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**NPS Raises “Three Cups of Tea” to Educator Extraordinaire Greg Mortenson**

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Article By: Barbara Honegger

Posted June 17, 2009

It was as if the entire Naval Postgraduate School sprang to its feet to give Greg Mortenson, author of the worldwide bestselling book *Three Cups of Tea*, a standing ovation at his Secretary of the Navy’s Guest Lecture, May 12 – a presentation which easily could have been titled “Build Them, and They Will Come.”



“They” are the thousands of Afghan and Pakistani children who have poured into the 84 schools that Mortenson and his Central Asia Institute have funded and built since 1993, when the people of the Pakistani village of Korphe nursed him back to health after getting lost climbing the world’s second-highest peak. Ever since, Mortenson has been on a passionate and dangerous quest to fulfill the dreams of thousands of Muslim children eager to receive the bedrock of civilization – an education.

“In that impoverished village, a young girl came up to me and asked for what she wanted most in the world, ‘Can you help me build a school?’ I raised the funds and returned, and built her the school. And we’ve been building them ever since.

“My message is a message of hope, and the great difference that education – especially education for girls – can make in the world,” Mortenson said. “There’s an African proverb: ‘Educate a boy, and you educate an individual. Educate a girl, and you educate a community.’ If you educate girls to at least the fifth grade level, you reduce infant mortality, reduce population, and the quality of health and life itself is increased.

“In one village, it took us eight years to get the mullah to let the first girl go to school,” Mortenson recalled. “By 2007, 74 girls were in classes. Now there are 350. Of the 84 schools we’ve helped build, only one has been attacked by the Taliban, because the whole community has been involved,” Mortenson noted.

“The lesson is to empower the community through education and put the elders back in the center of their communities,” he stressed. “Real progress and security comes from empowering local leaders to take control of their projects and give their people what they want and need. “[Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff] Admiral Mullen has got the message and is asking the local leaders to tell us, ‘What do you want and how can we help you get it?’

“Also – and very important – a son must get his mother’s permission to go to Jihad, and many educated women refuse to allow their sons to join the Taliban.”

The other saying Mortenson mentioned is the one upon which the book’s title is based. “‘Three Cups of Tea’ comes from the deep cultural tradition in that part of the Muslim world,” he said. “With the first cup of tea you share with the people of a village, you’re a stranger. After the second cup, you’re a guest. And after the third, you’re family.”

“The first time I read *Three Cups of Tea* – for one of my classes here at NPS – I was amazed as well as inspired,” said Maj. Amy Bumgarner, who nominated Mortenson to be invited to give the lecture and was given the honor of introducing him. “This book should be required reading for everyone in the military,” she said, “because what he says is true. The real enemy is ignorance.”

Because of his dedication to building schools, especially for young girls, Mortenson has been kidnapped by the Taliban, for whom educating females is forbidden, and has had fatwas put out against his life. But through it all, he has persevered, and now even has some ex-Taliban teachers willing to risk their lives to promote education.

“In 2000, there were 800,000 children in school in Afghanistan, mostly boys,” the author noted. “Today, there are 10 million – 7-1/2 million boys and 2-1/2 million girls – the greatest increase in school enrollment in history. Afghan girls and boys desperately want an education, and many girls, their families and teachers risk their lives daily to get it. Since 2007, over 400 schools, most of them for girls, have been burned or bombed in Afghanistan and over 320 in Pakistan. But the girls return, sometimes walking over two hours to get to class.

“Teachers have been murdered, and acid thrown into girls faces, all for the ‘crime’ of wanting to be able to read and write and know about the world outside their village,” Mortenson said. “And why? Because their greatest fear is not the bullet, but the pen. They know that the Koran says ‘The ink of a scholar is holier than the blood of a martyr’ and encourages education – its very opening line says ‘Read!’ And there is nothing in the Koran that says girls can’t go to school. The pen truly is mightier than the sword.”

As Tom Brokaw, the only one of 400 celebrities to respond to Mortenson’s first request for donations, has said, the success of his passionate quest to bring education to the wildest parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan “is proof that one ordinary person, with the right combination of character and determination, really can change the world.”

Since that first glimmer of support from Brokaw – whom the author quips now wishes he’d donated more than \$100 – Mortenson has been to Pakistan and Afghanistan over 30 times and has the ear of the nation’s top military leaders. “Admiral Mullen and General Petraeus have read the book, and it’s now mandatory reading for counterinsurgency training and Special Operations,” he noted.

Mortenson’s “Pennies for Peace” program encourages school children to raise funds to help eradicate global illiteracy. Last year it was in 279 schools, and has now reached over 4,000.

“When I served in Afghanistan in 2006, we adopted a school in a small village just outside of Baghram, where I was stationed,” Bumgarner recalled, “so I have some idea of what it must have been like to build 84 of these schools from scratch. With *Three Cups of Tea*, you see the dedication of the Muslim people. They had different fears, and the same



have taken to build 64 of these schools in remote areas. What Three Cups of Tea can do is give a better understanding of the Muslim people. They're not different from us – not in any way that matters.”

For more information about the Central Asia Institute and Mortenson's work, go to [www.ikat.org](http://www.ikat.org). Three Cups of Tea is available in the NPS bookstore.

*Photos provided courtesy the Central Asia Institute.*

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