



Person of the Week: Greg Mortenson

Targeted by the Taliban, the 'Three Cups of Tea' Author Never Gave Up on His Peacebuilding Efforts

By ALICE MAGGIN

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[Greg Mortenson](#) has been promoting peace by building schools and [purging ignorance in Pakistan and Afghanistan](#) for more than a decade.

"If you fight terrorism, that's based in fear. But if you promote peace, that's based in hope," Mortenson said. "And the real enemy I think is ignorance. It's ignorance that breeds hatred."

Watch the story tonight at 6:30 p.m. ET on "World News."

It all started accidentally. In 1993 on his way down from a harrowing and unsuccessful climb of the world's second tallest mountain, K2 in northern Pakistan, an exhausted and dehydrated Mortenson stumbled into the village of Korphe. The people of the village helped him get well. While recovering he noticed the children had nowhere to learn.

"When I saw those 84 children sitting in the dirt and they asked for help to build a school I made a promise that day that I would help them," Mortenson explained.

Mortenson returned to the United States and began to try to raise money for the project. He composed letters on a borrowed electric typewriter and sent them to 580 celebrities asking for help. He got one \$100 check.

"What changed things around was that my mother, who is an elementary school principal in Wisconsin, invited me to come and talk to the kids. A fourth grader named Jeffrey said I have piggy bank at home and I am going to help you," Mortenson said.

Jeffrey and his school mates raised 62,400 pennies. It was the start Mortenson needed. Three years after he had left, Mortenson returned to the remote Pakistani village. But his difficulties weren't over. He had to let go of what he calls his controlling ways.

"The village chief Haji Ali he took me by the side and said if you really want to get a school built, son, you have to sit down and be quiet and let us do the work. And six weeks later the school was built," said Mortenson. "It was a lesson I had to let go and let the communities be empowered."

Mortenson said he had found his calling. He started a nonprofit group called the [Central Asia Institute](#) and has since built 78 schools for 33,000 Pakistani and Afghan children. That is an amazing accomplishment in a region where the literacy rate is as low as 20 percent. The road has been anything but smooth. He had a fatwa leveled against him by a Muslim leader who didn't trust him. He was kidnapped. And when he began to focus on educating girls, the Taliban did all they could to stop him. But he persevered.

Investing in Women

Mortenson's belief in educating girls comes from an African proverb: If you educate a boy, you educate the individual. But if you educate a girl, you educate a community.

"Several studies show if you educate a girl to at least the fifth grade level it does three important things: one, it reduces infant mortality; number two, reduces population explosion; and number three it improves the quality of health and life itself," explained Mortenson.

And in Pakistan and Afghanistan, which have been called breeding grounds for terrorism, it is even more vital.

"In the holy Koran when a young man goes on a jihad he first has to get permission and blessing from his mother," said Mortenson. "If a woman has an education she is much less likely to condone her son to get into violence or to terrorism."

Three Cups of Tea

Mortenson chronicled his often arduous undertaking in the best-selling book ["Three Cups of Tea"](#). The title of the book explains his first steps to working in a very different culture.

"With three cups of tea & the first cup you're a stranger, second cup a friend, and the third cup you become family. That doesn't mean you just go around drinking tea, having peace in the world. But what it means is that first we have to build relationships and get to know each other," he said.

And Mortenson has certainly done that. On Tuesday he received the Sitara-i-Pakistan or Star of Pakistan, that country's highest civilian award.

"The way we really need to look at things is not in terms of decades, but in generations. There's a profound impact on just one single child's education. And it's just like a seed that is planted. It doesn't turn into a fruit in a tree until maybe ten or 20 years later," he said.

Twelve years working on the other side of the world has changed Mortenson's view point, he thinks, for the better of mankind.

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