

Heights of Caring

AFTER SEVENTY-EIGHT DAYS of attempting to reach the summit of the world's second-highest mountain in memory of his sister Christa, Greg Mortenson realized he wouldn't make it to the top. Little did he know that his apparent failure would lead him somewhere higher.

Mortenson remembers being "devastated" because he hadn't reached his goal. The 1993 climb up K2 in the mountain ranges of northern Pakistan had also taken a serious toll on his body. A pair of local porters led him to their village to recuperate.

He was stunned by what he saw and learned. Almost no one knew how to read. One in three infants died. Medical care was nowhere to be found. After the first week in Korphe, Mortenson visited the village school. There was no teacher because villagers could not afford the \$1-

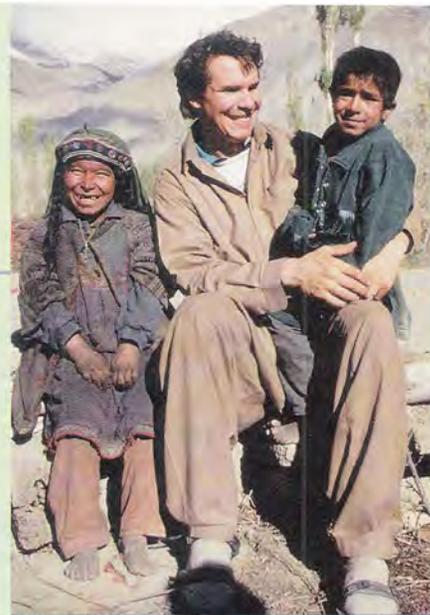
a-day salary; no building; no paper or pencils. Still, the eighty-four children focused single-mindedly on their work, scratching out their lessons in the dirt.

"They asked me to build a school there—a far greater goal than climbing a mountain," Mortenson recalls. In Christa's honor, he pledged to help the villagers' dream become reality. Raising the \$12,000 necessary turned out to be a longer struggle than climbing K2. Upon his return to the United States, Mortenson hand-typed 580 letters soliciting donations from climbers and celebrities. He also wrote sixteen grant proposals. Apart from a \$100 check from newscaster Tom Brokaw, every request was turned down.

The breakthrough came in the following year, when a fourth grader at the rural Wisconsin school where Mortenson's mother teaches heard about the Korphe project. The student initiated a penny drive that garnered 62,340 pennies. "It mushroomed from there, because I used that story to tell adults, and that inspired adults to start contributing," Mortenson says. But the former army medic also had to cash in his retirement policy and sell his climbing equipment and car to make the project's ends meet.

Much to the surprise of villagers who were used to broken promises, Mortenson returned to Korphe in 1995. The school was completed in 1996. That same year fellow climber Jean Hoerni, Ph.D., set up a nonprofit foundation, Central Asia Institute, to allow Mortenson's work to continue. To date, CAI has helped build thirty-one primary schools and educate 8,210 students, including 3,400 girls, in isolated mountain villages in Pakistan, Mongolia, and Kyrgyzstan. And that's only a fraction of its work, which also includes environmental restoration, health projects, and vocational training for women and men.

"The more I do this, the more I become a proponent of girls' education," Mortenson says. United Nations statistics show that every year a girl is in school is a step toward reducing her vulnerability to poverty, hunger, child mortality, maternal mortality, HIV/AIDS, and other diseases.



Tara Bishop

American climber Greg Mortenson has built a new school for these Korphe village children in the Karakoram mountains of northern Pakistan.

Mortenson's lessons in community development have not always come easy. He used to strive for control of all the details—until a Korphe elder pulled him aside. "He said, 'We're grateful to God that you've come to help us put the first school in the area,'" Mortenson recalls. "Then he told me to sit down and shut up and quit micromanaging. He took my records and receipts and plumb line, and he locked up all my stuff in a locker in his house."

Mortenson was stunned, but he soon "realized they could teach me far more than I could teach them." This realization has led to a model in which all decisions about what kinds of projects to implement and where to house them are ultimately made by villagers, not by CAI. Mortenson sometimes worries that the increasing literacy rate will harm the ancient oral traditions in these remote mountain villages. "I often wake up in the middle of the night, because I'm wondering if what I'm doing is a good thing," he says. "All I can say is, when communities are empowered to make decisions, they know what's best for themselves. And what they want is education for their kids."

—Kathryn Kingsbury

More Information:

Central Asia Institute
P.O. Box 7209
Bozeman, MT 59771
877-585-7841
cai@ikat.org
www.ikat.org