Central Asia Institute’s
Journey of
HOPE

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PAKISTAN AND
AFGHANISTAN
Journey of Hope
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An in-depth field report by writer Karin Ronnow and photographer Ellen Jaskol documenting the work of Greg Mortenson, the nonprofit Central Asia Institute, and its youth program Pennies for Peace.
journey of hope

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Central Asia Institute
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MISSION: To promote and support community-based education, especially
for girls, in remote regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

PHILOSOPHY: CAI is a grassroots organization with a philosophy that
has evolved through years of firsthand field experience. The primary goal is
to empower local people to be fully involved in every aspect of a project.
Our community partnerships are facilitated by village committees, whose members are selected
for their dedication, initiative and accountability. We take great care to cooperate with the government, political and religious
groups in this complex region. Each project is locally initiated, implemented and managed in its entirety. We use innovative
techniques to encourage people to take responsibility for their own vitality. The community matches CAI funds with equal
amounts of local resources and labor to ensure the project’s viability and long-term success. CAI’s successful projects are a solid testimony to the strength of community-based initiatives.

LOGO: The Central Asia Institute logo depicts a mother wearing a traditional headscarf, holding her child and embraced by
mountains. Her sleeve suggests a book and reading, while the river signifies the hope that education and literacy bring.
The crescent moon and star pay respect to the communities that CAI serves, which are of Islamic tradition and faith. The
mountains are the Karakoram, Pamir and Hindu Kush ranges (the greatest consolidation of high peaks in the world), which are integral to the communities Central Asia Institute serves. The color blue represents the Lapis stone (Lapis lazuli) and blue Topaz, unique to Central Asia. The logo was designed by Brynn Breuner of the San Francisco area in 1995.

A boy and his donkey pass students on their way home from school in Skardu, Pakistan.
Travelers to remote areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan eventually figure out that planning for what comes next is usually a futile effort. Things change rapidly. Roads close. Trucks break down. People insist on serving tea and then, upon hearing the day’s plan, suggest it might be best to go a different way for security reasons. Before you know it, plan No. 38 is out the window, morphing into plan No. 39.

In that part of the world, “you can’t plan anything and have it come out the way you expect,” author Bapsi Sidhwa once wrote. It’s important to be flexible.

Nobody knows that better than the foreign staff of Central Asia Institute, the Bozeman, Mont.-based nonprofit organization that promotes education in some of the most remote corners of Pakistan and Afghanistan. They are masters of adaptation, as they deal in a complex, fluid and dynamic environment.

This past June, photographer Ellen Jaskol and I witnessed this phenomenon while traveling with CAI staff in northeast Afghanistan. At the end of one 40-mile journey that took 10 hours on a winding, bumpy road, we stopped in Koran-wa-Monjan, in the Hindu Kush Mountains.

The driver went to park the old Land Cruiser and we were walking up to the village chief’s house when someone came running up the hill to tell us, breathlessly, that our truck had nearly been swept away by the river.

CAI staffer Janagha Jaheed translated for me as the messenger gestured excitedly.

“Commandhan Wohid Khan (had) called the commander to say, ‘Our guests are coming, you take care and protect them.’ So the commander started to come this way. But on the way he saw the truck in the river. A flash flood came up and the river was up to the windows of the truck. If he didn’t come, the water would have rolled the truck. It was tipping, you know? The commander used a cable and pulled the car out.”

Crisis averted. And suddenly there was time for tea while the truck and all our gear dried out.

The next day, as Ellen listened to Janagha describe what it took to get the CAI school in Koran-wa-Monjan built, she said, “There are so many variables with these projects, it’s amazing that they get it all done and it all works out.”

But they do and it does. Over and over and over again.

Greg Mortenson, CAI’s executive director, has said every year for the past 17 years, “This was our best year ever.” He said that was true again in 2010. And given the events unfolding in Pakistan and Afghanistan in 2010, that’s saying something.

In Pakistan, the summer’s unrelenting monsoon rains and flash floods triggered the worst flooding ever in that country, a natural disaster of monumental proportions. For people in Hunza region, it was a double whammy, coming on the heels of a massive landslide in January that had dammed the Hunza River, created a 14-mile-long lake upriver and cut off the only road.

In Afghanistan, the war escalated until it became the deadliest year since the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001. Insurgents came over the border from Pakistan into Nuristan Province and started bloody battles with locals and foreign and Afghan forces. That fighting sent hundreds of refugees over the mountains into neighboring Badakhshan Province, where villagers and officials tried their best to help.

Even remote, once peaceful Badakhshan became a Taliban target. CAI staff adapted, as they always do, and helped in new and unusual ways. In Pakistan, they set up tent schools in flooded areas and delivered food, shelter and cash to families who had lost everything. In Afghanistan, they arranged a helicopter airlift of humanitarian aid for the Nuristan refugees.

And through it all, CAI continued the work of promoting education, especially for girls. By November 2010, it had either established or was significantly supporting more than 170 schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan. It built new schools in remote villages that had never had a proper school. It supplied teachers to overcrowded and understaffed schools run by the government and other organizations. The number of girls in the scholarship programs doubled. New women’s literacy and vocational centers went up. Teacher-training and basic health-care efforts increased.

The organization’s growth has been amazing to watch. But, Mortenson said, CAI couldn’t do any of it without great support from people all around the world.

“CAI is blessed to have incredible support from people of all political persuasions, faiths, socioeconomic backgrounds and geographical locations,” he said. “More than 4,500 schools participated in our Pennies for Peace program (quadrupled from last year) and more than 4,000 people attended CAI’s gala fundraisers in Washington, D.C., Chicago and California this year. We are thankful to the Pakistan-Afghan community in the U.S., who responded generously to these fundraising efforts, and to Sadia Ashraf and her husband Tauheed, who coordinated these events with a great group of more than 250 volunteers.”

All these contributors support CAI for a variety of reasons. But what they have in common is the heartfelt belief that education is the key to a peaceful future, that girls must be educated along with the boys and that we all have a vested interest in the world’s children.

Peace,

Karin Ronnow, editor
Nov. 2, 2010
Bozeman, Mont., USA
ARKUT, Pakistan – The road up the narrow Yasin River Valley ends abruptly at the edge of a vast dry river of rocks and boulders, remnants of the devastating flood that left one-fourth of this village homeless.

The August flood was triggered by monsoon rains, which filled high-mountain streams to overflowing and sent water cascading down the mountain into the village.

The water created a massive landslide that buried houses as people ran for their lives.

“My home was there,” said Bibi Alum, pointing toward the rocky swath.

In this region of the Hindu Kush mountains, in far northern Pakistan, the flood wiped out 55 homes and left more than 500 people with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Amazingly, no one in Darkut died that day.

“The flood happened in the daytime, so when we saw lots of water run down, we ran here to higher ground and watched as our houses were totally destroyed,” said Bibi Alum, 65.

“We just saved our lives, nothing else, not a single thing,” 50-year-old Gil Numa said, her eyes welling up with tears. “We even lost our land, so now we don’t have anywhere to build a home and we don’t have any money.”

The women, who spoke in the local Brushaski language, huddled with five others outside a tent that housed 30 members of four families.

“They are filled with such sadness,” said Faisal Baig, who manages Central Asia Institute’s projects in Hunza and here in the Ghizer District. “This is the first big flood here. They get heavy snow and avalanches, but never before this kind of damage.”

The same story is told in villages across Pakistan’s Northern Areas, now known as Gilgit-Baltistan. The remote region is home to the Karakoram Mountains, which contain the world’s greatest consolidation of high peaks (64 peaks above 21,000 feet in a 100-mile area) and the longest glaciers outside the polar region.

Spring runoff from heavy winter snowfall is an annual affair. But this year, it combined with months of seemingly endless rain and spawned the most destructive flooding this region had ever seen.

“We had heavy rain in April and May, and then again in June, July and August,” said Mohammad Nazir, CAI’s Baltistan operations manager.

The biggest storms hit the area on July 28. Water poured down the mountains, the sodden earth beneath it giving way. Streams became gushing rivers carrying boulders that crushed everything in their paths.

It continued for 10 days, and killed more than 184 people across Gilgit-Baltistan, according to Pakistan government statistics. Much of the region’s fragile infrastructure – bridges, roads, irrigation channels and power lines – just washed away.

Boys stand by the remains of one of 55 homes in Darkut, Ghizer District, northern Pakistan, destroyed by a massive landslide in August.

**Historic floods create deluge of hardship**

**Unrelenting rains in Gilgit-Baltistan trigger Pakistan’s flooding nightmare**

Bibi Alum, Darkut village resident
"The floods took Pakistan back 25 years," said Sarfraz Khan, CAI's Pakistan operations director. "This year the floods destroyed so much."

And the disaster just kept moving south. Gilgit-Baltistan's swollen rivers and streams poured into the country's largest river, the Indus, creating a slow-moving crisis that moved steadily downstream the length of Pakistan to the Indian Ocean. The floodwaters swamped villages, destroyed more than 1.4 million homes, uprooted an estimated 20 million people and killed at least 1,500.

The nightmare grew to become Pakistan's, and the world's, worst-ever natural disaster.

"CAI schools are safe, no problem," Nazir said. "But CAI does some relief work also."

'Like nothing before'

CAI's focus is education, especially for girls, not disaster relief. But that focus requires building relationships with local leaders in all the villages where it works. So when the floodwaters hit -- and government and aid groups were slow to deliver aid -- those leaders immediately reached out to CAI for help.

"After the floods began in late July our staff were inundated with requests to help the displaced and starving families, the widows and the orphans," said Greg Mortenson, CAI's executive director. "Although the media reported that the floods started in Swat Valley and to the west, we immediately received reports that actually even more significant flooding was occurring from Ghizer all the way over to Baltistan, where our main projects and work are."

Even the government hospital in Skardu, led by Dr. Niaz Ali, an opthamologist CAI helped train, asked CAI for help with medicine to treat skin and eye infections, rampant diarrhea and waterborne disease. "Please arrange donation of drugs for controlling the epidemic disease. Thanks," said the official request.

CAI originally intended to stick to its standard disaster-management procedure, Greg said, "which is to put a priority on continuing education in temporary tent schools, help teachers and make sure displaced kids can continue their education.

"But it was obvious right away that the immensity of this disaster was like nothing before. According to the United Nations, this flood in Pakistan equaled the impact of the 2004 Indonesian tsunami, the 2005 Kashmir earthquake and the 2010 Haiti earthquake combined," he said.

CAI's board of directors met and discussed the fact that the region was getting little help, he said. Plus, CAI donors had begun sending money designated for flood relief.

"So we set up a separate fund that would be used for disaster relief, consulted with local officials to coordinate payments and began to provide some cash relief on a limited basis," he said.

The organization's total relief package for Pakistan's flood by October was $340,000, with $100,000 to Ghizer district, $140,000 to Baltistan, and $100,000 to a flood-relief committee of two-dozen government leaders, ulema or religious leaders, some of the top NGO leaders and the various valley representatives.

Given that the Pakistani government's total aid to the region as of September was $641,000, Greg noted, "CAI's total was more than half of what the whole government gave."

The organization designed a payment schedule: less than $100 for people who were injured; $115 to $250 for families with damaged or destroyed houses; $300 if a family member was killed.

"We also purchased two months worth of rations, including flour, ghee or vegetable oil, salt, dal (lentils), rice and vitamins for about 4,200 people," Greg said.

Unlike multilateral big development aid, which goes through several layers of bureaucracy before it reaches the communities that need help, all of these funds went directly to the communities, Greg noted.

"The committee worked together with the Pakistan Army and the government to determine when and where the aid was most needed," he said. "And those district government officials who helped guide our efforts said, had the money come through foreign aid or the federal government in Islamabad, the equivalent impact and funds needed to achieve the same results would be over $1.8 million."

CAI received a letter of thanks from Syed Mehdi Shah, chief minister of Gilgit- Baltistan, dated Oct. 13, 2010, in which he expressed this heartfelt gratitude "for the benevolent gesture" and said he especially appreciated that it had been done cooperatively with local government leaders and officials.

A Darkut man whose family lost everything in August's flash flood receives cash aid from CAI staff in September.
The people of Darkut did a lot of juggling in August to help house the 500-plus “internally displaced people,” which is what the UN calls people like Bibi Alum and Gil Numa, who were forced to flee their homes but remained in their country.

At first, the IDPs sought refuge in the CAI school, located uphill from the flood zone. CAI built the five-room high school in 2009 to supplement an adjacent five-classroom primary school built and run by the Aga Khan Foundation. It is the only high school that accepts girls for miles around.

“But when the IDPs moved into the school, all the other people said, ‘No, not here,’” said Zar Khan, Darkut’s education committee chairman. “We can be alive, but we still need education, so we must keep the school open.”

The IDPs were then moved downhill to the government school; those classes were taught in the CAI school at night, Faisal said.

But the government school only provides a portion of the needed shelter. The Aga Khan Foundation supplied some tents, which helped, and the government supplied some food, but that ran out fast, Zar Khan said.

In mid-September, the sprawling camp was home to hundreds of people who had no means to start rebuilding their lives.

That’s where CAI’s cash relief came in.

In September, CAI staff distributed about $250 in cash to each family that had lost everything. When the money had all been distributed and documented, one of the village leaders, Sorom Khan, gave a short speech.

“We are surprised to receive this much-needed relief,” he said. “Inshallah, the people will rebuild. They have no other option. We are too poor to go anywhere else. So you are angels for us here. You are the only organization to give us a cash gift and we cannot thank you in words. May God bless you and all the people of America who help us.”

Faisal explained why he had wanted CAI to start promoting education in this region.

He said he had watched the Taliban and other extremist Islamic groups move northward from Pakistan’s tribal areas and the Swat Valley, especially after last year’s major Pakistan military offensive there.

“One police official had connection with al Qaeda,” he said. “He was trying to recruit militants through local extremist madrasses, and send them to Afghanistan to fight. Musharraf arrested him and his police job was finished. But even then, I saw more extremist madrassas (schools) starting up in Ghizer and increasing numbers of students wearing madrassa uniforms walking to those schools.”

Extremists impose their own strict interpretation of Islamic law in some of the villages they occupy. They banish women from the streets, burn girls’ schools, attack government offices and charity groups and punish men who shave their beards, he said.

Plus, Sarfraz added, everyone knew about the use of opium in Ghizer. “The drug people push opium on the remote-area people, not the city people. The places with education, there is no opium.”

As Sarfraz spoke, he steered the creaky SUV over yet another sea of rocks and stopped beside a group of men clearing debris left behind by the flooding.

In this small settlement, three families lost everything in the floods and CAI wanted to help, he explained.
As the staff emerged from the car, 14-year-old Sadia happened by on her way home from school and stopped to tell the staff what had happened.

"We are one of three families that lost their house," she said. "It happened at 4 a.m. The neighbors came and pushed the door and said, 'Get out!' Now we are staying with some relatives. We got some food from the government, but no tent, nothing else. Our house and fields, garden and orchard, our land - everything is gone."

Saidullah Baig, operations manager for CAI's Hunza and Chapusan Valley projects northeast of here, then counted out the money and Faisal handed it over. The generosity surprised the men.

"You are the first people who came here and helped us and we did not expect this kind of help," one of the men, Mohammad Shah, said. "We respect your humanitarian work. You come to remote areas where it is difficult to travel and live. We have never seen this kind of kindness in our whole lives. We want to thank you for all that. And we want to thank your country."

"And we feel proud because we are helping."

"These people sitting in front of you, some walked 20 to 30 miles to meet you," Sarwar told the CAI staff. "Your great institution helped us have success in higher education. This valley has an agricultural base, but the flooding disaster wiped out all croplands and many, many homes."

"I learned of this great organization by some reliable sources, and it has helped us to open doors to poor families and children who didn't have access to education," he said. "The college is especially important for women's development and women's empowerment in this area, so they may develop and earn the means to support their families and their children for a better future."

He and the college teachers had organized a reception for CAI that day, complete with singing, poetry recitations, prayers, speeches and a community feast. The assembly hall CAI had built for college exams and community events overflowed with people.

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At that point, Saidullah announced that nine families who had lost every-thing in the floods would receive cash relief, which drew rousing applause and shouts of gratitude.

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Kabul man walks through a field at the edge of the flood zone in September, harvest time for those farmers with anything left to harvest.
the Karakorams, a rocky, icy mountain range that includes K2, and the massive Baltoro Glacier. The Indus River begins east of here, in India, but much of its water comes from Baltistan’s Shyok and Shigar rivers.

“One teacher’s father died running to catch wood in the river that was coming from India side,” Nazir said. “The river was also carrying dead bodies from India, near Kargil. But mostly here, the landslides killed people.”

When the floods came, many areas were inundated with water for days, Nazir said. “In Baltistan, in some areas the water was eight feet, 10 feet deep and stayed for 20 days at that same level. Crops and orchards and houses were buried in the water and the rich topsoil was carried away.”

The floods washed away much of the year’s harvest and killed thousands of farm animals. The Shigar River Valley, for example, produces 50 percent of the potatoes for northern Pakistan, Nazir said. “Each family usually earns $5,000 a year for potatoes. But with flooding, most of those crops are gone.”

The already isolated area was further cut off when the Skardu Road, the only overland route from the Karakoram Highway east to Skardu, the region’s central city, was blocked for weeks by landslides. Trucks were unable to deliver food and fuel and prices skyrocketed in Baltistan.

Nazir had several school projects under way during the summer, including reconstruction of CAI’s first school in Korphe, where the roof had collapsed due to heavy snow. “Thank Allah, we got that project done, no problem,” he said.

But in Qumra and Thalis, the deadly floods temporarily shifted Nazir’s focus.

Ten-foot wave of water

Qumra residents had become accustomed to the sound of rain by early August. But the sounds they heard before dawn on Aug. 7 were unprecedented.

“Before my waking it was a big noise of thunder and I wake and first thought it was a thunderstorm, or maybe an earthquake,” said Ghulam Abbas, who lived high above the river, in the “upper village.” “But then there was very heavy rain, strong wind and much thunder. I ran outside and saw the water coming down with great pressure and height. It was 10 to 12 feet high in some places. It jumped over the trees.”

The flood-gorged Shut Nala (‘nala’ means stream) hit the village at 2:50 a.m. And the wave of water continued to flow through the village until 9 a.m., Ghulam said, adding that he is still astonished that he survived.

Schoolgirls in Darkut, where Zar Khan, education committee chairman, said, “We can be alive, but we still need education, so we must keep the school open.”

“Thirty-three people died upside, another five downside,” he said. “Many houses were gone on both sides, and fruit trees and fields where we grew wheat. I am 50 years old and I have seen rain and mudslides and such before. But like this? Never.”
After consulting with district government officials who said they were strapped for cash, CAI provided cash relief to the affected families to help them get back on their feet.

Luckily, the new CAI school was spared. In September, work on the four-room building was well along and Nazir anticipated CAI would hand it over to the community in the spring.

“This is for our kids,” said Sayeed Haider Shah, one of three brothers who asked CAI for help and then donated the land. “We have one school, but it is far. This will be free education for hundreds of students. We are thankful to Central Asia Institute and to Nazir Sahib. He’s a great man.”

Perhaps the Baltistan village with the most striking visual evidence of the floods’ destruction is Thalis, a small village of about 200 people. CAI is building a school in Marzigong village, just north, and has several other schools nearby in the Hushe River Valley.

It’s a beautiful area, frequented by foreign climbers and trekkers and ringed by irrigated wheat fields with stunning views of snow-capped peaks all around.

Many Thalis residents had built their homes along the Thalis Nala, a mountain stream that also provided power for dozens of flour mills. Then at 2 a.m. on Aug. 7, Thalis Nala rose up. “I was sleeping, and when I heard the boulders and rocks coming down the mountain, they sounded like thunder,” said Gub Khor.

Sajjad Ali said he was also at home and sleeping. “It was like a thunder noise, a big clap of thunder, like something hit hard,” Sajjad said. “And everywhere people were screaming, ‘Get out, get out,’ and running. We only saved our lives. The rest of everything rushed away in the flood.”

Sajjad was injured that day when some sharp debris cut a deep gash cut across his side as he ran. He spent 10 days in the hospital.

A widow named Chokbee, 44, said the flood swept away her two shops in the village bazaar and all the food she had for her seven small children. “We have house, thank Allah, but we have no food. All the crops are gone,” she said.

The swath of devastation along the nala displays the unbelievable power of water. Sixty-eight houses are gone. Those that remain teeter perilously on crumbling ledges, their missing walls exposing the places where people once lived. The community mosque was gutted from below and half of it swept away by the floodwaters.

The flourmills were washed away, too, erasing the only means the village had for processing wheat. As of September, it was still unclear what area farmers would do with the tons of wheat they had harvested. As the rains continued to fall, there was a good chance it would all rot, Nazir said.

Yet life goes on, because it has to, Nazir pointed out. As in Darkut, the people are too poor to move away, so someone must help them rebuild their lives.

“Marzigong School will open in the spring, Inshallah, and that will give people hope for the future,” he said.

“But for now, I will order one big truck filled with tons of food and blankets, warm clothes and mats for these people. And when the Skardu Road opens, we will deliver,” Nazir said.

“I am 50 years old and I have seen rain and mudslides and such before. But like this? Never.”

- Ghulam Abbas

The boy walks through the rubble left behind in Thalis, Baltistan, northern Pakistan, after a flash flood killed 13 people and destroyed homes, shops and the mosque in August. CAI, which is building a school just north in Marzigong village, provided cash relief and humanitarian aid to survivors.
UNZA DISTRICT, GILGIT-BALTISTAN, Pakistan – When the landslide cut loose from the towering mountain above Attabad village last January, Farzana was at home doing chores.

“It was about 11 a.m., but suddenly it got very dark, like nighttime,” the 14-year-old recalled. “And then there was this horrible kind of sound. I ran out of the house.”

Boulders as big as cars careened down the mountainside. Houses, rocks, rubble and tons of dirt poured into the Hunza River below, halting the river’s flow with a 200-foot-high earthen dam.

“It was horrible,” said Shaheen, 11, of Attabad. “A lot of dust was rising and we were suddenly all in the dark, crying and running here and there.”

There had been some landslide warnings, although no one had predicted when it might happen. Cracks had been developing in the mountainside for nearly 20 years. In anticipation, some sections of upper Attabad village had been evacuated as early as 2007.

Disaster struck on Jan. 4, 2010. Three villages were wiped off the map: Attabad Bala (upper), Attabad Payeen (lower) and Sarat, across the river. Nineteen people died that day, 70 were injured. Hunza’s hospitals were overwhelmed.

“Central Asia Institute staff went there immediately and within hours an onsite inspection revealed this was catastrophic,” said CAI’s cofounder and Executive Director Greg Mortenson.

People were buried under rubble. Entire families suddenly had no shelter in the deepest part of winter. “People lost their land, house, crops, animals – all are finished,” said Sarfraz Khan, CAI’s operations director in Pakistan.

The landslide created a long-term crisis, too. Over several months, the river continued to back up behind the earthen dam. Five more villages – including Gulmit, the district capital – were claimed by the waters of a lake that eventually grew to 14 miles long and more than 200 feet deep.

Houses, fields and orchards were completely underwater. More than 12 miles of the Karakoram Highway, or KKH, the trunk road that connects China and Pakistan’s northern Gojal District with the rest of Pakistan, was also submerged.

With no road, Gojal – home to some 22,500 people and more than a dozen CAI projects – was cut off. The only link from the lower to the upper Hunza River Valley was a boat.

By October, 10 months after the landslide, the only change was that the lake had gotten deeper. And everyone was watching to see if the earthen dam would hold.

“That lake is potentially capable, if the dam bursts, of flooding hundreds of thousands of people to the south in the Indus River Valley,” Greg said.

Relief camps and CAI school

Immediately after the landslide, hundreds of families from Attabad and Sarat moved to relief camps in Karimabad’s Aliabad village.

“All are fine in my family, but our house is gone and all our land,” Farzana said. “We could not stay there. The same day as the landslide we came to Karimabad.”

The Pakistan government and a few charity groups delivered some food and medicine, candles and matches, tents and blankets, plastic mats and jackets via army helicopters. But it wasn’t enough.

Hunza under water after deadly landslide
CAI provides hope with tent schools, scholarships, aid

Farzana, 14, left, and Shaheen, 11, of Attabad village, which was destroyed by a landslide.
Primary school students file into their tent-school classroom in Karimabad’s Aliabad village.

And although the government had promised cash relief, that help wasn’t materializing. At Sarfraz’ request, CAI stepped in.

“By Jan. 28, although this area provided a crucial link to Pakistan’s northern areas and to China, very little help had arrived and pleas to the government were going unanswered,” Greg said. “So for a particular group of people who were on the brink of starvation, sleeping under rocks and in caves, CAI donated $28,000. Sarfraz also told the people that we would set up schools within those temporary camps.”

In Aliabad, Farzana’s family and some 1,200 of what the United Nations calls “internally displaced persons” or IDPs, a class of refugees ineligible for UN aid out of international sovereignty concerns, were shifted into the village school. But when classes resumed after the winter break, “parents and the community became very angry and put much pressure on the IDPs to move,” Sarfraz said.

“The local people said, ’Our kids are suffering, get the IDPs out,’” Sarfraz said. “But nobody wanted to give land for school, and the IDPs had no land. So eventually the community gave the community polo ground for the students. And then I ordered tents for a school.”

Fifteen big white canvas tents were set up inside a boundary wall around a dusty schoolyard. The IDP children joined the students from Aliabad village, creating a school with 505 students in nursery through 10th class.

“We are grateful for CAI. It has helped us in time so our kids didn’t lose any time on education,” acting head teacher Gari Khan said.

In addition, CAI gave dozens of female students from the landslide-affected areas scholarships for higher education in the city. “The IDPs are also very thankful because 50 of our daughters, from class seven to class 12, got CAI scholarships to Islamabad for higher education,” Gari said. “We are very grateful.

Nevertheless, it has been a tough year for some students, Gari conceded.

“Of course there was some tension when it happened, but we managed some special classes for the students and it minimized their depression,” Gari said. “But now this is the ninth month and the government hasn’t taken any steps, so now parents and elders are getting highly depressed. They have nothing left.”

One of the Aliabad teachers, Gulzadi, said the shift to the tent school has been stressful for everyone involved.

“It is much more difficult than it used to be. We have more students and fewer teachers,” she said.

“And it is very difficult to be in the tents during the heat of summer and the cold winters. I wish the government of Pakistan would concentrate on these refugees because this is not their permanent settlement. They need help as soon as possible.”

Shangri-la

Meanwhile, north of the landslide, thousands of people had scrambled to higher ground above their villages, afraid to leave the only place they had ever called home.

It’s not hard to understand their attachment. The Hunza River runs through a stunningly beautiful valley. Some even believe it is the place that inspired British author James Hilton’s mythical Shangri-La in his 1933 book, “Lost Horizon.”

The snow-covered peaks of the western Karakoram and eastern Pamir mountains tower over the glacial and snowmelt-fed river. Centuries of inhabitants have nurtured grassy pastureland, poplar forests, fruit-tree orchards and terraced, irrigated fields in the lowlands.

Petroglyphs of ibex on the Sacred Rocks of Hunza are striking reminders of the valley’s ancient history. The petroglyphs also include the names of the Hunza kings who ruled with feudal authority beginning in the 1300s. The kingdom, and its monarchy, survived British occupation and the creation of Pakistan in 1947. It wasn’t until 1973, when Pakistan President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto dissolved the king’s power and made Hunza part of the region now called Gilgit-Baltistan, that the local people were empowered.

Nobody misses the king, Gari Khan said. “Our people had much more trouble when there was a king.”

Construction of the Karakoram Highway, an engineering marvel started in 1959 and opened in 1982, brought further change to the region. Stretching from southwest China, over the Kunjerab Pass into northern Pakistan and down along the Indus River to Abbottabad, the highway became a lifeline for the region. It also fueled growth of a tourism industry, although in recent years the global economic meltdown and fears of terrorism have slowed the flow of foreign visitors to a trickle.

And now, to nobody’s pleasure, the landslide has created this big lake in the center of the valley.

“Because of the landslide and the recent floods, one-fourth of CAI’s projects in the remote Chapasulan Valley and Upper Hunza were completely blocked off and CAI staff had to find innovative ways to continue projects there,” Greg said.

After the landslide, when it became clear that a long stretch of the KKH was likely to remain underwater for some time, Pakistan’s National Disaster Management Authority arranged for delivery of eight big wooden dories. The boats, operators and mechanics were shifted north from the port city of Karachi.

Almost immediately, makeshift trading areas took shape at the boat landings on the northern and southern ends of the lake. Chinese trucks hauled tons of goods to the northern end of the lake, where they were shifted onto boats and “shipped” 14 miles downriver to the lake’s southern end at Attabad.

Lake with no name

One cold, grey day in late September, Sarfraz and Saidullah Baig, CAI’s operations manager for the Hunza region, set out to check on CAI’s projects north of the lake.

Just getting to the boat landing at Attabad was no easy task. The KKH ended abruptly at the landslide area – an enormous 200-foot-high hillock of rocks covered with a thick layer of fine glacial silt that turns immediately to mud when it rains. Heavy construction equipment has been used to carve paths from the end of the KKH over the dam to the makeshift port.

The lakeside trading area was noisy and dirty, bustling with activity. Laborers lined up when the boats came in and
A boat arrives with humanitarian aid for residents stranded in their village after the Hunza River became a lake.

...
Boys study Dari in their primary school class at CAI’s English Language and Computer Learning Center in Kabul. The school accepts poor and orphaned children who would otherwise have no chance of getting an education and many of the boys go directly from school to jobs, in order to help support their fatherless families.

A fifth-grade girl writes her name on the blackboard in the Ali Khwaja village school in east-central Afghanistan, where classes are held in a mosque. Community elders this summer asked CAI to help them provide a proper school for the children, in part because there is not enough classroom space and in part because girls over a certain age are not allowed inside mosques, limiting their access to education.

Students at CAI’s English Language and Computer Learning Center in Kabul take a play break between classes. The school houses a growing number of programs, ranging from computer classes to a primary school. On the wall of the center are the words, “Education is Light.”
ORAN-WA-MONJAN, Afghanistan—Janagha Jaheed stood at the top of a tall wooden ladder and drew the outline of a star on the side of the village’s new school—the community’s project’s final touch.

“These are poor people, but they got this school built in three months,” said Janagha, director of the Marco Polo Foundation, an arm of Central Asia Institute that oversees projects in Badakhshan Province. “On the way here, we pass schools that take three years for the government to build.”

The village’s motivation was simple, said Mohammad Zakir, a village elder, teacher and foreman of the school construction project. “Without education nothing is possible. So we find the power and do our best,” Zakir said, taking Janagha’s place on the ladder and sketching another star.

The school is high in the Hindu Kush Mountains northeast Afghanistan, a 10-hour drive on dirt roads from the closest city. It lies in a beautiful valley, but at 10,000 feet altitude, the land is not very productive and the villagers are poor. Opium addiction is a problem.

And then there’s the foreign Taliban fighting U.S. and Afghan forces just over in the mountains in Nuristan Province. In addition to occupying people’s houses or burning them down, stealing food and anything of monetary value, the extremists have been accused of beheading those working with the Afghan government or foreign forces.

The fighting spurred residents from Nuristan’s Barg-e-Matal village to flee north over the Kafir Pass. They walked over the mountains empty handed and wound up here in Koran-wa-Monjan, tapping this village’s already meager resources.

“This is the fourth time in the last year fighting has forced Barg-e-Matal refugees to come to our village,” Zakir said. “This time I had 180 people in my house for five days. We try to help these refugees very much, to treat them like our family and make sure they do not go hungry.”

The problem is, he said, “We share what we can, but we have very little to share.”

“The local people have big problems,” said Sarfraz Khan, CAI’s operations director in Badakhshan. “All are poor. They have no food for themselves.”

So in June, two weeks after the new CAI school opened, Janagha and Sarfraz were here for another reason. Two helicopters were on their way with food and tents for the refugees.

“Nobody has been any help to these people,” Sarfraz said.

“Government gives them no help, no food, no buildings, no tents. Then refugees come and ask the villagers for food. All these people are very poor and share what they have, but they cannot really help.”
So CAI works with military to deliver help and then everybody will come together and build good relationship.

As Zakir drew the star on the school, a commander with the Badakhshan Border Security Force stood a few yards away, talking on the phone with his boss, Commanding Officer Wohid Khan. BSF has a small check post in the area and Wohid Khan, a longtime supporter of CAI’s work in the region, had ordered his troops to secure the area for the mission.

But no one was resting easy.

“The commander says the Taliban is right across the river,” Janagha translated. “But do not worry. The helicopters can come. The soldiers are guarding us.”

Zakil came down off the ladder and added, “The Taliban have come before, but it is impossible they come today. Soldiers were on duty all last night. None will come here today.”

But is the school in any danger of a Taliban attack in the future?

“Of course we worry,” Zakir said, “but we do not let them come and do anything because we built it. It is our school.”

Saga of Barg-e-Matal

Down the road, in a sweeping meadow on the bluffs over the River Thaghab, eight men representing the Barg-e-Matal refugees had gathered to await the helicopters. They waited under the hot sun on a large Afghan rug spread out on the grass.

“We have lived in the region for thousands of years, but now we must leave,” said Sham Shullah, 60, a Barg-e-Matal elder. “Now it is very difficult and very much dangerous for us to be there. There was so much fighting and so much killing. They burn many, many houses. All the houses are of wood, no stone or cement, and they pour petrol all over and burn the houses with people still inside. More than 50 people were killed. Only we save our lives, nothing else.

“Three-hundred people came this way, walking for four days. But many people are still there because they were not able to come.”

Across the meadow, Wohid Khan’s officers were posted around the helicopter-landing pad that was, as CAI’s Executive Director Greg Mortenson said, “Flat, green and ready.” He had researched all sorts of options for delivering help. But Koran-wa-Monjan is so high up in the mountains and so remote, the logistics of transporting anything are daunting.

The same mountainous landscape and isolated villages are what attracted the Taliban to Nuristan in the first place, Haji Abdul Sabur, the chief of the Barg-e-Matal’s village chief, said in an interview in Kabul, where he and some of the other refugees wound up.

“The Taliban moved in because the geographic location is good,” Sabur said. “Our district has a long, 180-kilometer border with Pakistan so the fighters training in Pakistan – Chechen, Uzbek, Arab, Pakistani – come easily across the border. They are not even Afghan Taliban.

“And the mountains in Nuristan make it much easier for the insurgents to hide. There are many trees for covering them and the big bombs and rockets can’t work there,” said Sabur, whose blue eyes and white beard suggest the Nuristanis’ claims of ancestral links to Alexander the Great.

The Barg-e-Matal villagers have no way to fight the Taliban; worn down by poverty and neglected by the government, they surrender or flee, they have no other choice, he said.
Western-backed security forces have repeatedly tried to wrest control of Barg-e-Matal from the insurgents, but then they leave, Abdul said. Last year, International Security Assistants Force (ISAF) closed its base in Nuristan.

Then in June, heavy fighting drove the refugees north again.

“The Taliban are like pirates who attack and take what they want,” Ghulam Allah, another elder in Kabul, said, punctuating his remarks with angry, animated gestures. “The situation is very bad. Nobody can go there. In two villages, people have survived by eating only mulberries.”

Back up in Koran-wa-Monjan, Sham Shullah, his face sunburned from all the time he has spent outside since leaving home, explained that the families that surrender their homes and food to the Taliban — about half of the 2,000 families wind up trying to appease the insurgents — feel they have no other options.

“We ask them, ‘Why do you support the Taliban?’ They say, ‘what are we supposed to do? They come here and replace the Afghan flag with the Taliban flag. They have huge weapons. They are everywhere in the mountains and there is nowhere to go.’”

Sham Shullah sighed and looked across the river into the mountains. “Of course, maybe they will follow us here, too, and come at night and kill us and go back.”

And with that, he and the other elders settled in to wait for the helicopters.

The mission

Greg is all about building relationships and it was through his introduction to U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. J. Olaf Holm, 44, of Spokane, that the idea of the humanitarian mission became a reality.

“We are desperate to get food and vital shelter to about 800 Nuristani refugees who fled Barg-e-Matal with the Taliban attack in late May,” Greg wrote in an e-mail to Holm. “Barg-e-Matal was retaken by the Afghan National Army in early June, however the refugees who fled the area are terrified to return, as there are Taliban lurking near Kafir Pass, ready to kill them if they return home. We are unable to get any help from them from the United Nations or the Afghan government.” The UN typically does not help refugees who stay within the borders of their own country.

Greg’s e-mail resonated with Holm, who had been following developments in Barg-e-Matal. Gen. Stanley McChrystal, former ISAF and U.S. commander in Afghanistan, had developed a close relationship with the Nuristan elders. But due to frequent attacks, high casualties and small population numbers being served in that region he had been asked to pull U.S. troops from the remote forward operating bases in Nuristan, and instead focus efforts on large military operations in Helmand and Kandahar.

“I had requested several times to lead a support/assault mission into the district, but there was resistance due to the high threats to our types of helicopters. We never launched and the Taliban took over,” Holm said. “So when Greg got in touch with me and requested the support, there was no question I would find a way to help.”

A 26-year Air Force veteran, he wanted to do something meaningful to mark the last flight of his second one-year tour with the 438 Air Expedição Air Advisory Group in Afghanistan.

Yet organizing “The Badakhshan Mission,” as it came to be called, was no simple matter. A month of planning resulted in a crew that included Holm and another U.S. pilot, two Afghan pilots-in-training and a seven-man support crew. Holm sought, and eventually got, approval from the top brass of the Afghan military and U.S. forces.

CAI staff ordered and delivered 7,000 pounds of supplies – 12 huge canvas tents, bags of flour, sugar, rice and ghee (clarified butter), shovels, saws, picks and axes, hammers and nails, trowels, bags of cement, wheelbarrows, plum lines, flashlights and batteries – to the NATO air base in Kabul.

There, Holm then lined up a C-27 transport airplane to carry people and materials to an airport in Badakhshan and two of the Afghan National Army’s (ANA) Russian Mi-17 transport helicopters to deliver the goods.

Finally, on a day in mid-June, Holm and his U.S.-Afghan crew landed on the bluffs beside the River Thaghab.

Zakir ran up to greet them and then pointed to the elders, shouting over the whir of the helicopter rotors: “Those men represent the refugee families. They are very glad to see you, sir. These people are poor. They have lost everything. They are starving.”

Holm was moved beyond words and turned away for a minute to collect himself, before stepping forward to greet the elders. “Asalaam aleikum,” he said, offering the traditional Muslim greeting that means “Peace be with you,” and shaking hands with each of the men.

Then he shrugged off his body armor and said, “Let’s get this stuff unloaded.”

War in Badakhshan

There are many ways to fight insurgents; theories abound. But Greg has long believed that education is key to lasting peace in the world. He sees education as “light,” and often repeats a Persian proverb, “When it is dark, you can see the stars.”

The stars, or “sitaras,” on every CAI school in Badakhshan symbolize the region’s enormous battle against illiteracy and poverty.

“Greg told us that, ‘The light shines from Badakhshan to Kabul, not from Kabul to Badakhshan,’” Janagha said as he and Zakir looked up at the star on the Koran-wa-Monjan school. “This school will bring more light.”

Until recently, Badakhshan was spared much of Afghanistan’s widespread violence. A mainly ethnic Tajik region bordering Tajikistan, it is one of the few Afghan provinces not controlled by the Taliban before the US-led invasion of 2001. And it is stunningly beautiful, with the peaks of the Hindu Kush and Pamir mountains and miles of pristine rivers.

But while the high peaks protected residents from the outside world, it also made it easier for successive Afghan governments to ignore the area. As a result, the region lacks modern amenities such as electricity and paved roads and is plagued by poverty, illiteracy, drug addiction and government corruption.

All of those things serve as “dry tinder” for militancy, the Christian Science Monitor reported in August. “There are signs that the security is slipping.”

‘When it is dark, you can see the stars.’

A girl carries a baby lamb in Koran-wa-Monjan. School-age girls are often responsible for attending to their families’ livestock.
Those signs include Taliban raids on a police checkpoint, a government guesthouse in Kasham district and a government office in Baharak.

A few days before the June CAI mission, three German soldiers were injured when their vehicle hit a roadside bomb in Wardoch. And in August, Taliban attacked and killed eight medical aid workers in the mountains just south of Koran-a-Monjan.

“Six Americans, one British, one German – all are dead,” Sarfraz reported over the phone the day the news broke. “This is really bad.”

The International Assistance Mission team had apparently crossed paths with Taliban fighters who had fled Barg-e-Matal and were hiding in the mountains. “People told them it was dangerous,” Gen. Agha Nur Kamtuz, police chief in Badakhshan, told the Los Angeles Times. “They said they were doctors and no one had anything against them.”

The situation underscored the Taliban’s assertion that its had decided to treat all aid workers in Afghanistan as “foreign occupiers,” and the attack prompted some international aid groups to re-examine their security protocols.

But for Greg and CAI’s Afghan staff, it only underscored how important their work is to the long-term stability of the region.

Thaghab School
The new school in Koran-wa-Monjan replaces a tiny mud-and-timber structure with low ceilings and a grass roof where 150 students studied in the semi-darkness for four years, Sarfraz said. “The people themselves built this.”

“When we saw the students in the old school it was intolerable to both me and Sarfraz,” Janagha said. “We said, ‘Your project starts at this moment.’ The owner of the land was in Ishkashim, so we rented a car for them, and they went and asked the man if he would donate land. The man said, ‘All of my land is in your service. You can choose whatever you want.’ Then I sent them building materials, a design plan and one of our masons to make the foundation.”

By late June, the students had already shifted to the new school, although work hadn’t quite finished on the bathroom and boundary wall.

“They want protection for the school,” Sarfraz said, pointing to a broken window in a classroom. “I say we put wire over the windows because some person threw a stone. We need to make this school perfect. Other people will come and see. We want to make many projects in this area, so we need everyone’s support. No broken glass. And get a chokidar (guard) to stay here at night.”

The three teachers and community leaders nodded as Sarfraz spoke.

Then Zakir said, “The teachers, that is still a problem. We face a lack of teachers. Getting teachers here is impossible. Why would they come here? People are looking cityside for jobs, not mountainside. So we have three teachers for six classes. All volunteer because of their children. The government paid salaries for a while, but then stopped.”

He is one of those teachers. Growing up, his father was a trader and “had a little money” to send him away for schooling. But no one else in this village could afford such a luxury. He has six children, including three daughters in the school, and three boys still “too small for school.”

Another one of the teachers is Bibi Khanim, a 30-year-old woman who grew up in distant Ishkashim, graduated from high school and then married a man from Koran-wa-Monjan. They have four children ranging in age from 8 to 14.

She said she volunteers as a teacher “to help the
people. I want my children to be well educated and make their lives better than ours is now. I don’t want my children to live like this.”

She also teaches basic math, Dari, reading and writing, and nutrition, hygiene and sanitation to 25 women in the afternoons, she said. “It makes me very happy. Learning brings many changes to life because without literacy, it is difficult to continue and improve your life. There are many problems education can change, but most is opium, ‘oppy.’ If they are educated, they will not get addicted.”

Bibi Khanim also provides the only medical care for three villages, using skills she acquired “when a doctor came to Ishkashim to treat the opium-addicted people. At that time I was a student and I volunteered and learned some medicine. It was difficult situation, but I learned a lot.”

But here she has no medicine, and despite her best efforts, “many women and children die,” especially during labor and delivery.

Upon hearing all of this, Sarfraz promised CAI would arrange salaries for the teachers, organize a teachers’ training and send school supplies and some medicine to the village.

Zakir’s eyes filled with tears.
“I am so grateful. The first time you come you made a school. The second time you come, you make salaries and give us medicine. I am so happy I am crying and I will not forget you forever.”

Show it can be done

Once the helicopters were unloaded and the soldiers had tea with the elders, it was time to go. Another stop had added to the mission: delivery of two generators and two air compressors to a CAI school in Ishkashim.

“Ishkashim is on the Tajikistan border,” Greg had written to Holm. “We need the compressor and generator for many purposes, including to help set up a runway” for future aid delivery.

Ishkashim’s elders and government officials had organized a big celebration in honor of the flight crew’s arrival and the CAI donation. The district education director, the city’s mayor, teachers, religious leaders, Com-

mandhan Wohid Khan and hundreds of students met the helicopters with flowers for everyone. The students sang, in English, “Welcome to Badakhshan, welcome to Wakhan. We welcome our guests, you are our best guests. Welcome to Badakhshan.”

The reception then moved into the second CAI girls’ high school in Ishkashim, which had opened a year earlier and was already proving too small.

“You have a beautiful school in beautiful place,” Holm told the girls.

As the girls filed into the school, Holm said the mission also demonstrated to the government that it is possible to help the people of these remote areas. “There are a lot of people all around the country making this mission go and I’m excited to see such great cooperation between all of the different agencies,” he said. “I hope that this is just a small glimpse of what will come.”

In a classroom inside the school, one of the students, Dawlat, 18, told Holm, “We need your help and encouragement. This is a poor district. It is not near to anything. If we don’t have education, for the development of our country, especially for girls and for cities like this, we have nothing.”

A few minutes later Sarfraz asked the students and teachers what they needed, and they rattled off a list: more books for the upper classes, a chemistry lab, sports equipment and more classrooms. Sarfraz wrote down their requests and then announced that CAI would build a third girls’ high school in Ishkashim.

The visit was quick, but before leaving, Holm took a few moments to thank everyone involved.

“Flying up here today, every turn brought more and more beauty – the green grass, the waterfalls, the white-topped mountains, it’s all breathtaking,” he said. “But the most beautiful were the people who met us. There’s nothing more important than for a society to take care of its children and it’s obvious you do. The government of Afghanistan, the United States, we all need to work together for the future of Afghanistan.”

“Thank you for letting me be a part of this. I will always have you in my heart.”
AIDAN SHAHR, Afghanistan – “The pen is sharper than the sword of a king,” the teacher wrote in Pashto on the blackboard in a hallway where a class of fifth-grade girls sat cross-legged on the cement floor.

“Write that down,” he told the students.

The girls leaned forward, dipped their wooden sticks into ink and water and wrote oh-so carefully in script letters: The pen is sharper than the sword of a king.

English author Edward Bulwer-Lytton coined a similar phrase, “The pen is mightier than the sword,” in 1839 for his play “Richelieu; Or the Conspiracy,” which he had gleaned from the writings of the Prophet Mohammed, who circa 651 A.D. wrote, “The ink of a scholar is holier than the blood of a martyr.”

After practicing that sentence a few times, the teacher wrote, “Kabul is the capital of Afghanistan” and said, “Now write that.”

And with intense concentration, the girls continued their lesson.

While some children in the Western world learn to type on a computer keyboard before they even enter kindergarten, here in central Afghanistan, paper and ink is still the medium for nearly all students – including the 600 girls at Familia Girls School.

This summer, the girls were still studying in a 10-room rented house that was full to overflowing. They are divided into morning and afternoon shifts, but there’s still not enough room. In addition to the fifth-grade class in the hall, a sixth-grade class was outside in the hot sun.

But by late 2010, they will all study together in the first 12-classroom girls’ high school down the road, built by Central Asia Institute.

“There are now 600 girls, but there will be more when there is a school,” said Wakil Karimi, CAI’s Afghan operations manager.

That there are girls in school here at all is an accomplishment. The people who live in this capital city of Wardak District are largely poor, religious, conservative and Pashto. The literacy rate in Wardak is 25 percent, according to the Afghanistan Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development’s provincial profile report.

And even though the city is just 22 miles southwest of Kabul, “the Taliban presence here is very strong and there often is fighting here between ISAF, the ANA (Afghan National Army) and the Taliban,” Wakil said.

Only about 20 percent of girls age 6 to 13 in Wardak are enrolled in school and only 17 percent of the schools are girls’ schools, according to the 2009 provincial education report.

The girls are well aware that, in some of the insurgents’ minds, they are crossing a line by attending school.

“Unfortunately the situation of Maidan Shahr is not good for girls who want to go to school,” said 19-year-old Arzo, who sat on ninth-grade classroom floor in front of a row of burkas hung on the wall. Girls in this region...
begin wearing burkas around age 14.

“We are afraid one day the Taliban will put poison in our school. So many girls are afraid that they don’t even come to school. Some women teachers do not come to school because they are afraid from the Taliban, too,” the outspoken Arzo said.

The headmaster, Aziz Ullah, agreed that the community school has had trouble attracting both students and female teachers.

“The problem we have is that some people don’t think it is safe,” he said. “For 30 years there has been fighting in this province, so some parents don’t let girls go to school.

“Another problem we have is that people don’t want to send their daughters to school when there are only male teachers. But we don’t have educated women here and the women from Kabul say this is a dangerous area and the government doesn’t pay them enough salary to travel. We had two women teachers, but Taliban sent them night letters, giving them a warning, ‘If you don’t stop, we will kill you.’ So they stopped.”

But while he acknowledged that the Taliban occasionally try to intimidate, he said he has no problem with the Taliban. “There is even a Taliban teacher at our school, Aziz said. “Come and meet him.”

In his black turban and shalwar kameez, Qare Haroon stands before a class of eighth-grade girls, teaching Arabic. He has drawn circles with black kohl around his eyes.

“I teach girls because they are part of our society. I love to teach them and it is important work. Our Holy Prophet Mohammed, Peace Be Upon Him, has written that it is very important to have education for girls and boys. They have to learn.”

One of his students agreed.

“Education is very important for all humans, boys and girls,” Spogmi, 17 and an eighth-grader, said. “My mother does not have education, but she stresses to me that I must go to school, she wants to give good education to her children. She knows that education is the basis of everything: we understand the difference between good and bad. Without education, we cannot do anything. Foreign countries went ahead because they are educated. Our country is backward because there was no education for 30 years.”

Fighting ignorance

Across Afghanistan, millions of girls were banned from education under the Taliban’s rule in the 1990s. According to UNICEF, in 2000, only 800,000 Afghan children were in school, and most of them were boys.
But today, there are 9 million children in school in Afghanistan, and 2.8 million of them are girls,” said Greg Mortenson, CAI’s executive director. CAI has contributed to that increase. As of October 2010, it had built or significantly supports more than 80 schools in Afghanistan. And Wakil still gets dozens of requests for new schools every month.

In Maidan Shahr, as laborers spread cement over the redbrick walls of the new school in June, Wakil pointed across the schoolyard to a boys’ high school built by the French. That building needs to be replaced, too, as the roof is collapsing making sections of it unusable only six years after construction, Wakil said. “The elders here complain about that and invite me to rebuild that school also.”

But Wakil already has enough on his plate overseeing dozens of CAI projects in Afghanistan. He is responsible for getting government permission, lining up materials, overseeing construction and – most importantly – building the relationships with local people that will last long after the schools are built.

“We teach them, ‘This is your school. These are your daughters and your sisters. You build a good building.’ If they build it themselves, they take care of it because they built it by their own hands. A good example of that is Saw Girls’ School in Kunar. The Taliban has control of that area. But they say to Taliban, ‘This is ours. You cannot destroy or burn it.’ And then they say to us, ‘We pray for you all the life.’”

Such prayers are appreciated. Wakil and his small crew work hard, often in dangerous, remote areas of this war-ravaged country. CAI has established 11 schools and has plans for another three in volatile Kunar Province; two in Logar Province; and has started construction on two in Urozgan Province.

“More people from Kunar Province now ask CAI, you come to our village, which is under control of the Taliban, to build a school and we will protect you,” Wakil said. “Slowly, slowly I go ahead with them. I build trust with them and step-by-step I tell them, the building is from our side, anything else is from your side.”

He depends on those relationships with the community, especially the elders, which are at the core of CAI’s philosophy.

“We never do anything without the consultation and input of the elders and shura,” Greg said. “It is crucial to do anything.”

Relationships have also been vital to Wakil’s work in Urozgan Province in central Afghanistan. Home to Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban,
the population is largely conservative, rural and illiterate; less than 5 percent of the population is literate.

Yet in 2008, Wakil befriended a group of senior elders who wanted to build girls’ schools in Urozgan. And by the fall of 2010, CAI had started constructing two schools in the Dae Rawood district. “They will be completed soon and we will start more, by the help of the elders, who have good, strong friendship with CAI,” Wakil said.

But in the meantime, he has had to adapt CAI’s formula in order to promote girls’ education there.

“In Urozgan, most men are against girls’ education,” he said. “They say they won’t let the girls go to school. The women there, they cannot even walk in the street. There are no women teachers. Right now there is only one girls’ school in all the province, a school that has 200 students in the provincial capital of Tarin Kot. CAI supports that school, but the students are afraid of the Taliban.

“So I gave them a new idea that we have to start education for girls in the mosque with the mullah imams, who are religious teachers in the villages. In there, we can also teach the girls about math, science, geography and other subjects with no problem. All the elders, local people and official people with whom I had meetings, they agreed and said it was such a good idea. I started a few and as soon as possible, after a few months, we will slowly shift them over to girls’ schools with the help of mullah imams and give them a good chance at education.”

Kabul center

Kabul, on the other hand, is overflowing with people, many of whom want education – as much and as soon as they can get it.

The city in 2010 is a clash of old and new. The markets are filled with open-stall bazaars where everyone talks on mobile phones. The poor and the lame beg. Satellite dishes have been mounted in the weirdest places.

Amid the rubble of decades of war, new buildings are under construction, where laborers use pulleys to lift iron bar and hand tools to break stone. On the streets, cars, motorcycles, diesel putt-putt rickshaws and trucks mingle with horses, goats, sheep and cows.

Kabul overflows with people. It has more than quadrupled in population in the past decade. As a result, traffic is congested.

“There is too much traffic and not enough roads,” Wakil said one day as he drove along a main thoroughfare being reconstructed. “There were 70,000 people in Kabul when they built this road. Now there are more than 5 million and it’s too much.”

The insurgents still attack targets in the city, blowing up hotels with foreign guests and targeting government institutions and international charity groups.

He pointed to a bombed-out wall along the road. “British VIPs were killed there in suicide bombing in May.”

Yet life goes on. People go shopping, the bakers churn out an endless stream of bread, the kids go to school and their parents to work, women do the laundry and the cooking, everyone stops for prayers.

“All the disabled people begging on the streets, that situation disturbs me,” said Maliha Azizi, 29, literacy manager at CAI’s English Language and Computer Learning Center in Kabul. She finished high school in Pakistan, where her family lived as refugees for nine years. “We came back because we love our country. This is our homeland.”

And things are better than they used to be, she said.

“In Kabul, it is not so bad. We had a three-decade fight in Afghanistan. Under the Taliban, women didn’t have education or health programs. Now we pass days and nights in (relative) peace.”

At the CAI Center, bright orange buildings, the words “Education is Light” declare CAI’s philosophy. Wakil bought the land for $24,000 some years ago and built the two-story school for $70,000. CAI runs a growing number of programs at the center, including a school for Kabul’s poor and orphaned children.
“This is a school for children whose parents have died or are very poor,” Wakil said. “We have 120 students and six teachers who come here six days a week. Right now it goes to class four, including prep class. Year by year we will make more classes and expand the program.”

One of the fourth-grade students, Marzia, is 18 years old. “Her family is very poor,” Wakil said. “Before, her parents don’t let her go to school. Now, after a long time, her parents say OK. So I accepted her as a student in this class. Now is a good chance for her to learn.”

Her family had lived in Parvan Province, north of Kabul, but immigrated after 2001. Her father is a roadside laborer with a sixth-grade education. Her mother is an illiterate housewife.

“I am very glad. At this age I am very determined to learn,” Marzia said. “Education is very important. Because of education my eyes open. Without education my eyes will be shut. Maybe I don’t have a chance, but I hope to be a doctor. It is difficult, but I try. It would be a very good job and helpful to people.”

First-grade teacher Asma, who also teaches English classes to adults in the afternoon, said “Many students want to be doctors because doctors have good roles in the society and in the country. Doctors rescue a lot of people. They want to be doctors because they see so many suicide bombs.”

In addition to the primary school, CAI opened a computer center here in 2007. About 500 students attend one of 14 classes, each one lasts about an hour and costs about $1 per month per student, although “girls are free,” Wakil said. “Even The Afghan Army and police, high-level officers, come and want to learn computer. They said they need it to work in their offices. Some of them walk one or two hours to come here at night to learn, and we charge them a small fee to cover our costs to stay open late. Most of them don’t know English so we have to help there also.”

At the present time, about 70 percent of the Afghan Army is illiterate, according to the U.S. Department of Defense, which is reflective of the similar literacy rate of the Afghan people.

Generators for the 20 computers back up the inconsistent power supply. “We teach different programs, Windows, Excel, PowerPoint. Some of the students are in other schools but come here in the afternoons because they want to know how to do accounting, lists and charts. People want skills for work,” Wakil said.

Old Soviet checkpost

The main road north out of Kabul drops into a wide, sandy valley, home to New Kabul City, a series of houses built for Afghan refugees who recently returned to Kabul only to find no place to live.

Nomadic herders summer in this valley. The ever-present wind kicks up the sand, creating dust storms that swirl around the small smokestacks at the brick-making factories. The wind, and
lack of water, has made the area unappealing to a lot of refugees.

The road heads north into Parvan Province, an area where violence is much less of a daily occurrence than it once was.

Home to Bagram Air Force Base, the region marked the front lines between the Soviets and the mujahedeen during the 1980s and between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance during the 1990s. “Taliban were powerful in this area before,” Wakil said.

Mud houses in Durani village, where 150 mostly Pashto families, make a living as subsistence farmers 45 miles north of Kabul. Drought and poverty prevail. War has driven them out, over the border to Pakistan, numerous times. They always return.

“This village is very poor and the children are sometimes starving,” Wakil said. “They want to build a girls’ school to help with their future.”

For the time being, the village has set up a school in the private house of an older man who moved to Pakistan during the war and didn’t return. The community pays him rent.

The crumbling mud-and-timber house was built as a Russian checkpoint, complete with old ammunition boxes stuck in the mud walls. Part of an old Soviet tank motor sits in the yard; the shell of the tank is outside the crumbling boundary wall. The yard is filled with thistles, snakes and spent bullets.

The kids sit inside low-ceilinged rooms on plastic mats. The government pays four teachers and a headmaster to keep things going.

“There are 200 students, there are no good books, no chairs or furniture, no blackboards, not enough teachers,” Wakil said. “Also, there are no doors on the rooms so always there is wind and dust. The roof is not good.”

On that June day, the classes at the primary school were sparsely attended.

“Many of the children didn’t come today because they go to take care of the animals,” said teacher Sher Rajan. “Some are sick and since we have no hospital or doctor, their parents must carry them to Kabul. But they want to learn something. And we want to be their teachers.”

CAI started construction of a six-classroom school that will accommodate 400 students, all girls.

“A new school will be really good for us,” the teacher said.

**Study in caves**

Just down the road in Ali Khwaja village, students and teachers are also anxiously awaiting construction of a CAI school. For years, the community has held classes in the village mosque. The school is well attended; in fact there’s not enough room for all the students so the first-grade class is held on the front stoop.

“Sometimes there is no space here or the weather is bad, so they study in these caves,” Wakil said, pointing at the holes in the mountainside propped up with sticks and rocks. “During the fighting, they used to live in the caves. Now put animals inside.”

But the problem with the mosque is that girls over a certain age can’t go inside.

And the village has been ignored by the government and other NGOs, said Mullah Jan, district education manager.

“You are very brave. You are the first foreigners to come here,” Mullah Jan told this reporter. “CAI is the first NGO to come to this area. Nobody comes here. We are happy and surprised to meet you today.

“One time the provincial education manager came to a nearby village. Only one time he came. And he came in a tank.”

The community school in the mosque goes up to class five and 300 boys and girls are enrolled. After class five, the boys walk 90 minutes each way to a government high school.
The girls are out of luck. "Older girls don’t have permission to come to mosque. If they have a building, they will come," Wakil said.

The villagers’ need for help is clear. Families grow potatoes, wheat, onions, garlic, grapes and mulberries, but only to subsist on, there is simply not enough to sell.

The children are malnourished. And they all wear dusty, ragged clothes. Under their scarves, some of the girls’ hair is so matted it forms dreadlocks.

As is common in Afghanistan, some of the girls in the early elementary classes are older. That’s because, the district education manager said, during the Taliban time (1994-2000), girls were not allowed to go to school.

"Now people agree to send girls to school," and there are schools that accept girls in the district, "but the numbers decrease day by day because they have no buildings," he said. "If we have buildings for girls, parents will let children go to school, but they will not if they are sitting out in the trees and the sunshine."

Ethnic divisions, said Mullah Jan, a large man who wears a turban and a long beard, further complicate the situation.

"The provincial government are Persian and speak Dari, but the people in these villages are Pashto. So the provincial government does not want to send information about the needs of this village to ISAF or the NGOs. Another problem is that this area has nobody to voice problems to high officials, no Member of Parliament. We would be lucky if you build us a school. And it will be a big shame for the provincial government."

Over tea, Wakil informs the education official that, if possible, CAI will build a six-classroom school in Ali Khwaja. The village elders produce a letter, their official request for a school. Those that can’t sign their names have put their thumbprints on the document. Once Mullah Jan approves it, it will go on to the provincial education manager, then to Kabul.

"We need a school for this area," Mullah Jan said, sipping green tea. "Three things are important for education: teacher, students and a building. They are all very important. They have the teachers and students in this village, but no building."

Tent school

As the scorching summer sun beats down on the wind-torn canvas tent that is her classroom, second-grade teacher Nazila bends over to write math problems on a tiny blackboard set on the floor. She has 66 students in her class. Tires and broken furniture are piled on top of her tent and the half-dozen others set up inside a crumbling mud wall to keep them from blowing away.

"You can see it is difficult to teach here," Nazila said. "The weather is hot. There is no space for the students. And there are so many distractions. It is not a good environment for learning."

Despite the difficulties, the Momurad Khwaga Village Girls’ Middle School boasts 720 students, said village chief Haji Abdul Wasi. Some of the girls walk an hour each way. They want to be here. "Education is very important for us," said eighth-grader Fatana, 13. "It gives good direction for us. By education we know ourselves, our parents, our village, our area, our god. Without that, we cannot do anything. With knowledge we can build our country. It protects us from going the wrong way and keeps us going the right way."

"War is the result of ignorance. People don’t have knowledge and because of that they fight. Today we are kids, but next time we will be mothers, adults, teachers, doctors and engineers. So education is important for girls, not only for boys."

By late 2010, CAI will finish construction of a 12-room, one-story high school in Momurad Khwaga, complete with good latrines, which is the girls’ No. 1 request. The tent school will be history.

"The government does not come here and this is the first time an NGO comes here to ask about a school in the village," the village chief said.

Another grateful teacher is Hadija, who has 84 students in her first-grade class, which meets outside the wall, on the grass.

"When it rains, no school," she said. "I hope to produce good students to help the society. But right now, we need a building."

'I thank Allah for CAI'

It’s much the same story in Musakhil village, farther north in the province, where Wakil has another project.

Work has begun on a CAI girls’ primary school with nine rooms for the 300 students through class three studying in a rented, run-down house.

"The government pays the teachers, but they
need a building for the school and the government has no money,” Wakil said. “CAI school will be the first girls’ school ever in this village.”

In mid-June, Wakil’s crews and community volunteers were busy teaching the locals how to lay the foundation. When he stopped to check on their progress – stopping to pick fresh mulberries from a tree by the road – dozens of people crowded around to listen.

Wakil made a few suggestions and left the men to start pouring cement.

As dark clouds rolled in over the mountains that surround this ancient village, Wakil walked to the home of the headmaster, Nakibullah, who said the school is desperately needed.

“Without school, people will live like before. But if they get education, they will have better lives. I know the value of education. I studied chemistry at university. So I asked my father to donate the land.”

His father, Said Muhammad, donated the 328x328-foot square piece of land.

“I donated the land because I love education, I love knowledge,” he said. “Here, there was no school for the girls. Education is very important for girls because the first teacher at home is the mother. We can finish all ignorance at home if the mother can teach well to the children.

“Things are much different than they were before, when people were not eager to send girls to school. That was the result of fighting. But if you want to remove the source of war, we must have education. The people who make war use other people to fight their battles – the poor people, the uneducated. People join the fight because they are hungry. If we get education, the brotherhood will start and all people will have friendship.”

That CAI has come to Musakhil and offered help came as a pleasant surprise. And Wakil has let the community know that, as with all CAI projects, no U.S. government funds, USAID or Department of Defense money was used to fund the school, and that all the support comes from private donors, including children.

“We are very grateful for CAI,” he said. “We didn’t go and knock on CAI’s door. You came to us. And we are glad. Now we think about America as our friend. As a representative for the village, I thank Allah for the staff of CAI and we pray every day for long life for all the good people who support this organization.”

Middle school students in Kapisa Province, Afghanistan.

A ragged, weather-beaten tent offer the only relief from the sun, wind and rain for these second-graders in Kapisa Province.
SKARUD, Pakistan – On any given weekday morning, the streets just outside the Government Women’s College here fill with the sight of hundreds of young women dressed in their white uniforms hurrying to class. Their presence on the city streets and at the college vividly marks the relatively rapid change in thinking about females and education in this remote northern region of Pakistan known as Baltistan.

“Just 10 years ago, many people were still not ready to get higher education for their daughters. I was not seeing girls on the road, coming to the college. Now, they fill the street,” Dr. Uzma Saleem, president of the college, said in September. “They are more confident, more learned, more keen to know what the rest of the world is doing. And they are changing their homes and their environments. Their parents, they are keen to learning, too. You can see more and more women in the villages, women who are not educated, who take the hands of their children and walk them to school each day because they want their children to be keen learners. So it is a rapid change in the past 10 years,” Uzma said.

A key ingredient in that change inarguably has been Greg Mortenson and the dedicated local staff of his Central Asia Institute, which began building schools and promoting education, especially for girls, in Baltistan in 1993. Seventeen years later, in addition to building more than 60 schools in the region, CAI is extending scholarships to female graduates of those schools.

“When we agree with a community to establish a school, it is also a covenant with all the children in that community who aspire to improve or change their lives through education that their dream will become a reality,” Greg said. “We want to make sure that whether they want to get through high school or go on to become a pilot or a nurse, a doctor or an engineer, their dreams will come true.”

The scholarship program has become an integral part of CAI’s work in Pakistan and Afghanistan. But convincing community leaders and parents that this is the right path has been challenging, Uzma noted.

“This transformation is difficult because most of the Baltistan people are not educated,” she said. “Baltistan is famous for its natural beauty and tourism and it has its own culture and traditions, but it’s a fact that the area has not prospered due to very low literacy rate and poverty.”

Yet people are coming around. “Women constitute half of the society, their education directly influences the whole family and society, so we must enlighten their lives through education,” she said.

For Westerners, the idea that women hold up “Half the Sky,” to borrow a phrase from New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof, is nothing new. But in remote regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan, it is still revolutionary.
Korphe’s academic stars

Two of the girls making their way every day to the Skardu Women’s College are Jahan, 23, and Tahira, 26. They were both among the first females to complete CAI’s first school in Korphe, in the Braldu Valley, high in the mountains north of Skardu. (Their stories were told in “Three Cups of Tea,” Greg’s bestselling book about his work in the mountains of Central Asia.)

But they are the only two girls from Korphe who continued their education.

“In the Braldu Valley, these are just two girls who got higher education – Tahira and Jahan,” said Mohammad Nazir, CAI’s operations manager in Baltistan. “In all the valley, there are just these two.”

For five years, Jahan and Tahira have lived in Skardu with relatives while completing high school and three years of college.

Years ago, when Jahan first asked Greg about further education, she said she wanted to be a doctor. However, her test scores in science subjects were “weak,” she said, so she adjusted. In addition to her regular studies, she squeezed in six months training as a ladies’ health worker. And, as of the fall of 2010, she has one more year to go to earn her bachelor’s degree.

When she’s done, Jahan wants to pursue a master’s degree in English and/or psychology. “And then I want to teach in one of Dr. Greg’s schools. I could help many people in the Braldu Valley.”

One thing looming large on her horizon, however, is an arranged marriage to a young man chosen for her when she was 10 years old. Her fiancé, age 27, is an uneducated farmer and mountain-climbing expedition porter who lives near her village.

“So many times I said, ‘No, I don’t need to marry,’” Jahan said. “First I say, ‘Let me finish my bachelor’s degree.’ Now I say, ‘I want to get my master’s.’ But my father, too, is illiterate and has no interest in education. He made this promise years ago, so this is about his honor; when he says something, he must make that happen. And now my fiancé’s side, they are forcing (the issue). They are ready, making plans, making plans.

“It’s hard to keep saying no. Inshallah, I can just stay in school,” she said, her shoulders slumping.

After hearing of this situation in September, CAI reiterated that CAI will pay for Jahan’s education for as long as she wants to stay in school and dispatched Nazir to Korphe to negotiate with Jahan’s father for more time.

Tahira’s situation, meanwhile, has gotten a little more complicated, too, although she has more control over her immediate future. Within the past year, she married a man from Korphe, who is 28. “It was an arranged marriage, but we were interested in each other, too,” she said. And they had a baby in September, which Jahan helped deliver.

But Tahira’s husband is educated. Like Tahira and Jahan, he finished high school and is one year away from finishing college. And he supports Tahira’s efforts to finish college.

“If CAI can support me further, I can manage to keep going,” Tahira said, holding her newborn baby in her arms. “I am interested in a master’s in psychology. In our area, people have their own kind of mind. Many of them are still illiterate and have no knowledge.

And mentally they are often in a bad way.”

A trained psychologist with interest in addressing mental-health issues in northern Pakistan would be long overdue, Greg said.
Nasreen, a CAI scholarship student pursuing a nursing degree in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, checks on a patient and her hours-old baby at Bilal Hospital in Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Nasreen plans to return with her family to their home Chapusan Valley in remote northern Pakistan once her education is complete.

“For people who have mental illness or depression in Baltistan, there’s nowhere to go,” he said. “Dr. Niaz Ali, an ophthalmologist who works in the region, told us that there are no psychologists available for the nearly 1 million people in northern Pakistan.”

Shakeela’s clinic

Access to health care in the region, however, just got easier for hundreds of women in the Hushe Valley, a valley of 4 million people east of Skardu, where CAI school graduate Shakeela has set up a small women’s clinic. Her work is aimed in part at helping to reduce the sky-high maternal mortality rate in northern Pakistan, where the rate is 780 deaths/100,000 live births, compared to 17 in the United States.

Shakeela, 21, has been part of the CAI family since 1996, when CAI established its second school in Hushe. Her father, Mohammad Aslam Khan, is the first educated man from Hushe, and has encouraged his daughter in her education every step of the way.

Those steps included finishing class eight in Hushe; high school in Khaplu, a city 21 miles south of Hushe and 45 miles east of Skardu; and vocational school in Lahore. With the help of CAI scholarships, Shakeela also completed a 16-month course in midwifery and two years study of basic health care and is now a qualified “ladies health worker.”

“I got lucky and God blessed me when I got scholarship with CAI,” she said in September. “I decided to study health care because I want to help other people in my village, especially with labor and delivery cases because it is really hard for women — so many die that way. It is really important for girls who get education to come back and help.”

And so she has. Shakeela asked for and received CAI’s help in setting up a women’s clinic in Khaplu. CAI pays the rent for a four-room clinic and helps cover the costs of equipment and medicine.

She also married and had her first child in the past year. Having a husband who supports her work in addition to her parents’ support makes it much easier for her to split her time between their village home in Hushe and the clinic in Khaplu.

“Now the whole Hushe Valley knows that Shakeela has health education, so everyone rushes to her,” Nazir said. “Most women call to Shakeela to come to their house to help with labor and delivery, but for exams and things like this, now they can go to the clinic.”

Shakeela said, “I want to help women with personal hygiene, and for vaccines and such, but especially the delivery and care of babies. There are all kinds of problems with labor and delivery in our area. Sometimes the placenta comes first, or the baby’s head is big, or the baby died, or the mother. I will try to handle everything, but what I cannot handle, it is a three-hour drive to Skardu. There is a hospital there. But mostly I think I can save a lot of people from having to travel that distance.”

“We will support them!”

In many ways, Shakeela, Jahan and Tahira got the CAI scholarship ball rolling. Now the program in Pakistan has grown to include more than 150 girls from CAI community schools studying at high schools and universities in Pakistan and Afghanistan — 28 in Afghanistan, 40 in Gilgit, 80 in Islamabad/Rawalpindi and at least a half-dozen in Skardu.

“All CAI scholarships are all need-based, not necessarily performance based,” said Saidullah Baig, CAI’s operations manager for the Hunza region of Gilgit-Baltistan. “Some of the students are orphans. All of them are from poor families. None of them could be doing this without CAI.”

Or as Amila, 21, one of the girls studying in Rawalpindi put it, “Without CAI, I would be done with my schooling.”

The girls selected for the program must have completed the highest level of education available in their village — in some cases that means eighth grade, in other places, class 10, which marks the end of high school.

Once selected, CAI arranges for them to move to a girls’ hostel in the city where they will study. In the past, some have gone as far away as Islamabad, but Greg said, “As more and more girls’ middle and high schools evolve in these areas, CAI will transition the program to enrolling girls in regional institutions, closer to their homes and families.”

The hostels are safe places for girls to live in the cities, said Nadia, 23, a former CAI scholarship student who earned an MBA from Karakoram University in Gilgit and works in the hostel there while applying for jobs as an accountant.

“CAI scholarships are very important to these students because their parents are jobless or otherwise cannot support their children,” Nadia said. “CAI gives them clothes, transport, college fees, food and hostel fees. This is the opportunity of a lifetime for these girls.

And here in the hostel, they are secure and protected, they are given proper time to study and free time. The atmosphere is very good.”

The scholarship girls generally attend government high schools and colleges.

CAI staff work hard to select the right girls, line them up with the right academic environment, answer all their parents’ questions, keep the girls focused on their education, guide them and encourage them to work hard – all while ensuring that their needs are met.

“CAI is supporting each girl 10 percent – bed sheets, clothes, shoes, school fees, hostel fees – everything,” said Sarfraz Khan, CAI’s Pakistan-based operations director.

“As long as they do not fail, we will support them through college.”

In return, CAI expects their best effort.

“I am lucky!”

Iqra, 13 years old and in her third year studying in Rawalpindi, recognizes that she has an opportunity that most girls from her village in Azad Kashmir will never have. She’s smart. But she also works hard. She consistently scores high on her exams and is at the top of her ninth-grade class.

“I am in a good school, it is so good,” said Iqra,
who previously wanted to be an army doctor, but now wants to be a computer engineer.

For many of the girls, life has been extremely difficult, and the scholarship opportunity comes as a bit of a surprise. They have all grown up in difficult, and the scholarship opportunity comes to help people with blood pressure, heart attack and pneumonia. Being in our village, where there are no doctors, is a big assistance. It is everything to us. Other girls are determined to put in the long years of study to become doctors.

Many of the girls want to be teachers, in part because that is the job most of them see their mothers doing, and in part because they understand better than most the importance of good teachers. A few are interested in computers, engineering or even law enforcement – fields long off limits for cultural reasons. Others are determined to put in the long years of study to become doctors.

Many of their fathers are unemployed. Most of their mothers are illiterate. Their family members are disabled, physically and mentally (depression is rampant in Afghanistan). And the reminders are everywhere of a time when females were banned from education, work and even being in public.

“In Kabul, most of the men have low thinking about women and when they see girls on the street they make it difficult,” 18-year-old Liza said. “Some people just won’t let their wives and daughters outside at all. They are scared about suicide attacks. There was one five minutes from me last week. But I want to show it can be done.”

And they are doing it. CAI’s scholarship program in Kabul is helping 28 girls, who dream of the day they will be teachers and doctors, journalists and engineers. They want to make things better for their country and for their families.

Lema, 17, is in her first year of medical school, with hopes of becoming a doctor.

“This is my hope from childhood because it is a good job, for helping people and also for my family,” she said. “I won’t finish school for another 10 to 12 years, but then I can help bring more change in Afghanistan. Positive change. By the help of God there will be more opportunities to live in peace.”

In hopes of playing a small role in advancing peace, Lema volunteered to translate for Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, when he visited a CAI school in Panjshir Valley in 2009. “That was the first time I went outside Kabul and the first time I translated for anyone. But it was really good experience.”

Peace is also the goal of Tahira, whose life was permanently altered 13 years ago, when she was 10 years old and sound asleep in her bed.

“At midnight one rocket hit our home,” she recalled. “People from the neighborhood came to help us and took us to the hospital. At that time I was in shock, I didn’t know I lost an arm and a leg.”

Her family was torn apart. Tahira’s brother and nephew were killed, as were two guests staying at their home. Four years later, Tahira’s mother died. Tahira, now 23, has a prosthetic right leg and no left arm – one of millions of Afghans with a major physical disability. “Nobody wants to get married with me, so I need to support myself,” she said.

And with a combination of gumption and a CAI scholarship, she is laying the foundation to do just that.

“I finished high school, then class 12 and now I am in two years teacher training. I want to teach Islamic studies,” she said. “Mostly I am angry at the people who started this fighting, all the leaders of the country. I have never known peace. I started my life amid all this fighting.”

Lema said the war creates significant obstacles for girls trying to go to school in Kabul.

“Every time there is suicide attack it makes life more difficult for us,” she said. “We can’t go in public cars and taxis and we cannot travel alone because we are girls. So we have to stand and wait for the bus, sometimes for one-and-a-half hours. But we don’t have any other way.”

Yet the scholarship has been a dream come true for her, she said.

She is smart. “I skipped several classes, got through Class 10 in eight years. I graduated high school in top position.” But as one of nine children in a poor family, her options were limited. “Before this scholarship, I had a lot of problems with my studying,” Lema said. “Now things are very good for me. The scholarship makes this possible. I am very happy.”

Liza, who also happens to be Lema’s best friend, is also a stellar student at the top of her class at Kabul University. She’d like to be a journalist.

“If I get the opportunity to be a journalist on television, I want to go to every province of Afghanistan and get all Afghan women’s ideas and tell all about them,” Liza said. “I have two uncles who come to Kabul and say they are surprised to see women in school and college and university and working. I couldn’t believe them.

“I want to express all around the world how Afghan women live. I want to show the talent of Afghan girls all around the world. I want foreigners to get a better understanding of Afghan women,” she said.

She, too, comes from a big family of nine children and said the scholarship has made a huge difference in her life. “Most of the problems are solved by money,” she said. “The CAI scholarship is a big assistance. It is everything to us. Other women living in the provinces don’t have education. Even my father asks why I want to make myself better with education. But our generation, the new generation, especially the female, we want to change the thinking.”

Yezzneerw for peace

Perhaps the girls who face the most barriers to higher education are those studying in Afghanistan.

After 30-plus years of war, their country is in a profound state of disarray – economically, politically and socially.

Many of their fathers are unemployed. Most of their mothers are illiterate. Their family members are disabled, physically and mentally (depression is rampant in Afghanistan). And the reminders are everywhere of a time when females were banned from education, work and even being in public.

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Peace is also the goal of Tahira, whose life was permanently altered 13 years ago, when she was 10 years old and sound asleep in her bed.

“At midnight one rocket hit our home,” she recalled. “People from the neighborhood came to help us and took us to the hospital. At that time I was in shock, I didn’t know I lost an arm and a leg.”

Her family was torn apart. Tahira’s brother and nephew were killed, as were two guests staying at their home. Four years later, Tahira’s mother died. Tahira, now 23, has a prosthetic right leg and no left arm – one of millions of Afghans with a major physical disability. “Nobody wants to get married with me, so I need to support myself,” she said.

And with a combination of gumption and a CAI scholarship, she is laying the foundation to do just that.

“I finished high school, then class 12 and now I am in two years teacher training. I want to teach Islamic studies,” she said. “Mostly I am angry at the people who started this fighting, all the leaders of the country. I have never known peace. I started my life amid all this fighting.”

Lema said the war creates significant obstacles for girls trying to go to school in Kabul.

“Every time there is suicide attack it makes life more difficult for us,” she said. “We can’t go in public cars and taxis and we cannot travel alone because we are girls. So we have to stand and wait for the bus, sometimes for one-and-a-half hours. But we don’t have any other way.”

Yet the scholarship has been a dream come true for her, she said.

She is smart. “I skipped several classes, got through Class 10 in eight years. I graduated high school in top position.” But as one of nine children in a poor family, her options were limited. “Before this scholarship, I had a lot of problems with my studying,” Lema said. “Now things are very good for me. The scholarship makes this possible. I am very happy.”

Liza, who also happens to be Lema’s best friend, is also a stellar student at the top of her class at Kabul University. She’d like to be a journalist.

“If I get the opportunity to be a journalist on television, I want to go to every province of Afghanistan and get all Afghan women’s ideas and tell all about them,” Liza said. “I have two uncles who come to Kabul and say they are surprised to see women in school and college and university and working. I couldn’t believe them.

“I want to express all around the world how Afghan women live. I want to show the talent of Afghan girls all around the world. I want foreigners to get a better understanding of Afghan women,” she said.

She, too, comes from a big family of nine children and said the scholarship has made a huge difference in her life. “Most of the problems are solved by money,” she said. “The CAI scholarship is a big assistance. It is everything to us. Other women living in the provinces don’t have education. Even my father asks why I want to make myself better with education. But our generation, the new generation, especially the female, we want to change the thinking.”

Nazlee, 15, left, and Albina, 15, are pursuing higher education in Rawalpindi with the help of CAI scholarships.
Lawyer, teacher, role model
CAI’s newest staff member wears many hats

GILGIT, Pakistan – Fozia Naseer sat on the floor of the common room at the girls’ hostel in September, fielding the Central Asia Institute scholarship students’ questions with her typical wisdom and wit.

“How did you get to study in the U.S.?”
“What was it like?”
“What did your family think?”
“Were you scared?”
“You learned to ride a horse, do martial arts and even ride a bicycle!?”

The girls’ eyes were riveted on her. They laughed at her jokes and gasped at her bravery.

“I was a CAI scholarship student just like you and now I work for CAI,” Fozia told them. “I have just come back from two years in United States, after receiving my law degree to my home in Azad Kashmir. Now, I will use my full effort to help with education in my country, and also to help all of the CAI students in Kashmir, Rawalpindi, Skardu, Gilgit – everywhere CAI works.”

Fozia, 27, connected with the girls instantly. “Wow; they are so great,” she said, grinning, as she left the hostel a couple hours later.

The unwritten part of Fozia’s new job description will no doubt be “role model.” She got to this point in her life through a combination of hard work, unrelenting determination and indomitable spirit.

With the help of her family, she graduated from high school, got a bachelor’s degree in education and a master’s degree in political science. Then she got a part-time job and started going to law school. “A law degree gives me a kind of way to protect myself and other girls. I don’t worry about what other people are going to think. I think about law and just do it,” she said.

And that’s when she met Greg Mortenson, CAI’s executive director.

Greg was in Kashmir to follow up on CAI’s efforts after the devastating October 2005 earthquake that killed more than 75,000 people in the region. The 7.6-magnitude quake was a disaster of monumental proportions and CAI was working hard to ensure that an entire generation of children didn’t go uneducated for lack of schools.

“The girls’ high school in Patika, the next village to my village, was destroyed in the earthquake,” Fozia said. “More than 100 girls died there. UNICEF, OXFAM, MERCY, AKDN and other aid groups helped with food and shelter, but no one bothered to re-establish our schools. Not until Greg Mortenson came did we get another school.”

(In the years since, CAI has built and re-established 25 earthquake-proof schools in Azad Kashmir, mostly for girls, and set up a scholarship programs to help hundreds of girls who want to continue their education beyond high school.)

During that trip, Greg met a part-time teacher at one of the CAI schools. He sensed great promise in this young woman.


So Greg arranged a scholarship for her to finish law school, making her the first locally educated female lawyer in Azad Kashmir. And then he and CAI staff in the U.S. arranged her post-graduate studies at Montana State University in Bozeman, Mont.

“I am the first in my village ever to go to America,” Nasser said.

Fozia spent two years at MSU. About a year after arriving, she reflected on the differences between Kashmir and Bozeman with characteristic humor.

“The culture is totally different. For example, if you want to meet someone in the United States, you need an appointment. And you ask, ‘May I come in?’” she noted. “In Kashmir you just show up, like for big celebrations, and sometimes you stay six, seven, eight days. And you just walk in.

“Also the dress is totally different. Religion is totally different. Food is totally different. (In the U.S.) it is cooked without spices. And it’s half cooked. At first it was really boring,” she said.

“And another thing, in Kashmir, women are not allowed to go out and walk. Here you can sit in a shop. And I think that is nice. Life is easy here. You make appointments and just go. But the language is hard,” Fozia said.

Actually, Fozia speaks English quite well, and is one of the most well-spoken and well-educated individuals in her village, where she returned in May.

She said in September that she’s eager to work with the scholarship students and find her niche in CAI’s Azad Kashmir program, but she’s trying to pace herself. Having a woman in this position is new in the conservative region she calls home.

“Our family is good, they think education is a must for women, but here, some people think that women must be kept in the home,” she said.

“So this is new. And I am really excited to do the work with CAI and to really do something for my village, for my country. ✳
KABUL, Afghanistan — Every morning, after their husbands head to work and their children to school, nearly 20 women make their way through the dirt streets of this war-torn city’s south side to a pair of metal doors in a mud-brick wall.

The women push open the creaky doors and slip through into a dusty yard on the other side. After hanging their blue burkas on a clothesline, they duck through a curtain in a doorway of the house and sit in a circle on an Afghan rug. Then they retrieve their books, notebooks and pencils from hidden places under their clothes or in their bags.

And their daily two-hour lessons in basic literacy begin.

“Some of the students here are young women whose parents don’t let them go to school and some are older women who missed school, who never had opportunities to go to school,” said Wakil Karimi, CAI’s Afghan operations manager.

The “classroom” is one of 25 women’s literacy centers CAI has set up in private homes around Kabul, safe havens where women can gather and learn to read.

“During the Taliban time, we were afraid to go out, afraid that the Taliban would kidnap us,” said Palosha, a 26-year-old student and mother of three. “But I want to learn and get basic education, to be able to read signboards on the shops and roads so I am not going to the wrong places, and to read a newspaper.”

As Palosha spoke softly, the teacher wrote the letter “C” on a small blackboard propped up against the wall, and then asked the women to use it in a word.

“They have three books that they work their way through to achieve basic literacy,” Wakil said. “One woman told me after she finished three books that the program had been like university for her.”

CAI pays the teacher, who has a 10th-grade education, and provides the materials – textbooks, notebooks, pencils and erasers. The teacher’s mother owns the house. The classes are free.

Outside under the hot early summer sun, young boys flew kites from a nearby rooftop. Other kids, too young or too poor to be in school,
kicked an empty water bottle in an impromptu soccer game. U.S. helicopters flew low overhead.

Fifteen minutes after class had begun, the gate was pushed open from the street and a young woman rushed in with her little boy, who had a broken arm.

“He fell from the roof,” she explained, a weary smile on her face.

She was late to class. But she wouldn’t have missed it for the world.

Earning money

About 350 miles away as the crow flies, in the upper Hunza Valley of northern Pakistan, are three women’s centers where women gather daily to sew, knit and make handicrafts to sell in the local market.

Life for most women in rural parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan has always been hard. Recently it has gotten harder.

Women used to rely on help from their children and husbands. But with a new emphasis on getting, and keeping, kids in school and with a growing number of men leaving home to find work in the cities, women’s days are filled with chores from dawn to dusk.

“Often now, only the mother is left at home and she has to do all the cooking and washing, preparing kids for school, work the fields and handle the livestock,” said Saidullah Baig, CAI operations manager for the Hunza Region.

At least two things are getting lost in that transition—traditional ways of making cloth and clothing, and time spent with other women.

“Being able to come to the women’s center to meet together and discuss problems is helpful,” Saidullah said.

Like CAI’s women’s centers in rural Pakistan’s Chapusan Valley and Afghanistan’s Wakhan Corridor, the Hunza centers are more oriented toward vocational skills than literacy.

“CAI gives them a building, training and supplies,” Saidullah said. “In every case, we want to help them make good products and then help them market their products so that in the future, this can be a source of income for these women.

Their main problem is education for kids. So if they make money, they can buy children’s shoes and books, pay school fees and help their husbands.

“Some are already earning good money. Others still have much to learn,” Saidullah said.

In the village of Ghalapen, CAI has provided a simple, well-built structure with three rooms and a bathroom for the women. Situated amid terraced crop fields at the base of the majestic Karakoram Mountains, the house is across the road from the Hunza River, a frigid tributary of the mighty Indus River, the lifeblood of Pakistan.

Thirty-three women ranging in age from 18 to 80 use the Ghalapen center.

“During summertime, we come here for one to two hours, but in winter we have more time, so we come for three or four hours a day,” said Shabana, 30, the center’s bookkeeper and secretary. “The building is light and we have storage space for our materials and one room with heat for winter. It is also a good place for us to come together, share our problems and help each other out away from the men.

“We give so much thanks that CAI gave our poor, small village this project. We hope to have good success and help our children get education.”

The older women focus their energy on the wooden products, turning raw wool into yarn and thread that is then used for coats, caps, gloves and socks. It takes them eight to 10 hours to knit a pair of gloves that sells for US$6. The traditional long, thick, white wool coats for men, complete with embroidery, sell for about US$30 apiece.

The younger women, at the center focus on the stitchery. CAI recently organized a four-month training in traditional embroidery and patterns for pillow covers, tablecloths and wall hangings. “Younger women don’t have as much time, so stitching, which they can do for 10 minutes or one hour, is more suitable.” Saidullah said.

The center, built in 2007, is having a few growing pains. For example, in September, a dispute arose between the older and younger women over what to do with proceeds from sales of the handicrafts, which are sold in a local market.

“The older women say the center should build a pot of money and, when it gets large enough, start dividing it or use it to buy a small flour mill,” Saidullah explained. “The younger women make handicrafts. The handicrafts sell better. So they think differently, that maybe they should each get the money for their items.”

He then turned and told the women that the committee that runs the center—four women and two men—ought to be involved in the decision.

“The committee should help you,” he said.

“The committee can buy material if you need it, help manage fuel for the winter, contact me for support or to give reports and help manage the selling process.

“If you divide the profits to all members or give directly to the person who made it, that is your decision. But we don’t want you to fight about it. You and the committee decide.”
Women learn to sew at the CAI Gircha Vocational Center in the upper Hunza valley of northern Pakistan.

Hand-cranked sewing machines

Farther north on the Karakoram Highway, edging closer to the China border, is the small village of Gircha.

“This is the border place, lost in the last of Pakistan, so we are grateful for CAI working here to improve the skills and living conditions, and for their strong support, especially for females,” said Raza Muhammad, a retired community development worker who is now chairman of the Gircha women’s center committee.

In the four-room house CAI built for the Gircha vocational center in 2009, the women have divided into three groups, each group sitting in a circle on the floor of a different room.

“We are in three shifts, according to our training,” a woman named Tajimuk, 50, explained.

In one room, the women most familiar with traditional ways of making wool clothing card and spin raw wool into yarn. In another room, women do embroidery and fine handwork. The youngest women, those who have some education and are able to count and measure, sew clothing in the third room.

CAI buys the raw materials for the products. As a group of 11 women brush, or card, bunches of soft, brown wool to get out the knots, others twist the fibers by hand into strands and then attach them to a ball of yarn the size of a soccer ball. “This is raw camel wool from China,” Saidullah said.

As she pulled and twisted the wool, Sitara, 50, said, “[As a result of CAI] building us this house, we are free any time to work on our skills and manage our time. We hope in the future to be earning some money from this.”

In the next room, Bulzina, 30, sat cross-legged on the floor, embroidering a brightly colored traditional hat. With four children at home, a husband who works in Karachi and her own efforts to earn a college degree, Bulzina leads a busy life. But she said she is grateful for the center.

“The center is important because collectively we have a chance all together to get training, make products to sell in the market and have some money to pay our children’s fees for education and other needs,” she said. “It also gives us a chance to be together.”

In the third room, 12 women sit on the floor around a long, low table covered with blue fabric and topped with hand-crank sewing machines – electricity is unreliable in this region. The women are making their own shalwar kameez under the watchful eye of their trainer, Sultana Razir. “We go step by step, first working on making seams, then stitching and cutting.”

Roshan, 35, said she was married at age 15 and has six children.
“It is a hard life here for women,” she said. “But here we are learning skills, and even if we are not earning a lot, we will be saving money by making clothes for our children. Then when we get skills, we can make things to sell and use the profits for our kids’ education.”

Requests for help
CAI’s women’s centers have proven enormously popular in recent years, driven largely by requests from women who want to learn basic skills.

The nonprofit organization’s mission is to promote education, especially for girls, in remote areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Yet in many of the areas where CAI works – including Afghanistan’s capital city – literacy rates among adult women are often in the single digits.

There are several reasons for this: Cultural traditions of men as providers and guardians of family honor and virtue; geographic isolation; years of war in Afghanistan; and the increasing influence of radical interpretations of Islam.

But women and girls have begun to assert their right to education – whether basic literacy or higher education – and their right to work and make some money to spend as they wish. Accomplishing that requires involving the men in communities, showing them that educated women are more of an asset than a threat. And that takes time.

“The women’s centers are at various stages of development and some of them have a long way to go, but all are providing critical services,” said CAI’s cofounder and Executive Director Greg Mortenson. “Conceptually, the centers are important for several reasons. One is that they are a place where women can get together and share problems. They are able to do that in an environment where they feel safe sharing.

“Another is that we encourage and empower women to manage their own endeavors. They are places where the women can learn not only vocational skills, but share ideas about marketing techniques and how to manage money. We also take the opportunity to teach them basic lessons in hygiene, sanitation and nutrition.”

Back in Kabul
At the heart of CAI’s efforts in Kabul is a large, two-story school building on the city’s south side. What began as a computer center with basic classes in English and math, has expanded to include a K-10 school for orphans and numerous women’s programs.

The center has 23 teachers, offering classes in English, computer, physics, math, algebra and sewing.

“We have a literacy program here for women, who during the fighting couldn’t get education and had no opportunities to see each other, no learning from each other,” said Maliha Azizi, 29, the literacy manager at the Kabul Center. “Families now let their wives and daughters come to the center. And most of the women are very happy to get out of their homes, meet each other and learn to read and write. They are also happy because now they can read signboards and use mobile phones.

“When we make the opportunity for them to learn it makes them very happy because it helps them, especially girls and women from low economic situation,” Maliha said.

The center’s goal is to “first prepare them for reading and writing,” she said. But women have also asked for, and CAI is providing:

• A once-monthly program advising women on how to take care of themselves during pregnancy;
• English and computer classes just for women and girls;
• And a basic health program.

“We teach cleanliness, brushing teeth, give
them soap and toothpaste and advise them how to be clean and what is the benefit of that,” Malia said. “We tell them how to live healthy.”

The center has also added 90-minute daily sewing classes to help women make clothes for themselves and their families.

“Eventually we hope to have handicrafts,” Malia said. “Everyone wants to help.”

Indeed, women are starved for knowledge and skills.

Wakil can barely keep up with requests for the home-based centers.

This past summer, a “school” that had been operating independently, and without any financial support, was brought under CAI’s auspices. A 38-year-old mother of seven, Sabiera, a high school graduate married to a pediatrician, saw the need for women’s education in her neighborhood.

“One of my hopes was always to be a teacher and serve the women of Kabul,” Sabiera said.

“For one year I taught freely, without any salary, because I felt the difficulties of the women. They want to learn. They hope to get good education. And sitting together and changing ideas is good.”

The females in Sabiera’s class range from age 12 to 45 and most of them are already mothers. One young woman held her son on her lap as he teetled on a notebook. In a corner of the room, a baby slept on the rug.

“Before this time, the situation was very bad and we had no opportunity to get education,” Mirjan, 45, said. “Our family didn’t let us out. But we feel comfortable and safe in this class.”

Mirjan’s daughter, 18-year-old Fazila, is also in the class. “My husband says the situation is very bad, too dangerous for me to go to a regular school. So I have to obey the rules. But this way I have the opportunity to learn something.”

A woman in northern Pakistan knits gloves to sell in a local market.

**In memory**

**Mmir (leader) Abdul Rashid Khan**, of the Kirghiz tribal people of the Wakhan corridor in extreme northeastern Afghanistan, passed away peacefully in his tent in Ghoz Khon, near the China border in eastern Pamir on Dec. 27, 2009. He was in his late 70s. Rashid Khan’s lifelong dream was to establish a school for his people, and his summons to create a magnificent train of dozens of yaks to help build a school before he died was documented in the final pages of Greg’s second book, “Stones Into Schools.”

“In September 2009, he told his people he was at peace because his school at Bozoy Gumbez had been completed,” Greg said. “He also issued a warning to all Afghan people that without education there was no hope for the future, and spoke very strongly against the Taliban resolve to destroy girls schools.”

“It was painful and hard to hear of his death. Abdul Rashid Khan was a shura (elder) of great caliber whose courage brought great hope to his people. May his faith and the Pegasus horse that Abdul Rashid Khan so often admired in the constellations take him to his creator above the great expanse of the beautiful Pamir and Hindu Kush mountains. May Allah bless his family and people,” he said.

**Haji Ahmad Khan**, a shura leader in Dae Rawood village in Afghanistan’s Urozgan Province, was killed by Taliban forces in October 2010. A dear friend of CAI, he played a key role in galvanizing community support to help hundreds of boys and girls start going to school in a region with few schools. He also worked day and night to negotiate between community elders, Taliban, Afghan government and ISAF military forces to try and solve complex issues in a peaceful way and to put the needs of the local people first. Haji Khan always said he feared only Allah Almighty, and was a champion of education like no other. Our prayers, thoughts and support are with his family during this tragic time.

**Saddiq Ali**, the father of a CAI teacher in Mayourdu, was killed during severe flooding in Pakistan in July 2010. His son, teacher Sharif Hussain says it was through his father’s encouragement and support that he became a teacher, and his father was deeply involved and committed to supporting the Mayourdu Community School.

**Truck driver Abdul Sayed**, of Asabad, was killed on Oct. 20, 2009, in the Naray district of Kunar Province, while delivering school supplies for construction of a CAI school in the area. His truck hit an IED (improved explosive device) and he was then attacked and burned by the Taliban. According to local sources, the Taliban thought the truck was carrying supplies for a U.S. military base. Abdul Sayed was married with five children, and his children have been given funds to attend school.

**With thanks**

**Haji Ghulam Parvi**, manager of Central Asia Institute’s Baltistan program, has retired after 14 years of work with CAI.

“Haji Parvi was the guiding light for CAI in Baltistan, and he worked tirelessly to organize communities to spearhead education in remote valleys of Baltistan and in Skardu,” says Greg Mortenson, CAI’s co-founder and executive director. “His enthusiasm and persistence was contagious, and CAI is very grateful for his many years of valuable assistance. His legacy lives on today through the thousands of children he helped.”

**Doug and Genevieve Chabot**, of Bozeman, Mont., worked for and were a significant help to CAI for many years. They resigned to pursue other opportunities.

“Doug volunteered for several summers to roam into remote and sometimes volatile regions of Afghanistan, assisting CAI local staff in coordinating our school projects with provincial and national ministerial-level authorities,” Greg said. “He is remembered for his ability to work 18 to 20 hour days for weeks on end and his infectious laughter.”

Genevieve helped CAI for five years, and is credited with helping to initiate the girls’ scholarship program and maternal health care training program in Pakistan.

“Her work changed the lives of hundreds of girls,” Greg said. “We are exceedingly grateful for her guidance, assistance and persistence in the face of innumerable hurdles.”
When Cassie Eng turned 7 in June, she invited her friends to a Pennies for Peace birthday party and asked them to bring all their loose change in lieu of presents. “I wanted to help children in Pakistan and Afghanistan have a place to learn, like Dr. Greg,” she said, referring to Greg Mortenson, executive director of Central Asia Institute, P4P’s parent organization. “I can collect pennies and that helps children go to school.

“In school you learn lots of things. You learn how to read and write. You learn about the world. You learn how to care for yourself and others. When you care for others, there is peace.”

Cassie, who lives in San Francisco, collected 34,002 pennies, or $340.02, in one day. In addition, friends and relatives made online donations in her name. And, she added “My friend, Kai, and my cousin, Nicole, now want to do the same thing for their birthdays.”

When she mailed her donation, she had this to say to her hero:

“Dear Dr. Greg, For my 7th birthday I wish for Peace. A penny helps kids read & write. They learn how to take care of each other & themselves. When people care, they bring peace to the world. When I grow up I want to be just like you. You make the world feel super happy. Love, Cassie Eng.”

’Going bananas’

Cassie’s birthday party was just one of thousands of creative ways people participated in P4P in the past year, doing their part to make children half a world away “feel super happy.”

All that energy generated 250 million pennies – or $2.5 million. “These days Greg likes to say ‘Pennies for Peace is going bananas,’ and he is completely right,” said Christiane Leitinger, director of the P4P program.

The money raised buys school supplies, desks and furniture for CAI’s schools in remote areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

But P4P is much more than a fundraising effort. The program demonstrates that something many people consider worthless – a penny – can actually make a difference in the world.

“What started out as a small grassroots effort of kids at Westside Elementary School in River Falls, Wisc., is now an award-winning international youth service-learning program that reaches across the United States and around the world,” Christiane said. “Last year, more than 4,000 programs participated in Pennies for Peace campaigns in over 50 countries.”

From Norway to Indonesia, Cupertino to Boston, the program’s popularity crosses gender, race, religion, age and socioeconomic lines.

“I often find it interesting that the schools that
are most eager to join our Pennies for Peace program are often the poorest schools, that it’s some of the poorest kids in the United States who are most willing to reach out and help other poor children around the world," Greg said.

But it’s not just schools. A wide variety of other groups get involved – senior citizens, faith groups, bridge clubs, book clubs, service organizations, Scout groups, and even prisoners and politicians.

In Houston, Texas, retired businessman Frank Duffy drafted a team of friends to reach out to Houston-area schools.

“What started off as a humble effort evolved into a major effort and a team of boosters that calls itself Texans for Pennies for Peace,” Leitinger said.

Duffy’s advocacy included introducing Christiane to the Texas state librarian. The result is that, “following the example of the New Jersey state libraries, the Texas state libraries are planning a statewide summer read—Pennies for Peace campaign in 2011 centered around Greg’s books and the Pennies for Peace curriculum,” Christiane said.

Tools for teachers

To enhance P4P’s power in the classroom, Pennies for Peace now has a “toolkit” for teachers.

Developed with key support from the National Education Association and the Pearson Foundation, and available free at www.penniesforpeace.org, it is “a comprehensive, organized collection of tools that help any kind of educator develop a meaningful service-learning experience,” Christiane said.

At its heart is a standards-aligned K-12 curriculum with lessons centered around math, language arts and social studies, she said. Each kit includes “reproducibles, rubrics and assessment tools” and lots of additional materials, including: National Geographic maps, photos, postcards and stickers, templates for letters to Congress and press releases, fact sheets, a glossary, and videos about life and culture in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

“All this wonderful information, and it’s free,” Christiane said.

“Educators have been ecstatic to have a resource that makes initiating a campaign and teaching the subject matter so uncomplicated,” she said. “One of the most moving comments received came from a teacher in a small, rural Colorado school, who called Pennies for Peace, ‘the best anti-bullying program I have used and a worthwhile character-building program.

“While it wasn’t specifically designed as such, the ripple effect of Pennies for Peace is magical.”

Teachable moments

This year, an excerpt from Greg’s first book, “Three Cups of Tea,” was also adapted into a stage performance by New York’s American Place Theatre. Performed by actor Curtis Nielsen, the one-hour, one-man show has traveled to schools across the country, and other unique venues such as the Aspen Ideas Festival and film festivals in Banff and Telluride.

“Alternating between scenes in the U.S. and Pakistan, we become aware of the lessons that can be learned from a culture that is seemingly so different from our own,” according to www.americanplacetheatre.org, and “come to understand the need to share in the responsibility of educating children everywhere.”

The play has become another way to create “teachable moments,” underscoring the program’s message that it is possible for one person make a difference.

Over the years, some children have felt so empowered by P4P that they started their own charitable efforts.

“A lot of times, after a year or two of raising money for students in Pakistan and Afghanistan, they find something within their own community to support,” Greg said.

Learn more by visiting www.penniesforpeace.org
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF PAKISTAN

Area: 477,657 square miles; almost twice the size of California.
Population: 174,578,558
Life expectancy: 65.26 years
Median age: 21 years
Population growth rate: 1.5 percent
Infant mortality rate: 28th highest in world
Literacy rate: 29.9 percent (age 15 and over can read and write)
Living below poverty level: 24 percent
Religion: Muslim 95 percent (Sundi 75 percent, Shia 20 percent), other (includes Christian and Hindu) 5 percent
Arable land: 24.44 percent
Climate: Mostly hot, dry desert; temperate in northwest; arctic in north.
Terrain: Flat plains in east; mountains in north and northwest; Balochistan plateau in west
Highest peak: K2 (Mount Godwin-Austen), 8,611 meters or 28,251 feet

Source: CIA World Fact Book

ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF AFGHANISTAN

Area: 251,737 square miles; slightly smaller than Texas
Population: 28,395,716
Life expectancy: 44 years
Median age: 18
Population growth rate: 2.6 percent
Infant mortality rate: 2nd highest in world
Literacy rate: 28.1 percent (age 15 and over can read and write)
Living below poverty level: 36 percent
Religion: Sunni Muslim (80 percent), Shia Muslim (19 percent), other (1 percent)
Arable land: 12 percent
Climate: Arid to semiarid, cold winters and hot summers.
Terrain: Mostly rugged mountains, plains in north and southwest.
Highest peak: Noshak, 7,485 meters or 24,557 feet

Source: CIA World Fact Book

‘Educate a Girl. Change the World’
Web-based video series puts students in spotlight

Numerous global studies show that the single most effective and important investment that can be made in a society is to educate the girls. Even an education to at least the fifth-grade level has a profound impact: girls marry later, infant mortality drops, maternal mortality drops, and the income stays in the home and communities.

An old African proverb says, “If you educate a boy, you educate an individual. But, if you educate a girl, you educate a community.” Greg Mortenson, co-founder of Central Asia Institute and Pennies For Peace, believes this theme can have a global effect to empower girls and women in a big way. Inspired by the web campaign, “The Girl Effect,” CAI has embarked on its own web series, “Educate a Girl. Change The World.”

Emmy award-winning producer Michael Simon and director Jeanne Kopeck have interviewed hundreds of Central Asia Institute students, families and educators of all ages in Afghanistan and Pakistan to create a dynamic audiovisual presentation to fulfill this mission.

“We want to spread the news about the great things that happen when girls are educated, especially at least to the fifth-grade level, in societies that were previously illiterate,” Kopeck said.

The powerful images and videos will appear on CAI websites, www.ikat.org and www.penniesforpeace.org, and be screened at Mortenson’s appearances on the road.

Recommended reading: “What Works in Girls Education” (Council on Foreign Relations Press, 2004). The 103-page report is $10 and can be ordered online at www.cfr.org/publication, or by calling 212.434.9400, or by post at Council on Foreign Relations, Harold Pratt House, 58 East 68th Street, New York, NY 10065.
‘Stones into Schools’ released in paperback

This nonfiction book by Greg Mortenson, founder of Central Asia Institute, was released in paperback in late October. "Three Cups of Tea," left off in late 2003.

"Three Cups of Tea" describes how Mortenson and his intrepid manager, Sarfraz Khan, brainstormed around Afghanistan's Badakhshan Province and Wakhan Corridor, moving for weeks without sleep, to establish the first schools there.

Their 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 Mortenson helps the U.S. military formulate new strategic plans as a road map to peace.

The hardcover edition was published in December 2009.

All of these books may be purchased at your local bookstore or by visiting www.threecupsoftea.com or www.stonesintoschools.com.
About the journalists

**KARIN RONNOW**, 48, is assistant managing editor at the Bozeman (Mont.) Daily Chronicle, where she has worked for 14 years. She earned her undergraduate degree in urban studies and journalism from Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn., and master’s degree in journalism from Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism in Evanston, Ill. Prior to joining the Chronicle, she was a reporter for daily newspapers in Maine and Georgia, a U.S.-based business reporter for Lafferty Publications in Dublin, Ireland, and managing editor at the Livingston (Mont.) Enterprise. Her 2007 stories on CAI’s work in Afghanistan and Pakistan were nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and she has received numerous journalism awards for her reporting and writing. She lives in Livingston with her husband, Kimball Leighton, and their two dogs, Darwin and Beatle. Their daughter, Carmine, lives in Missoula. Karin can be reached at klronnow@gmail.com

**ELLEN JASKOL**, 47, has been a photojournalist for 26 years, spending 17 years at the Rocky Mountain News in Denver, and before that, nine years at the Los Angeles Times, where she began her career as an intern in 1983. She earned a bachelor’s degree in English literature from University of California Los Angeles. She has won numerous local and national awards for her photography, including two Pulitzer Prizes while at the Rocky Mountain News, where she was also that paper’s Photographer of the Year in 2008. Her work over the years took her to Italy, Jamaica, Mexico and Cambodia. In the past year, her business, Ellen Jaskol Photography, has grown to include business, nonprofit, magazine and family clients, and now Central Asia Institute. She lives in Denver with her husband, Steve Katich, and their two dogs, Manny and Jane. Steve has two grown daughters; Helen is a student at CU Boulder, and Alexandra lives and works in New York City. Ellen can be reached at ejaskol@hotmail.com.

How to make a difference...

Central Asia Institute
PO Box 7209
Bozeman, MT 59771
406.585.7841
www.ikat.org

Since 1996, Central Asia Institute’s mission has been to promote education and literacy, especially for girls, in remote regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

CAI has established or significantly supported over 170 schools in both countries. CAI is a registered 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, federal IRS EIN # 51-0376237.

▶ Sign up for CAI’s email newsletter at www.ikat.org/alima

Pennies for Peace
PO Box 7209
Bozeman, MT 59715
406.585.7841
www.penniesforpeace.org

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 535 million pennies have been raised by over 11,000 campaigns 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.
Central Asia Institute's mission: Promote and support community-based education, especially for girls, in remote regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan.