing streams, huge rocky fields and precarious riverside switchbacks. I saw magpies and sagebrush that reminded me of home, but the women on the road carrying firewood, the children herding goats and the small apricot and walnut trees were vivid reminders that I was a world away from Montana.

Last summer, Teru and I traversed the Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan, where the valleys are 9,000 feet high and the peaks soar far, far high above. Teru’s photos reveal the raw, stunning beauty of the place and its people. But the smells, the gritty wind, hot sun and the taste of tea made with curdled goat milk are harder to convey. The Wakhi people captured my heart. The desperate poverty, hunger, disease, opium addiction, illiteracy, decades of war and centuries of neglect are writ large on their faces. Yet they exuded kindness and generosity, talked loudly, laughed often, worked relentlessly and entrusted me with the details of their lives and their dreams. It was, and still is, a lot to process.

So you have in your hands Vol. III of the “Journey of Hope.” In compiling it, my goal is to convey a hint of the passion and determination for education among rural Pakistanis and Afghans and Greg Mortenson’s Herculean efforts to provide it.

— Karin Ronnow, Livingston, Mont.
I first traveled to Afghanistan in the spring of 2002 — it had been a few months since the Sept. 11 attacks, the subsequent arrival of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, and the rapid collapse of the Taliban regime. The U.S. military campaign, known as Operation Enduring Freedom, was widely perceived as an accomplished mission, and attention was already swinging towards the impending war in Iraq. As quickly as it had arrived, the international media was moving on, and Afghanistan was on its way back to becoming “the forgotten war” again.

In Kabul, I wandered the ruins of a city that looked like it had been obliterated in a nuclear war, as its residents emerged into an unfamiliar state that could almost be called “peace.” I had expected to stay in Afghanistan for two weeks, then to return to my long-term project photographing the Tibetan diaspora across Asia.

Instead, I spent two months in Afghanistan, and I never made it back to the Tibetans. In the years that followed, I made more than a dozen journeys to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir, and to places like Iraq and Banda Aceh, Indonesia, tracking a path of war and natural disaster across a shattered landscape.

A few months after my first trip to Afghanistan, I met Greg Mortenson in Northern Pakistan, where he helped me penetrate the “impossible” territory of the Siachen Glacier, where the armies of India and Pakistan were fighting an endless war for control of the world’s highest and coldest battlefield.

At the time, Greg had built two-dozen schools in Pakistan, and his U.S. staff was comprised of a single part-time assistant who worked out of Greg’s garage in Bozeman, Mont. Even then, his commitment and perserverence were obvious, but no one could predict the scope of his vision. Over the years, I watched him do the impossible, over and over again, across the most challenging terrain on Earth. CAI now has 131 schools across the region, including projects in some of the most volatile provinces in Afghanistan.

I saw these places while traveling with U.S. soldiers and Marines, and former Afghan mujahideen, in Helmand, Kandahar, Wardak and the Korengal Valley — places often referred to by the U.S. military as “enemy central.” Across the border in Pakistan’s tribal areas, I witnessed the spreading fire of insurgency, and the waves of refugees displaced by warfare in the Swat Valley, and by a massive earthquake in the Northwest Frontier Province and Azad Kashmir.

With this perspective, I have a unique appreciation of how difficult Greg’s work has been. I also recognize how unusual it is that he has done it all without any of the trappings associated with huge international aid organizations. As far as I have seen, CAI is absolutely unique — it has no extravagant fleets of U.N.-style Landcruisers, and no highly paid teams of Western consultants living behind the walls of armored compounds in Kabul or Islamabad. By most standards, it has a tiny crew of completely “unqualified” aid-workers — a rag-tag band of local taxi drivers, porters, and former soldiers and insurgents — led by a former mountain-climbing nurse from America.

These days, a lot of powerful people are trying to understand the secret to Greg’s impossible accomplishments. I can only suggest one possible explanation: an uncommon application of common sense, and 16 years of 22-hour workdays.

It has been one of the greatest honors of my life to have known Greg Mortenson, and to play a small role on his team.

— Teru Kuwayama, Palo Alto, Calif.
A student reads a speech she has written about girls’ education at the Gultori Girls’ School near Skardu, Baltistan, in Pakistan’s Northern Areas.

Where it all began
CAI laid foundation for promoting literacy in Baltistan, Pakistan

BALTISTAN, Pakistan — At New Khanday School one morning last May, celebration was in the air.
The teachers and students at the school, with its awe-inspiring view of the 7,821-meter Masherbrum peak, were giddy, celebrating a sports victory.
“Yesterday we participated in an athletic tournament for all of the Masherbrum area and we took first place!” Muhammad Iqbal Qadry, 33, said proudly.

One of three mountaineering guides who founded the school, Qadry ushered his visitors into the three-room school's sparsely furnished office to show off the trophy.
Athletics may seem peripheral, even extravagant in a place where literacy rates are still less than 10 percent, and where reading, writing and arithmetic lessons are a precious commodity — but it's not, said Fida Muhammad, 32, another of the school's founders and its financial secretary.
“We need sports,” Muhammad said. “Students need physical activity so they can come back to school and their brain is fresh.”

That is progressive thinking in this part of the world. But the three friends who started New Khanday School are not typical educators.
“I am working in tourism and I want to do something better with my life, but I am not educated,” said Qadry. “We decided that we needed development in our village. But if no one is educated we cannot develop. School is an investment in the community.”

That investment is needed now more than ever. The problems plaguing Pakistan have leaked into the mountainous and impoverished Northern Areas in many ways, but are particularly pronounced in the trekking and mountain-climbing business.
Dozens of mountaineering expeditions used to come this way every spring, prepared to spend many weeks and lots of money on food and supplies, porters and guides. In recent years, security crackdowns have meant fewer government-issued expedition permits and more no-go areas, where soldiers block the roads and prevent access to the giant peaks of the Karakorum Range.

How bad is it? Well, Qadry said, usually New Khanday sees at least 1,500 visitors in a season.

And this year?

“So far, it is only you guys,” he said.

Shift in thinking

New Khanday is 60 miles as the crow flies from the tiny village of Korphe, where Greg Mortenson recuperated from his 1993 failed attempt to summit K2 and promised to come back and build a school.

He’s now spent 16 years working in this remote and long-neglected region called Baltistan under the auspices of his Central Asia Institute. As a result, there are more CAI schools here than anywhere else. The current tally is 56 schools, plus a handful built by CAI that have since been turned over to the government, according to Haji Ghulam Parvi, CAI operations manager for this region.

More than 6,400 students are enrolled in CAI’s Baltistan schools, most of them girls. And while CAI’s schools, called “maktabs” here, have significantly increased the region’s literacy rate, the presence of girls represents the most significant shift in local thinking.

“Ten years ago, Greg was going everywhere saying, ‘Please build a girls’ school.’ That has changed. Everything has changed,” said Parvi, who has worked with Mortenson since the beginning of CAI. “Now, everybody sees education for girls as much important. People know that if boys are literate, they leave the village. If girls are literate, they stay to make the change in the villages.”

And change is something people here desperately want.

The Northern Areas has been a “disputed” territory — part of the Kashmir-Jammu swath of land that Pakistan claims, but India wants — since partition in 1947. The Pakistan government has invested in a strong military presence in the area, but the paucity of social services for the estimated 1 million residents is striking. Hospitals, doctors, government schools, public water and sewer projects and industry are sorely lacking. Literacy rates are estimated at 17 percent for women and 31 percent for men.
“This is a rural area, very poor,” said Muhammad Ali, a teacher at Tinjus Gomba Skardu School. “There is no system of teaching in the house. Parents are farmers. We are raising sheep and cows. There are no paying jobs in our village.”

Some locals are hoping things will begin to change with the Pakistan government’s August decision to grant the area more political autonomy. But hopes have been dashed before. And no matter what happens in that regard, the role education will play in a better future is unquestionable.

“The education of boys and girls both is a must for the development of the area,” said Syed Hassan Shah, principal of the Federal Government InterCollege Shigar, where CAI pays two teachers’ salaries. “But especially girls. Without girls’ education, no sector can be developed. We have experienced that when girls are educated, everything is different in the house — health, hygiene, daily life, everything. And they will become the mothers and the mothers will motivate the children as their parents. So if the woman is educated, there will be better education and society will be developed.

“When we see the difference between the present situation and after education — it will be astonishing. It will be like day and night, like light and dark,” he said.

Overflowing with students

New Khanday Village is in the Hushe River Valley, one of a spider-web of valleys high in the Karakoram Mountains that channel water from the peaks and glaciers to the mighty Indus River.

CAI began working with Khanday locals on their school project in 2005. At first the organization provided one teacher, with the thought that “if they can do by their own, it is good,” Parvi said. CAI was also helping the village install a water system to bring clean drinking water “down from upside” via a 2,200-meter pipeline, Parvi said.

Both were necessary because a flood in the upper reaches of Khanday Village had displaced more than 100 households. “Everybody had to go someplace safe,” Parvi said. The village elders resettled those families and called the area “New Khanday.”

Then in 2008, the CAI teacher moved to a job at the nearby government high school, where he makes more money. The New Khanday School was floundering. So CAI stepped in again, helped build a new school and provided books, uniforms and salaries for four teachers.

The school reopened in March 2009 with 100 students, 35 girls and 65 boys, and it is already full to overflowing. Each classroom houses two grades. When the weather cooperates, some of the students move outside to study. There are still no desks, just mats on the floor, and “in the winter the floor is cold,” Muhammad said. “We need a little heat for the children.”

In fact, like all CAI schools, the school is so popular that the need surpasses the school’s ability to accommodate.

“We need more classrooms, more furniture, more teachers, sports stuff,” Qadry said, ticking off the items on his wish list.

Complications

The wish lists for CAI’s Baltistan schools never end. In many schools, the teachers have found ways to expand programs with limited resources. But Parvi gets constant requests for everything from pencils to playground equipment.

“There is a desperate need for expansion nearly everywhere,” Parvi said.

The budget for CAI’s work in Baltistan has doubled in the past two years, Parvi said. And CAI still gets 20 to 30 requests for new schools here each year.

“The government education system is poor and the demand is much there, so all the communities of Baltistan are still looking to CAI,” he said.

Yet the organization has had some growing pains, Mortenson said.

“Our goal was to start schools in the remote ends of the remote valleys where there were no schools and on the Line of Control” between India and Pakistan, he said.

Given that Baltistan is a land of high peaks and many valleys, the organization had carved out quite a task.

“We started in Braldu, then Hushe and Thalle, Shigar, Hushe, Gul-tori, Dassu, Bisil and Basha valleys,” he said. “We’ve created between one and five schools in all those valleys as a kind of catalyst to get other schools going. It took about 14 years to establish our primary mandate and leverage on the district-level government to put in government schools.”
The formula for a CAI school has always been simple. CAI staff meet with village elders who have inquired about a school, explain the need for donated land and labor and the required girls' enrollment, then provide materials, books, supplies and teachers.

But as time goes by, things get far less simple.

In some cases, schools are now run jointly with the Pakistan government. In other cases, the schools were turned over to the government after several years — with mixed success. There are issues related to teacher pay and a shortage of qualified teachers in the remote areas. And getting supplies into this area is expensive and further complicated by narrow roads, landslides and other logistics.

"Every project has its own merits and demerits," Parvi said. "Only a few things are the same school to school, project to project."

Creating sustainable projects is hard work in a place with so few resources, Mortenson said.

"This is where our first efforts to really create sustainable projects started 14 to 16 years ago and we really want them to be run by the communities, the local people and the teachers," he said. "About half the schools are very successful. Another 25 percent still need some help. And another 25 percent, those in the most isolated, more impoverished areas, will probably need significant help for a long time."

Periodically CAI runs into locals who use the schools to scam outsiders. One American climber was lured into sending a man money to support a school in Hushe Valley, only to find out CAI ran the school and the man was just pocketing the donations. When locals found out what was happening, they put a halt to the scam.

"The local people know who is honest, who is taking money, who is spending money," Parvi said.

Ongoing school costs, which average about $1 to $3 per child per month, also complicate matters. When and where to start charging fees is a decision left to the village education committees, in consultation with CAI.

"First, we needed to get them motivated," Parvi said. "It is always a negotiation, a trade-off, over paying for the school, books and uniforms, teachers' salaries. CAI's goal has always been to provide 100 percent free education, including books and uniforms, but we are also always trying to make the projects sustainable and that often means we are not talking about schools being completely free after 10 to 20 years."

Biggest girls' school in Balistan

One school that is near and dear to CAI is the Gultori Girls' School, located near Skardu in an area intended to serve as temporary refuge for villagers fleeing the 1999 Kargill conflict along the Line of Control.

The refugee camp, the Brolmo Colony, was set up on a flat, dusty plain just south of the Indus River. It is relatively close to a government boys' school. But the girls had no school. So CAI built one.

Enrollment has climbed steadily since the school opened. This year's enrollment was 350 girls, from nursery school through class nine.

"It is the No.1 girls' school, by number of students, in Baltistan," Parvi said. "And they have stayed in school. Of the 20 girls who started here in 2000, 19 are now in class nine. The 20th married and moved to Iraq."

CAI recently started the Islamia Public School for boys in a nearby rented house. It is an "English medium" school, which means classes are taught in English, rather than Urdu. Sixty students have enrolled in prep, nursery and first-grade classes, and over time, it will be expanded through high school.

"But this will not be free like the refugee girls' school because we want it to be self-sustaining," Parvi said. "We will provide the building, books and uniforms. We will charge 100 rupees per month (about $1.50) plus a 100-rupee one-time lifetime registration fee. Other private schools charge 200 and 400 respectively."

To accommodate the two growing schools, CAI is investing in another building.
“The existing school was too small for the girls. We were trying to put another floor on top or get a house to rent, but it was not possible,” Parvi said. “So we bought a piece of (adjacent) land and we’re building a new school with 10 classrooms in a two-story building for the girls, along with an assembly hall, science laboratories, more playground equipment, toilets and a boundary wall.”

The girls, their teachers and Principal Aliah Kansar, who has been there since day one, are grateful to CAI. “When this school for refugee girls began, nobody knew if it would succeed,” one student told a school assembly in May.

But the school did succeed and “we hope CAI will continue to help. All children here are thankful to CAI.”

As the girls fanned themselves with their English and math workbooks and the little boys — squatting in Pakistani fashion off to the side — began to lean on each other, Fatima, a confident sixth-grader, delivered a speech that, in her own words, underscored the message CAI has devoted itself to spreading.

“There is no doubt that education is a light that has been giving you power,” she read from her handwritten speech. “But there is a problem of women’s education in our society because of lack of proper understanding of education in Islam. There are many illiterate people in our society, and educational facilities for women are still controversial.

“But in Islam, male and female have equal rights to take education. Men and women are like two wheels on a vehicle. If you have only one wheel, you have a problem and then the whole vehicle goes down. … The better educated a woman is, the better attention she can give her children and the better chance there is of a nation rising up.

“CAI is giving everything to help poor families give our daughters education and a better life,” she said.

Teaching is best job

In the spring, a dust storm usually kicks up in the afternoon. This pattern continues for months until mid-summer when the Indus River rises over the dusty, silty, glacial sand. The Balti people call the Indus “Sange,” or the Lion River, meaning “the mighty one that defeats everything,” Parvi said.

One afternoon in May, as the wind picked up and the afternoon clouds rolled in, Parvi’s driver negotiated a small pickup truck along a rutted dirt road into the mountains south of the Indus.

After a series of white-knuckle switchbacks, the driver turned toward a stand of trees and slowed to a crawl to follow a trail patted down by centuries of livestock and people traipsing to and from Lower Chunda. Vehicles are uncommon in these parts.

Parvi walked ahead, shooing goats and cows, lifting branches and greeting villagers. CAI has just started working in Lower Chunda, trying to help the village resurrect a girls’ school built by the World Bank Social Action Program or SAP, in the mid-1990s.

The school’s predicament is sadly typical of what happened with most of the SAP projects in the Northern Areas, Parvi said.
PAKISTAN HISTORIC TIMELINE

1947: Partition from India.
1948 & 1965: Wars with India over disputed Kashmir territory.
1971: Civil war; eastern half of Pakistan secedes, becomes Bangladesh.
1973: Constitution approved.
1978: Zia dies in plane crash.
1988: Government imposes Islamic law.
1988-1999: Civilian governments alternately headed by Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif; each elected twice and removed from office on corruption charges.
1999: Kargil conflict with India; war in the Siachen glacier region.
1999: Military coup; Gen. Pervez Musharraf assumes control.
2001: Musharraf declares himself president, remains chief of army.
2001: U.S. bombs Afghanistan; religious extremists flee into Pakistan.
2004: Cease fire with India over Kashmir.
2004: Growing tension and fighting along Afghan border.
2007: Benazir Bhutto assassinated; voters elect new civilian government.
2007: Musharraf removes chief justice.
2007: Benazir Bhutto and Sharif return to campaign for national elections.

Spring 2007: Musharraf removes chief justice.
July 2007: Army commandos storm Red Mosque in Islamabad to crush uprising; terrorists recrutcate with attacks on government facilities and civilians.

Nov. 3 2007: Musharraf declares state of emergency; sacks Supreme Court; suspends constitution.
Nov. 28, 2007: Musharraf retires from Army; remains president.
December 2007: Benazir Bhutto assassinated; general elections postponed.
May 2008: Pakistani authorities sign peace deal with NWFP government to end military operations in Swat; deal falls apart within three months.
June 2008: U.S. Amps up drone attacks on Pakistan-Afghanistan border.
August 2008: Musharraf resigns.
August 2008: Sharif leaves government.
September 2008: Zardari elected president.
September 2008: Suicide bombing of Marriott Hotel in Islamabad.
November 2008: Terrorist attack in Mumbai, India; investigators link terrorists to Pakistan.

January: Increasing reports of Taliban along Afghan border terrorizing civilians, beating and killing officials, burning girls’ schools.
February: Pakistan signs ceasefire with Taliban in Swat, allowing strict Islamic law. Taliban promise judicial reforms.
February: Supreme Court bans Sharif and brother Shahbaz from elected office in Punjab because of election irregularities and outstanding criminal charges; Zardari puts Punjab province under federal rule.
March: Militants attack Sri Lankan cricket team.
March: Sharif brothers join lawyers planning “long march” from Lahore to Islamabad.
March: Antigovernment protests in Lahore trigger government clampdown.
March 12: Army Chief Gen. Ashfaq Kayani meets with government leaders worried about Long March, urges political resolution; high-level U.S. diplomats pressure Zardari to peacefully resolve situation; proposed compromises rejected.
March 15: Sharif begins march; riots in Lahore; crowds meet marchers en route; Islamabad sealed off.
March 16: Government announces judges will be reinstated, jailed activists released and federal rule in Punjab ended; Sharif calls off march.
April: Taliban move into Buner district, 65 miles from the capital; police retreat. U.S. drone attacks in Rawalpindi, rattle Pakistan.
May: Author Ahmed Rashid says, “I no longer say that there’s a creeping Talibanization in Pakistan. It’s a galloping Talibanization.”
May: Humanitarian crisis as more than 2 million people flee fighting in NWFP.
May: Militant bomb attacks increase across country.
June: Pakistan military says it has snuffed out “organized resistance” in Swat.
June: U.S. drone attacks increase along border.
June 24: Pakistan military announces move into South Waziristan in tribal areas; increasing artillery fire, imposing blockade to choke off Taliban supplies.
August: Pakistan Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud killed in Waziristan.
August: “Terrorism and extremism are eating at Pakistan like termites,” Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani says.
October: Two weeks of extremists’ attacks, including one on military headquarters in Rawalpindi, rattle Pakistan.
October: Pakistan prepares for ground offensive in South Waziristan.

— Sources: CIA World Factbook, Wikipedia, news reports

2009 PAKISTAN TIMELINE
The program’s goal was to train teachers and provide a school building, working in conjunction with the Pakistan government. Then, after three years, the government would take over. But the government didn’t hold up its end of the deal.

“Then, after three years, the government would take over. But the government didn’t hold up its end of the deal.”

Parvi said.

Mortenson said SAP was launched in 1992 to meet unmet basic needs in Pakistan, including education. "Pakistan didn't live up to its end of the deal, so the whole system was set up but with half the funding," he said.

CAI helped in various ways with 18 SAP schools, but after 12 years, the SAP program faltered and the World Bank gave up and left.

"The program was discontinued," Parvi said.

Villages tried to keep the schools open, but most were ill-equipped. "And the first-graders? The facility is clearly inadequate. On this day in May, 94 nursery students and new admissions, including some 8-year-old first graders, were crowded into one of the two classrooms where Mohammad Saeed, 32, was teaching the alphabet. A tall, thin man, with yellow-tinted eyeglasses perched on his narrow face, Saeed said after 13 years in the job, he considers teaching "the best job in the village."

"While teaching girls I feel especially good because I feel we are teaching the community," he said. "Because we are left back, we feel as soon as possible and as much as possible we should help the girls up to help the society up. They are the No. 1 citizens who will teach to others."

The second classroom was also packed full, with 60-plus second- through fifth-graders. Girls were lined up two or three to a desk, facing different ways in order to focus on their particular lessons.

In one corner, teacher Mohammad Raza Khan, 33, coached the girls on their English. The students read aloud:

"Is this a pen? No, this is not a pen. It is a pencil."

And the first-graders? They were outside in the dirt with a third teacher.

As Parvi took stock of the situation, the village elders surrounded him, pleading for more classrooms, teachers and textbooks.

"They are really under stress," Parvi said, as he listened to their requests.
Mohammed Nazir, second from right, checks on construction of a CAI school in Daltir, Thalle Valley, Baltistan.

Construction continues

Mohammed Nazir, who runs his family’s Indus Hotel in Skardu, has gone from being Mortenson’s hotelier, to CAI volunteer, to employee. Last year Mortenson charged him with overseeing construction of three schools; this year, three more.

Nazir’s capacity for juggling the logistics of building in extremely remote areas of his native Baltistan is impressive. But even for him, the logistics can be onerous. Skardu got nine feet of snow this past winter, so getting in and out of the high mountain villages was tough. And then there’s the question of building materials.

This spring he spearheaded a project in Katisho — a 51-mile drive from Skardu that takes four hours in good weather. "There is no sand for 30 kilometers, so we sent the people down to the river and they bring it up on their backs," Nazir said, adding that sand is needed for making cement. "They made 200 trips. Then the water came up and washed it all away."

So the villagers started all over again, determined to get their school built.

"Inshallah (God willing), this school will be very successful," he said.

And if the Katisho School is anything like the Mayurdo School, success will be an understatement.

The three-room school in Mayurdo went up in 2008 and opened for classes in 2009. "We set it up for 40 students and one teacher," Nazir said. "Eighty students showed up the first day."

Yet another school, built this past spring in the Thalle River Valley near Khapalu, underscored the logistical issue of coping with immovable objects. The Daltir School was built with help from Ghulam Muhammad, a local man known respectfully as "the Triple-Load Porter.

Daltir is at about 7,000 feet altitude, alongside the Shayok River, a little oasis of fruit and almond trees, wheat and vegetable crops amid steep scree slides and rocky slopes littered with boulders the size of Mini Coopers.

To prep the donated land for construction, Nazir said, "it took 70 dynamite blasts to clear," Nazir said.

But it was all worth it, he said.

The Daltir Village asked for and will get a small, co-ed English medium primary school. "We are mostly porters and herders and farmers," Muhammad Ibrahim, a mountain-climbing guide and head of the local education committee, said of the 400-household village. "We grow our own food and have little money, but we want to give quality education to our children. Government agencies are ignoring our requests."

The village has decided to charge a small fee to help with teacher salaries, Nazir said, because they understand that the teachers are key to the quality of education their children will receive.

"Education is like the human eye," Ibrahim said. "It opens our brains and minds and then we can know each other."

A student in a CAI girls’ school in Baltistan stands to introduce herself.
AT THE END OF THE ROAD …

By KARIN RONNOW

In the remote, far northwestern reaches of the Northern Areas of Pakistan, Central Asia Institute began work this year on two schools in the Ghizar Valley.

The push into this new region has been led by Faisal Baig, a CAI staff member increasingly concerned about the lack of schools in the region, and the new presence of extremist groups, including Talibain, in the region.

Baig has worked with CAI for thirteen years, in many capacities, including as a self-appointed bodyguard for any CAI visitors. He’s a quiet, tough man, who is illiterate, but believes firmly that education, particularly for girls, is a critical investment in the progress and stability of his homeland.

“The people in Ghizar Valley where Faisal is building projects are mentally tortured” by the proximity of the Taliban, saidullah Baig, Faisal’s cousin, and CAI’s program manager for the Hunza / Gilgit region, said in May. “The Taliban keep pushing from the west and south as the Pakistan drives them out of their sanctuaries, and now the new place is Yasim and the Ghizar Valley.”

Ghizar Valley is at the westernmost end of the Gilgit region and borders Afghanistan and China. It is ruggedly beautiful, with high mountains, including Koyo Zum, the 22,500-foot peak in the Hindu Kush Range.

The people in Ghizar raise crops and herd animals, at a subsistence level, saidullah Baig said. “They grow potatoes, wheat and vegetables for eating, not for export.”

There are some service and government jobs, but not enough, he said. In the winter, “the area is closed off by snow for four months. So some men, carpenters and others like that, they come out from the valley for work. Then in March they go back and in the summer they work in the fields.”

The region’s vulnerability to extremists increased this past spring, when the Taliban in Pakistan’s Swat Valley tried to take over neighboring Buner, triggering attacks by the Pakistan Army.

The people of the Gilgit region, located along the Karakoram Highway (KKH) to China, are also largely Shia and Ismaili, while the Talibain are Sunni.

The battles in the NWFP prompted this comment in the Pakistan Tribune on April 28, 2009: “Most do not grasp the gravity of the threat posed by the Taliban. It is a pity that few people in this country seem to understand what the rise of the Talibain means for this country and the region. The Talibain may open a new front in Gilgit soon if they wrest control of the strategic Karakoram Highway.”

The Baigs’ hope is that by providing the three co-ed schools, one primary and one high school, with an emphasis to help girls, in the local communities will be better able to resist the influence of extremist groups entering their valleys.

GILGIT

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the Hunza Valley, saidullah Baig is busy with a host of other projects. He operates out of Gilgit, the administrative capital of the Northern Areas, in the foothills of the Karakoram Mountains, at 5,000 feet. Located right on the Karakoram Highway, some consider Gilgit the “gateway to China.”

CAI has extensive projects in the Gilgit area, including:

• Fourteen vocational centers, seven in the Charpursan Valley and six scattered throughout the Hunza region. The women embroider and do other traditional crafts. They also make clothes, including uniforms for CAI students.

• One water project in Charpursan Valley.

• One museum in Charpursan. “We just started to collecting,” and cultural heritage is an important part of CAI’s work, Baig said.

• Eight schools in the Charpursan Valley, three of which are completely CAI, another three of which are run with other non-governmental organizations.

• Teachers for government schools. “The government makes a program for building a school,” Baig said. “Then it makes a program for staff, teachers and a chokidar (guard). Then the government changes and the new government forgets those projects. So the community manages, with fees, to get one or two teachers. But not all villages can afford it. So Greg teachers for government schools. And then I have good connections with the community if have need for small supplies.”

• Midwife training for rural health workers.

• A preschool in Charpursan. CAI provided a building, teacher, furniture and library books for the 23-student school. “We trained the teacher for four months,” Baig said. “She’s local, 24 years old and married with one child.” The goal is to eventually upgrade it to a primary school.

• A scholarship program for eligible girls interested in continuing their education.

DHOK LUNA

Many miles south and east of Gilgit and Islamabad is the remote hamlet of Dhok Luna, and the home of Suleman Minhas, CAI’s Punjab operations manager. CAI has worked here to establish girls’ education all the way from kindergarten through high school.

“People wonder what they can do to help their children,” Minhas said. “Old, young, poor, rich, everybody has the same worries, and they all want education.”

With Minhas’ guidance, the village has donated land and constructed a girls’ middle school, a boys’ middle school and, most recently, a big red-brick girls’ high school, the only one in the region.

Suleman said it has been hard work, but added, “CAI staff we never sit down on chair, only go, go go for girls education.”

The six-room boys’ middle school, an updated version of the school Minhas attended as a boy, offers preparatory through fifth-grade classes, serves 150 students and has two teachers. CAI turned it over to the Pakistani government, but the government has not provided a teacher since 2000. “We keep asking,” Minhas said. Meanwhile, CAI fills the gap.

Teacher Pervez Abhtar, a teacher at the adjacent boys’ high school, said in March, “The government is not interested in this area. The government does nothing. So, Inshallah, we remember Dr. Greg Mortenson forever. It is a great honor that he keeps coming back here. All kindness comes from Allah No. 1 and then from Dr. Greg Mortenson No. 2.”

The landscape here is quite different from other areas where CAI works – flatter and more verdant. Dhok Luna, part of the Punjab Province, is hot in the summer, dry and mild in winter, Minhas said.

The Punjabi people here are Sunni, and mostly farmers, using yoked oxen to plow their fields, with a few cows and camels fed on pasture grass. The closest “mountain” to the village is a hill compared to the highest peaks of Pakistan. Minhas said he climbed it once, as a younger man, in two hours.

A short distance down the road from the boys’ school are the girls’ schools, on land donated by Malik Allah Ditta, 90 years old and toothless, but still active and engaged. Like others in the village, he said that without CAI, the village children would be receiving only marginal educations.

“We no have idea before who will come in our area to help us because the government, we’re not on that list,” he said. “So I think Allah put masala together to make Greg and then sent him to Pakistan, and then sent him to Suleman, who came to us and helped.”

The girls had been studying in a two-room middle school, sitting on the floor. Ditta said. The closest girls’ high school was 90 minutes away by bus.

CAI and the village cooperated on the new middle school several years ago, and Minhas insisted on dedicating it to Mortenson’s mother, Jerene. The high school, which will house 200 students, is a new addition in 2009.

“Before Dr. Greg came here there was not any education for females here after fifth grade,” Malik Abdul Karim, a founding member of the education committee, said in March.

“CAI did for us what the government has not been able to do in 50 years”
Mortenson gets Nobel nod, Pakistan’s highest civilian honor for ‘his relentless efforts for the cause of education’

By KARIN RONNOW

On March 23, 2009, Haji Ibrahim watched on television as Pakistan’s president draped the heavy, green and gold Sitara-i-Pakistan medal around Greg Mortenson’s neck in a formal ceremony in the nation’s capital.

The Sitara, or Star of Pakistan, is the nation’s highest civilian award and has been given to only three foreigners.

“When I saw Greg Mortenson win the Sitara Award, due to happiness I was weeping before the television,” said Ibrahim, the village leader in Hushe when Mortenson began working in the Northern Areas. “There are many stories about Greg, but sometimes one cannot imagine he is a human being. He is more like an angel.”

The award was given in recognition of Mortenson’s 16 years of work in Pakistan under the auspices of Central Asia Institute.

“He is an American who played an extraordinary role in promoting education” in Pakistan, a state official said in introducing him at the ceremony. “He motivated the people … to boost education as a tool for combating poverty. In view of his relentless efforts for the cause of education, he has been rightly described as the Sir Syed of the Northern Areas of Pakistan.”

The venerated Sir Syed Ahmed Khan was the 19th century pioneer of modern education for Muslims in pre-Pakistan India.

Mortenson, 51, called the award “a great honor and humbling.”

“This comes from the people of Pakistan,” he said. “I realize I have to uphold myself to the highest standards. But I have always thought of myself as a person trying to do a little good in a little corner of the world. And I still am the same shy, reserved person with a big heart as I was when I started.”

CAI’s overseas staff and supporters threw a party for Mortenson after the awards ceremony, showered him with rose petals, hung garlands of fresh flowers around his neck and cheered in Urdu, Balti and Pashto.

“The Sitara award is a great achievement because there are so many much bigger (non-governmental organizations) and nobody else has received this award,” Saidullah Baig, CAI’s Gilgit project manager, said.

“This award is an honor, a big honor, not only for Greg but for Greg’s family and for all of Central Asia Institute,” Sarfraz Khan, CAI’s operations manager, said.

One of Mortenson’s biggest fans is Pakistan Army Col. Tariq Javed, assistant military attaché at the Pakistan Embassy in Washington, D.C. He said Mortenson’s work helps to “create respect for the Western world in Pakistan, not with words, but with deeds.”

“I believe what Greg is doing for my countrymen and women is the correct approach to countering terrorism in the region,” Javed said. “The only solution to this menace lies in promoting education.”

Although many of Mortenson’s supporters in the United States were unaware of the Sitara award, they did know he had been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. And on Oct. 9, many were up early awaiting the Nobel Nominating Committee’s decision.

U.S. President Barack Obama was awarded the prize. And Mortenson’s supporters were disappointed.

“Everyone in this room thinks you should have won the Nobel Peace Prize,” a woman told Mortenson the next morning after a speech in St. Louis. “But Mortenson was typically down-to-earth about it. “I’m pretty busy right now,” he said.

He’s not kidding. Between flying around the country to give more than 250 lectures in 108 cities in 2009, finishing his second book and managing the overseas operation from afar, Mortenson is constantly trying to find time to visit CAI schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan and, most importantly, carve out precious time with his family.

When his 9-year-old son found out his dad hadn’t won the prize, he whooped with delight, knowing that the prize would have meant more time on the road for his already overscheduled dad.

“If this means more time at home with my son and daughter and my wife, Tara, that’s what I want more than anything,” he said.

It’s a constant juggling act for him. Last summer, when he won the Jefferson Award for Public Service, known in some circles as the Nobel Prize for community and public service, Mortenson noted that the “best part of this week” had been traveling with his wife, Tara Bishop, and their two children, Amira and Khyber.

In addition to the Sitara, he has received dozens of awards from organizations around the world, including being named one of America’s Best Leaders by U.S. News and World Report in October 2009. He also received the Freedom Forum’s Free Spirit Award in 2004; the Red Cross Humanitarian of the Year award in 2005; and the Golden Fleur-de-lis Award from the city of Florence, Italy, in 2006.

Thirteen universities have granted him honorary doctorates, and others are waiting in the wings to bestow their highest honors.
The past year has been hard on Pakistan, as the nation has endured continuing series of attacks from Taliban-linked forces. Pakistan’s Army has launched a series of offensives against the insurgents in the Swat Valley and the tribal areas along the Afghan border. As always, those hardest hit have been civilians caught in the crossfire. Battered by government artillery barrages, U.S. cross-border drone strikes and insurgent suicide attacks, waves of displaced civilians have fled their homes, with entire villages and towns left in ruins. The estimated numbers of "internally displaced persons" from the Swat Valley, Bajaur, and now Waziristan has reportedly crossed the 2 million mark — in a country already struggling with as many as 8 million refugees and IDPs that still remain from the wars in Afghanistan and Kashmir, and from a massive earthquake that struck the region in 2005.
‘Pencils and prayers’

CAI works in Afghanistan to build peaceful relationships amid war

TIRIN KHOT, Afghanistan — One of Central Asia Institute's goals is to help communities promote girls' education in areas where few or no girls have the opportunity to go to school — areas that are remote, isolated, home to religious extremists or plagued by conflict and war.

Urozgan Province in southcentral Afghanistan is one such place, in particular the larger towns of Dae Rawood and Tirin Khot, the original stomping grounds of Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, said CAI's founder and director Greg Mortenson.

“We've wanted to build a girls' school in Dae Rawood ever since we found out that's where Mullah Omar was from, but I figured that would be maybe in 20 years,” Mortenson said. “It was kind of like a joke — 'Dae Rawood or Bust.'

But it’s no joke now.

Wakil Karimi, CAI's hardworking and enterprising Afghan operations manager, met a group of 13 Urozgan provincial shura (tribal leaders) in Kabul in July who were coincidentally trying to track down reports of a strange American organization that was helping girls go to school. That organization was CAI.

Wakil, 31, invited them to his home for dinner, where he talked to them about CAI, and showed them a DVD about CAI.

“I tell them, ‘We are good and simple NGO, we work in village, not in city, and we don't have big office, or Landcruisers or gunman – only pencils and prayers’”

Then he took them to Char Asiab valley, south of Kabul, to see a CAI school for themselves.

“They were much happy, especially when they saw the swings and slips (slides) in the playground, and they quickly asked for a girls' school in their villages,” Karimi said.

At the elders’ invitation, less than a month later, he and Mortenson hopped a ride on a small plane run by PACTEC, a voluntary organization that flies people doing humanitarian work around Afghanistan, to a U.S. military air base in Tirin Khot, the provincial capital. The plan called for a jirga (a meeting of tribal leaders) to seal the deal for a girls' high school in the region.
“We had our first cup of coffee at my home, our second cup of tea that day in Char Asiab, and we’ll have our third cup today in Urozgan,” Karimi said as the plane taxied down the runway in Kabul, “and then like the book, after we finish the third cup of tea, then we are family.”

**Historic jirga**

Urozgan, in Afghanistan’s central highlands, is Taliban heartland and little has been done by the government, allied forces or nongovernmental organizations to develop the region. Literacy is less than 20 percent and “infant mortality is still a horrifying 25 percent,” the Economist reported in May 2009.

But, Mortenson said, “What we are finding out is that sometimes is not necessary to have total security if the shura are empowered to establish a school for themselves.”

He’s learned that in Kunar, Panjshir and Nuristan provinces — areas where CAI has worked with local communities to build schools in the past few years, and where extremists make the idea of sending children off to school each day, especially girls, a precarious notion for many parents.

Yet in all of these places, there is a fierce desire for secular schools; the shura and parents determined to give their children the education they were denied due to three decades of war and neglect.

On the hour-long flight to Urozgan, Mortenson was excited, wrapping his scarf in his hand nervously, and commenting on the occasion, “Even in Urozgan, people desperately want education, but unfortunately in an area like this, the only funding coming in is millions of dollars to support military operations and not schools.

“So this is amazing. This is one of the top three events of CAI history. Opening Korphe School in Pakistan in 1996, going into the far eastern end of the Wakhan Corridor in 2008, and now in 2009, to the home turf of Mullah Omar.”

As the small plane flew west toward the barren, mostly roadless Pashtun tribal lands, Mortenson recalled an old Pashtun saying: “Allah (God) created the Earth and it was good. And then he took the leftovers and created Afghanistan.”

But Mortenson, whose love of the harsh Afghan landscape and its people runs deep, added, “Some say he saved the best for last.”

As the plane neared Tarin Khot, the pilot warned that he’d be making a series of tight circles, dropping from 24,000 feet to 5,000 feet in a minute, to avoid any heat-seeking missiles that might be fired by the Taliban from distant hills.

“These are brave pilots,” Mortenson said.

The plane touched down at NATO’s International Security Assistance Force base just after two Blackhawk helicopters took off on patrol. Under a blazing hot midday sun, Mortenson and Karimi walked to the gate to meet the shura, who had driven 90 minutes from Dae Rawood to meet their guests.

“The shura is how Afghanistan is really run,” Mortenson said. “A jirga is a meeting of the shura. We depend on the shura to advise us about what they need.”

At the gate, the elders presented Karimi and Mortenson with local black turbans, standard attire for the region and the main headdress of the Taliban.

Mortenson and the Urozgan shura elder Haji Ibrahim Akhunzda embraced as if they had known each other for decades, and then everyone piled into a couple of old trucks with tinted windows and headed for the provincial education director’s office.

The assent of Urozgan’s education director, Rahmatullah Faiz, would be key to any CAI work in the region. Although there is little government or NGO work in the region, there are piles of regulations and strict building standards from the distant Kabul government that severely restrict what kind of projects can be launched.

“Welcome, welcome, dear brothers” Rahmatullah Faiz said, greeting Karimi and Mortenson. “This is the first time in many months anyone has come to see me to offer assistance and we are so happy and honored to see you”.

In Faiz’s office, the fan was blowing hard as the elders, Mortenson and Karimi took their seats. Tattered prints of Afghan President Hamid Karzai hung on the walls, the heavy maroon curtains pulled against the hot sun.

Faiz told Mortenson that Urozgan has about 61 schools, about 18 of which were closed “because there is so much fighting I cannot guarantee security.” But many of the districts in Urozgan have no schools at all, he said, or only schools for boys.

“Dae Rawood has had much stress,” Faiz, 54, said. “I am happy you have come to see for yourself, but first we must have tea.”
Students at CAI’s Pigish High School in the Wakhan Corridor, Afghanistan.

The jirga then shifted to the director’s home, where a feast was served, with lamb and sauce, nan (bread), buttermilk and cucumber on ice and big chunks of sweet melon.

As they ate, Faiz told Mortenson about his family, which includes two wives and 20 children (13 boys and seven girls). Two of his sons attend university in Kandahar. “They are busy learning,” he said proudly.

Tea was poured and the men passed around a can of snuff before getting down to negotiations. In addition to a primary girls’ school in Dae Rawood, the elders asked CAI for a girls’ high school in Tirin Khot, a female hostel, a women’s center and a teacher-training program.

“Because if you have good teachers, you have good students,” Faiz said. “Professional teachers, they don’t live here because there is no teacher training.”

Wakil, on behalf of CAI, agreed to the requests for the two girls’ schools and teacher training program, but deferred on the hostel and women’s center for a year.

He then explained the process to start a school, which involves the Urozgan shura providing some free land, subsidized labor and resources like wood. He also said CAI’s rigorous curriculum would be integrated within the compulsory government standards of teaching.

The local imam (Islamic clergy) said a blessing, a contract was signed, another round of green tea was shared, and the deal was sealed. An agreement like this, within the Pashtun tribal culture, is the equivalent of a blood oath, which all parties will protect with their lives, Karimi said.

Everyone went outside to fuss a little with their turbans before a compulsory group photo in the courtyard, and then the elders took Mortenson and Karimi back to their plane at the base.

On the return flight, Mortenson said, “It reminds me of the early days in Baltistan when we met and had solemn meetings with lots of men without a girl in sight. Just wait a year, however, and there’ll be a school with hundreds of girls running around.”
Drink tea and talk

Mortenson’s approach to working in Afghanistan has largely gleaned from his 15 years of experience working in remote Pakistan, plus some trial and error. The emphasis is significantly on girls’ education, and he relies heavily on local CAI staff to negotiate the deals.

“I’m essentially a cheerleader these days,” he said in August, “and our staff are the real heroes who work around the clock almost every day of the year to help girls go to school.

“In order to convince mullahs, Taliban and other people that girls’ education is top priority, our local staff have to be very innovative, creative and sometimes courageous. They have to meet and deal and talk with many people, including shady people, the Taliban, corrupt government officials, military officers, skeptical mullahs. And the criticism and threats do keep coming year after year.

“But even if we don’t like each other, or don’t agree, we still must talk, drink tea, debate and dialogue. Our greatest successes often began as our greatest challenges. And each year, dozens and dozens of new strands are woven into our relationships, and when all those friendships are added together it is like a strong steel cable of hope that twists across the landscape of remote communities,” he said.

CAI’s success here is particularly poignant given the daunting redevelopment needs. Afghanistan has the lowest literacy rates in Asia. An estimated 42 percent of Afghans live on less than $1 per day, according to the UN Development Program. Law enforcement is virtually nonexistent, and powerful individuals, opium traffickers and government officials who commit crimes, often go unpunished. The government is weak and corrupt, the justice system broken.

As for education, it is free at all levels, but schools, books and teachers are in short supply. Many parents still keep children at home; it’s often too expensive or too dangerous for kids to be in classrooms. And there are simply not enough buildings; in many places, school is still held in tents or out in the open air.

Since 2002, the U.S. has committed billions of dollars to Afghanistan’s reconstruction, for projects ranging from roads to electric power stations. But perhaps less than 20 percent of that has reached the rural areas, and most of it is woven into lucrative salaries for consultants and the massive infrastructure needed to support their endeavors.

Yet Mortenson, always the optimist, points to success.

“If you just read newspapers and watch TV and talk to your friends, it seems like a big scary mess over there,” Mortenson said. “But I’m optimistic. There are bad things happening, but good things are happening, too.

“Today, there are 8.5 million kids, including 2.4 million girls, in school in Afghanistan, up from 800,000 in 2000. That’s not bad. Land ownership, including among women, is up dramatically.

The Afghan Army is up to 80,000 trained soldiers, and the goal is 180,000. A national central banking system was established in 2006. Roads are being built, including the one from Kunduz to Kabul to Kandahar, all the way from north to south, across the country.

“All of that represents significant progress, when one considers that most of the foreign attention, media and humanitarian aid was focused on Iraq, not Afghanistan from 2003 to 2008,” he said.

Starkly beautiful Wakhan

Yet in the isolated Wakhan Corridor, a 200-mile-long narrow strip between Tajikistan and Pakistan in northeast Afghanistan, reconstruction is a misnomer. This remote area remains largely undeveloped.
Scenically, it is spectacular, with the towering peaks of the Pamir and Hindu Kush mountains on either side of the Panj River Valley. The people are friendly and incredibly generous with what little they have — everyone wants to kill a sheep to celebrate the arrival of guests. The women and girls wear brightly colored, handmade clothes and hats atop their dupattas (scarves). The interior walls of the otherwise unadorned mud-and-straw homes are sometimes washed with bright primary colors or drawings of the ibex, snow leopards and Marco Polo sheep that inhabit the mountains.

Compared to the rest of Afghanistan, it is also relatively safe, and the Ismaili sect people are eager to get their girls educated.

Yet for all its glory, the Wakhan — and the larger Badakhshan Province in which it sits — is a very remote region, visited by only a few outsiders annually and virtually ignored by the Afghan government.

A single, narrow road traverses the corridor from east to west, but only goes about halfway, stopping at the edge of the Pamir in the Wakhi ethnic hamlet of Sarhad. In the summer and fall, very few miles vehicles must stop and navigate mountain streams gushing down to the Panj. To get anywhere, most people walk or ride the ubiquitous miniature donkeys, or on horseback or camels. They live in small villages, extended families crowded into squat mud and straw houses. People scrape by, working in the fields and herding the animals — goats, sheep, cows and camels. There are a few small dukans (shops), but few people have any money to spend, so the whole area relies heavily on a barter system.

“Have we big problems on the economy side here,” the headmaster of the Piggish High School said in August. “If people have money, they go to Kabul. If they have no money, they stay here. It is much bad for us. We are very poor people.”

Badakhshan is where CAI launched its initial work in Afghanistan in 2000, when Sarfraz Khan, CAI’s Pakistan-based operations director, met with tribal leaders to discuss building schools. Those leaders made it clear right off the bat that they understood any progress in their region depended on education.

But way out here, who is going to build a school? “The government doesn’t come here,” locals say repeatedly. “Our teachers rarely get paid, and some have back pay for two or three years, and only get a few token bags of World Food Program (WFP) wheat in lieu of forgotten pay.”

The few government schools in existence are either in old tents, or in crumbling, unheated mud shelters, often without doors or windows to keep the weather at bay.

“Until CAI came, these brave students sat on stones and were writing with sticks in the sand,” Khan said.

Mortenson put Khan in charge of CAI’s efforts in the region and his steady progress has resulted in 16 mostly co-ed schools in Badakhshan, from primary to high school level, and six women’s vocational centers. The biggest of those projects is Ishkashim Girls High School, which was finished in 2008 and already boasts 1,200 students. The smallest is in Pitukh, a primary school for 160 students.

Every school wall is marked with CAI’s signature in Badakhshan — a single, white large sitara, or star.

In the village of Piggish, before CAI came to help, nearly 300 students were crammed into an old government school and UNICEF tents. CAI replaced all that with a 12-room school, with latrines and a boundary wall. The students, including 135 girls, and 14 teachers are giddy about the results.

“Before, we were having big problems teaching students in the rain, cold and snow,” the headmaster said. “Students were sitting on stones. Nobody came here to help them. Now CAI has built this school and we are thankful to Allah, Dr. Greg and CAI for education help.”
Out in the wide-open spaces, the near-constant wind in the Wakhan pushes the smell of sage along the river corridor. In the villages, however, the air is filled with more pungent smells — animals, burning dung, and human sewage.

Mortenson often says that to fight poverty, “you have to smell poverty, you have to see poverty, you have to taste poverty.”

And poverty is writ large in the Wakhan. The estimated 11,000 Wakhi people who live in these remote villages struggle to meet basic needs. The situation is further complicated by opium trafficking and addiction, and diseases that range from bacterial stomach infections to polio.

Everyone works hard to help keep their families alive.

“In early morning we make tea, clean the clothes, take care of our animals, then come to school,” 14-year-old Shad Barg said of her daily life in the village of Goz Khun. “When we leave school, we go get the animals from the mountains, make the tea, study by candlelight or lantern, go for prayer and then eat and sleep."

The next day, they do it all again.

Shad is one of a group of seven seventh-grade girls who walk hours each day to study at the Goz Khun School after the primary-school students are done for the day. The teacher stays into the late afternoon to help them with math and English.

“We need education to open our minds,” Shad said.

The closest middle school is “much far,” Khan said, and the walk includes navigating a deep and fast-moving stream. Eight boys from the village make the three-hour journey each day, but the girls’ families will not let them go.

“CAI needs more students to expand the school for these older girls,” Khan said.

And CAI is the girls’ best hope at the moment. The government has invested precious little in the Wakhan Corridor’s educational infrastructure over the years.

Even Qais Mehraeen, director of the Badakhshan Education Department, said on his first visit up the Wakhan in August that the government has no money to build schools in the Wakhan, not a single one.

Mehraeen made the trip in part to visit with villagers and discuss their needs, and in part to visit the CAI schools, at Khan’s request. He also wanted to enforce the distant central government’s authority to craft new rules for schools, an effort met with great animosity from local leaders.

At two separate jirgas — one in Khundud, about one-third of the way up the Wakhan, and another in Sarhad, at the end of the road — Mehraeen drew crowds of more than 40 men, some of whom had travelled many miles by horseback from the Pamir to talk about schools.

The jirga in Sarhad was held in a classroom at CAI’s Sitara (Star) High School. Light poured through the skylight in the center of the room, a Wakhi architectural feature built into every CAI school in this region. Sarhad is a village of 48 families surrounded by mountains, so far off the beaten path that visitors are uncommon, especially from the government. For generations there was no school here, and most of the adults can’t read or write at all.

Toshi Boi, a Sarhad elder and a relatively wealthy man by Wakhan standards, said given the government’s inability to help, the region desperately needs CAI.

“Education is most important now,” Boi said. “When you have no maktab (school), when you have no education, you are blind, you have no eyes. When you have education, you can see.”

At the jirga Mehraeen explained and listened as the local men stood one by one and spelled out their requests and concerns. After a couple of hours of sometimes heated debate, Mehraeen announced he wanted to see more CAI schools. He gave permission for CAI to start a high school in Sarhad, the first one in the whole region.
Afterwards, Khan explained that on the drive up the Wakhan, Mehraeen had seen the bad condition of the road and the crumbling government schools. He also saw all of CAI’s projects and repeatedly heard from locals that they needed more schools.

“He had not seen before how bad it is,” Khan said. “Now he says, ‘Please, go ahead, we need all the help we can get,’ and he is much happy. But still, the villagers are afraid Kabul government officials will try to shut our schools down, because CAI no give bribe to anyone.”

Roadless Pamir

East of the Wakhan is an even more remote area of Afghanistan called the Pamir, where there are no roads and the Kirghiz nomads spend most of the year following their grazing livestock through the towering Hindu Kush mountains.

There is no school in the Pamir, in part because children are constantly on the move with their families. The government did hire a couple of teachers to follow the nomads on horseback, but they never reached their assigned job locations.

During the jirga in Khandud, when Mehraeen was informed of the situation, he said, “Yes, we need to teach the children for the future.” He directed one of his staff members to go to the Pamir, “see the place, see how we can teach.” Despite their nomadic lifestyle, the Kirghiz recognize the importance of educating their children.

“Look at us. Government is no help to us,” a Kirghiz man named Morad said. “We can’t get good, well-trained, educated teachers without a school, but there is no school. … What, all the world needs education, but for Kirghiz, we get nothing?”

Mortenson has been hearing such sentiments for a decade, and long ago began trying to set up a school in the Pamir. In 2008, Khan and his masons finally laid the foundation for a school in Bozoi Gumbad, the first school in the region. The idea is to teach children in double shifts for four months, leaving them free to spend the other eight months of the year in the mountains with their families.

The school was completed in October of this year.

Building women’s skills

Dotted across the Wakhan, in smaller structures marked with the white star, are CAI’s women’s vocational centers, also built on land donated by the villages and geared toward helping women develop some basic skills.

“The old women here have no education,” Khan said. “Most cannot even write their name.”

The five centers give the women a place to gather and make handicrafts. They make their own yarn and thread from wool, then knit and embroider socks, gloves, mittens, vests and children’s clothing. They also do bead work.

The goal, Khan said, has always been to collect the handicrafts and sell them at the market in Ishkashim. But the projects have had trouble getting off the ground. So this year, CAI hired a woman named Samina, 25, to help with training at the centers. She spent four months traveling in the region, helping to motivate the women and teach them new skills.

“For six years we have a vocational center, but we have some problems,” a woman named Momo said, as she sat on the floor of the women’s center in Kipkut and knitted a pair of brightly colored socks. “We need a hard-working vocational center so we can make money for our children, for education and for health.”

“Now we have a good teacher. We have better tools. And we are working hard to make money so we can give loans to our husbands – with interest,” she said, laughing.

Unending need

Khan and Karimi have been working straight out for several years now, but there is no rest for the weary. The requests from communities are coming fast and furious as communities see CAI’s successful work in other villages and clamor for schools of their own.

A new development this year was CAI’s creation of the Marco Polo Foundation, part of what Mortenson called the organization’s “push to sustainability.” The goal is to put all CAI schools in the northern reaches of the country, except the Wakhan, under the umbrella of the foundation, which will be run by Afghan people, he said.

To date, those schools and projects include:

**BAHARAK AND JIRUM GIRLS’ HIGH SCHOOLS:** These two schools are in an area surrounded by wheat fields and fruit orchards, two hours southeast of Faisabad.

**SHOUHADA:** The town’s name means “Valley of the Martyrs,” and CAI this year built a 3,000-student girls’ school.

**FARKAR:** In Takhar Province, west of Badakhshan, CAI built a school on the site where the first Afghan mujahedeen (freedom fighter) training camp was established after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979.

**ZEBAK:** Two hours south of Ishkashim. The Taliban bombed a high school there in 2005, which was then shut down, and CAI is building a new one.

Those projects are all being handled by Khan, who tends to stick to the northern reaches of the country. Then this summer, as if he didn’t have enough to do, he met some war refugees and sparked another CAI project, this one in Nuristan Province.

The backstory is that the Taliban attacked and seized the town of Barg-e-Matal, an old resort area, in Nuristan on July 10, Mortenson said.

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**HISTORIC TIMELINE OF AFGHANISTAN**

1747: Ahmad Shah Durrani unified Pashtun tribes and founded country.

1800s: At center of British-Russian battle for regional dominance.

1919: Independence from limited British control.

1973: Democracy experiment ends in coup.

1978: Communist counter-coup.

1979: Soviets invade to help communist regime; mujahiden rebels fight back, with help from U.S., Pakistan & Saudi Arabia.

1989: Communists fall; mujahiden factions wage civil war.


1996: Taliban seize Kabul; Northern Alliance emerges as primary opposition.

2001: Taliban toppled after U.S. invasion. Taliban leaders retreat to Pakistan to regroup.

2003: Taliban guerrilla factions start to harass occupying forces in Afghanistan.

2003: NATO takes control of security in Kabul.

2004: Taliban joined by new generation of local recruits, radicalized by occupation.

2004: Government adopts constitution; Hamid Karzai elected president (five-year term).

2005: National and provincial legislative elections.

2006: Tensions with Pakistan increase; Afghan government accuses Pakistan of failing to control militants on border.

2006: NATO takes control of all peacekeeping forces.

2008: War spills over into Pakistan with suspected U.S. soldiers attacking border village and drone fires missile into Pakistan.

2008: By September, military says it is deadliest year for U.S. troops since start of war.

2008: U.S. Gen. David McKiernan says forces unable to hold cleared territory, calls for roughly 20,000 more soldiers and says situation likely to get worse before it gets better.

2008: Taliban spray battery acid on faces of students at Mirwais Mena School for Girls near Kundahar.

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*Source: CIA World Factbook, news reports, Wikipedia*
Children of all ages spend hours before and after school helping in the fields and herding animals, but run to meet visitors or passersby.

There were brutal attacks on the locals, eight police officers and dozens of locals were killed, and the Taliban stole people’s goats, money and winter supplies of flour.

U.S. and Afghan forces responded on July 14th, and killed 40 or more Taliban, but were only able to push them to the surrounding hills. About 70 families fled the fighting, seeking refuge in a village called Koh-e-Munjor, where Khan befriended them. Once they heard about CAI’s work, they asked for a girls’ high school and “we want to do it,” Mortenson said.

But the Taliban’s “Ring of Kalashnikovs” in the hills outside Barg-e-Matal make work there difficult. “There’s no way to get in there by donkey, horse or road. It’s completely blocked off by the Taliban. We can’t get in there. So they are trying, without any supplies, to build it with local materials. But the Nuristanis are incredible craftsmen, they do beautiful stone and woodwork, and they are finishing the school there,” he said.

Karimi, meanwhile, has his hands full with projects in Urozgan, Kabul and the eastern part of the country.

In Kunar Province, for example, the organization has nine schools, all of which have been built in the past two years. Building schools in this volatile area near the border with Pakistan, where Taliban fighters clash daily with allied forces, was a risky bet for CAI.

“There are many Talibans coming there because it is on the border, so this place is very dangerous,” Karimi said. But he has found ways to work there. “In each village we try to find a man who has connection with the Taliban, who can help us. Still, in one village, at night the Taliban came to one CAI girls’ school and tried to burn the door. After than, we had shura there for protection of the school day and night.”

Before the students were afraid. Now they are happy and studying,” he said. And this summer, Karimi met with 200 Gojar nomads who roam free across Afghanistan’s parched land, who also insisted that CAI start educating their girls.

And the list gets bigger every month.

Military connections

CAI also started working in Panjshir Province, a few hours drive northeast of Kabul, in 2008 after Karimi and Doug Chabot, a volunteer for CAI, traveled to the ruggedly beautiful area to meet with locals and discuss the possibilities.

Compared to other parts of the country, Panjshir is relatively stable and CAI quickly set up three primary schools in the province.

One of them, Pushgar Primary School, garnered some international media attention when Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, visited the school to assist with the inauguration in July 2009.

Mullen, who along with some other senior U.S. military commanders has met with Mortenson a few times, was accompanied by New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman, who wrote about the visit:

“I watched Greg Mortenson, the famed author of “Three Cups of Tea,” open one of his schools for girls in this remote Afghan village in the Hindu Kush mountains. I must say, after witnessing the delight in the faces of those little Afghan girls crowded three to a desk waiting to learn, I found it very hard to write, ‘Let’s just get out of here.’

AFGHANISTAN 2009 TIMELINE

2009: Civilian deaths increasingly turn Afghans against foreign military presence.

February: U.S. President Barack Obama announces 17,000 more troops.

May 7 – Obama releases new Pentagon budget that doubles the amount of money used by American commanders in Afghanistan to win over population – building soccer fields, renovating hospitals, improving schools.

May: Taliban code of conduct calls for reductions in civilian attacks, suicide bombings and harm to prisoners.

May: Karzai and Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari hold two-day summit with Obama.


June: Taliban attacks reach highest level since 2001.

Summer: Obama administration considers overhaul to war, including new emphasis on development, long-term security, training of Afghan forces and more U.S. troops.

July: U.S. amps up anti-Taliban offensive in Helmand Province.

July: McChrystal tells LA Times he sees potential for integrating Taliban into Afghan society because most of them were under sway of charismatic leaders, working for pay or frustrated with their local government.

August: Congressional Research Service reports U.S. has spent $223 billion on war-related funding for Afghanistan; aid expenditures exceed $9.3 billion.

Aug. 20: Afghanistan elections; President Hamid Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah pull in most votes, but election fraud leads to fall runoff.

Aug. 31: McChrystal releases analysis of situation in Afghanistan.

September: McChrystal tells audience in London switching to a strategy more reliant on drone missile strikes and special forces operations would lead to “Chaos-istan.”

October: Obama mulls whether to send up to 40,000 more troops to Afghanistan, as McChrystal requested.

Nov. 7: Scheduled runoff in presidential election.

— Source: CIA World Factbook, news reports, Wikipedia
“. . . “it was no accident that Adm. Mike Mullen, the U.S. chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff — spent half a day in order to reach Mortenson’s newest school and cut the ribbon.”

Mullen’s visit generated a lot of goodwill, Mortenson said.

“Admiral Mullen does not usually take time out to visit a small village in Afghanistan, but I saw it as him fulfilling a promise, and he and his wife Deborah are huge proponents of girls’ (and boys’) education, and believe in the ‘Three Cups of Tea’ message about building relationships,” Mortenson said. “The Pushgar community was honored and very excited to have a ‘sitara,’ meaning ‘star’ for the four general stars on his lapel, like Admiral Mullen as their guest, and said it was one of the best days of their lives.”

But for some, the visit raised questions about Mortenson’s increased consultation with the U.S. military. For the past three years, Mortenson, a military veteran, has visited dozens of military bases to brief and educate troops deploying to Afghanistan on cultural issues, tribal nuances and how to build relationships with the elders and communities of rural Afghanistan.

“First and foremost, I am a humanitarian, and I feel it is important to talk and help anyone who is trying to make a difference and serve the good Afghan people,” he said. “My work with the military is all voluntary, without honorarium and I cover my own expenses. I do it as a fellow veteran and because I have seen the military go through a huge learning curve over the last two or three years; the military really gets it with putting the elders in charge, listening and learning from the local people.”

Capital city

CAI staff long ago coined the phrase, “We start in the mountains and go to the cityside,” to sum up the organization’s emphasis on working in remote areas.

Kabul is the exception to that rule.

Karimi lives in Kabul, and he seems to have a built-in sensor for what the overcrowded city’s war-weary, unemployed, unskilled and often fearful residents need most in terms of education.

Nearly 5 million people live in Kabul, up from 2 million in 2002, and many of them are illiterate refugees from other parts of the country.

They live packed tight in homes, most without electricity, water or sewer service. For some, home is in one of the squatter camps that have cropped up, muddy compounds in the center of the city where goats scrounge in the garbage and people mark their space with blankets and tents.

Kabul is also a dangerous city, where suicide bombs explode with alarming frequency. Military planes fly overhead, pickup trucks loaded down with soldiers in full battle gear are a regular sight and armed security guards watch over the stores, homes and government buildings.

One August morning, as his cousin drove the pickup truck toward one of CAI’s centers, Karimi was fielding a steady stream of phone calls. “Morning-time is always much busy,” he said. It was a week before the Aug. 20 national election and campaign posters covered walls, poles, car windows and billboards. Security in Kabul was tight, as the Taliban was making good on its vow to disrupt the elections.

Women in blue burkas, often carrying or holding hands with their small children, hustled down the streets as Karimi’s truck bounced along the pot-holed streets, past bicycles pulling carts and men riding small donkeys.

Karimi stopped first at one of two English school/computer centers he has set up in the city, offering basic reading, writing and math classes and tutoring.

The success of these centers has been phenomenal. In addition to helping computer-illiterate children and adults, the centers’ nontraditional students include small business owners, doctors and other professionals. Even the Afghan Army is sending soldiers to work on basic skills.

Then he made a stop at his home, for a jirga with elders from Maiden Shar, in Wardak province southwest of Kabul, where CAI is working on a 3,200-student girls’ school.

“It will serve a huge area, the only one in the province,” Mortenson said. “Some students will walk three hours just to go to school.”

Lehman Shah, an elder from Maiden Shar and supervisor of the school project, said the school is desperately needed. Girls now only go to school through grade six, and they are spread out studying in different houses scattered throughout the area.

“We do not have good economics, people have only a small garden and we are lucky if we have one cow,” he said. “Almost all people are jobless because the land becomes dry. We don’t have sugar for tea.

“But day by day, the situation changes. People know education is important and send sons and daughters to school for good life and future. And if we build a school, other girls will come because some parents don’t want to send their children to other people’s houses.”
It won't be cheap. To comply with the government regulations, CAI must use double walls of rebar-reinforced concrete, Karimi said. That, plus boundary walls, latrines, supplies and furniture will bring the cost up to about $80,000, Karimi said.

Karimi is a little nervous about security, since the Taliban have are active in that area.

"I am worried," he said, "but these men tell me not to worry. They have consulted with the local Taliban leaders, who also approved the girls' school because it was being set up by the community and not outside contractors with armed guards."

Shah tells him, "We will guarantee your safety, even if we lose our life. We do all things for our children and all the people there will protect the school from any insurgents."

Next, Karimi made the rounds of a few of the women's literacy centers, or "home schools" for women and girls whose families do not allow them, for religious or security reasons, to attend school in a public place.

The literacy centers are "100 percent free," Karimi said as he opened a gate and entered a yard. Inside, 27 girls and women, some with babies, were sitting outside under a canvas tarp to keep the hot sun at bay, working on their arithmetic lesson.

"CAI pays the teachers' salary and buys all books, pencils and notebooks," he said. The teacher then asked him a quick question and Karimi added, "They have also asked for chairs, toothpaste and soap."

At another home-based center, one student, her brown eyes peering out from a face wrapped tightly in a dupatta, said, "Before I didn't know anything. But we learn from this center and are eager to get more education."

The 31-year-old teacher said, "This is a golden chance for them to learn to read and write."

The demand for such centers has been unceasing, and for that reason Mortenson suggested Karimi organize a meeting for the directors of all the centers, encourage them to form their own NGO and then let the women take it from there.

Karimi did just that, and within a month the number of literacy centers had more than doubled, from 17 to 37, Mortenson said.

"Literacy is spreading like wildfire," he said. "These women are determined."

Count Safiya, 19, among those determined women. She was one of a dozen students studying in another home school, where the students ranged in age from 10 to 30, their burkas hanging from nails on the wall behind them.

"Many times I beg to my mother and father, but they say, 'School is not for you. It is for boys,'" Safiya said. "But education is important for everybody, so we can go places and understand. When we can't read, we don't know whether this is a barber shop or a beauty shop. But once we can read the signboards, our eyes are open. We can see the bus stops, dial a number on a phone. We learn mathematics so we don't get cheated in the market."

"I hope this continues. We need more education," she said. [A young girl, curious but shy, in a home in Khandud Village in the Wakhan Corridor, Afghanistan.]

School is out by 2 p.m. each day so students have time to return home to help with livestock and farming and to collect water for drinking and dung for burning.
At a medical training clinic this summer in Charpursan Valley, way up north in Pakistan, a woman carried a 9-year-old girl into the room to see a female doctor — a rare thing in the region — visiting from the United States. “The girl could only crawl,” said Genevieve Chabot, a consultant for Central Asia Institute, who had helped organize the clinic. “Her grandmother was hoping that Dr. Reid had something to help the young girl’s knees, because they were so sore from crawling around.”

Dr. Genevieve Reid, an OB/GYN from Livingston, Mont., examined the girl and concluded that she had spina bifida. She turned to the students she’d been working with as part of a midwife-training course, and explained that spina bifida, Latin for “split spine,” is a birth defect that prevents the neural tube around the spine from fully closing during development. Her 12 students, brought together by CAI and ranging in age from 15 to their early 30s, took it all in, astonished at the coincidence between that morning’s class and this girl’s condition. “Amazingly, yet again, Dr. Reid had taught her morning class on nutrition for pregnant mothers-to-be,” Chabot said. “Folic acid was discussed at length, as well as the need for iron supplements in this impoverished region, with little meat or access to a balanced diet. Folic acid is one of the most important supplements for pregnant women to take to prevent birth defects like spina bifida.”

A few days earlier, another coincidence had occurred. On “Suture Day,” Reid talked about stitching up women after they deliver a baby. That afternoon, one of the midwives-in-training, Aziza, attended a birth, with Reid coaching, “that, yes, ended with the need for stitches,” Chabot said.

**CAI fills dire need with midwife training course**

Women in CAI’s midwife training program practice nursing skills at a clinic in Pakistan’s Charpursan Valley, near the Afghan border. The newly trained midwives returned home to villages where the maternal mortality rates are among the highest in the world.
“The women all start to whisper when these coincidences happen,” she said.

Yet the coincidences demonstrated just how valuable basic medical knowledge can be.

The dearth of skilled women’s health-care workers in remote areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan means most pregnant women never receive any prenatal care, deliver their babies without any help and have no access to medical care if something goes wrong.

As a result, it’s not surprising that Afghanistan has the third-highest infant mortality rate in the world and Pakistan the 32nd highest, according to the CIA World Factbook, with 152 deaths per 1,000 live births in Afghanistan and 65/1,000 in Pakistan.

As for the women, in Pakistan, 297 of every 100,000 die giving birth. And the maternal mortality rate in Afghanistan is a staggering 1,600/100,000 live births.

“The situation is so dire that a woman in Afghanistan dies from pregnancy-related complications every 27 seconds,” according to the Central Asia Health Review. In Afghanistan, “religious stigma toward gender separation is so deeply ingrained that a husband would rather let his wife die in childbirth than allow a male physician to treat her.”

CAI founder Greg Mortenson often says that when he asks women in Afghanistan and Pakistan what they want most, they tell him, “We don’t want our babies to die and we want our children to go to school.”

So this year, CAI charged Chabot with organizing a midwife’s training program in Charpursan. Twelve women were chosen to participate in the intensive month-long program in the Charpusan Valley. And Chabot recruited Reid to come teach the classes.

The idea was to go five or six days, then take a day or two off, Chabot said. “But the women didn’t want to take a day off. Their dedication and motivation were amazing.”

Each morning Reid led classes on topics ranging from birth defects to rashes, communicable diseases and abdominal pain. The women learned to take a pulse and blood pressure, and what those measurements meant. And they had a chance to talk about sex, pregnancy and labor — topics generally taboo in their village cultures.

Then in the afternoon, Reid led practical teaching clinics in different villages across the region. The clinics gave the midwives-in-training the opportunity to meet with patients, assess problems and determine the best solution, Chabot said.

And, in the case of the girl with spina bifida, they witnessed a happy ending, too.

While talking to the doctor that day in the clinic, the grandmother mentioned that the girl would sometimes pull herself up on the wall and move around.

“Ah ha! This girl has the opportunity to be upwardly mobile if she had the assistance of a walker or crutches,” Chabot said.

Then Reid asked if the little girl went to school. The answer was no.

“We then responded that CAI will work to get her a walker and crutches and even a scholarship for elementary school if the family allows her the chance to have an education,” Chabot said. “The grandmother clapped and prayed, so happy with the turn of events and the new options for her granddaughter’s life.”
Faces of the Wakhan

PHOTO ESSAY BY TERU KUWAYAMA
“There is an African proverb I learned as a child in Tanzania, ‘If you educate a boy, you educate an individual. But if you educate a girl, you educate a community.’”

- Greg Mortenson

Educate girls, change the world

Greg Mortenson and his Central Asia Institute have been promoting education, especially for girls, in remote areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan for 16 years — yet not a day goes by that someone doesn’t ask Mortenson if he’s not tempting fate by emphasizing girls’ education.

The short answer is rarely. Most of the extremists’ attacks occur in places where CAI schools are not.

The long answer is yes, in some places where CAI is working, security is dicey. The long answer is yes, in some places where CAI schools are not.

“... CAI staff spend a lot of time drinking tea and building relationships with local leaders to ensure complete commitment to every school.

“In order to get things done, we often have to deal with a lot of shady people,” Mortenson said. “We have to have tea with the Taliban and corrupt government officials, the U.S. military and the visionary imams, and with the despot mullahs who are opposed to education and literacy.

“It’s all in a day’s work to get the job done and insure that the need to get kids in school is met,” he said.

Many cups of tea and sometimes years later, a school is established and there is no doubt about who owns it – the village does. So when threats do crop up, villagers protect those schools with their lives.

Only one CAI school has ever been attacked by the Taliban, two years ago in Afghanistan. The attackers were shot at, some killed and some arrested, and the girls were back in school within two days. The militia now guard the school day and night and operate under a shoot-to-kill order regarding any militants who threaten a student or teacher.

“It’s not how I’d run a school,” Mortenson said. “But it’s not my school. It’s theirs.”

‘Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.’

— Nelson Mandela

As for why it’s important to take the risk and build girls’ schools at all, Mortenson said it’s simple. "That is the universal request we hear from women and communities: 'We want schools.'"

But the barriers that keep girls in poor countries out of school are numerous.

MEASURING STICKS

CAI founder Greg Mortenson often points to three areas where increased female literacy makes a difference in a society: infant mortality rates, population growth (just under half of the population in Pakistan and in Afghanistan is under the age of 15, just about to enter childbearing years) and quality of life.

INFANT MORTALITY RATE

AFGHANISTAN: 152 deaths per 1,000 births.
PAKISTAN: 65 per 1,000.
U.S.: 6.26 per 1,000.

POPULATION GROWTH

PAKISTAN: 180 million people, growing about 2 percent a year.
AFGHANISTAN: 28 million people, growing at nearly 3 percent.
U.S.: 307 million people; growing at less than 1 percent.

QUALITY OF LIFE

The U.N. Human Poverty Index measures and ranks countries using adult literacy rates, probability of living to age 40, access to clean drinking water and number of underweight children. The higher the number, the better the quality of life.

AFGHANISTAN: Dead last on the list; No. 135 out of 135 countries.
PAKISTAN: No. 101
U.S.: No. 13

A seventh-grade student in Afghanistan's remote Wakhan Corridor.
and, in some cases, deeply entrenched. In Pakistan and Afghanistan, where female literacy rates are at 36 and 13 percent, respectively, according to “The World Factbook,” extremists are the most vocal and violent obstructionists. They attack, bomb and burn girls’ schools, throw acid in female students’ faces and threaten anyone who dares to challenge their edicts to keep women out of public life.

Girls’ education is haram, or unIslamic, they say. But Mortenson said, “Islamic scholars have told me that there is nothing in the Koran to prohibit girls’ education.” Experience has taught him that this opposition is rooted not in theology, but in the extremists’ recognition that poor, illiterate communities are far more vulnerable to Taliban offers of money and martyrdom than communities where families are fighting hard to educate their children. After all, educated girls grow up to be educated women who are less likely to let their children join violent extremist movements.

In the Hadith, which is the teachings of Islam, it says, “The ink of a scholar is holier than the blood of a martyr.” In other words, “Their greatest fear is not the bullet, but it’s the pen,” he said. “They fear that if the girl gets an education, grows up and becomes a mother, they’ll lose future recruits.” But in these countries, where religion informs almost every aspect of daily life, a growing number of religious leaders are working hard to counter the extremists’ anti-female rhetoric. Syed Hassan Shah, principal of the Federal Government InterCollege Shigar, in Baltistan, Pakistan, is one such leader.

“According to Islam, until women are educated, no good society can be developed,” Shah said. “Islam says that education is for both boys and girls and there should be no difference, there should be opportunity for both of them. Another teaching of Islam is that every person should get an education and learning — even if he has to go to China.”

When he was starting the college, parents were more than willing to send their boys. Girls were another story. So to help recruit female students, he enlisted the help of his eldest daughter, Tahreem Fatima, who was studying in class 12 in Skardu.
“Nobody was willing to send the girls to the boys’ college, so she came to college for one year with the boys,” Shah said. “She made a big sacrifice. It was difficult for her. But I am a religious leader, so other parents saw that and said, ‘Let us send our daughters also.’”

His strategy worked.

“I believe that women everywhere share the same dreams: to be educated, to live in peace, to enjoy good health, to be prosperous and to be heard. And, of course, these dreams start with the education of girls.”
— Laura Bush, former first lady

Religion, however, is just the tip of the iceberg. Many, many things conspire to keep girls out of school in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Poverty, for example, also informs all aspects of life for million in this region. Subsistence living means families often need girls at home to help in the fields, herd livestock or tend to younger siblings. The cost of school fees, books and uniforms sometimes requires families to choose between sending sons or daughters to school, and the boys are often seen as the better choice, due to their ability to get paid work and contribute to the household income down the road.

Another barrier to girls’ education is distance. Sometimes the schools that accept girls are just too far away. Parents aren’t comfortable having their daughters walk alone for hours each way in rural areas, especially in war zones.

And then there are the seemingly obvious but often overlooked aspects of the need for privacy and safety at the schools themselves. Parents may not say it, but they want their girls to go to schools with boundary walls and private toilets, especially adolescent girls. And, due to fear of sexual harassment or even violence, they steer clear of schools that employ only male teachers.

Older girls in the Lower Chunda School in the Northern Areas turn around to hear the teacher talking to younger students in another grade. The girls are packed tight in the school, which CAI recently adopted.

**ECONOMIC BENEFITS**

**INCOME GROWTH:** Girls’ education leads to increased income for the girls themselves and for nations as a whole. Increasing the share of women with a secondary education by 1 percent boosts annual per capita income growth by 0.3 percent, according to the World Bank. That’s significant, since per capita income gains in developing countries seldom exceed 3 percent a year.

**FARM PRODUCTIVITY:** Educated farmers are more efficient and their farms are more productive, which leads to increased crop yields and declines in malnutrition, according to the World Food Program.

**HEALTH BENEFITS**

**FERTILITY RATE:** Educated women tend to have fewer babies. A 2000 study in Brazil found that literate women had an average of 2.5 children while illiterate women had an average of 6 children, according to UNESCO.

**INFANT MORTALITY:** The better educated the women, the less likely their babies are to die. “Primary education alone helps reduce infant mortality significantly, and secondary education helps even more,” according to “What Works.” “Girls who stay in school also marry later, when they are better able to bear and care for children.”

**MATERNAL MORTALITY:** Greater knowledge of health care and fewer pregnancies significantly reduces the risk of maternal mortality, according to the World Bank.

**REDUCED DOMESTIC VIOLENCE:** Educated girls and women are more likely to stand up for themselves, resist violence. “In poor areas where women are isolated within their communities, have little education and cannot earn much, girls are often regarded as an economic burden and women and girls sometimes suffer deliberate neglect or outright harm,” according to “What Works.”

**HEALTHIER CHILDREN:** Educated women “learn what their children need to stay healthy and how to secure necessary support for their children,” including health care, better nutrition and sanitation, according to “What Works.” They also channel more of their resources to the health of their children than men.

**WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT**

**EDUCATED CHILDREN:** Educated women more likely to insist on education for their own children, especially their daughters. Their children study as much as two hours more each day than children of illiterate mothers and stay in school longer, according to “What Works.”

**LOCAL POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT:** Educated women are more likely to participate in political discussions, meetings and decision making.

**DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS:** Studies show that education promotes more representative, effective government. As women are educated and approach parity with men, research shows “governments and other institutions function better and with less corruption,” according to “What Works.”

When CAI joins with a village to address those concerns and get girls enrolled in school, the outcome is girls who lead richer, more productive lives, contribute to the health and welfare of their families and grow up to raise educated, healthier children.

“In short, there may be no better investment for the health and development of poor countries around the world than investments to educate girls,” according to the Council on Foreign Relations’ “What Works in Girls’ Education: Evidence and Policies from the Developing World.”

Research has proven that educated girls marry later, have fewer children and those children are less likely to die. Educated girls also contribute to family income, insist their own children are educated, and lead healthier lives.

“We can drop bombs, we can build roads, or we can put in electricity, but unless the girls are educated, the world won’t change,” Mortenson said.

Conveying that message to parents, Shah said, has become less onerous over time.

“There is already a big difference and the difference is good and positive,” he said. “We still have to teach the religious people. And there might be, in the mountains or other places, some people who don’t understand. But people are seeking better and better opportunities for their girls, so the change is very good.” ★
CAI scholarships help 'pioneers' break down barriers to illiteracy

Every generation has its pioneers. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, it is young women from poor, conservative, far-flung villages pushing for the opportunity to continue their educations who are breaking new ground.

“There are no educated women in our village now,” Fatima, of Azad Kashmir, said. “Parents have not allowed girls to go on for higher study — some because they are uneducated, some because they think it is safer and better for girls to stay home and cook, some because they are just closed-minded. Some religious people and old-minded people are upset about us changing the culture. “But we will change the old minds, the life, the culture and the society. Slowly, slowly, parents are thinking that in other places the culture is different. Now women are only working as teachers. But in 10 years there will be lawyers and doctors, and they will be parents, their minds will be open and their children, too, will get higher education,” Fatima said.

Central Asia Institute has spent 16 years chipping away at illiteracy, especially among girls, in remote areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. But one of the glaring realities for girls is that once they complete whatever education they can get in their village — primary, middle or high school — they often are barred from higher education.

“Africa having been in Pakistan for 16, going on 17 years, our long-range goal is that everything will be totally run by local people and communities,” said Greg Mortenson, CAI’s founder and executive director.

“In Baltistan, for example, when I first started working in the region, the main and only focus was to build a school, and then a few more schools. It was about brick and mortar and furniture.

“At that time I never realized that within a decade or two, all these schools would be exploding with students and that of the first wave of literate children in the communities, over two-thirds of the students would actually matriculate. I was just thinking more about getting them up to a fifth-grade level!”

In 2002, CAI expanded its mission to target regions where there are no schools due to physical isolation, religious extremism, conflict or natural disaster.

“But CAI has now realized that it is not just about brick and mortar, but it is about a promise that we will help every child achieve their dream — no matter what,” Mortenson said.

Some students in Baltistan, where the organization began, had already been offered scholarships to continue their education. But there was no organized effort to extend that offer to all CAI students. So two years ago, CAI selected 12 girls from northern parts of Pakistan — Azad Kashmir, Charsadda Valley and Gilgit — to participate in the first round of a program based in Rawalpindi.

“There are so many orphans and girls from low-income families who have finished high school and cannot afford college,” said Saidullah Baig, who runs CAI’s programs in Gilgit and organizes the scholarship program from that region. “And without school, in Pakistan the option is marriage, often when they are quite young.”

The students, ranging in age from 12 to mid-20s, live in a hostel and attend high school and college.

“The villagers in the Neelum Valley (in Azad Kashmir) are so poor and the parents are not educated so they are not interested in their daughters getting an education,” said Ifra (which means read in Arabic), a shy but determined 13-year-old scholarship student who wants to be a doctor. “Without support, many girls stop school after class five. But I’m feeling proud because the scholarship is giving me a chance to get a better education, be stronger in the home and have opportunities for work.

“Girls who do not finish class five now look at me. I am changing the girls’ minds, the villagers’ minds. Inshallah (God willing), I will be a doctor and example, they will be proud and they will allow their daughters for study after seeing me,” she said.

The program — which costs CAI about $40 to $80 per month per scholarship student for tuition, room and board, books and supplies — is already making a difference. Many of the students at the Rawalpindi hostel say they feel much different than they did when they arrived. They are certainly more confident.

“We feel stronger,” said Nola, 25, from Charpursan, finishing class 14, studying sociology and education. “We feel like we are also doing something for our village.”

And they all have career goals — three want to be teachers for CAI, three want to be doctors, one a lawyer, one an engineer, another a police inspector.

They say their hero is Genevieve Chabot, the CAI consultant who did the lion’s share of the work to get the program going.

She, in turn, said she gets her inspiration from them.

“It is interesting to watch the girls grow
more confident and start expressing their dreams as more of a reality, with more details and goals, and with the trust of knowing that CAI is supporting them, while also expressing a mature understanding of the responsibility they hold with this opportunity of a higher education," Chabot said. "It gives me goosebumps."

This year, the program expanded to Afghanistan, where CAI is sponsoring 15 scholarship students at the college and university level.

While all these young women are brave and determined, they are still vulnerable. They are identified here only by first name for their safety.

**Adjustment problems**

Students are chosen for their lack of family resources and potential for academic success, Baig said. "We choose them on a need basis and based on their test scores," Baig said. "Also, any girls from my area who are offered scholarships must help to work with projects in the future.

"And finally, while they are in school, we expect their best performance. They must maintain their marks and work hard so we can continue them up to graduation. The goal is to get them through four years of college, then on to a master's program. Greg works 18 hours a day so that these girls can study higher education, so they should be working just as hard," he said.

The social realities, too, can be daunting, said Jahan Ali, 20, one of the first girls to graduate from CAI's first school in Korphe, who now studies economics in Skardu.

"All the other students here in the college are from Skardu, so when I and the other students from the valleys of Baltistan came here for the first time, we felt far behind the other girls. We were upset that we were not equal to the other girls. We were feeling lonely. All the girls teased us because of the dialect of Braldu and our poor English. In college, we also face many languages, many dialects."

"But we overcame that. In six months we started to adjust. After two years, we started feeling at par with the other girls. Now we are very happy here," she said.

**Hostel life**

The CAI students who arrived in Rawalpindi in August 2008 had some "adjustment problems" at first, said Hina Beenish, 21, who runs the hostel in Rawalpindi with her husband.

"These are more modest girls, from poor, remote and very much hard areas," she said. "But they are in a good position. They can benefit from the program and from higher education and be role models for their area. All are already stronger than they were when they came here."

The hostel is a key part of making the scholarship program work. Culture dictates that girls who live away from their families must live with a "guardian," usually a male relative. Hostels serve as a good substitute when that's not an option.

"Families like hostels where there are good rules and regulations, no illegal relationships with boys, where the people running the hostel have good reputation," Beenish said.

The girls are never allowed to leave the hostel on their own. "Because of security reasons, they can't go out without a guardian. So people have trust, and it can be a lady, not a man," she said. "Anywhere a girls’ hostel it should be controlled."

A safe, controlled environment is the goal of Ghulam Parvi, CAI operations director in Baltistan. For more than two years he has been working to get a student hostel built in Skardu to accommodate CAI school graduates from throughout Baltistan. The Tibbet Hostel has gone through several incarnations, but now the building is nearly complete.

It will house 120 students, including 64 girls, who have completed fifth class in a CAI school and whose parents want them to stay in school, Parvi said.

"Inshallah, it will be one of the best places in Pakistan," Parvi said. The lower level has a dining hall and game room for chess and table tennis. Boys and girls will eat and use the game room separately, he stressed. This is important to some parents and religious leaders.

Upstairs, behind separate entrances for boys and girls, are two stories of dorm rooms — girls on one side, boys on the other — and a bank of single-stall flush toilets with a common sink for washing on each floor.

The top floor houses a big hall that will be used for student assemblies or teacher training, a library, a computer lab, two guest rooms and one room for a mosque.

The warden will live on the first floor, on the girls’ side and "it will be a lady, not a man," Parvi said. "She will live here so girls can get help anytime from here. Like a guardian. So people have trust, and it can be maintained."

**The Korphe girls**

The Tibbet Hostel will lead to a vast expansion of the scholarship program in Baltistan, which now includes 10 students from different valleys, at various stages of their continuing education.

It will benefit other girls like Jahan and her cousin Tahira, 22, who moved to Skardu five years ago after graduating from the Korphe School, where Tahira’s father worked as the first CAI teacher. Jahan’s grandfather, Haji Ali, is featured prominently in “Three Cups of Tea,” and played a major role in CAI’s history.
Because there was no hostel for them, they live with male relatives — a brother and an uncle — and attend the Government Girls' College. Ultimately, Jahan thinks she'd like to open a handicrafts business in Skardu; Tahira thinks she'd like to go on to get her master's degree.

“I have motivated all my family to send all children to school,” Tahira said, “and there is a big change in family, in hygiene, in daily life. Now they are thinking for many future objectives.”

The Tibbet Hostel would also benefit girls like Shakeela and Hasina Khan, daughters of Aslam Khan, an elder in the Hushe Valley who helped Mortenson build one of CAI’s first schools more than a decade ago.

Both girls graduated from the Hushe School. Shakeela went on to study science and health care in Lahore and returned home in October with plans to open a health-care clinic in nearby Khapalu.

“She is the first and the only trained lady health worker from her village,” Parvi said. “She will provide much-needed health care for women and children in her region and be a good role model for other girls.”

Hasina, 16, just finished class 10 in Khapalu. Like her sister, she is bright and determined and has focused her studies on science. She wants to be a doctor, return to the family’s village home in Hushe and serve patients.

The girls’ mother, Salma, cannot read or write. Most women in Hushe would insist their daughters stay and help at home, but not her. She proudly moved with the family to a small house in Khapalu to make this work.

“I am thankful to God that my daughters want to go to school and serve the community,” she said. “When the women from Hushe come here to visit, they always say we are fools to live here in a small house, no place to go outside. ‘Why are you here?’ they ask. I say, ‘You will see the result in some years.”

Aslam is just as adamant that he is doing the right thing.

“Changes in society now are very fast and I want to take care of my daughters so they have a better future,” he said. “I am accepting of the hardships. I see the world changing. I have witnessed many women in my life who had problems with childbirth. So I am determined to try to put all three daughters on the medical side. I’ll get my reward after death as a shareholder of their success.”

Brishna’s depression is gone. Her parents are excited for their daughter. Brishna’s future looks vastly different than it did a year ago.

In addition to decades of war and an economy in ruins, the Taliban rule in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 took a terrible toll on women, who were banned from school, work, politics and public life.

When Karimi selected the first scholarship girls from among hundreds of disadvantaged students, he had some hard decisions to make.

One of the other students selected, Fariba Kazimi, 20, studies Spanish literature in Kabul University. She is more than halfway through a four-year degree program.

“I want to be a translator, maybe a teacher,” she said.

Born in Kabul, she spent nine years in Pakistan during the Taliban regime, attending primary school there. “We came back to Afghanistan in 2001.”

Her father died earlier this year. “He was sick and he didn’t work. He was 66. He died of heart disease,” she said.

Fariba is like many young people in Afghanistan who feel obligated to continue their education so they can help support their fatherless families. She lives with her mother and an older sister, who works in The Education Ministry. Her mother, 56, is illiterate.

“She supports us in our education and now I want to support her because now she is old,” Fariba said. “She is weak, but she must work to pay for food, clothes, house. She works in a kitchen in a house, for washing and cooking.”

She made appointments for her mother to visit with Karimi two or three times, but didn’t show up. “She’s afraid.” But when the meeting finally took place, “she is satisfied.”

“The situation in Afghanistan is not good for the girls because lots of family didn’t want girls to go to school,” she said. “I wish peace would come in our country. We need good occasions for learning, especially for girls, especially for girls in the provinces.”

In Rawalpindi last March, Saidullah Baig gave the scholarship students a mid-year pep talk. He said he knew that their situation was difficult, but that the payoff would be a better life for them — and for their country.

“Be strong, work hard, study hard, don’t let small things get you down and steer you away from your studies,” Baig tells them.

“You are changing society. You are significant and important. You are pioneers.”
Spare change adds up to make a difference

BY KARIN RONNOW

Sometimes, all it takes is one child to inspire a whole community.

Kindergarten teacher Laura Williams spent months planning a Pennies for Peace, or P4P, program at Jacks Valley Elementary School in Carson City, Nev. She had a feeling it would work well at the school and help teach a global perspective.

One challenge she faced early on was winning over a few reluctant teachers, whose questions and concerns included: “We already do so much fundraising. How could we ask families for money in these trying times? The curriculum is so packed there’s no time for this extra stuff,” she recalled.

But Williams persevered. And before she knew it, she had help from one of her students.

She kicked off the program with an all-school assembly in January 2009 and played a video narrated by Amira Mortenson, 13-year-old daughter of P4P founder Greg Mortenson.

“Afterwards, we talked about the students in Afghanistan and the power of a penny,” Williams recalled. “We told the children that our goal was for every child to contribute at least one penny and that we hoped to raise $500. We talked about places to find pennies and earn pennies.

“And then a little kindergartner raised his hand. He came up, took the microphone and told the school that he had nine pennies in his pocket and asked to put them in our pocket. It was amazing. You could feel the energy in the room.”

And the kids took it from there.

“Every kid insisted that their teachers participate — so that took care of the last of the reluctant teachers,” Williams said. “There was positive energy everywhere!”

Idea takes off

The Carson City effort was one of 4,428 school assemblies, library events, and music programs registered to participate this year.

The groups registered to participate this year included schools, libraries, churches/synagogues/mosques, civic groups, Scout troops, local businesses, women’s book clubs, senior citizen groups, three prisons and the offices of congresswoman and one U.S. senator, he said.

All that energy churned up 92.4 million pennies – or a total of $924,000 — in just one year.

The money goes entirely to buy school supplies, desks and furniture and fund teacher training in CAI’s schools in remote areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. P4P was first inspired by students at Westside Elementary School in River Falls, Wisc., where Mortenson’s mom, Jerene, was the principal.

Jerene Mortenson knew her son was having trouble raising money for that first school, and she thought it would be good for both him and her students to hear about what he was trying to do.

The kids were so inspired they collected 62,340 pennies to help Mortenson build a school in Korphe, Pakistan. It was the largest chunk of money he had received to date – “and it came from kids,” he said.

Today, P4P has evolved into a service-learning program, with an accompanying curriculum for teachers that guides penny-collection efforts while simultaneously helping students better understand what life is like for their less-privileged counterparts who live in remote villages half a world away.

Knowing that kids relate to kids, Mortenson also initiated publication of a young readers’ edition of “Three Cups of Tea,” complete with a Q&A with Amira, and a children’s picture book, “Listen to the Wind.”

“Greg wants students to know that they have the capacity to affect change,” said Christiane Leitenger, director of the P4P program.

And it doesn’t have to be change in Pakistan and Afghanistan, Mortenson said. It can be change right in the students’ own community.

“What’s even more exciting is that hundreds of kids having done Pennies for Peace have decided to start their own programs and nonprofits, working in their own communities,” he said.

JOH concert

With that in mind, Leitenger organized a celebration for young people and their families on Sept. 20 at Red Rocks Amphitheater outside Denver. The free concert, sponsored by P4P, drew 6,000 people.

The event was a “call to action to our youth, to inspire them and to help them make their voices heard in this era of hope and change in our country,” Leitenger said.

“We want everyone, youth and adults alike, to walk away from this event knowing they can make a stand in their own communities for causes that inspire them.”

The evening concert featured young activists sharing stories about how they are changing the world and an exhibit fair of organizations started by or specifically for kids.

There was music, too, by the Colorado Children’s Chorale, indie rocker Brad Corrigan of Braddigan, Megan Burtt, Dakota Blonde and Barry Ebert.

Amira Mortenson, 13, was co-emcee for the evening. She sang “Three Cups of Tea” with the Colorado Children’s Chorale and interviewed her dad onstage. Her videotaped interviews with journalists Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, authors of a new book about women in the developing world, “Half the Sky,” and with fellow Montanan Tom Brokaw, who offered wisdom and perspective.

“Mr. Brokaw you wrote a book called ‘The Greatest Generation.’ I want my generation to be the next greatest generation, how
should we do that?” she asked Brokaw.

Amira’s counterpart on stage, Arezow Doost, an Afghan-born television reporter from Texas, interviewed five youth activists from across the country about their efforts to build peace through action.

The activists were:

**Ana Dodson,** 17, of Evergreen, Colo., creator of Peruvian Hearts (www.peruvianhearts.org). Ana was born in Peru and adopted when she was 3 years old. When her family took her back to her birthplace at age 11, she visited an orphanage, saw the poverty and sadness and realized what her life could have been like. As she was leaving a young girl hugged her, started to cry and said, “Ana, I know you will not forget about us and that you will help us in the future.” Peruvian Hearts supports the Hogar Orphanage in Anta, Peru, a lunch program for children in Cuzco, Peru, and other programs for underserved children in that area.

**Ashley Shuyler,** 24, of Genesee, Colo., traveled to Tanzania with her family at age 11. “I saw children my own age begging on the side of the road, ramshackle schools,” and learned that only 5 percent of the girls were enrolled in school, she said. In 2001 she started AfricAid (www.africaid.com) to support girls’ education in Africa. She has raised $700,000 toward that end and, according to the Huffington Post, “won pretty much every youth service award imaginable.” Her nonprofit organization supports eight schools in Tanzania and provides scholarships, vocational programs and educational initiatives in Tanzania and the United States.

**Zach Bonner,** 12, of Tampa, Fla., was inspired by the immense needs in his community following Hurricane Charlie to start the Little Red Wagon Foundation (www.littleredwagonfoundation.com). The project has since expanded to raise money and awareness about homeless and disadvantaged children. He has walked 1,225 miles (from Tampa to Tallahassee in 2007, Tallahassee to Atlanta in 2008, Atlanta to Washington, D.C., in 2009) to raise money, and plans to walk from 2,300 miles, from Florida to California next year. In 2006 President George W. Bush awarded Zach the Presidential Call to Service Award.

**Brothers Garret and Kyle Weiss,** of Danville, Calif., are die-hard soccer players. At a World Cup soccer game between Angola and Iran in Germany in 2006, however, they saw people with even more passion – the Angolan fans. Inspired by that passion, and knowing that organized sports are a luxury few people in impoverished countries can afford, the brothers decided to try to bring their enthusiasm for the sport of soccer to African children. Their organization, FUNDaFIELD (www.fundafield.com), has raised money to construct five soccer fields in Africa, helping children there build confidence and learn teamwork, communication, discipline, respect and fair play.

These young people’s impressive stories, along with their compassion and determination, drew rousing ovations from the Red Rocks audience.

Mortenson then offered the young activists some advice: listen to people when they tell you what they need, build relationships, work hard, persevere and take risks.

“You also must not be afraid to fail,” he said. “Where we really fail is when we don’t listen to other people.”

Encouraged by the growing number of young people committed to helping others at home and around the world, Mortenson notes that, according to U.S. News & World Report, in 1970, about one-third of college students were participating in service-related work. By 1990, one generation later, it had fallen to 18 percent. But now, it’s back up over 40 percent. And it is driven by the students themselves.

“Kids get it,” he said.

‘Helping is contagious’

Count the 18 girls in Brownie Troop No. 20326 in Boynton Beach, Fla., among those who get it. Their penny-collection effort was so successful that it spread beyond the troop to include their school, then all the schools in the community and the local business community, said Brownie leader Debbie Donnelly-McLay.

“Helping is contagious,” she said.

Donnelly-McLay had read “Three Cups of Tea” and was looking for ways to broaden her Brownies’ perspective on the world.

“We had been involved with Afghanistan by making care packages and writing letters of encouragement to our soldiers,” she said. “So the girls had learned about the country and the current events taking place.”

But when she showed the DVD with Amira explaining the program, that “ignited their fire,” she said. “By taking part in Pennies for Peace, they were able to have a more direct connection to the children in Afghanistan and a better understanding of how education can make a difference.”

Word of their efforts traveled fast and the penny collection soon included the entire school.

“Everyone was enthusiastic,” Donnelly-McLay said.

“We presented the DVD to all the children and put collection containers in each classroom,” she said.

In one month, the Brownies raised $500. The troop delivered the money – and bookmarks for schoolchildren overseas — to Mortenson when he was in Florida for a speaking engagement.

In addition, the local Rotary Club was so inspired that it plans to set up P4P in all the Boynton Beach public schools and donate copies of the young readers’ edition of “Three Cups of Tea” to the schools, she said.

“This activity overall has had a profound impact on the girls’ attitudes and behavior,” Donnelly-McLay said. “When they realized that many children did not even have paper to write on, they saw how different can be for other children. Many said they would like to share with these children and help in other ways.”
Pennies for Peace also had a profound impact on a sixth-grader in Virginia. Sequoia Carillo, 12, was so inspired by her experience that she wrote a poem — in 10 minutes. Until she read the book, the Forest Edge Elementary School student had not realized there were places in the world where girls were still not allowed to attend school. “I think everyone deserves equal opportunities, and in order to have equal opportunity you need education to back you up,” she said.

Here is an excerpt from her poem, which was published in the CAI newsletter, Alima:

“All these children want is to learn
Think what you’ve always wanted, perhaps achieved
And imagine someone saying that it’s impossible and it’s something you don’t need. …
“Just give a little and see
That educated is the best thing to be
It’s America’s greatest treasure
Let’s help other kids share our pleasure.”

Leitenger invited Sequoia to read the poem at the Mom’s Choice Awards in New York City in April 2009, where P4P received the Volunteer Organization/Program of the year award.

“I invited her up to NYC to help receive the Mom’s Choice Award for Pennies for Peace, because what she wrote really underscored what an impact the book and P4P can make,” Leitenger said. “We later learned that her uncle was a Marine who had been killed in Afghanistan in January. He had read ‘Three Cups of Tea, and in his down time in Afghanistan he would go into villages and help build schools.”

Sequoia said participating in P4P gave her a feeling of working with others to make a difference. The students at Forest Edge raised $1,300. Writing the poem was a way to share her passion and make the program more visible.

The experience has also inspired her to think ahead. After college, perhaps, she’d like to travel overseas “and see how everyone else’s life is different from mine and help as much as I can. I want to help people, like Greg (does),” Sequoia said.

Toolkit & young readers

To help teachers create effective, multifaceted penny-raising campaigns, P4P joined the Pearson Foundation and the National Education Association Foundation in 2009 to release a K–12 service-learning toolkit.

“The NEA Foundation funded the creation of the content for the toolkit because we saw it as an important opportunity to expand student service-learning as a viable way of addressing 21st century issues,” Harriet Sanford, president & CEO of the NEA Foundation, said when the kit was released.

The P4P toolkit (available free at www.penniesforpeace.org), includes a standards-based K–12 curriculum, with rubrics, an assessment tool, suggested classroom activities, fact sheets, National Geographic maps, stickers and posters, and videos about life and culture in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Curriculum in action

Back in Carson City, Williams said that she spent the entire fall semester prepping for her school’s P4P program. But the toolkit really helped her tackle questions and concerns.

When the reluctant teachers raised their eyebrows at her ambitious plan, she said, “I addressed each concern on the spot and positively. I had looked really carefully at the Pennies for Peace Web site and downloaded curriculum ideas, to get my ducks in a row, so to speak.”

She told the teachers she’d have curriculum ideas for each teacher and did a couple mini workshops. “I printed ideas straight off the Web site, it really wasn’t difficult.”

She also had the complete support of the principal, which helped. The school’s parent council got on board, too, donating $200 to buy books about Pakistan and Afghanistan for the school library, and flags from 80 countries. The parents “asked our teaching staff to use this campaign to help promote global awareness,” she said.

Once the program was under way, teachers began incorporating the ideas from the toolkit and came up with a few of their own, Williams said. They used pennies for math activities, assigned each classroom a flag and the job of researching that country, and used P4P’s underlying concepts to help teach about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and President Obama’s call for service, she said.

“Parents got involved because the children were so excited,” she said. “They were giving their children their pennies from change, helping to look in couches and cars for lost pennies, and never passing by a penny on the ground. The children were telling grandparents and aunts and uncles and pretty soon extended families were sending their pennies.”

Parents who owned businesses set up donation jars on the counters. And one man who read about the effort in the local newspaper dropped off a jar of pennies in the school office. In the first three weeks, the students collected more than $700 in pennies. By the time spring break rolled around, that number had more than doubled — to $1705.46.

“The results have been amazing,” Williams said. “Students were excited to learn about different parts of the world. They have a much deeper understanding about this area of the world now, and a personal connection to it.”

“My (kindergarten) students can talk about Afghanistan and current events in the world relating to Afghanistan better than most adults off the street. And they have an intrinsic desire to help others. It’s been so exciting to see. I truly believe that Pennies for Peace is the event bringing us all together,” she said.

Top 10 Lessons Learned from Pennies for Peace

The people in Rockford, Ill., raised well over $100,000 in their Pennies for Peace campaign in 2008. Following the effort, leaders compiled a Top 10 list of things the children had learned from the experience.

1. COMPASSION – Our children learned that there are children in other parts of the world who have no school, no classroom, no teacher, no paper and no pencils.

2. GRATITUDE – Our children learned that their own schools, classrooms, teachers, paper and pencils cannot be taken for granted.

3. HUNGER FOR EDUCATION – Our children learned that where there is no education, there is a hole in a life and that by providing schooling for children around the world, they can promote peace through understanding and a better life through knowledge, a precious example of education’s value.

4. PHILANTHROPY – Our children learned that through their gift of pennies, they can help children on the other side of the world, and that when enough pennies are contributed, they can build those children a school.

5. TOLERANCE – Our children learned that though others may speak different languages and wear different clothes, we are all the same inside.

6. DETERMINATION – Our children learned from Greg Mortenson’s example that one person can make a difference and that initial failure can make your goals clearer.

7. PEACE – Our children learned what peace feels like and thought about what it might be like to live in a world where there is no peace.

8. PRIDE – Our children learned to be proud of the compassionate hearts within themselves, their schools and their community for raising money for Pennies for Peace.

9. KNOWLEDGE – Our children learned about children just like themselves in other parts of the world.

10. COLLABORATION – Our children learned that by working together we can accomplish amazing things.
“‘STONES INTO SCHOOLS: PROMOTING PEACE WITH BOOKS, NOT BOMBS, IN AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN,’
By Greg Mortenson (Viking; $25.29 HC)


With a forward by Khaled Hoseini, Mortenson’s new book traces CAI’s work in Afghanistan and Azad Kashmir, Pakistan.

In it, according to the book jacket, “Mortenson describes how he and his intrepid manager, Sarfraz Khan, brainstormed around Badakhshan Province and the Wakhan Corridor, moving for weeks without sleep, to establish the first schools there. Those efforts were diverted in October 2005 when a devastating earthquake hit the Azad Kashmir region of Pakistan. Under Sarfraz’ watch, CAI helped with relief efforts by setting up temporary tent schools and eventually several earthquake-proof schools.

“The action returns to Afghanistan in 2007, as CAI launches schools in the heart of Taliban country and as Mortenson helps the U.S. military formulate new strategic plans as a road map to peace,” according to the book jacket.

The hardcover book and audio CD are scheduled to be released Dec. 1.


“‘THREE CUPS OF TEA: ONE MAN’S MISSION TO PROMOTE PEACE ... ONE SCHOOL AT A TIME’
By Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin (Penguin; $15 PB)

“Three Cups of Tea” has been a New York Times bestseller since its January 2007 paperback release, more than 3 million paperback copies have been sold in the United States and the book has been published or is in the process of being published in 26 other countries.

The book has also drawn a steady stream of awards and accolades, including Time magazine’s Asia Book of the Year in 2007, the Kiriyama Prize for nonfiction, the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association’s award for nonfiction, the Montana Honor Book award and the Dayton Literary Prize award for nonfiction. It was a top selection in Border’s bookstore’s Original Voices’ category, a finalist at the Banff Mountain Festival book awards and a Critic’s Choice selection in People magazine.

Former President Bill Clinton mentioned Mortenson and the book in his book, “Giving.” First Lady Laura Bush contacted Mortenson to say that she was reading the book and enjoying it. And the U.S. Pentagon has made the book mandatory reading for all senior officers and for Special Forces deploying to Afghanistan.

Countless book clubs and church groups chose “Three Cups of Tea” as a book to read and discuss; the book was adopted and promoted by over 450 One Book community-read programs; and over 500 high schools, colleges and universities in the United States have adopted it as required reading for students. For more information, see threecupsoftea.com.

“YOUNG READER’S EDITION

“‘THREE CUPS OF TEA: ‘ONE MAN’S JOURNEY TO CHANGE THE WORLD ... ONE CHILD AT A TIME’
By Greg Mortenson and adapted for young readers by Sarah Thornton (Penguin Young Readers Group; $16.99 HC, $7.99 PB). “The young reader’s edition of the world-wide bestseller ‘Three Cups of Tea’ has been specially adapted to bring this remarkable story of humanitarianism up to date. It includes brand new photos, maps and illustrations, as well as a special afterword by Greg’s 12-year-old daughter, Amira, who has traveled with her father as an advocate for the Pennies for Peace program for children.”

— Penguin promotional material

In addition, Penguin has an audio CD version of the young-adult book. The introduction is read by actress Vanessa Redgrave and the book is read by actress Leoni Atossa, an Iranian who grew up in Germany, lives in Los Angeles, and starred in the movie “Kite Runner.”

NONFICTION PICTURE BOOK, AGES 6-8


“Told in the voice of Korphe’s children, this story illuminates the humanity and culture of a relevant and distant part of the world in gorgeous collage, while sharing a riveting example of how one person can change thousands of lives.”

— Publisher’s promotional material

“‘BUY A BOOK, BUILD A SCHOOL

All of these books may be purchased at local bookstores or by visiting www.threecupsoftea.com. Click for an online purchase and Amazon or Ingram will donate 7 percent of all book purchases (all books, anytime) to CAI.

“WHAT GREG UNDERSTANDS BETTER THAN MOST—and what he practices more than anyone else I know—is the simple truth that all of us are better off when all of us have the opportunity to learn, especially our children. By helping them with basic education, he’s shaping the very future of a region and giving hope to an entire generation.”

— ADM. MIKE MULLEN, CHAIRMAN, JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF
Since 1996, Central Asia Institute’s mission has been to promote education and literacy, especially for girls, in remote regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

As of 2009, CAI had established 131 schools, educating more than 58,000 students, including 44,000 girls. CAI is a registered 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, federal IRS EIN # 51-0376237.

Pennies for Peace, or P4P, was conceived by students and teachers at Westside Elementary School in River Falls, Wis. Originally called Pennies For Pakistan, it was renamed in 1996. Since then over 140 million pennies have been raised by over 4,000 schools all over the world.

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.

Sign up for CAI’s e-newsletter, “Alima,” at www.ikat.org/alima

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A BIG THANKS TO THE
BOZEMAN DAILY CHRONICLE (MONT.)
FOR ASSISTING WITH THIS PUBLICATION.

www.ikat.org