HEART & SOUL

Humanitarian Greg Mortenson is on a mission to build schools in remote regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

By Steven Beschloss | Photography by Dan Winters & Deirdre Eitel

Greg Mortenson married his wife six days after they met. He has entrusted his fate to warring tribal leaders in Afghanistan, men who would be shooting at each other if he were not there. He has witnessed extreme poverty and fierce brutality, yet considers himself an eternal optimist and believes that paradise is on Earth.

Since 1993, Mortenson has engaged in a struggle to build nearly 80 schools in some of the most remote and dangerous spots on the planet. He's endured an eight-day kidnapping by the Taliban and suffered death threats from fellow Americans who condemned him for "helping Muslims."

He's said goodbye to his young family for painfully long missions in Pakistan and Afghanistan, without any certainty that he will return. And he's co-authored a publishing sensation, *Three Cups of Tea*, which has been on the *New York Times* paperback best-seller list for more than 100 straight weeks—creating a thunderous clamour from a growing legion of fans hungry for a piece of this newly minted humanitarian rock star.

So it would be understandable if Mortenson were more cut off, more reluctant to make such strong personal contact. No, what strikes you first about this 51-year-old boyish former K2 mountaineer is his deep kindness and unusual openness. But it's exactly this heartfelt openness that has made the seemingly impossible possible and secured him the most valuable role of peacemaker. In his inspiring quest to increase literacy, reduce poverty, empower women and plant seeds of hope in places long ignored, Mortenson takes the time to sit down, drink tea, build relationships, blend in—and earn trust.

"He cares so much about the people he's serving, and they understand that on a gut level," says Deirdre Eitel, a photographer who has travelled several times with Mortenson.

"He was born with the ability to relate to people on a different level," adds Genevieve Chabot, international program manager of Mortenson's non-profit organisation, the Central Asia Institute, based near his home in Bozeman, Montana. "He lives within their context. He doesn't have a schedule. I hear from people over there, 'He's very much like us.'"

This compassionate quality is at the heart of what inspired his book and its title—a pivotal lesson from Haji Ali, his Pakistani mentor and village chief in Korphe, an impoverished and isolated town in a valley of K2, the world's second-highest mountain. Korphe is where Mortenson built his first school in 1996, determined to keep his promise to local villagers who nursed him back to health after he failed to reach the Himalayan peak. Impatient for results, Mortenson was pushing the local villagers to complete their building—and driving them crazy. Ali, who treated Mortenson like a son, told him he must slow down and respect their ways. "We may be uneducated," Ali said. "But we are not stupid. We have lived and survived here a long time."

Holding a steaming cup of tea in his simple hut, Ali explained that over the first cup you are a stranger. The second time you take tea, you are an honoured guest. And the third time, you become family, and "for our family, we are prepared to do anything, even die."

Mortenson learned the lesson well. From that first school, completed with stone and wood for a mere US$12,000, he has gone on to build 77 more and employ more than 600 teachers, educating some 28,000 students, including 18,000 girls.

Future Vision Central Asia Institute schools must offer education to girls, who use their education to build their communities.

All Photography courtesy Deirdre Eitel & CAI except pg 88 Dan Winters

Each of these schools has been built—at a cost of $15,000 to $25,000, he says—in areas that are physically isolated, suffering violent conflict or war, or facing religious extremism. And they depend on the local community, which is required to chip in with a plot of land, local wood and other materials and manual labour to assist Mortenson's team of skilled labourers.

The statistics are impressive, but they belie the profound effort involved. "It's our staff that has the cunning and the dedication," Mortenson insists, minimising his own role. "They are literally willing to risk their lives." No matter how long it may take. In Chunda in Pakistan, for example, "It took us eight years to convince the local mullahs to build a school." Mortenson's team has vetted more than 500 requests for new schools—"there's such a fierce desire for education," he says—and he and his staff envision one day building schools in Taliban strongholds such as Deh Rawood, Uruzgan, in southern Afghanistan, the birthplace of Mullah Omar, the Taliban's founder.

But building the necessary relationships takes time—in a case like this as much as 20 years—says Mortenson, a Minnesota native with self-described "Norwegian stubbornness." Why so long? "I think what they fear the most is that if girls get an education and become mothers, they'll have lost the ability to control the society."

Mortenson's experience has attracted attention from some unlikely quarters, including Gen. David Petraeus, the former U.S. commander in Iraq and now head of U.S. forces in the Middle East. In a recent e-mail, he told Mortenson what he learned from his book: First, listen to people more; second, work to build relationships; and third, have respect for the people and their way of doing things.

Despite instability in Pakistan and Afghanistan, Mortenson feels secure. He benefits from a legendary reputation and locals he trusts. "I can go into areas where maybe only Special Forces would go," he says, explaining that once he is accepted he receives protection and hospitality. This is called *nena watay*, right of refuge. "Sometimes I go between areas where clans have fought for hundreds of years over land and water. Then we'll have tea and they'll hand me off and I can go there and spend two days."

Such journeys, despite their dangers, are grounded in hope—and a goal. "We are trying to be peacemakers and we know that through education, even if they just have to collaborate with me to get me to different places, they are starting to take notes of each other. If one valley or clan starts a school, then they've really embraced it. And then even their adversary wants a school."

Mortenson's unusual comfort with a complex mix of cultures dates to his earliest years. Born in Minnesota, he was only three months old when his family moved to the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. He was greatly influenced by his father, a persevering man who was proficient in Swahili and spent nine years raising money to build a school and hospital in Tanzania with the local people's help. Africa gave his impressionable son an unusually diverse picture of life and encouraged his gift for languages.

He attended an international school with children from dozens of countries. Normal life was a swirl of nationalities and religions. Among his early memories: Going with his father to see witch doctors perform exorcisms and experiencing diverse forms of prayer. More spiritual than religious, Mortenson believes that religion should be about connecting people, not dividing them.

Mortenson admits his passion may be extreme, but "I feel like the luckiest man on the planet having this job." It surely helps his aid group's revenue, which jumped to $8 million last year, buoyed by book sales surpassing 2 million copies in 29 languages and an increasing number of speaking engagements. He's now finishing a follow-up to *Three Cups of Tea*, sure to expand his and his organisation's profiles.

Still, he's frustrated and baffled by his failure to secure larger donations from his richest backers. He acknowledges that it might be easier if he could take supporters to see his schools first-hand, but he's reluctant to put either donors or his schools at risk with high-profile visits. This same caution and care has led to his rejection of nearly 60 offers to date from Hollywood producers, studios and others to make a movie based on his book. "The film could have a huge impact . . . and bring a message of peace. I'm totally aware of that," Mortenson says. But he worries how an inauthentic rendering could "put our students in jeopardy."

Success of this magnitude might inflate the ego of a less self-directed personality. But Mortenson clings to the lessons that stem from his failures. He knows the height of the mountain he still must climb—and he's able to use that knowledge to fuel his continuing struggle to raise money and build schools, even if it means being away from his wife and children and risking a fatal misstep.

"Greg is undaunted by failure," says his wife, Tara Bishop, a practicing psychologist. "It's a real gift." And not his only one, which she noticed the first day they met: "This man has an exceptionally large heart."

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