Central Asia Institute’s Journey of Hope

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PAKISTAN,
AFGHANISTAN
AND TAJIKISTAN

Journey of Hope
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Central Asia Institute’s field report documenting projects in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan.
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Wherever you see the peace sign, you can find related stories on our blog at www.ikat.org/cai-communique.

Disclaimer: In a few stories, people’s names have been changed to protect their identities, for security reasons or per their request.

Cover Photos - Cover: Students raise their hands to answer a question during class at the Byazid Girls’ Middle School in Afghanistan’s Parwan Province in July. Inside cover: A Wakhi woman sits with her young child inside a home in the Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan. The woman was one of a group preparing bread for an upcoming wedding. Inside back: A nomadic Kuchi woman and her child make their way back to camp after collecting water near Kabul, Afghanistan, in July. CAI helps the community with tent schools at their seasonal camps near Kabul and Jalalabad. Back: A young student reads from her text in a makeshift outdoor classroom at Murad Khawja School in Kapisa Province, Afghanistan. CAI and the community completed work on a new school nearby in 2012.
Manifesting Hope

“W
ith heavy heart, I regret to inform you that our beloved brother, mentor, and dear friend Sarfraz Khan passed away peacefully at about 5:30 p.m. Pakistan time,” Greg Mortenson wrote to friends and supporters on Nov. 13, 2012.

As impossible as it seemed, it was true. Central Asia Institute's most-remote-areas program director, whose amazing contributions were detailed in Mortenson's book “Stones into Schools,” had died of cancer. He passed away at home in Islamabad, surrounded by family. He was 55.

Hundreds of people wrote to Mortenson and CAI expressing sadness, astonishment, and grief. In Pakistan, his family swiftly made arrangements to return Sarfraz to his home village of Zuudkhan, in the Chapursan Valley, northwest Pakistan. They made the journey by road, up the Karakoram Highway, into the mountains.

“At the moment of our death, we contact friends and family and the news spread everywhere,” said Saidullah Baig, CAI’s Gilgit-Hunza director, who accompanied his longtime friend on his final journey. Along the way, people were watching for the entourage, and stepped into the road to offer condolences and prayers. Many even joined the procession.

“At every village, we had two or three cars join, with so many people inside each car.” By the time the funeral caravan turned off the KKH into the Chapursan Valley, “about 100 cars were with us.” And upon their arrival in Zuudkhan, “3,000 people were there” to pay tribute to Sarfraz, he said. “It was unbelievable to see.”

Sarfraz was buried there in the village where he was born. “Death is a reality of our life as human beings; one day every life has to end,” Saidullah said afterwards. But even though “Sarfraz has left us, he is alive in our hearts forever.”

Indeed, Sarfraz will live on – through his nine children, and through the countless students whose lives he touched in his selfless determination to build a better future for his valley, his country, and children everywhere.

Sarfraz was born in Zuudkhan to Haji Muhamad and Bibi Numa in, as best he could figure, 1957. His formal education ended at eighth-grade. He married twice, and had two daughters with his first wife and seven children with his second wife, Bibi Numa.

By the time Greg met Sarfraz in 1999, Sarfraz had already become a legend. “The stories that clung to him were both colorful and provocative,” Greg wrote. “Some described him as a mishmash of contradictions: an ex-commando skilled in the art of alpine combat, who drove a ‘Taliban Toyota,’ loved music and dancing, and wore a peacock-blue, Dick Tracy-style fedora in the mountains. Others hinted at a man with an unusual past: a smuggler of gemstones, an imbiber of whiskey, a trader of yaks.

“Outlandish claims were made about his marksmanship, his horsemanship, and his dentistry. ... There were some dark rumors of scandal, too: tales that spoke of a divorce from a first wife and, following on the heels of that disgrace, an even greater one arising from the unthinkable demand that he be permitted to gaze upon the face of his second betrothed before he would consent to marry her. ... Who could say where the truth ended and the legends began.”

Turned out, much of it was true.

Sarfraz had spent years looking for his niche. After finishing class eight, Sarfraz taught school. But just a year later he joined the Pakistan Army and was assigned to an elite mountain force. During a firefight in Kashmir in 1974, he was shot in his right hand, leading to paralysis that caused three of his fingers to curl inward and formed his trademark “crook.”

After an honorable discharge, Sarfraz taught school again in Zuudkhan for a year. When that didn’t suit, he left the village for a series of “cityside” jobs: long-distance driver on KKH; chokidar (security guard) in Karachi; restaurant worker in Lahore; and chauffeur, mechanic, and auto broker in Peshawar. Restless and unfulfilled, he returned to Zuudkhan, and spent the next decade as a trader in the vaulting Hindu Kush mountains between Chapursan and the Wakhan Corridor in Afghanistan, rounding things out with periodic stints as a porter on mountain-climbing expeditions.

Sarfraz was not particularly proud of his past, which had generated what he called, “not much success.” But Greg saw that Sarfraz’s hardscrabble years had yielded precisely what CAI needed: a man willing to navigate difficult terrain, who knew the customs of the mountain people, spoke seven languages, had a vast network of business associates, and wasn’t afraid to try something new. Sarfraz’s impressive skill set was complimented by his “energy, ambition, and a rather flamboyant sense of his own theatricality,” Greg wrote. Plus, he “seemed to be genuinely intrigued by our last-place-first approach to building schools.”

G
reg hired Sarfraz as CAI’s most-remote-area project director and the two became fast friends. “In ways that neither Sarfraz nor I fully understood at the time, each of us seemed to round out and finish off something inside the other,” Greg wrote. For his part, Sarfraz often said that “Dr. Geeeeereg,” as he called him, had saved his life, giving him a chance to do meaningful work and “serve the people.”

He and Greg spent the next few years building the relationships
necessary to start work in the Wakhan. Along the way, Sarfraz put Greg through a sort of “Afghan style” boot camp, teaching him everything from what to wear on his head – a lungi (a Pashtun wrap-around turban) in Pashtun areas, a mujahedeen’s pakol (woolen hat) in Tajik-dominated areas, or a duff (white skullcap) in the mosque – to how to behave with conservative mullahs, warlords and village elders, to how to find a safe ride. The two spent weeks at a time traveling with little sleep, eating sketchy food, drinking gallons of tea, and living on a regular “ration,” as Sarfraz called it, of ibuprofen.

Then came the devastating October 2005 earthquake in Azad Kashmir, Pakistan. Greg and CAI temporarily shifted focus and resources to the area and Greg sent Sarfraz to visit remote areas to evaluate how best CAI could help. Amid the chaos and confusion, one thing became clear – the government lacked the resources to rebuild the thousands of damaged and destroyed schools. So Sarfraz set up temporary tent schools and built relationships, eventually installing more than a dozen earthquake-proof premanufactured schools, good for five or 10 years. He also set up scholarships for girls seeking higher education beyond what their villages had to offer.

But work had not slowed in Afghanistan and Sarfraz was soon traveling what became a well-worn path between school projects in Azad Kashmir and the Wakhan, with infrequent visits home. Greg also enlisted Sarfraz’s help building relationships elsewhere in Afghanistan, as CAI’s work spread to include projects in Kabul, central and eastern Afghanistan. Most recently, he sent him to Tajikistan to forge an entirely new set of relationships and lay the groundwork for CAI’s work there.

Sarfraz’s biggest accomplishment was no doubt dozens of schools and women’s vocational centers stretching from central Badakhshan province all the way to the end of the road in the Wakhan Corridor. Each school is marked by a large white sitara (star) and collectively they represent the largest investment in the education of Badakhshan’s children – by anyone, ever.

Yet his proudest moment was the day he fulfilled Greg’s promise made to the nomadic Kyrgyz people of the Afghan Pamir. Sarfraz overcame immense logistical challenges to move building materials and masons into remote Bozoi Gumbad, where he built a small but solid primary school. He said the Bozoi school had been his greatest achievement.

Sarfraz came to CAI with a unique set of skills and he put every single one of them to use for the benefit of the organization. Sarfraz often said he was lucky to have found Greg. But CAI was the real winner. Sarfraz had an amazing, intuitive understanding of what Greg and CAI do and why. And he worked hard to carry that work forward, helping to build stronger communities, stronger people and a stronger CAI everywhere Greg sent him.

Explaining his work in September, Sarfraz said, “We are working for all needy people. In all places where nobody is helping these people, CAI wants to help. Not just for Sunni or Shia or Ismaili. Our boss’ vision is to serve all the poor people and the needy people, places where there is no school, or if there is a school, it is like for animals – that’s where CAI wants to help. All the time we are getting many questions from the government. Why are you going to the mountains? Why don’t you work on the cityside? I tell them the government, the other NGOs, nobody is helping for the poor people in the mountainside, only on cityside. And going to those areas – Pamir, Chapursan, Korphe – is not easy. But that is CAI and Greg Mortenson. We need for everyone strong education. We need for girls and we need for women. We can show how it works and then they become good people and peace comes.”

And he did it all with understated wisdom and wit. He loved to laugh. He loved music. He loved his family and his friends. He was honest, fair and consistent.

During his last visit to Badakhshan in July 2012, people alternately thanking him for or seeking CAI’s help met Sarfraz at every turn, inviting him for tea and huge meals of mutton and rice. He never stopped encouraging, coaching and, when necessary, scolding people of all ages to work harder, do a better job, build a better future.

Within a month of that July visit to the Wakhan, Sarfraz was in an Islamabad hospital, where doctors spent weeks diagnosing the cause of his severe back pain. He had stage 4 cancer. He had good doctors, excellent care, and amazing family support, but the cancer took over.

In October, Greg and Sarfraz made one last trip together, this time to Tajikistan. But within a week it was clear that Sarfraz could not continue on, and he returned to Pakistan.

The men said their final goodbyes a few weeks later, in the wee hours of the morning Nov. 11, 2012, at Sarfraz’ home. Then Greg left for the United States. Sarfraz died at home two days later.

His father, Haji Muhamad, preceded Sarfraz in death. He is survived by his mother, Bibi Gulnaz; his wife, Bibi Numa; three sons: Hassan, Nawaz, and Qudrat; six daughters: Fozia, Azra, Anita, Shanaz, Mehnaz, Gulshad; brother Alam Jan; three sisters: Lal Nasab, Izath Nasab, and Sultan Nasab; and numerous nieces and nephews.

It is hard to imagine doing this work without Sarfraz. He was such an integral part of CAI. But we must and we will. As former CAI board member Julia Bergman said, “Onwards, somehow.”

– Karin Ronnow
Just the logistics of getting to Bozoi Gumbad boggle the mind.

High in the mountains of the eastern Wakhan Corridor in northeast Afghanistan, Bozoi Gumbad is home to the semi-nomadic Kyrgyz people – and one of Central Asia Institute’s (CAI) most-remote projects.

The region, also known as the Afghan Pamir, has a rich history. Aryan tribes are thought to have crossed the mountains in 2000 BC, en route to Europe. Marco Polo supposedly spent the winter there recovering from malaria in 1272 AD. And western nations sent expeditions to search for the source of the mighty Oxus River or a route through the inhospitable terrain.

The Afghan Pamir remained largely uninhabited until the Kyrgyz fled there during the 1930s Bolshevik Revolution. But their troubles didn’t end. Distance, disinterest, and disrespect have made Kyrgyz life exceptionally hard.

“It is the tragedy of geopolitics and decades-old suspicions between China, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan that continue to deny them access to simple human rights like health care and education,” said Greg Mortenson.

16,329-foot Irshad Pass from Pakistan (over a border closed to foreigners); or the six- to eight-hour drive on an old Soviet tank road from Sajmak, Tajikistan (also over a closed border).

Sarfraz had traveled each route at one time or another. When he needed to deliver supplies last July, he chose the Sajmak route. In Khorog, the capital of Tajikistan’s Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO), he got special permission from Tajik and Afghan border commanders. He then headed east.

But his health was deteriorating. En route to Sajmak, he stepped out of the truck and immediately fell unconscious on the gravel road, hitting his head and revealing how sick he really was. Yet he was undeterred. “No problem. We finish this mission,” he said.

But his destination remained elusive. This journey ended a few days later with news that a Tajik general had been shot dead near Khorog and the border with Afghanistan was sealed up tight.

Reluctantly, Sarfraz returned to Khorog, stumbling into some of the worst fighting in the country in decades. After four days watching gun battles from the apartment windows, he escaped to the Dushanbe airport, then home to Pakistan. Shortly thereafter he was diagnosed with terminal cancer.

Yet Sarfraz never gave up anything easily. His doctors ordered radiation therapy to reduce the size of the tumor, and helped get his pain under control. And in late September, he and Greg set out to complete the Bozoi mission before winter settled in.

Back in Dushanbe, Sarfraz set about re-securing the permits needed for the Sajmak-Bozoi trip. This was especially difficult in the wake of the Khorog violence; the Tajik government had banned travel to GBAO for most foreigners.

Sarfraz also introduced Greg to the government officials and community leaders essential to CAI’s work in Tajikistan.

“Everywhere we went there was lots of tea drinking to get anything done,” Mortenson said. “After about a week in Tajikistan, Sarfraz could barely even walk a short distance without slumping over in
pain. I told him he needed to go home and rest. He initially refused to turn around again. But finally after a phone call with CAI Board Chairman Abdul Jabbar, he agreed to go home.

“For two days before he left, Sarfraz gave me a crash course on who to be in touch with, who to avoid, how to circumvent some of the impossible Soviet-era regulations, and how to successfully navigate work in Tajikistan.”

Greg found the complexity and delicacy of the negotiations overwhelming.

But Sarfraz was adamant that Greg get to Bozoi. “When you don’t know what to do, when something seems impossible, don’t act like you are in control and know what you are doing. Ask people to help you, and you will find your way.”

Before Sarfraz left for home, he pressed the three necessary permits into Greg’s hand. Greg said, “How did you get these? No foreigners are even allowed in GBAO right now.”

Sarfraz smiled and said, “Relationships and lots of tea. Now go.”

For the first time in years, Greg had to make his way to a new place without a translator, guide, or familiar face. “Now it was up to me and I clung to every word of advice Sarfraz had to offer,” he said.

With stops to see four CAI-supported schools in progress, Greg made his way toward Sajmak in GBAO.

Three days later, concertina wire, high fences, and a few watchtowers marked their arrival at the border. Greg was prepared for a bureaucratic nightmare. But thanks to Sarfraz, negotiations only took about five minutes.

“At about five hours after entering Afghanistan we arrived at the Kyrgyz’s Minora encampment, home of the clan of Abdul Rashid Khan, who was the Kyrgyz leader before his death in 2009,” Greg said. “It was in a big basin. Dozens of horses and yaks and hundreds of sheep had been brought in for winter grazing.”

The Minora elders expressed deep remorse at Sarfraz’s illness and offered duas (prayers) for his health. Then they all held a jirga (meeting) “where they vented their frustration at the Afghan government for not helping, about the closed borders, and their desire for one more school in the region,” he said.

The jirga was followed by a meal of mutton stew and green tea. Then, as evening set in, Greg, Hamid, Juma, and a few Kyrgyz men began the three-hour drive to Bozoi.

Barking dogs heralded their arrival in Bozoi, where local leader Haji Uzman met them, expressed surprise at Sarfraz’s absence and sorrow at the sad news of his illness. Then he took the CAI crew to a yurt to settle in for the night.

Haji Uzman told Greg the school had closed for the season four days earlier, but introduced three Bozoi students, who visited with Greg and demonstrated their reading and writing skills.

The next day, as the supplies were unloaded, Greg went to the school, which had 52 students and five teachers in 2012. During the tour, he asked if the unusual arrangement – which includes a student hostel providing room and board during the six-month school season – was suitable.

“I had wanted to understand if other options might be more feasible, like a traveling school,” Greg said. “But the shura (elders) explained that while some of them move around with the animals, most Kyrgyz actually live in small hamlets of three to five dwellings. So they and Sarfraz came up with the idea of a school with a hostel so the kids could remain there for six months at a time.”

The school’s success meant many more Kyrgyz wanted education, the elders told Greg. “So we made plans to expand the Bozoi school and add more facilities next year.”

On his way back to the border crossing, several parents stopped Greg to show off their children’s reading and writing skills and “persistently” ask him to spend the winter in the Wakhan with them.

“During my time there, I realized that even though most of the people were illiterate and isolated, they have a fierce desire and appreciation for education,” Greg said.
BADAKHSHAN PROVINCE, Afghanistan – The bumpy dirt road along the Sangliche River winds between the rocky slopes of the Hindu Kush Mountains into what some locals have grudgingly come to call “the Taliban mountains.”

“During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan 30 years ago, the mujahedeen came to these mountains to fight the Russians here,” said Sarfraz Khan, Central Asia Institute’s program director in northeast Afghanistan. “Many people died.”

Now the enemy is the Taliban.

The people of Badakhshan boast that the Afghan Taliban government that emerged after the failed Soviet occupation never ruled this northeast province. For a long time Badakhshan was considered the safest province in Afghanistan. Not anymore.

The mountainous province’s proximity to Pakistan makes it easier for Islamic militants to shift here undetected, while the remoteness makes it difficult for Afghan and coalition forces to oust them.

Badakhshan’s proximity to Tajikistan, meanwhile, has also made it a corridor for smuggling opium to Central Asia and Europe. And the poverty and isolation of its people has meant that, for a long time, nobody paid much attention.

“The Taliban numbers and strength are growing hugely and mostly they are based in Tergaran, in remote and mountainous Warduj district, where (CAI) built our school in 2010,” said Janagha Jaheed, CAI northeast Afghanistan field director. “Fortunately, all CAI schools are still safe and active. But the security situation is getting worse day by day.”

CAI schools, students and teachers carry on, however. That’s what people do in Afghanistan. But life and work in Badakhshan is infinitely more complicated than it used to be.

At Bazghir Higher Secondary School, which CAI helped build in 2010, Headmaster Alam Gul said in July that the militants in Warduj have made his job much harder.

“We are afraid of Taliban all the time,” he said. “I come one hour before school starts to check classroom and around the school to make sure no one has attacked the school and that it’s clear for all students. Also government people come here and check because they think the Taliban might come this way from Warduj to fight the local people here and make problems. These Taliban are
Districts in Badakhshan Province, Afghanistan, where CAI has projects

“The people are much afraid, but they let their children go to school. Everybody knows we shouldn’t let the Taliban stop education.”
— Elder from Kunar Province, Afghanistan

security forces, who has survived two attacks on his life.

“Warduj is at the center of four districts, so it is a good central location for working to get districts away from the government and turn them into war fields,” he said, adding that there are now “300 or 400 Taliban with guns” in Warduj. “The other reason is that the people in that village are very religious and very conservative, so they support the Taliban more than the other areas.”

Yet the violence is not confined to the district. Warduj has become a base for attacks as far away as Kunduz and Takhar provinces to the west. Militants in suicide vests target police checkpoints and government officials, and kidnap police officers and NGO workers.

Two female medical workers and their three Afghan translators were abducted in May while traveling on horseback to flood-stricken areas in the northern part of the province and held captive until rescued by a NATO operation. Two years ago, 10 foreign medical workers were killed after running an eye camp in southern Badakhshan.

NATO and Afghan forces retaliate with air strikes, ground attacks and raids to eliminate prominent Taliban leaders, seize weapons and explosives, and stop the attacks.

It’s a vicious cycle.

APRICOT PITTING

West of Warduj is Baharak Valley, where CAI supports an office to assist numerous schools. A three-hour drive south of the provincial capital Faisabad, the valley is less isolated than districts to the east.

On a typical July day, farmers harvested the first summer wheat crop, students took the government-mandated exams, and a group of children sat at the edge of a field in the shade pitting apricots for drying.

Yet the militant presence was palpable, the tension and anxiety evidenced by more women wearing burqas in public, more army and police check posts, more guns, and more wariness of strangers.

One night, just after sunset, Jaheed told the visiting CAI team that they must move. Taliban activity had been reported nearby. “Taliban are trying to burn the mobile phone tower in Jurm and cut that they must move. Taliban activity had been reported nearby. “Taliban are trying to burn the mobile phone tower in Jurm and cut.

Plans for a leisurely dinner were scrapped and the team scrambled to pack up. A rattletrap old Japanese station wagon that reeked of gasoline was employed to deliver the crew to safer lodging. The driver, instructed by Jaheed to “go fast,” drove like a maniac in the dark night. Despite the dust turned up by a dump truck on the road ahead, he rolled all the windows down, which cut the gas fumes, but did nothing to decrease the choking dust. To top it all off, he
sought to diffuse the tension by repeating, at high volume, all the friendly greetings he’d recently learned in English.

The crazy ride lasted only 10 minutes, but once was enough. The next day, the CAI visitors headed for Ishkashim, taking a roundabout route that decidedly did not go anywhere near Warduj.

**TAJIK BADAKHSHAN**

Ishkashim, at the western end of the Wakhan Corridor, sits on a big bend in the Panj River, which forms the Afghan-Tajik border.

Place names in this area get a little tricky, with two Badakhshans, two Ishkashims, two Wakhans, and two Pamirs. Even the people – their ethnicity, religion and languages – are the same.

Yet for all these border regions have in common, there are some glaring contrasts – not the least of which is fewer extremist militants on the Tajik side. That is not to say Tajikistan is without armed conflict. But it is more about control of lucrative smuggling routes and regional warlords than ideology.

Yet the conflict in Tajikistan came to a sudden head in July after Gen. Abdullo Nazarov, an intelligence chief posted on the Tajik-Afghan border, was murdered in broad daylight on the road between Ishkashim and Khorog, the capital of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) in eastern Tajikistan. The Tajik military immediately accused a Khorog-based warlord, Tolib Ayombekov, of plotting Nazarov’s murder.

When Ayombekov allegedly refused to surrender, thousands of Tajik security forces moved into Khorog and began some of the most intense fighting Tajikistan has seen since the end of the post-Soviet civil war in the 1990s.

Khorog residents were suddenly cut off from the world. The government blocked cell phones and Internet connections, closed all roads to Khorog and shut down the airport. A media blackout kept the outside world guessing what was happening while helicopter gunships, armored vehicles, snipers, and ground troops waged a bloody military operation in the city.

The CAI workers who’d recently escaped Baharak were then stuck in Khorog for four days during the fighting.

The Tajik government blamed “militants” for Nazarov’s death. But as Eurasianet.org later reported, “Political analysts suspect the government’s response to the murder was a masked attempt at consolidating authority over a mountainous region that has remained largely beyond central control since Tajikistan gained independence.
following the 1991 Soviet collapse. Sharing a long border with Afghanistan, Gorno-Badakhshan also is a well-known drug-trafficking route, and turf wars are hard to rule out. Others sought to implicate Afghanistan, reiterating warnings from Afghan Badakhshan that extremist activity there was increasing and that Taliban and Al Qaeda terrorists were trying to destabilize the entire area and move into Central Asia.

Whatever the real reason, when the fighting was over, an estimated 70 people, including at least 20 civilians, had been killed. The fighting also complicated CAI’s project work in Tajikistan. Closed roads, dwindling supplies, and communications blackouts put the four school projects there temporarily behind schedule.

Yet Sarfraz was a dogged taskmaster. He knew the communities needed the schools. And he was their No. 1 advocate. He and Mahbuba Qurbanalieva, CAI’s project manager in Tajikistan, and local leaders kept the pressure on construction crews. As of November, all four schools were nearing completion.

‘FIGHT OF EDUCATION MUST CONTINUE’

Back in Afghanistan, the battle for education is often one of life and death, and anyone involved must be vigilant.

Wakil Karimi, a CAI program director, is constantly mindful of the dangers of working in central and eastern Afghanistan. On a day trip to a new CAI-supported school in Logar Province, south of Kabul, he took two cars, an armed guard and a back road.

“This way we avoid the main road,” which is frequently used by NATO convoys or supply trucks, frequent targets of roadside bombs, he explained. The back road is also a way to avoid prying eyes.

The road went through the mountains that ring Kabul and into a deserted, hilly area that seemed a world away from the overcrowded capital. There was no water, no trees, and no crops. “This was an area deserted, hilly area that seemed a world away from the overcrowded capital.”

Karimi said, shifting his stubborn Toyota into first gear.

Just past the old battlefields, the land turned green again, irrigated by the Logar and Lalander rivers. And shortly thereafter, Karimi pulled up to Gumran Girls’ Middle School.

Located in a volatile area, Gumran students are well aware that education is key to a better, more peaceful future for their country.

“Education is the light that allows us to see the world,” said sixth-grader Fazeela, 11. “It is valuable for all people, boys and girls, to find the light of their own lives. And then it will be our job to give education to the next generation. That is how Afghanistan will have a better future.”

Fazeela, who wants to be a doctor, is one of 350 students at Gumran School. She is an excellent student who never misses a class, said her teacher, Rana.

Rana herself is well educated, with a university degree in chemistry and biology, but she teaches English. The fighting takes a toll on everyone, she said. Her husband is in the Afghan Army and is away from home for long periods of time.

“And as teachers we worry about the Taliban,” she said. “Every time there is an explosion, for one or two days the students don’t come.”

Militant activity is even more of an everyday reality in eastern Kunar Province, which borders Pakistan. It was here that Taliban killed a teacher and a religious leader who worked with CAI.

A local elder, Ghulam Ghus, said in an interview a few weeks later that the two men “were my close friends. We always worked together to make sure the school was safe. The Taliban was not happy with us.”

The project started about five years ago when Saw village elders “organized an education committee and decided we wanted a girls’ school, only for girls,” he said. The committee included the teacher, Malim Hidayatullah, and Malik Akbar, a religious leader who was “uneducated, but much interested to bring education for his grandchildren.”

With the help of a U.S. lieutenant colonel at a forward operating base in the region, they got a message to CAI Co-founder Greg Mortenson, who sent Karimi and Sarfraz to Kunar for a jirga with the elders.

The villagers explained the region and the isolated village’s struggles, Ghus recalled. Before the heavy fighting of recent years, Saw was home to about 3,000 families, he said, but many have moved to Pakistan. “This is an area out of control, with mountains all around and many trees, walls, rocks and a very narrow village. If helicopter flies over, they cannot see the people. But the Taliban is there.”

And the Taliban gave the committee trouble right from the start, challenging workers, trying to block material deliveries, and attempting to intimidate everyone involved.

But the villagers were undeterred. “Thanks to CAI, we built a school for girls,” he said. “When we started education, the girls were sitting outside on a carpet. CAI came at a difficult time for us and helped our students so much. No other NGOs come there. Now we have a school inside the village and a good chance for those girls.”

Still the Taliban did not let up. Two months ago, Taliban fighters visited the Saw School during classes and took the Afghan flag, Ghus said. “We wrote a letter, ‘Why did you do this?’ We need a face-to-face talk.’

“After two months, we agreed to have shura (elders) meeting. Hidayatullah was a member of the shura; Malik Akbar was well known to the shura. The Taliban said, ‘If you continue to do this work, you will have to take your family and leave the area.’ We met twice and they said this again. Then there was much arguing and they sent everyone away except those two men. They took them down the road and shot them both in the back of the head,” he said, shaking his head.

What will happen to their killers? “Nobody came to do inquiry. There is no government in our area. We talk to police, they say, ‘We cannot go there.’ How are we supposed to protect ourselves from the Taliban? They have rifles. A few have been killed by Americans shooting from the helicopters, but there are 100 of them. And they bring money and people from other areas, from Pakistan. The Afghan Army says it is the job of border police. But there are no check posts on the borders. Locals can’t do anything.”

Ghus and the older elders are exasperated, but the tragedy has
ISHKHASHIM, Afghanistan – Despite efforts to curb the opium trade, Afghanistan remains the biggest opium producer in the world, growing and processing an estimated 90 percent of the world’s supply.

And in northeast Badakhshan Province, it seems no one is untouched. Everyone either knows someone or is someone in the opium pipeline – a poppy grower or picker; an opium processor or smuggler; an official cracking down on or demanding a piece of the lucrative business; or an opium addict.

“We don’t grow a lot of opium here, but we have a lot of addicted people,” said Pariwash Gouhari, CAI’s Wakhan-Pamir community program manager. “Some of them start when they are small. When they get sick and there is no nearby hospital or doctor, their mothers and fathers blow opium up their noses or into their throats.

“As I was teaching in the school there was one 6-year-old student addicted to opium. He was fine until 10 o'clock every morning. Then he started crying and telling us he wanted to go home. Eventually he told us that at 10 o'clock every day his mother used to give him opium,” she said.

The United States has spent “more than $6 billion to combat the poppies that help finance the insurgency and fuel corruption,” but to little avail, the New York Times reported in May. Total acreage devoted to poppies in Afghanistan has only grown since 2001, and there is “so much money to be made that powerful political players, from police chiefs to governors, inevitably want a cut.”

Afghan-grown opium generates an estimated $4 billion a year. Farmers who grow it get only a tiny piece of that, but say it’s still more profitable than food crops. And insurgents have gotten ever more sophisticated about getting their piece of the cash flow. “Warlords Inc.,” a 2010 U.S. congressional report, found the Taliban profit not only from the 10 percent ushr tax levied on opium farmers, but also from a tax on traffickers and another on truckers who transport the product.

Law enforcement at every level alternately cracks down on the lucrative industry and demands in on the cash flow. Afghan President Hamid Karzai recently fired the Finance and Defense minister due to allegations of heroin- and opium-trafficking at top government levels.

But Afghans don’t just grow opium. They use it, and in increasing numbers.

Afghanistan has around 1 million opium and heroin addicts out of a population of 30 million, making it the world’s top per capita user, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC). A survey of opium use in Sarhad, the village at the end of the road that runs east from Ishkashim through the Wakhan Corridor, found nearly half of the estimated 1,500 residents there were opium addicts.

For women and children in the “distant and remote” villages of Badakshan, opium addiction often starts with medicinal use. “Anytime anyone gets sick, he or she cannot have access to a local clinic or good health services, so they use a small piece of opium to reduce their pain for awhile,” said Mohammad Zakir, head teacher at the CAI-supported school in Koran-wa-Monjan, a remote village high in the Hindu Kush Mountains.

For others, it is a way to escape the hardships of life in Afghanistan.

But opium is highly addictive and it doesn’t take long before people are using it several times a day, every day. And when addicts wind up feeding their addiction at the expense of feeding their families, everyone loses.
Education and public-health awareness help families fight the scourge of addiction. Parveen, one of CAI’s rural healthcare workers in the Wakhan Corridor, told Greg Mortenson in October that her village now has only a handful of opium addicts, compared to dozens a decade ago. “An opium-addicted husband is worthless to our community,” she said.

Most opium is grown in Afghanistan’s southern and southwestern provinces, “which are dominated by insurgency and organized criminal networks,” according to the UN. But in Badakhshan – on the Tajikistan border – poppy farming increased by 55 percent in 2011, and the number of opium-processing plants doubled, according to the UNODC.

In September, drug agencies destroyed six illegal drug labs in Badakhshan, according to Radio Free Europe. The drug busts yielded 5.6 tons of heroin, morphine and opium meant for the Central Asia drug pipeline.

Drug smuggling over the Panj River into Tajikistan creates a whole other set of problems, on both sides of the border. Opium and heroin addiction is increasing in Tajikistan, according to news reports, and drug trafficking is believed to have played a role in the Tajik military’s heavy-handed offensive in Khorog in July.

The situation is expected to worsen as international forces prepare to leave Afghanistan in 2014, taking with them the flood of U.S. dollars that so many Afghans have come to depend on.

Some communities are planning ahead. In July, four young men came to CAI’s office in Ishkashim to ask CAI program director Sarfraz Khan if the organization would help build a sports stadium.

“In Ishkashim, Wakhan and Zebak [a neighboring district], we have a young generation that has become involved with opium and heroin,” said Panjshambe Sadiqi, representing the group. “Women are also involved with heroin and this is bad for our society and culture.

“We want to build a stadium, with football, volleyball, hockey and cricket, where people from all three districts can come to play and maybe even compete. We tried to get help from the government and another NGO [nongovernmental organization], but there is no help for us,” he said.

The group has already secured the necessary land and would first like help building a boundary wall around the premises. Then, if possible, the young men want an enclosed gymnasium or stadium, “because winter is very cold here,” Sadiqi said.

“If possible, CAI can help,” he said. “You helped us a lot before in this area with education and this is our only hope.”

Khan told him he would pass along their request, but with the caveat that CAI focuses on education. And then he praised them for their hard work and forward thinking.

“This is a good idea, especially for young people who feel trapped and poor and start smoking opium,” he said. “If CAI cannot do it, maybe we can help you find someone who will.”

-KARIN RONNOW

steeled their determination to work for peace through education.

“We hope that the result of this is that more people will join us to work for our children,” he said. “If the base of improvement in the world is education and this is only one way to finish all problems, the fight of education must continue. Without education there is no chance for peace, development and a better future. People who don’t have education fight. People who have education don’t fight.”

The 10-room Saw girls’ middle school accommodates 310 girls in classes one through nine with 12 teachers.

“The people are much afraid, but they let their children go to school,” Ghus said. “Everybody knows we shouldn’t let the Taliban stop education.”

In October, Karimi reported that the Taliban leader responsible for the deaths of the two men in Saw had been killed by coalition air forces.

‘EDUCATION CAN BRING PEACE’

En route to visit schools in Kapisa and Parwan provinces, Karimi directed the driver onto a road near Bagram Air Force Base. In this valley north of Kabul, evidence of Afghanistan’s 30-plus years of war was everywhere. U.S. military helicopters flew overhead. NATO convoys of huge armored vehicles rolled down the road. Remnants of burned villages “from Soviet time” dotted the landscape.

“This is close to Northern Alliance front, too, during Taliban time,” Karimi said. “Always there is much fighting here.”

The driver navigated a narrow dirt road through the houses of Regwan to a community school at the edge of the village. Here the community had set up a temporary primary school – two classes in an old community building and five more classes outside, under the mulberry trees – while construction of a permanent building is under way nearby with CAI’s help. Already the school serves 300 girls and 65 boys and employs seven teachers.

“The only government school is far from here so people decided in this village we have to start a school,” Headmaster Aga Shireen said as he stood beside a first-grade class of 60 students sitting in neat rows outdoors.

“This is not a very good arrangement,” he said, noting the mulberry stains on the students’ clothes, “so every day I go to the construction site and check how work is going there. We try to finish work by the end of the summer and shift our school there. Construction is slow because we have no electricity here.”

“Kapisa is famous in fighting” and many French soldiers were killed in the province in recent years, Karimi said, as he watched a girl clean and bandage a nasty scratch on a younger student’s hand. As soon as she was done, Wakil asked her about her education and her dreams.
“Whatever happens to the country should be by our own hands,” Wahida, 12, answered him with surprising maturity. “And the only way to be free from fighting is to get education, get a good life and a good future. I can help by becoming a doctor.”

So many Afghans – exhausted by the fighting and the toll it has taken on their families, their villages, and their country – are pinning their hopes for a better future on education.

At a temporary girls’ school in nearby Murad Khwaja, the 626 students and their teachers were counting down the days until they could move from their ragged canvas classrooms into their new school, built with CAI’s help.

“School is the place where we can bring peace and development,” said Headmaster Qandagha. “By fighting we just bring destruction. By education we can finish ignorance and bring peace and prosperity to society and all nations. We hope for a bright future for these girls.”

PAKISTAN’S TRIBAL AREAS

The Taliban shooting of 14-year-old Malala Yousafzai in early October put the international spotlight on girls’ education in Pakistan and the extremists who oppose it. The Taliban shot Malala in the head and neck because, as New York Times columnist Nick Kristof wrote, “girls’ education threatens everything that they stand for.”

The attack occurred after school in the Swat Valley, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) Province. Last year alone in KP, “at least 55 schools were blown up,” according to a January analysis in the South Asia Intelligence Review. “Insurgents overwhelmingly target girls’ schools, ordering both women teachers and girl students to stay inside their homes in conformity with their peculiar version of Islamic teachings, with a threat of grave violence for noncompliance. The government’s response … remains entirely apathetic.”

CAI began working in KP a few years ago, under the leadership of Lt. Col. (Ret.) Ilyas Mirza, CAI’s operations director in Pakistan.

“No education and no development lead to fanaticism,” Mirza said. “While illiteracy was not necessarily dangerous a few decades ago, it can be extremely dangerous nowadays. To make someone a useful member of the society who can make positive contributions toward the development of his or her community, it is important that he or she is educated.”

Thus far, CAI’s KP projects have focused on the volatile tribal areas abutting North and South Waziristan. Although Waziristan has become almost synonymous with extremism, this hasn’t always been the case, said Mirza, who grew up in the region. “This area was one of the most peaceful areas on earth for outsiders and foreigners. If it was unsafe for someone, it was for its own people, who generally remained engaged in their feudal wars.”

But today the region is “a victim of terrorism,” he said. A sanctuary for insurgents, it has become a frequent target of U.S. drone strikes and Pakistan Army offensives.

“Anybody who is aligned with foreigners, particularly the U.S., and that includes the Pakistan Army, is a declared enemy of the terrorists,” he said. “This has had a great demoralizing effect on the local population, who cannot effectively counter this challenge. The enemy is concealed and his time of attack, target, and direction cannot be determined. So one has to exercise extreme caution.”

With cautious steps, CAI has thus far been able to work with communities to build three schools and expand two in KP’s Dera Ismail Khan district, and work with the University of Science & Technology-Bannu to install a potable water supply on campus, provide scholarships for 10 female students and start a library, CAI’s largest project to date.

And the militants have left CAI’s projects in KP alone. “The primary reason CAI schools have not been attacked or destroyed is because CAI works closely with communities on school initiatives and the communities are very loyal to their schools, and to helping their children with education,” Mortenson said.

FIRST SCHOOL IN DIAMER

CAI began working in Ghizer district in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), northern Pakistan, about four years ago when two project managers there began to see an increase in radical Islamic groups in the region.
The insurgents, forced out of Pakistan’s tribal areas and Afghanistan’s eastern mountains by U.S. and Pakistan military operations, sought refuge – and recruits – in Ghizer. Saidullah Baig, Gilgit-Hunza CAI program director, called Ghizer “a soft corner for extremists,” warning that isolation, poverty, illiteracy, and government neglect made the area ripe for exploitation.

Yet those same characteristics made it a good place for CAI to empower local communities through education, he noted.

The creeping militancy hasn’t abated, nor has CAI’s investment in Ghizer. In progress largely driven by Fazil Baig, CAI’s Ghizer program director, CAI now supports more than 20 projects in the district, including schools, public health projects and teacher training.

This year, for the first time, CAI’s efforts also shifted south into the Diamer district of GB, an area with a patriarchal society, strong tribal mores and “a heavy influence of orthodox clergy,” according to a 2012 Asian Development Bank report.

Diamer’s literacy and development rates lag well behind those of Pakistan. Poverty is endemic, with most families doing subsistence farming, and the literacy rate is estimated at less than 10 percent, according to the Asian Development Bank report.

The region is graced, however, with the seventh-highest peak in the world, Nanga Parbat (8,125 meters), and Fairy Meadows, “some of the most beautiful places in the world,” Saidullah said. The mighty Indus River courses through the district. And Diamer has the most abundant forest in GB, mostly pine and cedar trees, although heavy reliance on wood for cooking and heat and as a saleable commodity has let to warnings of deforestation, which are generally ignored.

Jahangir Khan, a social worker in Diamer, initially contacted CAI with a request for help with education in his home district.

“No NGO seems to be taking interest in the education of girls in this area,” he wrote. “I have observed CAI’s activities to promote girls’ education in other backward areas of Gilgit-Baltistan. I kindly request you take an interest in [Diamer]. If you ensure any program in Diamer for the betterment of girls and women, I offer my services for completion of this work with the best cooperation of all community members.”

Mortenson encouraged Fazil and Saidullah to go ahead, saying, Diamer “has been a dicey area for decades, but people are very loyal when trust is established. There is a dire need for schools, especially for girls. We will have to make sure to build strong relationships with locals.”

And that is just what they did. Fazil and Saidullah met with Goharabad community leaders in 2011, including Dil Pazir, a retired police inspector.

“Dil Pazir had initiated English-medium schools in Goharabad village, but had no building,” Saidullah said. “He is a soft-hearted person who wants to educate the poor population in his village.

“There are many challenges for NGOs working in this district to build schools because the local ulama (religious leaders) oppose building schools with kafirs’ (nonbelievers) money. So it is our mission to start slowly and build the school quietly.”

Construction continued through the summer despite the disruptions caused by an outbreak of sectarian violence nearby. At the end of Ramadan in August, 19 Shias headed north on the Karakoram Highway were killed at Babasur Pass; the second massacre of Shia travelers on the KKH this year.

The attacks triggered waves of protests across Gilgit-Baltistan, some of which also turned violent. Markets were closed, along with schools and government offices, strict curfews issued and checkpoints set up to control people’s movements.

But the Goharabad School went up, Saidullah said, and students should be able to move in when school resumes after the winter break in March.

“It’s hard to imagine, but there was not even one NGO school in the entire district until now,” he said. “Goharabad is the first and this credit goes to CAI. So many NGOs tried, but everyone else failed.”

Girls stand on the stairs and shyly greet visitors at the new CAI-supported Shah Dao Government Primary School in Paharpur, Pakistan. The old school was destroyed in the floods that swept Pakistan in 2010.

The new Goharabad School in Diamer, under construction with CAI support in 2012.
Continuing Hope

CAI helps young women continue on journey to lifelong learning

BANNU, Pakistan – In public, they are covered head-to-toe in full hijab and niqab, with only their eyes visible. Yet these brave young women challenge their communities’ traditional definitions of female roles every time they set foot on the University of Science & Technology-Bannu campus. They confront tradition quietly but persistently, determined that education is the key to a better future for themselves, their families, the tribal regions, and Pakistan itself.

Sometimes their ambitions seem to surprise even themselves.

Twenty-year-old Sidra, for example, is pursuing a master’s degree in botany. “I love nature and I would like to do research.”

But then she continued: “Actually, I’d really like to be an Air Force pilot.” She laughed softly and began wringing her hands. “I just have to convince my brother.”

She gave voice to her dream last winter and already it’s becoming a reality. This summer she passed her physical, an important step toward pilot training, scheduled for this school year.

Sidra is one of nine young women awarded Central Asia Institute scholarships to attend the university in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) Province. CAI also installed a clean-water system on campus and is building a university library.

Vice Chancellor Asmat Ullah Khan and KP legislator Akram Durrani started the university in 2005. The first graduates received their degrees in January 2012.

During a visit to the campus at that time, Khan said, “We had big dreams and eager students from the neglected tribal areas. At first our university only consisted of a couple buildings in the middle of a barren field. But over time we’ve recruited more qualified professors and now we are having our first convocation.”

When CAI Co-founder Greg Mortenson visited the campus in July 2012 with KP Gov. Wyed Massod Kausar and tribal elders from North and South Waziristan, the elders condemned U.S. drone bombings in the region, but thanked Mortenson and praised CAI’s help for the university.

Khadir Khan, a North Waziristan elder said, “We are mujahedeen (fighters) opposed to anyone who attacks us. But our greatest battle for self-determination is with education, not guns.”

The scholarship students’
The lack of investment in schools means the quality of education is often subpar. “I found some difficulties passing my exams before I came here because in South Waziristan we have no good science teachers, no good labs,” Surat said. “We study hard and try to learn, make good grades, but we face many obstacles.”

Surat and her classmates have known only fighting for most of their lives. A 2012 Stanford University report estimated between 474 and 881 Pakistani civilians had been killed in U.S. drone strikes since 2004. Pakistan Army offensives ebb and flow in the area, too, trying to oust the militant training camps and stop coordinated attacks on military convoys.

The local people “have to keep moving,” Surat said. “When the military operation started we had to move out and live with relatives; many people have to live in tents.”

Strength is required, she said. “In this area we believe you have to protect your family and be brave – the Pashto word is ghayrat.”

Bravery, along with the CAI scholarships, help Surat and her classmates as they pursue degrees in botany, business, chemistry, and English. Professor M. Subhan, who helps with the UST-B scholarship program, said he has no doubt girls’ higher education will make a difference in the region.

“To educate a girl is to dispense the light of education to the whole family to which the girl belongs, and will continue generation to generation,” he said. “We really appreciate the contribution of Central Asia Institute in this regard.”

**WE TRY TO HELP**

Some of the same obstacles to girls’ education – a patriarchal culture that devalues females, lack of government investment, and poverty – exist just over the border in Afghanistan.

In the mountains of Kunar Province in northeast Afghanistan, 95 percent of the population is Pashtun and 96 percent of the population lives in rural areas, according to the Afghan Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. Less than 18 percent of women are literate and less than 1 percent are high school graduates.

Hila* has battled that reality since childhood. And it hasn’t been easy. She is the only child of educated parents from Kunar Province. “My father wrote books and had a magazine about Afghanistan. He was killed by extremists when I was 3,” just as the Taliban took control in 1996, she said. “My mother was only 21 years old then, but her only wish was that I should grow up with education.”

But Hila had a rough go in school. “I was the only girl going to that school and from childhood I had to fight each person. I had many risks because so many people in my village are backward and the Taliban fought me. But it was not my bravleness in that time, for me it was just my habit that I go to school and come home.

“One day an old man who was Taliban came to our science class and said, ‘You are a girl. What are you doing in school? You should be in madrassa.’ I said, ‘I have a right to get education.’ And the man hit me for talking that way. Then my uncle came and argued with the Taliban and I was allowed to stay in school. I have always had to defend myself and fight for my own rights. And I want an education. Allah gives us this right to education. So I have no fear – it is my right to go to school.”

Hila, 20, now studies law in Kabul on a CAI scholarship. She is particularly motivated to be an advocate for Afghan women.

“ Afghan men think they are stronger than women, that they can tell women orders and we must do as they say,” she said. “In Kunar Province most women don’t even know they have the right to study and get an education. We shouldn’t be very proud of ourselves that we have women in this country who don’t know that.”

*A The names of these young women were changed for their protection.

** CAI-Afghanistan scholarship student

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“The names of these young women were changed for their protection.

We are the residents of this country. We can feel it better than other people. If we want freedom and human rights, we must do it.”

— CAI-Afghanistan scholarship student

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* The names of these young women were changed for their protection.
Working as an attorney or a judge would give her a platform to advocate for women’s rights, she said. “It is not possible that other people can bring freedom to this country. We are the residents of this country. We can feel it better than other people. If we want freedom and human rights, we must do it.”

CAI supports 18 scholarship students getting higher education in Kabul, said Wakil Karimi, CAI’s program director for the region. When he receives a scholarship request, “I review the situation with the family, check the economic situation, talk to the relatives and if it is good, I give a scholarship.”

In some cases, the students recommend their classmates. In other cases, local representatives petition Karimi. A parliament member from southern Ghazni Province, where CAI supports two schools, asked CAI to support 30 girls for education in Kabul. “But we can only accept three,” Karimi said.

Even though Afghanistan has a population of about 30 million, according to the World Bank only an estimated 70,000 attend university, of which about one-third are women.

“After the falling of the Taliban, many, many girls who cannot afford to go to university.” Karimi said. “They have intelligence and academic opportunity, but no money to support them. They are poor people. Especially the girls who come from the outer provinces – Kunar, Nuristan, Urozgan, Helmand – who must come to Kabul because there are no universities for them in those places. So we try to help them, we should help those girls.”

Saba* is also from Kunar Province, where her father is a teacher. “He always tried to convince me to study. He said, ‘You have to do service for your country.’”

Now 20 years old, she is in medical school studying to become a doctor.

“Mostly it was the people who have so many problems in my area who made me interested in education and medicine,” she said. “In the village, my cousin was pregnant and about to deliver a baby. At that time the doctor was not skillful; maybe he was not even a doctor. He gave her a medicine that was not good for her and she lost her baby. And then she died. That made me think I have to get education and come back to help the women.”

The absence of adequate health care also inspired her classmate, Roshina*. “My sister has eye problem, she is blind from meningitis when she was 11 years old. She is 17 now,” said Roshina, 20, who wants to be an eye doctor. “There are no women eye doctors in Afghanistan and some families don’t let their women, sisters, or daughters go to male doctors for eye problems. So some women lose their eyesight or vision at age 30 or 40. It is not only women; in Afghanistan men also don’t take care of their eyes. But I can help the women.”

However, Roshina is not likely to return to her village in Khost Province after she graduates. Her father died of “stomach problems” when she was 5 years old. She has one brother, but he is younger, “so there is no man with us, no responsible male to protect us. And without that, there is no opportunity for me to work in Khost.”

But just because they are in Kabul doesn’t mean these young women’s battles against tradition and a patriarchal system has ended. Public harassment of females is still a constant – even in the capital city.

“Men tease us on the road as we go from home to university,” Saba said. “In Afghanistan there are always people on the street, many who are unemployed, and they bother us. Also sometimes when we wait for our car, men say, ‘come with us,’ or the taxi drivers ask for our phone numbers or some other things that we cannot mention here right now. It is very stressful.”

INVESTING IN PEOPLE

In addition to its scholarship programs in KP and Kabul, CAI has well-established programs in Pakistan’s Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad-Jammu Kashmir regions.

Numerous global studies show that the greatest agent of change in a society is girls’ education and empowering girls – especially when girls and young women can be supported beyond primary or high school, when many are removed from school by their fathers to get married,” Mortenson said.

“When I first began this work 19 years ago, there was a critical need to merely get girls in school. However, more recently we’ve realized it’s just as important that CAI supports the first wave of literate girls

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▲ A Kashmiri scholarship student works in the dining room at the Muzaffarabad hostel.

▲ CAI has several projects in Muzaffarabad, the Azad Kashmir capital, including a scholarship program, teacher support, and building support for a teachers’ college.

▲ Scholarship students from the Hunza region and Azad Kashmir were all smiles during a February meeting with Greg Mortenson, lower center.
to become future leaders, educators, doctors, lawyers, engineers, and much more.”

CAI made some changes in its GB and AJK scholarship programs this year. Upon completion of the school year last spring, CAI began shifting the young women from Rawalpindi, Pakistan, to hostels and schools closer to home. A few exceptions were made in special cases, but the result is a much more cohesive, structured and supportive environment. Plus, it is more cost-effective, allowing for expanded programs in both regions.

When the shift was announced, Mortenson met with all the girls to offer encouragement and kudos for their hard work.

“You are the first ones. You are the brave ones,” he told them. “After you, it is much easier for other girls. But first girls have to push much. I know you work hard and face many different challenges. You are shining lights for your communities, and if you have faith, education and hope, you will succeed.”

Zora, 16, has just completed 10th class, which marks the end of high school in Pakistan. She likes math and biology and aspires to be a doctor.

“This scholarship has really helped me. I am from Shishkat in Gojal. There are five children in our family, but our father is disabled. Three years ago there was a big flood in our village and all fields and houses were destroyed. Families are living in shelters and camps. If I didn’t get this scholarship, I don’t think I’d be able to get higher education.”

Hazala Naz is also from the Gojal region. “After the flood disaster we don’t have houses, shelters, fields or places where we pray. Everything was destroyed. Our lives changed and we had no opportunities. Then CAI sent tents to my village and we became aware of opportunities for scholarship. We are very thankful to you. Our futures were so dark, but when we came here we became bright again, like stars. We want to work together to rebuild our communities.”

Saidullah Baig, who runs CAI’s Gilgit scholarship program, says bringing the girls together closer to home for higher education also increases the likelihood that the girls will return to their villages.

“We are doing teacher training in Gilgit and I am hoping the scholarship students can participate,” he said. “Then when some of the girls matriculate, they can return to home village and teach in schools. We should encourage them to give back. This is also very important for sustainability and reinvestment in people.”

‘CAI HAS BEEN A GREAT HOPE’

Iqra, of AJK, studied in Rawalpindi for four years. Now 17, she said she’s gotten a good education and is a premed student in Muzaffarabad.

“Our prayers are always with Greg Mortenson and Central Asia Institute for making this opportunity for us,” Iqra said. “During the earthquake in Kashmir [in 2005], our lives changed. My parents were injured and I thought I would not be able to go to school after that. We were all in shock. But CAI helped a lot with my school, Gundi Piran, and then for me with my education. CAI has been a great hope for me.”

Iqra now lives in CAI’s Muzaffarabad hostel during the school year, an oasis in the dusty, overcrowded AJK capital. CAI’s Kashmir program manager, Fozia Naseer, situated the hostel in a large rented house; hired a warden who the girls call “big sister,” a cook and a janitor; and contracted with a local security company to provide 24-hour security. CAI pays school fees and provides room and board, books, and stationary for the girls.

Child marriage cuts short girls’ opportunities

GILGIT, Pakistan

– Samina was 15 years old when her father announced her childhood was over. He had found her a husband, he told her, and it was time for her to marry and move out.

“I was shocked and started crying because I wanted to continue my studies and become a teacher,” Samina recalled.

But her father, a retired Pakistan Army soldier, told her he had no choice. The family was poor. He was unemployed. And she was the third of nine children, seven of them girls.

“There were so many problems to letting me study,” she said. “If a person has so many daughters it is hard for her family to find husbands quickly for all of them. And if the daughters are unmarried for a long time and staying with the father, it becomes harder to feed them all.

“My father told me to prepare immediately for marriage. He said after my marriage I could continue my education. My husband’s family promised me this also,” Samina said.

“But in the remote valleys of northern Pakistan, such promises are rarely kept.

Samina married in 2002. Soon after, she and her husband had a baby boy. Three years later, a daughter.

“My job became harder as I had to look after my babies as well as my family and husband,” she recalled. “My husband was a loyal and loving man who cared about me. But we had to feed our family. I was always busy with my life. My studies became a forgotten dream.”

Despite laws against it, child marriage is still common in the places where Central Asia Institute works. Girls drop out, or are pulled out, of school for marriages arranged by their families. The girls have no say in the matter. Babies come nine months later and only the strongest, most persistent of these young women ever get more than a basic education.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) launched an international campaign to end child marriage on Oct. 11, the first International Day of the Girl Child.

“No social, cultural, or religious rationale for child marriage can possibly justify the damage these marriages do to young girls and their potential,” said UNFPA Director Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin.

The negative effects of child marriage ripple through society. Child brides are more vulnerable to a life in poverty and to domestic abuse, according to a new UNFPA report, “Marrying Too Young.” Because their bodies are still not fully formed, these girls are at far greater risk of prolonged or obstructed labor, according to the UN. Their children are more likely to be weak and malnourished and, thus, vulnerable to disease.

Early marriage and motherhood also has profound psychological effects, UN studies have found. Tradition calls for them to move to their husband’s home, which means leaving friends and families behind. The husband’s family often puts them to work and punishes them if they don’t give birth to a boy quickly. They are isolated and powerless. CONT. PAGE 18

* The names of these young women were changed for their protection.
But child marriage is traditional in many parts of Afghanistan, said Hila*, a CAI scholarship student who volunteers at a Kabul women’s shelter. “The old culture in Afghanistan, especially in remote areas, is when the father kills another man, there is no law or court. So instead they make a jirga and the father gives his daughter to the man’s son for marriage. This will finish the case,” Hila said, adding that she has seen girls as young as 8 married off in this way.

“Some other people say it is just not good to keep daughters in home. At age 9 or 10, if she is still in her father’s house, she will escape when she becomes teenager. But if she is married to someone she won’t run away. (Or) in other cases when big families don’t have enough food or cannot provide for all their children, they sell their daughters. So you see you can sell, you can buy, or instead of money you can give the daughter or sister. They are property in Afghanistan.”

Afghan law sets a minimum marriage age for girls at 16, according to UNFPA.

Yet “many girls get married at age 15 because most families don’t want to keep their daughters in their home after age 15 because of poverty, tradition, and risky (security) situation,” said Wakil Karim, CAI’s program director in Kabul.

Pakistan law also sets a minimum marriage age at 16. But a report by Plan Finland, a nonprofit organization working in Pakistan, found the body of law on this issue offers “merely tokenistic punishments for child marriage offences” and provides “no deterrent effect.”

Urban families seem increasingly amenable to delaying a daughter’s marriage until she has completed school. But remote rural areas, change is much slower.

“Mostly girls in our poor societies are urged to marry between ages 15 and 20,” said Dilshad Begum, CAI’s women’s education program director in northern Pakistan. “The main cause is poverty. And the cause of poverty is the rapidly increasing population in an uneducated society. The poor families cannot provide education to their kids and so they marry them young, at an innocent age, because they think that it is the easy way to feed their kids. It is very far from their thoughts to educate their children.”

Girls rarely rebel, in large part because there’s nowhere for them to go, Hila said. “Some of the girls who got married by force by their family skip from their husband’s home,” she said. “Sometimes they are arrested and taken to jail. If they are in Kabul, they can go to (the shelter). If they are in some of the other provinces and they skip from their husband or father’s family, she would be killed. There is no chance for her.”

Education is the best strategy for protecting girls and combating child marriage, according to the UN. Girls who finish their education learn problem-solving, leadership, and critical-thinking skills. “When girls are able to stay in school and avoid being married early, they can build a foundation for a better life for themselves and their families and participate in the progress of their nations.”

And sometimes, young married girls do find their way back to school.

Samina’s husband was killed in an accident on the road from their village in Chapursan Valley to Sost two years ago, she said. Her husband’s family took her son and she and her daughter were forced to return to her father’s home in Chapursan, where she gave birth to a third child.

But just when things seem to have reached a new low, she was introduced to CAI. Samina applied for and received a scholarship, allowing her to earn a high school diploma as a private student and enroll at the Government Degree College for Women in Gilgit, where she is now a first-year student.

She said she still worries about what will happen to her children, but she will be better equipped to care for them, and a better role model, with education.

“I am so happy because I have been able to continue my studies,” she said. “This is a chance I did not think I would get.”

- KARIN RONNOW

The house is warm and welcoming. Fozia and the girls planted two vegetable gardens outside last spring that provided fresh produce through the summer. There’s also a badminton court and Fozia is assembling a library of academic and reference books, children’s books and fiction.

The 16 girls sleep three to a room and each room has its own bathroom. There are strict rules about cleanliness and personal hygiene. During study time, the girls can either stay in their rooms or join others at the large table in the dining room.

Fozia is a good role model for the girls, having fought hard for her own education, which includes an undergraduate degree in political science, a master’s degree in law, and postgraduate studies in the United States.

Abida, inspired by Fozia, also wants to be a lawyer. Now 17 and in her second year of college, she is studying history and civics. Her family’s home in Dawarian village was destroyed in the earthquake.

“We had to move to Muzaffarabad, where we lived in tents at a refugee camp for four years,” she said. “Then a landslide took down the camp. I want to be a lawyer in my own area, but I had no prospects for school, my family has no money for my studies.”

Fozia said Abida works hard, gets good grades and is on her way to a successful future. Fozia keeps close tabs on all the girls’ academics, with tutoring in the hostel for anyone who needs it and regular visits with their teachers to monitor their progress. And she encourages their dreams. Four of the other girls aspire to be teachers, one wants to be a doctor, another wants to be a banker. And just as in Bannu, there is a girl who wants to be a pilot.

“I am the youngest of six children from Kahori Village,” said Mahnoor, 13. “My father worked in Dubai as a baker and was able to help my older sister get higher education. But now he is back and unemployed. He can’t support me. But I want to stay in school so that I can be a commercial pilot and fly around the world.”


KARIN RONNOW/CAI
A chokidar (guard) poses for a photo at the Gumran Girls’ Middle School in Logar Province, Afghanistan. The right hand over the heart salutation is a symbol of respect.
Faces of Hope

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

• A burqa-clad woman covers her mouth as she smiles inside a CAI-run literacy center in Kabul, Afghanistan.

• A young girl stares into the camera while in class at the Rahesht Primary School in Afghanistan’s Parwan Province.

• A Tajik laborer takes a break from pouring concrete by hand on a new high school in Kona Kurgan, Tajikistan.

• A young Kuchi girl smiles as she listens to a lesson inside a CAI-donated tent near Kabul, Afghanistan.

• A Wakhi woman looks outside while tending the stove inside her home.

• A Tajik elder in Vankala, Tajikistan, pauses as he describes the importance of education for his country.

• A young boy rounds up his sheep in Ishkashim, Afghanistan.
KORPHE, Pakistan – At the bottom of the new dirt road leading up to the village, Greg Mortenson tapped the jeep driver on the shoulder and asked him to stop. “I want to walk up,” he said.

He crawled out of the back of the jeep, pulled a wool blanket over his shoulders and adjusted his Balti hat. He paused for a moment in the fading evening light, taking in familiar sights: the roaring Braldu River to his left, the snowcapped Karakoram Mountains straight ahead, and the steep rocky foothills leading up to Korphe on his right.

Then Mortenson, 54, his loyal friend Fazil Baig by his side, walked uphill to the village where his life changed forever.

“When I first came here, I had no money, no food, my hair was much long, my pants were torn, and my boots were finished,” he told Fazil, drawing deep breaths to compensate for the altitude. Then he laughed, adding, “I was younger, too.”

The two men passed terraced fields tilled for spring planting, walking alone until two men spotted “Dr. Greg,” dropped their handmade farming tools and ran to greet him. Then Ibrahim, one of Korphe School’s first students, appeared as if out of nowhere with his young daughter, Sakina. Mortenson was all smiles as the entourage grew to include “Master” Hussein, Korphe’s original teacher, then another man, then a boy, and then three more men.

When the troupe rounded the last big curve before the village, a crowd of men and boys met them with a cheer. Village chief Taha Ali, the son of Mortenson’s mentor Haji Ali, flashed his unmistakable grin in recognition of his old friend, and stepped forward to present him with the traditional wreath of artificial flowers.

“Greg is helping here for a long time, helping personally every person” Taha said. “Greg in Gilgit-Baltistan built many, many schools, gives many, many scholarships. But the last time he visited Korphe was many years ago, just after my father died, so everyone is anxious to see him again. Thanks God, Greg is here, strong, and the same and now everyone is relaxed and so much happy.”

The reunion continued long past sunset, with food, stories and green tea served into the wee hours. Yet the next morning, many of the night owls were right there with Mortenson as he visited the school, eager to introduce their children to Dr. Greg.

The eighth-graders were studying geography when Mortenson entered their classroom. He gave them a new world map, pointed out Montana and Pakistan, and made a tiny dot for Korphe.

The children told him of their dreams. Muhammad Talib, 14, wants to be a doctor. He is from the nearby village of Monjeng, a 30-minute walk. For health care, Muhammad said, “Nothing is there.”

Another boy wants to be a cook. Ramazan wants to be an engineer and Sadika wants “to help animals” as a veterinarian.

But Mortenson’s eyes lit up when Farida Batool, 14, said she wants to be a teacher.

“My mother and father are uneducated and I have only one brother, plus four sisters,” Farida said. “I want to go and get high education and come back and teach at Korphe School.”

“Skabash,” Mortenson said, praising her in the local language, a smile on his face.

CAIT’S BALTI ROOTS

Mortenson has worked in Baltistan for nearly two decades. He first came here in 1993 to climb K2, a 28,251-foot peak on the China-Pakistan border, the second-highest mountain in the world.

After his descent, he made fast friends with the locals and saw firsthand the remote communities’ glaring need for help educating their children. By 1996, he had...
formed Central Asia Institute and built his first school in Korphe. Since then CAI has established more than 40 schools in Baltistan.

“Eighty-five percent of the population know the situation of Dr. Greg, everything he has built, the help he gives in this region, and they have much respect for him,” said Mohammad Nazir, CAI’s Baltistan director. “Last year people much prayed for him.”

Nazir was referring to Mortenson’s health—a hole in his heart and a cardiac aneurism required open-heart surgery in 2011—and media accusations that he mismanaged CAI and overstated his work in the region.

But CAI and Mortenson have taken lessons learned and are now stronger and better in every sense. It was with a healthy heart and renewed vigor that Mortenson returned to Baltistan in May.

“Being back in Baltistan where this all began 19 years ago is incredible,” Mortenson said. “It’s especially exciting to see old friends and supporters. And it’s inspiring to see so many of the students, especially girls, whom I met when they were in kindergarten and have now grown into young men and women.”

A counterpoint to the joy, however, were the harsh reminders that, as Mortenson said, “there is still so much poverty here.”

Pakistan as a whole is wracked by rising food prices, increasing unemployment, energy shortages and rolling blackouts, an entrenched economic caste system, government corruption, political infighting, and growing extremism.

The mountainous region of Baltistan, together with neighboring Gilgit, forms Gilgit-Baltistan (formerly the Northern Areas), Pakistan’s poorest region. The Aga Khan Rural Support Program recently estimated 70 percent of the GB population is under- or unemployed. More than three-fourths of the GB population still does not have access to clean drinking water.

Some of this is directly attributable to government neglect. The Pakistan government granted GB self-rule in 2009, yet the region is still a “disputed territory” with India.

The resulting lack of schools and economic development, inadequate health care, and geographical and practical isolation make it exceedingly difficult for Baltis to rise above poverty.

Most Balti families get by as subsistence farmers and herders, with the whole family working to collect firewood and water, herd animals in and out of the mountains, plow, plant, weed, and harvest. As Mortenson said at Hemasii Primary School, “I am very thankful to all parents for helping their students to get an education. I know that if they are in school, families lose some work. But education is No. 1 investment for family.”

In some cases, family income is augmented by rudimentary mining operations for the gemstones and precious metals in the mountains. A few people manage to get government jobs or work as mechanics or janitors in the cities. And some work with visiting climbers and trekkers.

At Bien Primary School in Bashu Valley, Education Committee Chairman Mohammad Hussain said CAI’s help has rallied the community around a collective hope for a better future. “There is no government school here in Bien, this is the only school,” he said. “All here are farmers with some cattle. There are no gemstones on this side of the river. In this way of life, without education we cannot achieve anything. That is why we send our boys and girls to school, to get a better future.”

His sentiments were echoed in Daltir village in the Thalley Valley, where CAI helped build a primary school in 2009. Daltir’s 150 families are mostly subsistence farmers, with a few men periodically landing much-coveted jobs with mountain-climbing expeditions, said Muhammad Ibrahim, Daltir’s education committee chairman.

Education is increasingly acknowledged as the only way out of a life of poverty. “Our people are very poor, so the people of our village, our young generation, met together here and decided to set up one school,” Ibrahim said. “We worked without any aid, until we got help from CAI. Now we have nursery to five class, with 37 students. We are very thankful to you.”

Mortenson’s work in Baltistan has made a difference because education and literacy make a difference. The changes are tangible, said Nisar Hussein, a teacher at the CAI-supported school in Pakora, near Korphe.

“Now parents think it’s necessary to send girls to the school—this is the biggest change,” Hussein said. “But also we see that when people get education, they keep their children clean and take care for their health. We also see people with education are not so narrow-minded; there is less fighting and people more able to resolve differences. And everyone sees that if we have education, then we have money. If no education, money just goes like water.”

‘DR GREG, ZINDABAD’

Mortenson intended his May arrival in Skardu to be discrete. But word that he was here spread like wildfire. People came from remote valleys on foot, bus and jeep to pay respects and see with their own eyes that it was true—he was alive, healthy and back in Baltistan.

“This is a great day when Dr. Greg can see that the schools are strong and we can all see that Dr. Greg is strong,” said Syed Ahmad Ali Shah, who donated land for the CAI-supported primary school in Qumarah. Baltistan may be isolated and remote, but reports of Greg’s deteriorating health, and the media storm around him and CAI in the U.S., had made the rounds and his supporters were concerned, Taha said.

“Last year there were so many stories that Greg was out from CAI,” he said. “In Baltistan, somebody hears a story, then the message passed by mouth from one to another and in the end, it becomes very ugly. Because of that everyone was very worried. What happened to Greg? When a person you know for a long time, then you are not seeing him, you are not meeting him, and you are hearing so many bad things, you begin to wonder what has
happened. You become suspicious.”

Just his presence in May put many rumors to rest. His explanations helped, too.

“For three years I was much sick, no coming to Baltistan,” Mortenson said in Korphe. I have hole in my heart and no oxygen in my heart and brain. I worried maybe I die before I go back to Korphe. But Master Hussein and Taha say all Korphe making prayers. I have heart surgery and now I am much strong. Oxygen coming. Allah blessed all Korphe, children, and me.”

In Hushe Valley, at the inauguration of the Marzigon Primary School, Mortenson said, “I have problems with my heart, but now I am strong, ready to help the Hushe Valley.”

A student interrupted with a shout: “Dr. Greg, zindabad (long life)! Dr. Greg, zindabad!”

Mortenson smiled and continued,

“Twenty years from now I will come to Marzigon for heart health care and your doctors can take care of me. Your pilot will fly me. Your cook will prepare my meals. You have big dreams. This is good. Work hard, respect your teachers and elders and I promise CAI will help you become anything you want to be.”

**STUDENTS’ DREAMS**

Most often, students say they want to be doctors and teachers – and for good reason. As Amreen, 14, an eighth-grader at Hyderabad School, explained, “There are no doctors here now. We have the nurses, but no doctors. And there is too much suffering here. I want to help the sick people. I want to help humanity.”

At Jafarabad Girls’ High School, Mortenson was especially keen to catch up with the upper-class students, whom he met when they were little girls. His joy in seeing them was matched by their willingness to visit long after the school day ended. He learned that Shahina wants to be engineer, Shahida wants to be fighter pilot, and Khalida, Rubina, Jahan, and Sumera want to be doctors. Lida wants to be a nurse, “like Dr. Greg.” And Shahira wants to be a police officer.

Zahida, Zogra, Surghra, and Tzughra told him they want to be teachers. Two others, Shagupta and Nazia, were even more specific: they want to be girls’ primary-school teachers in Shigar.

“Shabash,” Mortenson said. “Teachers are very important.”

Then to the all-female teaching staff, he said, “I much thank you. A school building is good, but the teachers are the heart.”

During his six-week visit, Mortenson visited dozens of CAI-supported schools. Each day his two-jeep caravan criss-crossed scenic valleys and mountain burgs. He was like a rock star on a reunion tour. Everyone wanted to join the entourage. He renewed acquaintances, inaugurated schools and met with government officials, ulema (religious leaders) and, most importantly, students and teachers.

May is “bloom season” in Baltistan, as Nazir said, and during the mornings, men could be seen digging and repairing irrigation ditches while women worked in the fields. In the afternoons, it seemed almost every village had a cricket game going.

En route, young men on the road shouted, “Dr. Greg!” as he drove by.

“The kids are all grown up,” Greg said reflectively. “And it’s still very conservative. When we approach girls and women, they turn away shyly or run away. They turn their backs to passing vehicles.”

Yet no one blinked when the caravan passed a man on horseback talking on a cell phone.

Change is slow, but it is happening, said Basira, a teacher at Bagardho Thang Community School, west of Skardu on the Indus River.

“We are proud and thankful that within one generation our females are going from being illiterate to being enrolled in school, learning to read and write,” Basira said during Greg’s unannounced visit to the school. The six-classroom, co-ed middle school built a decade ago is a now bustling center, with 90 girls and 62 boys in kindergarten through eighth grade.

Because of CAI, she said, “All our students will make the shift from illiterate, ignorant farmers to nurses, teachers and engineers.”

**BOOKS AND BRICKS**


His goal was to help CAI-supported schools develop their small libraries and promote education and literacy in remote communities. CAI spent about $10,000 to buy the books in Islamabad.

The Baltistan Library Project also included donations to the Women’s Degree College-Skardu library and the Skardu Municipal Library.

The city library, located on a bluff next to the city polo grounds overlooking the Indus, has more than 6,000 books, Librarian Imitiaz Haider said. About 100 people visit the library each day. But, Haider told Mortenson during a small ceremony to mark the donation, “Basically we are working with zero budget, so every little bit helps.”

Mortenson, a huge fan of libraries and librarians, then filled out an application and paid a small fee to join the library.

“You are our first foreign member,” Haider said.

In fact, Mortenson and CAI have a lot of firsts in Baltistan. One hot, sunny day, Mortenson broke ground and placed the first foundation stone for a new CAI-supported school in Zil village, in the Bashu Valley.

“There will be three classrooms, one office, and two bathrooms,” Nazir said. “The contractor already has 3,000 blocks ready for construction.”

Sheik Muhammad Anwar, a longtime CAI supporter who donated the land, said, “My forefathers were Islamic scholars and now I am the mullah and the head of our village, but we have no school. The government has no ideas about our people’s difficulties. So I think we should build a school in this very far-flung place, and especially help the girls.”

The merits of such thinking are also evidenced at Jafarabad School – the first CAI-supported school in Baltistan to get a second-story expansion. The freshly painted, two-story blue school has become so popular that there is a waiting list, the school’s founder, Mehdi Ali, told Mortenson.

Jafarabad Girls’ High School students gather in the schoolyard for an assembly.
Mehdi, who built a reputation as a tough but honest police inspector before suffering a stroke this past year, started the school in his home. He joined the celebratory assembly in the schoolyard during Mortenson’s visit.

“More than 10 years ago, Mehdi sahib told me, ‘Big problem is girls’ education,’” Mortenson recalled. “I tell Mehdi I have no money. He said, ‘No problem, you use my house.’

“So we make two-room school in Mehdi’s house. Do we need to give Mehdi sahib big money? No. The teachers volunteered, but much love to the children. And the school grew from 25 girls to 60 to 80. Then Mehdi donated land and we shifted here,” Mortenson said, smiling and reaching out to touch fingertips with Mehdi.

As of May, 168 girls were enrolled in the 12-classroom school. CAI’s success in Baltistan was evidenced at every stop Mortenson made. The schools were not only running, but bursting with students, and communities repeatedly request additional classrooms.

In the Thalley Valley, CAI is helping with a five-classroom addition to the Daughoni Village Primary School. “This is now a double school for triple-load porter,” Mortenson quipped during a tour of the construction site, referring to Ghulam Muhammad, a renowned former expedition porter.

“I first met Ghulam in 1999 when we were doing a porter-training program in the Karakoram,” he said. “I had heard about this legendary porter who carried triple loads, 60 to 70 kilograms, or about 130 to 150 pounds, plus his own gear. He’s a big guy, but he was superman, carrying almost his own weight around on the most rugged terrain.

“He started asking us about a school in his village back then. For more than a decade he patiently kept trying. He donated the land. And in 2009 CAI was able to help his village build a school – CAI’s first school in Thalley Valley.”

Daughoni School now has 117 students, plus six teachers, two of whom are women. During a short ceremony, Mortenson asked how many students’ parents were educated. A few hands went up.

“When I come back in 20 years all hands will go up,” he told the students. “All your children can say their parents got education. CAI helps with motivation and money. We want to help you for five years, 20 years. You decide. If you work hard, CAI will help.

“But the money will also come with children’s education, 10 times more than we can help. Every student should make a big dream – you can be teacher, doctor, nurse, engineer, pilot, university professor. We pray for your success.”

SLOW BUT STEADY CHANGE

The drive from Skardu to Korphe takes six to eight hours,
depending on road conditions, and requires a reliable jeep with a capable, experienced driver like Daoud, who has worked with Nazir and CAI for many years. It also helps to have Fazil Baig and Apo Razak, CAI’s longtime public relations manager, on board as guides.

The route follows the Shigar River north to where the river splits into its two feeder rivers, the Bashu and Braldu. After stopping at a Pakistani Army checkpoint, Daoud steered the jeep across a one-lane suspension bridge into the Braldu Valley, headed northeast toward K2.

Here the road narrowed and Daoud covered long stretches of road in first gear. The river below, rolling with spring runoff, was filled with huge boulders, the scarred and gouged cliffs above revealing the boulders’ downward trajectories. As the jeep climbed into the mountains, it traversed dry, rocky areas and small villages with well-irrigated fields of wheat and barley. Every few hours, Mortenson asked Daoud to stop at a shrine and Apo or Fazil jumped out to offer a prayer and a donation.

Just as the sun dropped behind the mountaintops, Daoud turned a corner and pointed to the Korphe School in the distance. Mortenson leaned forward to look out the windshield. After many years away, he was back.

Some things in Korphe haven’t changed much over the years. But other things have changed dramatically. The new dirt road up makes it easier to get in and out of the village, especially with big loads. Electricity is now available for a couple hours at night. Perhaps most dramatically, Taha said, the population and number of houses have increased from 374 people in 32 houses in 1993, to 518 people in 42 houses – a nearly 30 percent population increase.

The school’s enrollment, too, has increased. Rebuilt in 2010, the Haji Ali Memorial School is now a middle school with 79 boys, 38 girls and four teachers. Now, villagers want it expanded into a high school.

“We are thankful for the school and for CAI’s support,” an eighth-grade boy told Mortenson. “But we want higher education. We request for a high school, sir, for more classrooms for high classes. Thank you for your help up.”

For that, the Korphe School will need four or five more rooms and some teachers, Taha said, adding that getting someone to donate land for the expansion will be the hard part. But he agreed to start pressing the issue with the villagers.

Mortenson also wanted to know how much Taha, Master Hussein, and other village elders were doing to increase the number of girls enrolled in the school. They said they had tried, and would keep trying, but traditions are hard to change.

The best explanation of how hard probably came from Mortenson’s old porter friend Hussein, who carried construction materials when the first school was built in the mid-1990s.

“I used to be expedition porter carrying double loads,” Hussein said. “Now I’m not able to work as a porter, so I’m a farmer, a good farmer. I have three children, two boys ages 5 and 6, and one girl, 15. Two other children died, one girl got pneumonia and one boy died the night after he was born.

“But I promised Dr. Greg I would send them all to school. One boy is in school, the other not yet. My daughter Marzia is in madrassa (religious school), doing Islamic studies. She is working in the field morning to afternoon. If she is in school, I lose worker. For madrassa it is just one-and-a-half hours for school. I feel for my mistake. But many girls are going to madrassa. Even the girls in Korphe School go in evening time,” he said.

The difference, of course, is that a madrassa education is all about the Koran and Islam. A Korphe School education is about reading, writing, history, science and math.

Taha conceded that not all the school-age girls of Korphe are enrolled in school, but more enroll every year. And it is making a difference.

“So many of our girls are going to school and all Braldu Valley is changing,” he said. “This is thanks to Greg and to Central Asia Institute.”

But Mortenson also gives enormous credit to Taha’s father, Haji Ali.

“Haji Ali told me, ‘I want one school in Korphe. I need one school please.’ He took me to see the students – Ibrahim, Jahan, Tahira, Chocho, Akhtar, Makmad, and so many others – sitting in dirt. There is no blackboard, no chalkboard, no building, no pencil. Their notebook pages are all full.

“Was anybody here in that first school?” he asked, and about nine men leaning over the school’s boundary wall and listening to Mortenson’s recollection raised their hands.

“The first class was much important.” Mortenson’s recollection raised their hands.

“Was anybody here in that first school?” he asked, and about nine men leaning over the school’s boundary wall and listening to Mortenson’s recollection raised their hands.

“The first class was much important.”

He then recalled the events that followed: returning to the United States to raise money, discovering he would have to build a bridge over the Braldu River if he wanted to get building materials to Korphe, problems paying workers and suppliers.

“Education is much hard work, it takes many years. Today Haji Ali is no longer with us. But his dream is here, the Korphe School is here. And today in Baltistan, CAI has more than 40 schools. In all Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan – more than 200. But if not Korphe, then not even one school would be a success,” Mortenson said.

A handmade sign maps the villages of the upper Braldu River.

“Apo then led the cheer: “Haji Ali, zindabad!”

“Dr. Greg, zindabad!”

“CAI, zindabad!”
Understanding Gilgit-Baltistan

SKARDU, Pakistan – Gilgit-Baltistan is perhaps one of the most beautiful places on earth. The Karakoram Range here contains the world’s greatest consolidation of high peaks, including K2, the world’s second-highest mountain at 28,251 feet and the upper reaches of the mighty Indus River, Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) has long been a destination for climbers, trekkers, and adventurers.

Yet GB, formerly called the “Northern Areas,” inhabited by 1 million residents, is hobbled by poverty, illiteracy and isolation. Central Asia Institute has deep roots in GB going back almost two decades. The first school CAI Co-founder Greg Mortenson built in Korphe is now one of more than 100 CAI-supported education, health, and women’s projects across the region.

GB lies along the ancient Silk Road, the 4,000-mile web of trade routes that once stretched from China to Europe. Its two major cities – Skardu, the capital of Baltistan in the east, and Gilgit, now the government center for the entire region – are centuries old, but their histories are refe with stories of conquest by outsiders.

In the 6th century, Gilgit-Baltistan marked the intersection of the Buddhist and Islamic worlds. Buddhism became the dominant religion after Tibet invaded and annexed Baltistan and Brushal (modern Gilgit) in the 6th century. Tibetan rule lasted until the 11th century and the death of the last king of Tibet.

For centuries afterward, Baltistan and Gilgit were ruled separately. A series of “petty chiefs” held power in Baltistan for nearly 600 years, a period that overlapped with introduction of Islam to the region in the 9th century. Then in the 12th century, an Iranian migrant founded the Magpon Dynasty in Skardu, held the region for 700 years, until the despotic Dogra rulers of Jammu, India, annexed the region. Baltistan remained part of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir until the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan.

In Gilgit, meanwhile, the end of the Tibetan empire gave rise to the Buddhist Trakhan Dynasty, which ruled until 1810, although Islam made significant inroads during this period. By the early 1800s, neighboring rulers – including various Indian factions – began a series of invasions. These battles for control continued until the British took over India in the late 19th century.

Kashmir and the northern areas almost survived British partition of India in 1947 as an independent state. But within months, a Pakistani military action amended the young country’s boundaries to encompass Gilgit, Baltistan and Azad Kashmir. India strenuously objected and the two countries have fought over this amended boundary, called The Line of Control, ever since.

Significant events in recent decades – including completion of the Karakoram Highway linking Pakistan’s major cities to China – have brought rapid change to the region.

The area covers 27,000 square miles, an area a little larger than West Virginia, and borders Afghanistan, China, and India.

Most people live in hamlets that dot the river valleys, surviving as subsistence farmers and herders. They grow wheat, barley, and potatoes in fields irrigated with manmade waterways. But there is so little arable land in the narrow valleys that crop terracing is necessary.

In addition to the snowcapped peaks, the region’s natural attributes include several enormous glaciers, which feed the Indus River. But the area also lies on some major fault lines, which cause frequent tremors and earthquakes, landslides and flash floods.

Natural disaster contributes to GB’s distinction as the poorest and most disenfranchised region of Pakistan. The average household income is $5.00 per capita per day, according to the U.N. Development Group. Seventy percent of the population is under- or unemployed, according to the Aga Khan Rural Support Program.

There is no major industry in the GB, and most of its non-food staples are imported from Pakistani cities to the south. What non-farm jobs exist center around the military, the region’s largest employer, civil service, and tourism.

Mountaineering and trekking have long been important to the economy, historically employing hundreds of local porters every year, but the number of climbing expeditions ebbs and flows with Pakistan’s security status.

Societal norms are centered on family, tradition and Muslim and Tibetan Buddhist principles. About nine major languages are specific to the region, although regional languages such as Urdu, Punjabi and Pashto are in wide use.

Geographic and technological isolation further complicates life in GB. The remote regions have no mail service, few banks and patchy cell-phone service.

The 300-plus-mile drive from Islamabad can easily take 18 to 20 hours. The once-modern KKH is poorly maintained and dangerous. In 2012, buses were twice stopped on the road, the Shia Muslim passengers identified and killed execution style. Roads are also frequently impassible due to earthquakes, landslides and snow.

The area is served by “daily” Boeing 737 flights operated by Pakistan International Airlines (PIA). But flights are frequently cancelled because of weather, equipment problems, or PIA’s use of the aircraft on other routes. The result is that many people wind up stranded in Islamabad for days trying to get north.

For those who do get here, the Pakistani government sometimes presents other obstacles to humanitarian work. Red tape can take the form of mandatory permits for certain areas, bringing work to a temporary and wasteful halt.

Against this backdrop, GB offers little social mobility, few educational opportunities, high maternal and infant-mortality rates, and a dearth of development.

China has long shown an interest in the region, funding massive public works projects – including construction of the KKH – and securing access to commercial markets in Pakistan and beyond.

And given Pakistan’s strained relationship with the United States and pervasive mistrust of India, which also claims GB, it’s not surprising that Pakistan works hard to maintain strong relations with its northern neighbor.

“There is a lot at stake here,” Kristina Ojuland Mep wrote on the New Europe website. “What is not visible right now may be that China is also using its presence in the Gilgit-Baltistan area as a deterrent to India’s opposition to its territorial claims to border areas.”

Gilgit-Baltistan would be greatly helped by economic and social development. But anyone who hopes to travel to GB – for business, to trek, climb, deliver medicine, build a school, or put money into the local economy – face’s a Hobson’s choice: risk your life on the KKH or wait for the plane to leave the ground.

And for now, Pakistan’s leaders seem uninterested in changing the dismal status quo. The situation – like so many things in Pakistan – is always someone else’s fault. No wonder the locals, proudly patriotic but powerless, are so frustrated.

– KARIN RONNOW
Central Asia Institute’s expansion into Tajikistan continued apace in 2012, with work on school buildings in four communities: Kona Kurgan, Vankala, Langar, and Zhyamag.

CAI Co-founder Greg Mortenson visited these villages, all of which are in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO), in October. Here is a small sampling of what he saw.

Kyrgyz teacher instructs a young reader, Razia, at the old Kona Kurgan High School near Murghab, Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast, Tajikistan.

Engineers and seismologists, right, discuss earthquake-proof design elements in CAI-supported projects in Tajikistan as construction continues on the Langar School.
Zhyamag School students line up in front of their new school building in the Vanj district of GBAO, Tajikistan. The Tajik government allocates only $62 per student annually, or $5 per month, for all supplies, teacher pay, fuel, and expenses.

An engineer in Tajikistan checks the blueprints for the Zhyamag School.

Altim Bek, a mason, works on the new Kona Kurgan High School in eastern GBAO. Due to the high altitude and long winters, the building season is only about six months long.

Sign explaining details of the Langar School project in both English and Russian.

Ninth-grade students and their teachers in Langhar, GBAO, Tajikistan. The students’ aspirations include teacher, civil engineer, sculptor, truck driver, medical doctor, nurse, journalist, and computer programmer.

Gul Pakza, 12, of Langar village, spends hours every day getting to and from the school from her mountainside home. A bright student, her big dream is to someday be a classical dancer in Dushanbe or Moscow.
RAHESHET, Afghanistan – Sarajul Haq, head teacher at Raheshet Primary School, bought books on all subjects – history, language, poetry, religion and science. He hung big maps of the country and the world on the wall. He filled a glass-fronted bookshelf with plastic models of human organs, and equipment for a science laboratory. He even supplied a microscope.

Haq, 50, built an amazing resource library for his community school with a small amount of money and a lot of determination. “He is a very clever man,” said Wakil Karimi, Central Asia Institute’s program director in central Afghanistan. “He started the school. Then the government gave each school some money from the World Bank for a library. Each school got this, but many times it just disappeared into someone’s pocket. But these are honest people here, thirsty for education. He built this library, picked out all the books and teaching tools.”

The primary school, constructed in 2011, has 10 teachers and runs two shifts of classes, with 160 boys in the morning and 130 girls in the afternoon.

“Before this school was in a mosque and people weren’t very interested to send their boys and girls to school,” teacher Mullah Ghazi said. “But now they are interested.”

Haq is modest about the library. He said he chose the science-teaching aids “because most people don’t know about the human body, so we have a chance to provide these things to show the students from class four – that’s when science education starts.”

He knows the value of books, full of ideas, explanations, and information. “Some students even come from other schools, walking a long way to use our books.” And he knew his village needed a school and that he had to play a role. “Teachers are nation-building people,” he said. “This work is important for the future of Afghanistan.”

Local leadership is a key ingredient in CAI’s recipe for success in every community. Having an educated teacher involved from the beginning greatly increases the school’s chance of succeeding.

“Sarajul Haq had an opportunity to get a job in Kabul, but he didn’t go there,” Karimi said. “He said he wanted to teach children in his village.”

‘I LOVE TO TEACH’

In places where education is getting started, where the illiterate population outnumbers the literate, it’s often hard to find local people to teach in the schools. But when it works out, the community benefits enormously. Local teachers have a vested interest in a school’s success. They know the children and their families. They are willing to sacrifice their own time and resources to ensure the educate they provide is of high quality. They show up for work and do their jobs with particular vigor.

High in Pakistan’s Karakoram Mountains, Bien Primary School also benefits from a local teacher. When Mohammad Bashir, 23, was growing up, Bien had no school. But Bashir’s father got a job in Lahore. He took his son along and enrolled him in school.

Years later, and with a college degree, “I came back to the village and started teaching,” Bashir said. “I love to teach. I love education. And I love to serve my community like this.”

A teacher gives instruction to his students at Gumran Middle School in Logar Province, Afghanistan.
Bashir is one of two teachers at the CAI-supported school, which has 32 girls and 38 boys in kindergarten to sixth grade in the tidy three-room school. He teaches “all subjects,” he said.

The other teacher, Mohammad Wali, also has a college degree (equivalent of high school plus two years of college), but he lives in Sesko, an hour walk from the school. Together with the community education committee, the teachers have built a good school, said Mohammad Nazir, CAI program director in Baltistan.

“They much cooperate with CAI,” Nazir said. “Without them, we are not successful.”

Hiring local teachers makes sense. But teachers come to CAI-supported schools with many different levels of education and training. Well-educated individuals often don’t want to stay in or return to their rural villages, opting instead for a life in the city. And it’s difficult to recruit teachers to schools in remote places where they have no connections.

In Afghanistan, the dearth of qualified teachers in general is also a problem. Plus, with the exception of a few schools in the remotest areas, the government pays teachers in CAI-supported schools and bears the responsibility of training. But the government often falls short.

The situation is different in Pakistan, where community education committees recruit the teachers for CAI-supported schools and pay them with a combination of CAI and community funds. These communities typically lack the resources to provide ongoing training.

‘TEACHER IS THE HEART’

With that in mind, CAI reinvigorated its teacher training in Pakistan this year. CAI Co-founder Greg Mortenson is an outspoken advocate of teachers. “The building is good, but the teacher is the heart” of every school, he says.

In April, Dilshad Begum became the education program director for CAI-supported schools in northern Pakistan.

The quality of instruction varies widely, Begum said. Her goal is to help teachers develop classroom and planning skills, and give them new ways to motivate students, get their attention and pique their curiosity. It is up to communities to assess individual teachers’ performance, she said. “But CAI can help motivate the teachers to improve.”

Mortenson cautioned that many teachers in CAI-supported schools work in the most-remote areas, don’t have the qualifications or education of their urban counterparts, and are alone, without support. “Sometimes training shames these people,” because it stresses their weaknesses rather than their strengths, he said. He wanted to ensure that did not happen.

Begum assured him she would treat all the teachers as professionals. “We are all working for the same goal – education. Sometimes people just need better tools.”

The first training session was in Ishkoman Valley, in the Ghizer district of Gilgit-Baltistan. She outlined the program, developed worksheets and handouts for teachers, and enlisted the help of some teacher-trainers from the college in Gilgit. The first four-day session was held in July; 22 teachers participated.

“It was good,” she said. “First we covered basic ideas, how to prepare lesson plans and activities and why planning is important. I told them that to transfer how much they know, to transfer the ideas, they should prepare the lessons with lots of activities.

“I also advised the teachers that they don’t have to be bound to the classroom. They can go outside, for example, for learning about plants. And they can try other things besides just writing and reading, activities like worksheets, flashcards or puzzle work, these kinds of things. In science and social studies, we don’t have to just ask the students to read and write, sometimes we have to show them practically how things work,” she said.

She said the team-building aspect of the training was helpful, too. “They were working together in groups and sharing ideas with each other. Every teacher needs to know that they are not the only ones facing these questions and insecurities.”

Teachers at Jafarabad Girls’ High School in Shigar Valley, Baltistan, listen as Greg Mortenson discusses the importance of teachers.

Master Hussein, right, donated the land for and has been a teacher at the CAI-supported school in Korphe, Baltistan, Pakistan, since its inception.
A teacher at a women’s literacy center in Kabul smiles as she teaches a lesson.

During the in-class observation portion of the training, Begum discovered a wide variety of competency. One first-grade math teacher who finished high school but had no specific teacher training “tried her best to make her lesson successful. She used materials for counting, like stones, chalk, pens and practically showed how to add the numbers. Her attitude toward the students was good and she went to each child individually to help them.” But she was trying to do too much at once, and the objectives of the lesson were not always clear to the students, Begum said.

“Some of the teachers have only metric [high school] education, so they will need lots of training,” she said.

Teachers of middle and higher classes tend to have more formal teacher training, but Begum had some suggestions for them, too. For example, she said, Urdu and English teachers should always speak the language taught in class and should improve their own vocabulary, grammar, and accents. Also, teachers should use “warm-up activities” for students, provide information about the topic to be studied, and ask questions about previous knowledge. She also encouraged teachers to innovate and make lessons more interesting, with less time spent copying from the blackboard and more time doing research, creative writing, and “fieldwork” outside.

“All the teachers of Ishkoman seem really hardworking and active,” she said. “If they get proper training, their work would be more satisfactory.”

She repeated the training in August farther north in GB, in the Chapursan Valley, adjusting the content to the needs of the individual teachers and communities. “I went to each school and worked with each CAI-supported teacher, going over lessons for each subject,” and observing them in the classroom, she said.

Then she visited CAI-supported schools in Gupis and Yasin valleys of the Ghizer district, observed the teachers in class and began planning a suitable teaching program for the winter school break.

She is also planning subject-specific training for 2013. “Many times school administrators complain that the teachers cannot teach the texts,” because the most current textbooks are written at a level beyond their training, she said. “We can help with that in very specific ways.”

TOO FEW FEMALE TEACHERS

In addition to a shortage of qualified teachers, schools in remote areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan have an especially hard time recruiting and retaining female teachers. This is not just a CAI problem. Extremism, cultural and traditional dictates about female mobility, and lack of education combine to make the pool of qualified female teachers shallow.

Amreen, 14, an eighth-grader at the CAI-supported Hyderabad High School in Shigar Valley of northern Pakistan, offered this simple yet oft-repeated explanation for the lack of female teachers in her school: “We have all male teachers because there are no qualified female teachers in my village.”

In Afghanistan, some young women – and their families – are still reluctant to sign up for teaching posts, given the violence of the region and extremist attacks on girls’ schools in particular. Afghanistan Today reported in August that of the 60,000 new teachers receiving formal training in the next three years, only 300 will be women.

Maybe one of them will be Shugofa, a 13-year-old student at Raheshet School, the school with the remarkable library. “I want to be a teacher,” she told me. “I feel the lack of a female teacher in my school.”

She said she encourages other girls to consider the same path. “When there was no school in our village, I was very sad,” she said. “I see other girls in the capital, they get an education. Why not us? Now we have a school and I advise all girls they should go to school and become teachers so we can help our country.”

Malika, head teacher and headmistress at Gulapur Girls’ Primary School in northern Pakistan, was CAI’s first female teacher back in 2000.

“Malika is unusual in that her uncle, who lived in Shigar, put a lot of pressure on Malika’s father to educate her,” Mortenson said. “So her father sent her to live with her uncle and she went all the way through high school and earned her FA [two-year college degree].”

Not long after finishing school, Malika began teaching girls in her home. She asked CAI for help and the organization provided a three-room addition for a small school.

Now she is CAI’s longest-serving female teacher. Her husband, Noor Mohammad, supports her work and sometimes pitches in to help her and the other teacher at the primary school.

Over tea with homemade crepes and doughnuts last May, she told Mortenson the older girls really want, and their families will support, higher education. “We would like a middle school,” she said, “and I could use another teacher, especially for the older girls.”

NEW GENERATION OF FEMALE TEACHERS

During a break from a teaching-methods class at the Government Elementary Teacher College in Muzaffarabad, Azad Kashmir, three students explained that, for their generation, especially in their conservative region, teaching is “the most respected profession,” especially for women.

“Thirty years ago it was very difficult for women in our society to get education and work,” said Mehwish Kabir, 20, of Neelum Valley. “My mother went outside the house for a job, but she could not get a good job because she had no education. So now she is encouraging her children to get an education. She wants it to be better for us.”

What changed?

“The whole environment changed,” said Bakhtawal Fatima, 20, of Muzaffarabad. “People now understand that education is important to survive.”

Kabir added, “When the rich families started sending their daughters to school, everyone looked and thought, ‘We must also do this.’”

Not all the girls at the college necessarily want to be teachers, she said. “Some are here because they are female.”

Her classmate Iram Nahad said she comes from a family of politicians and wanted to be a lawyer.

“Teacher-training is my father’s will,” she said. “Very honestly I tell you it is not my choice. But this is the only profession my family accepts for girls. So I will be a good and effective teacher. I would like
to teach high school. The students are older and their mental level is such that they can understand what you are trying to teach them.”

The good news is that some lucky students will have Nahad as a teacher. She’s bright, progressive and determined to be the best teacher she can be.

Kabir, too, has high expectations of herself as a teacher.

“As a citizen, I want to serve my nation, and as a teacher, I want to help bring good things to our country,” she said. “It is education that can change people’s minds. I think we can educate children and give them good values – honesty, truthfulness, sincerity, respect for each other, respect for elders, being a good person and a good Muslim. I think we need to teach about the Islamic way and the Western way, because it is important to understand both. We don’t want to teach our children secularism or terrorism. We want to teach out children about peace and honesty so they can have a better future.

“Education is preparation for life. If we help children become good citizens with good values and love for every person, it will be with them every day for their whole life,” Kabir said.

COLLEGE CLASSES NO LONGER IN TENTS

The college these young women attend is also a vast improvement over what it was a few years ago. The college buildings were destroyed in the massive 2005 earthquake. For seven years, classes were taught in tents.

“We were in the tents and open air,” said Principal Nageen Akhtar. “Students could not focus on their studies. It was sometimes too cold, sometimes too hot and the students had many disturbances.”

CAI worked with the community to design and erect a two-story earthquake-proof building with two science laboratories, classrooms, computer room, library, and examination room. More than 150 young women are now enrolled.

“We are very glad to be in this new building,” Akhtar said shortly after the college moved to the new building in January. “We have asked CAI for a lot and we are very grateful.”

Students who complete their studies here graduate with an associate degree in education. And that extra education makes a big difference, Bakhtawal said. “Teacher training is better than to just finish high school. To be a teacher, you need additional knowledge.”

“Reading aloud is not teaching,” Kabir said. “If the students are reading a chapter, afterwards the teacher needs to help them analyze it, take it apart, find real-life examples to make it come alive. We should be building students’ brains, teaching them how to learn. We say, ‘Education is limited, but learning is unlimited.’”

It’s kind of like the American notion of learning how to learn and then becoming a lifelong learner.

Critics of Pakistan’s formal teacher-education system point out that traditionally programs have focused on the “transmission model” (rote learning) of teaching and “therefore fail to prepare teachers who are able to engage students meaningfully in learning,” Mohammad Faig, a teacher at the Provincial Institute of Teacher Education wrote.

The result is teachers who have the fundamentals, but not the flexibility or confidence to explore alternatives to the way they were taught. The idea of a student as passive recipient of knowledge may not be the way the next generation will engage in the classroom, but for many older teachers, it is still the norm.

Begum hopes to change that, to give the CAI-supported teachers new teaching tools and a renewed enthusiasm for their jobs.

As additional encouragement, CAI also increased salaries for all its teachers in Pakistan in 2012, with raises pegged to length of service and level of education.

At a school inauguration in the Hushe Valley in May, Mortenson summed up his admiration of and support for teachers.

“Allah’s greatest gift to your community is your teachers,” he told the students. “This is a noble profession. Respect and obey your teachers. Work very hard because they are working very hard for you. You are very lucky because your mothers and grandmothers sacrifice for you to go to school. Today we give teachers a one-time bonus. And I will pray every day for you. I am here to work for you.”
Central Asia Institute’s latest “most-remote” project, Broghil High School, is perched astride a 12,500-foot pass in the Hindu Kush Mountains.

“There is no road, no electricity, no mobile service, no trees,” Sarfraz Khan, a CAI project director, said earlier this year. “People live in like shepherd’s place. Winter is very long and in winter it’s impossible anybody can go there. Even then it’s impossible to go from house to animal side (because of) so much snow. They build holes and tunnels. Many animals and people die.”

For centuries, invaders and traders used Broghil Pass to move between modern-day Pakistan and Afghanistan’s Wakhan Corridor. Some even speculate it was the route prehistoric Asiatic people used to migrate to modern-day Europe.

Today the border is closed, as there are no checkpoints, and Broghil has become an isolated village well past the end of the road, said Khan, who met a village elder, Mastal Muhammad Aziz, several years ago while traveling in the area.

“It is like no other village,” Sarfraz said. “They do some farming and have some yak and sheep, but it is very poor and there is a lot of opium; women and men spend all their time sleeping and smoking. They have no strong leader. So they need help for school and health.”

Furthermore, militant Islamic groups have moved north along the Afghanistan border in recent years, increasing the threat of extremist activity, said Fazil Baig, CAI’s Ghizer-area program director.

“Broghil has many, many problems. Nothing is there. It is wild place. They cannot even imagine education and health care. This is the last village in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province and it is very much ignored, more ignored than even Chapursan,” said Fazil, whose home is in Chapursan, east of Broghil. “We say we have nothing in Chapursan. But when we go Broghil we realize we are in better position than they are.”

A glance at a map reveals the Broghil school’s location in the middle of CAI’s project areas.

North over the pass is Sarhad-e-Broghil in the Wakhan and, a little farther on, Bozoi Gumbad in the Afghan Pamir. As the crow flies, Broghil’s also not far from Chapursan to the east, or Zebak region of Badakhshan province to the west. South are Fazil’s other projects in the Ghizer district of Gilgit-Baltistan.

But a closer look at the map reveals some of the logistical challenges of working in these areas. Mountains ripple out in all directions. International borders – all drawn by outsiders – and militant hotspots have closed ancient travel routes.

Indeed, CAI Co-founder Greg Mortenson seems to have focused the organization’s efforts in some of the most inaccessible – and some would argue, inhospitable – areas of the world.

For many years, Mortenson relied on Sarfraz to break trail in these areas. Sarfraz spoke at least seven languages, despite having

Then, come spring, “we rented yaks, donkeys and horses to take building materials from the end of the road 20 kilometers north to the village,” Fazil said. The beasts of burden were loaded with wood, reinforcement bars, metal sheets, and bags of cement for the trek from grassy plains to rocky slopes. “It took one week to move all materials.”

It turned out winter wasn’t quite ready to loosen its grip on Broghil; just as work began on the school’s foundation, it snowed. But for these mountain people, snow is “no problem,” Fazil said. They simply carried on with the work, determined to give their children a school and hope for a better future.

Villagers were keen to replace the crumbling mud-and-stone community school, Fazil said, and the newly finished eight-room school is a vast improvement for the 130 students and four teachers.

Breaking trail

A glance at a map reveals the Broghil school’s location in the middle of CAI’s project areas.
only finished class eight, and was an adventurer. If he couldn’t get somewhere by road, he’d ride a horse. If his horse couldn’t go, he’d walk. And he had an almost intuitive grasp of what Mortenson and CAI were trying to do in these remote areas.

“Our boss’ vision is to serve the poor people and the needy people, places where there is no school, or if there is a school, it is like for animals – that’s where CAI wants to help,” he said in September.

After working together in northern Pakistan, Mortenson sent Sarfraz to Afghanistan to meet with communities seeking CAI’s help. Then he sent him to Azad-Kashmir after a massive earthquake in 2005 destroyed thousands of schools there. Together they established a string of CAI-supported schools along the entire length of the Wakhan Corridor. And when that led to requests from people across the Panj River in Tajikistan’s Wakhan, Mortenson sent Sarfraz there in 2011.

“Greg is much hardworking, first in Pakistan,” Sarfraz said. “He had no money even for food and he didn’t know anybody, and he had much success in Pakistan with many schools there. Then he start to Afghanistan in same situation. ... Then the Kashmir earthquake came and Greg did the same.

“Then his vision was to go to Tajikistan and make ready for school. If possible, we should start there,” he said.

**‘GO THERE & MAKE RELATIONSHIPS’**

So in 2011 Sarfraz flew to the Tajik capital Dushanbe. He registered CAI with the government, and then made the 14-hour road trip over the mountains to the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) in eastern Tajikistan.

The GBAO is a vast mountainous region containing 45 percent of the country’s land but only 3 percent of its population. It is also the poorest region of Tajikistan, which is the poorest of the former Soviet republics.

As an autonomous region, the central government’s authority is loose here and the Wakhi, Pamiri, and Kyrgyz who inhabit the area “have come to see themselves as set apart from other Tajiks,” anthropologist Zohra Ismail-Beben wrote on registan.net.

GBAO’s population actually has more in common with residents of Afghanistan’s Badakhshan Province on the other side of the Panj (Oxus) River, including ethnic and linguistic heritage, and a feisty independence streak.

Tajiks, though, have the advantage when it comes to 20th century amenities. During its 70-year rule of Tajikistan, the former Soviet Union built roads, housing, schools and an electrical grid. But the Russians have been gone for two decades now and the infrastructure they built is in tatters, especially in earthquake-prone GBAO.

Despite their advantages, the Tajiks wanted something their Afghan neighbors had – relationships with CAI.

“Greg had letters and emails from people on the Tajik side,” Sarfraz said. “This was their request. They wanted CAI to come to Tajikistan and help them. So Greg order to me, you go there and make relationships with the Tajik people and government and we start a school there. So I go there and for seven months I fight with the government. They have different ideas” than CAI about how the projects should be set up.

So different that Sarfraz considered abandoning the idea of CAI even working in Tajikistan.

“I told them, ‘We need some help from your side, some help from our side. We can work together and make the old schools new. Otherwise I can go back. There are many other poor countries; they need many schools. We can go there. I have nine children and my wife in Pakistan, I no need to stay here.’ They say, ‘No, no. You stay. We work together.’ And now in 2012 CAI has four schools in Tajikistan.”

**MEN & WOMEN WORKING TOGETHER**

Sarfraz also set an example in the regions where he worked, hiring female directors in Afghan and Tajik Badakhshan, insisting girls be enrolled in all CAI-supported schools, and always preaching the merits of empowering women.

“In some areas, especially strong religious villages, girls’ education is much difficult,” he said. “But we say your daughters must come to school. We tell them girls get education, then they become mothers and they teach their children from very young, the children become good children and we have peace. Fathers aren’t teaching children; he is out from house, going to work. But mother is inside house.

“Sometimes we are meeting and meeting, saying this over and over again until we convince them that their daughters must come to school. In places where we have too much fighting on this, then we don’t make school,” he said.

He said he learned all this from “Dr. Greg.” But he didn’t just talk the talk. He walked the walk. Before his death in November 2012, he hired two educated women – Mahbuba Qurbanalieva in Tajikistan and Pariwash Gouhari in the Afghan Wakhan – to carry on CAI’s work in those regions.

He frequently said he found the conservative regional tradition of men keeping women hidden away at home excessive and impractical.

“I tell men, ‘You have only one man in your house but 20 or 25 people living there,’” including parents, children, daughters-in-law and grandchildren, he said. “So if man and wife share and he lets her come out from the house and make some money, his life becomes easier.”

Too often, he said, “in these remote places, the husband is not working, he won’t let his wife work, and they have no money, no food, no clothes. Then he starts using opium and gets on a bad road, he thinks about selling his daughter or wife. This happens. So we need in Muslim countries for the women to come out of the house and help their husbands and fathers and brothers. We need education. Otherwise, slowly, things become more bad.”

And as the population in these areas continues to explode, it is only going to get harder for families in to eke out a living, he said.

“Before it was like this: My grandfather had land in Chapursan. Then he had four sons. When he died, they separated the land four ways. My dad and my uncles, all their families lived on that land. Then my father, when he died, he divided his land by two for me and my brother.

“Now I have three sons, but there’s really no land left. My piece is too small. So this life is finished. That’s why we need women and men working together,” he said.

Sarfraz was a man ahead of his time.
The region needs innovative solutions. Pakistan, for example, now holds the dubious distinction of having the largest number of out-of-school children in South Asia, and most of them are girls, according to recent UNESCO figures.

Former Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani declared 2011 the year of education in Pakistan, but it made little difference. The country still has dismally low enrollment rates and public schools without teachers, books, or furniture. Poor and illiterate parents see nothing wrong with sending their children to extremist madrassas, where they get free room and board along with a conservative, sometimes radical, Koran-based education.

The nation’s education system is at a “critical juncture,” Pakistan Today newspaper reported earlier this year.

Hence the big round of applause heard in May when the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP) provincial government announced plans to double its education budget, from 2 percent to 4 percent.

“This is exciting news,” Mortenson said at the time. “In Pakistan’s entire history, the country has never put more than about 2.6 percent for education. This will probably do more to fight terrorism than 10 times that amount invested in the military.”

This progressive initiative comes at a particularly difficult time for KP (formerly the North West Frontier Province). KP abuts the tribal regions, where militants have found sanctuary since the U.S. attacks on Afghanistan in 2001. Thousands of Pakistani soldiers and civilians have been killed or injured in the past decade in bomb blasts attributed to terrorist groups in the region.

“KP and its adjoining areas were once tourist spots and used to host thousands of people,” the Express Tribune (Pakistan) reported in January 2012. “But with the passage of time and with increasing anti-state activities in the area … violence prevailed over the residential areas of the province. … The law-and-order situation got worse and soon spread a message of intolerance, because of which the international media started projecting KP as a ‘no-go’ area.”

Understanding the region requires some knowledge of Pashtuns, the largest ethnic group in the region. Sir Winston Churchill once defined Pashtuns as “always engaged in private or public war. … Every family cultivates its vendetta; every clan, its feud. Nothing is ever forgotten and very few debts are left unpaid.”

The Pashtun homelands are particularly difficult for outsiders, said CAI’s operations director in Pakistan, Lt. Col. (Ret.) Ilyas Mizra, who grew up in the area. “He who visits them with an evil design or hostile eye seldom returns. It is said that the roads to Waziristan (tribal area) are wide open, but there are no return roads.”

Much of this is driven by “an unwritten tribal code called Pakhtunwali,” he said. “It incorporates the following major practices: melmastia (hospitality and protection to every guest); nanawati (the right of a fugitive to seek a place of refuge, and acceptance of his bona-fide offer of peace); badal (the right of blood feuds or revenge); gharvat (defense of property and honor); and mamus (defense of one’s women).”

Yet the province also has a tamer side.

“Pathans in the settled areas of KP are more westernized,” Mirza said. “This could be because of education, the judicial system in place, or the heterogeneous society in which they live. They are more tolerant and easygoing.”

Regional leaders in those areas are also trying to revive the local economy, historically driven by agriculture and tourism.

Many will be watching, too, to see whether KP’s investment in education kindles the hoped-for changes. “The nation will watch with hope the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government’s comprehensive strategy to fight the dangers facing the province – and country,” Dawn (Pakistan) newspaper opined on May 22. The investment in education “has been called the first comprehensive ‘state response’ to the militancy that has been Pakistan’s scourge for more than a decade.”

**KINDERGARTEN TO PhD**

CAI, meanwhile, began quietly working with communities in the region in 2011.

KP has some of the lowest school enrollment rates in Pakistan, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. And schools in the Dera Ismail Khan district are among those “most neglected by the provincial government,” Mirza said. “Its population is inclined towards education, but being very poor cannot afford it.”

The first of five CAI-supported projects in DI Khan was the Shah Dao Government Primary School in Paharpur, a village on the west bank of the Indus River. The old government school there was severely damaged by the devastating floods that swept Pakistan in 2010. Three Pakistan TV news channels covered the story of the damaged school and the village’s subsequent use of an old shelter, but the government did not respond, Mirza said.

So he offered CAI’s assistance. A new school was completed in late 2011. Within weeks, enrollment increased nearly 10-fold, from six to 55 boys and girls.

“Already the number of students and the strength of the students has improved,” the head teacher said in mid-January. “Thank you for
work has produced a university that offers Khan set to work building a university. His 175 acres for a permanent campus and degree that these students can compete at Mirza said. “It is only after a university participate in some unhealthy activities,” open a shop or else resent education and graduate in places like Bannu except to address the dearth of options for young Ullah Khan founded UST-Bannu in 2005 to a different tack, focusing on higher country’s development.”

Men are dominant here, but women should A woman plays a pivotal role as a mother. are very good, especially for girls’ education. Syed Feroz Hussain said he, too, appreciated prepare for better futures.”

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In DI Khan, CAI also helped locals build a primary school in Matwala Shah, repair one school and build another in Jabarwala, repair a school in Mosa Khar, and install a potable water supply in Tattar Khel.

“CAI’s help has been most important,” said Samina Parveen, head teacher at the Jabarwala girls’ school, where CAI helped repair the existing building, built an additional classroom and provided school supplies. “The students were sitting in the cold. Now all 150 girls and two teachers are inside, in a good space and the girls can prepare for better futures.”

DI Khan District Education Officer Syed Feroz Hussain said he, too, appreciated CAI’s help. “The services you delivered here are very good, especially for girls’ education. A woman plays a pivotal role as a mother. Men are dominant here, but women should take their own place and play a role in the country’s development.”

About 80 miles north in Bannu, CAI took a different tack, focusing on higher education in conjunction with the University of Science & Technology-Bannu, where CAI has its largest project to date – a library.

Chief Minister Mohammad Akram Khan Durrani and Vice Chancellor Asmat Ullah Khan founded UST-Bannu in 2005 to address the dearth of options for young people in the region. “There is nothing for a high-school graduate in places like Bannu except to open a shop or else resent education and participate in some unhealthy activities,” Mirza said. “It is only after a university degree that these students can compete at the appropriate levels.”

The provincial government provided 175 acres for a permanent campus and Khan set to work building a university. His work has produced a university that offers bachelor to doctoral degrees, with classes in 24 disciplines, more than 100 professors, and 3,600 students. Women make up 16 percent of the student body and about 6 percent of the faculty, he said.

There are state-of-the-art science labs, greenhouses, high-tech equipment, and generators for with the inevitable power outages. The university also has agreements with universities in Britain, Turkey and Thailand, among others, to foster joint scholarship and academic exchange. “The reputation of our university has traveled,” he said.

Working with the university, CAI installed a potable water system on the campus and provides scholarships for female students. It also donated the library, making it “one of very few organizations to have shown interest in the development of Bannu,” Mirza said. “CAI initiated these three projects simultaneously and is looking at a few more. The contributions of CAI shall be remembered here for times to come.”

WHAT’S NEXT?

Thanks in part to CAI, the number of girls enrolled in school in Afghanistan and Pakistan has increased over the past decade, despite continued militant attacks on girls’ schools, female students and teachers.

“Nobody touches CAI schools because CAI makes friendships with the people,” Sarfraz said. “When we make projects, we stay 20 or 25 years with the villages. We don’t build and run. We are still with them.”

But with Western combat troops scheduled to leave Afghanistan in 2014, many wonder what the future holds – for girls’ education and for CAI.

The biggest concern for Afghanistan, and its neighbors, is still security. President Hamid Karzai has said that “permanent peace, development and freedom” will define a post-2014 Afghanistan. But after 30-plus years of war, amid increasingly sophisticated and numerous militant attacks and a massive underground economy built on the illegal opium and hashish trade, Afghans don’t put much stock in reassurances from the leader of their weak and notoriously corrupt central government.

They also worry about what will happen as military and humanitarian aid dries up.

Money has poured into the country in amounts unfathomable to the average Afghan. “Since 2001, donors are estimated to have devoted nearly $30 billion in development and humanitarian aid,” and $243 billion in military aid to Afghanistan, the Guardian (U.K.) reported in 2012.

Ninety percent of the Afghan government’s budget comes from foreign sources, the Christian Science Monitor reported in 2012. “The World Bank has warned of economic collapse in Afghanistan if international donors pull funding too fast.”

Worries seep across the borders, too, into Tajikistan and Pakistan. The entire region is apprehensive.

However, U.S.-Afghan talks are under way on a post-2014 security agreement, which would likely include a modest U.S. and NATO force in Afghanistan and “send a message to the Afghans and to their neighbors that the United States was not abandoning Afghanistan,” the New York Times reported Nov. 16, 2012.

And in the area of education, significant progress has been made. Yes, illiteracy remains above 70 percent, qualified teachers are still in short supply, and insurgents still target girls’ schools. But more students, especially girls, now attend school. The most recent UNICEF figures show 7.3 million students enrolled in primary and secondary schools, including 2.4 million girls.

And attitudes are shifting, even among some insurgents, said Waki Karimi, CAI’s program manager in Kabul.

“First they were against education, but now they understand education is the only way, it is important,” Karimi said in September. “Now they realize that after 2014 there will be no money and they want to get the trust, the heart of the local people, because villagers will ask, ‘What did you do for us?’ They now want construction of schools, roads, hospital, bridges, because foreigners will leave the country and the funds will come down. So this is the time to build the country.’

Afghanistan’s future is unpredictable. But CAI is in it for the long haul. Its efforts to help communities build a better future will not stop.

And there’s no shortage of communities in the region hoping to work with CAI to improve access to education.

“So many people are hoping and waiting for CAI’s help,” Fazil said. 
Nearly two decades ago, students at Westside Elementary School in River Falls, Wisc., decided to pool their pennies to support Mortenson’s efforts to promote education in remote mountain villages half a world away. His mom, Jerene, was the Westside principal and had invited him to talk to students about his work.

Pennies for Peace has grown into an international service-learning program based on the premise that something as seemingly insignificant as a penny can, as Mortenson said, “move mountains.” Children – and adults – in more than 7,300 campaigns in 34 countries, have collectively raised over $6.9 million according to CAI Operations Director Jennifer Sipes.

And that is a LOT of pennies. And every penny collected went overseas to support literacy and education.

For students who attend CAI-supported schools in remote areas of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan, those pennies translate into tangible gifts – pencils, pens, notebooks, erasers, desks and other furniture. These gifts are especially valuable because many of these children come from families who cannot afford such necessities.

But those who participate in P4P get something, too.

A mother in Long Island said she saw P4P as one way she could help her daughter envision her place in the world.

“My daughter is an only child and an only grandchild on my husband’s side, so it was my mission to combat her selfishness early by trying to get her involved in community service young and often,” Brook wrote in a blogpost on longisland.momypoppins.com.

Her daughter’s book club read “Listen to the Wind,” and Brooke registered the club as a P4P fundraising group with CAI. She downloaded photos of children in Pakistan and Afghanistan, along with stickers for the penny-collection cans, “and tons of additional information” from the ikat.org website.

“My daughter talked about helping ‘Dr. Greg’ with everyone she met,” she wrote.

When the book club reconvened, “all of the participants came with change from their piggy banks, which we pooled together.” Brook and her daughter then took the pennies to the bank, converted it to a check and mailed it to Bozeman.

She added that the idea of a penny drive could be used “for any other charity you’d like to support.”

Indeed, Pennies for Peace fundraisers don’t have to be for CAI. Mortenson encourages students to support other philanthropic missions. “A lot of times, after raising money for students in Pakistan and Afghanistan, kids find something within their own community to support,” he has said.

Pennies for Peace broadens students’ cultural horizons, teaches them the rewards of sharing and working together, and shows them they can make a positive impact on a global scale, one penny at a time.

Find out more: www.penniesforpeace.org

Penny particulars

- Experts estimate there are between 200,000,000,000 and 250,000,000,000 pennies in the world.
- The first pennies were minted in the United States in 1793, with an Indian head with a feather bonnet on one side, the words “ONE CENT” and a laurel wreath on the flip side.
- The Lincoln penny was first minted in 1909. For the first 50 years, it had a wreath of wheat on the flip side. In 1959, an engraving of the Lincoln Memorial replaced the wheat.
- The U.S. Mint produces more pennies each year – 13 billion – than any other coin denomination.
- During World War II, the U.S. Mint made zinc-coated steel pennies to conserve copper for the war effort.
- The average American household has $90 worth of pennies stashed in old jars, coin bowls, and odd pieces of pottery.
- It would take 84,480 pennies laid side to side to make a mile-long line.
- To make a mile-high stack of pennies would take 1.108 million pennies.
- Students in Fontana, Calif., hold the world record for the longest penny chain – 65 miles. The students laid the 5,491,200 pennies out side by side on a racetrack.
- (The kids actually collected 15.8 million pennies, or $158,722.63. The money was used to fund after-school programs for at-risk and low-income students.)
- Modern-day pennies are lighter than earlier versions. Today it takes 183 pennies to make a pound. Using older pennies, made before 1983, it would take 146 pennies to make a pound.

Sources: U.S. Department of the Treasury; Coinstar; World Record Academy

Jan. 26, 2012

“Dear Pennies for Peace,

We registered our Brownie Troop 3359 with your organization online and are happy to say we collected $591 in pennies for you!

We were third-grade girls at the time, studying at Christ the King Catholic School. We were able to educate our students/classmates on how much of a difference a penny could make.

We wish you much success and will always cherish what we learned about your program.

– Brownie Troop 3359 of Atlanta, Ga.

A penny, relatively worthless in the United States, buys a pencil in much of the developing world. And for students in Central Asia Institute-supported schools in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan, pencils are prized possessions.

Imagine how many children will be touched – and their educations enhanced – by the Atlanta Brownie troop’s contribution of $9,100 pennies.

“I am convinced that children are the real hope for peace in the future,” said CAI Co-founder Greg Mortenson. “Pennies for Peace is a children’s program developed over many years that proactively gets children connected, and to understand complex issues like war, poverty, illiteracy, or slavery, and to teach them that they can make a difference.”

A Korphe school student reads a letter from a Pennies for Peace supporter.

Generating Hope

Find out more: www.penniesforpeace.org

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Sources: U.S. Department of the Treasury; Coinstar; World Record Academy
Gratitude and goodbyes

We said goodbye to a number of people who worked with Central Asia Institute this past year, in addition to our friend and colleague Sarfraz Khan, who is eulogized in the opening pages of this publication.

Two men who were instrumental in building and running the CAI-supported school in Saw, Kunar Province, Afghanistan, were killed by Taliban fighters in June: Malik Akbar, a local religious leader, and Malim Hidayatullah, who taught math, Pashto, and Islamic studies at the school. In late October, we learned that the man responsible for their death had been killed in a combined NATO and Afghan air strike. Additional details of developments at Saw School are contained in the “Protecting Hope” story on page 9 of this publication.

In late August, the father of Wazir Karim, CAI’s Gilgit-area scholarship manager, was killed in an accident on the Karakoram Highway in the Gojal Valley, north of Gilgit. Wazir’s uncle and eight others also died in the wreck, considered the worst road disaster in Gojal’s history. All were returning from a wedding.

Also in late August, a fatal car accident ended the too-short life of Sonia Shah, daughter of CAI Board Director Iram Shah. Sonia’s accident occurred near her home in suburban Chicago just one day before her planned departure for her freshman year at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Va. Inspired by Greg Mortenson’s work, Sonia had spent the previous “gap year” between high school and college pursuing her dream to start a girls’ school in her family’s ancestral village, Kangra, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Pakistan. CAI mourns the loss of this bright, ambitious, and sensitive young woman.

Just before going to press, we also learned that David Oliver Relin, coauthor with Mortenson of “Three Cups of Tea,” died in Oregon on Nov. 15, 2012. Greg said he and David worked for three years on the book, which went on to become an international bestseller. “He was a gifted writer. But he was also a deeply committed humanitarian who used his words and stories to make a difference in people’s lives. I will miss him.”

And last, but certainly not least, we want to express gratitude for the hard work of members of CAI’s stateside team who moved on to other pursuits in 2012. As CAI evolves, people move away, but it is especially hard to say goodbye to individuals who are hardworking and dedicate themselves to CAI’s mission. We wish them continued success.

– KARIN RONNOW

“I really don’t want to say goodbye to any of you people.”
– Christa McAuliffe, teacher and crew member of Challenger space shuttle

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Since 1996, Central Asia Institute’s mission has been to empower communities of Central Asia through literacy and education, especially for girls, promote peace through education, and convey the importance of these activities globally.

CAI has established or significantly supported more than 300 community-initiated education and service projects. CAI is a registered 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, federal IRS EIN # 51-0376237.

About the journalists:

KARIN RONNOW, 50, joined Central Asia Institute as communications director in May 2011, after nearly 25 years as a newspaper journalist. Prior to joining CAI, she was a reporter for daily newspapers in Maine and Georgia, a U.S.-based reporter for Lafferty Publications in Dublin, Ireland, managing editor at the Livingston (Mont.) Enterprise, and assistant managing editor of the Bozeman (Mont.) Daily Chronicle. Her 2007 stories on CAI’s work in Afghanistan and Pakistan were nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and she has received numerous awards for her reporting, writing and editing. She earned her bachelor’s degree in urban studies and journalism from Macalester College in Minnesota and master’s degree in journalism from Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism in Illinois. She lives in Montana with her husband, Kimball Leighton, and their two dogs. Their daughter, Carmine, lives in Boston. Karin can be reached at klronnow@gmail.com

ERIK PETERSEN, 37, has been a Montana-based photojournalist for 13 years and made his first trip on behalf of Central Asia Institute during the summer of 2012. Now a freelance photojournalist pursuing a teacher’s degree, his newspaper work includes eight years at the Bozeman (Mont.) Daily Chronicle and five years at the Livingston (Mont.) Enterprise. Erik has garnered many state, regional, and national awards for his work, including being named newspaper Photographer of the Year in the western U.S. and Canada two years in a row. He earned his bachelor’s degree in mass communications from St. Cloud University in Minnesota. He lives in Clyde Park, Montana, with his wife, Faith, and their two sons, Henry and Kasa. Erik can be reached at erikpetersenphotography@gmail.com.
Central Asia Institute empowers communities of Central Asia through literacy and education, especially for girls, promotes peace through education, and conveys the importance of these activities globally.

www.ikat.org