

Greg Mortenson

Promoting Peace, One School at a Time

Darryle Clott, Holocaust Educator and Holocaust Workshop Coordinator at Viterbo University, shares how Greg Mortenson inspires her and how hard she worked to bring him to Viterbo.

Greg Mortenson is a ♦humanitarian, ♦international peacemaker, ♦co-founder of the nonprofit Central Asia Institute, ♦founder of Pennies for Peace, and ♦co-author of *New York Times* best seller *Three Cups of Tea* — which has sold over 3 million copies. It has been published in 34 countries and is taught in more than 90 colleges and universities as well as in more than 400 middle and high schools. The book is mandatory reading for all senior U.S. military commanders, military officers in counter-insurgency training, and U.S. Special Forces deploying to Afghanistan.

The book's phenomenal success led it to be adapted into a young reader's version and a children's picture book, *Listen to the Wind*. Mortenson's newest book, *Stones into Schools*, continues where *Three Cups of Tea* left off in 2003.

Greg's Transforming Moment

In 1992, Mortenson's youngest sister, Christa, who suffered from severe epilepsy, died suddenly at age 23. Heartbroken, Mortenson decided to honor her memory by leaving her favorite amber necklace at the top of K2, the world's second-

highest peak. But less than half a mile from the summit, after more than 10 punishing weeks of climbing, he turned back to help rescue a fellow mountaineer in trouble. On a five-day hike back to the main road, Mortenson was separated from his team and took a wrong turn off the trail. Lost, sick, and deeply disappointed, he stumbled into a tiny Pakistani village ringed by jagged peaks, so isolated that no foreigner had ever visited. The people of Korphe, farmers and herders, welcomed him and nursed him back to health.

The village had no school; the children met outdoors on a patch of bare ground, even in the frosts of autumn. A part-time teacher shared with a distant village came only three days a week, but the kids — 78 boys and four girls — still gathered every day to study. Most scratched their lessons in the dirt with sticks. No books, no pencils, no paper, no roof — just a fierce desire to learn. Greg promised them he would build them a school.

Fulfilling a Promise Leads to Pennies for Peace

When Greg built his first school in Korphe, Pakistan, he fulfilled a promise to the people of Korphe that he would help them build a school. From that promise has grown an incredible humanitarian campaign. Mortenson has established over 131 schools for desperately poor children in ruggedly remote regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan gently but effectively persuading village elders to embrace equal education for girls. Greg's schools currently



Greg Mortenson's website

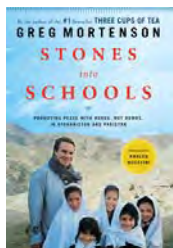
provide education to over 38,000 children, including 28,000 girls.

Much of this has been accomplished through Pennies for Peace — a program in which school children collect pennies used to ♦build schools, ♦provide scholarships, and ♦pay teachers. Such a project makes the students active participants in promoting global peace as they study the countries that they are helping.

Since its humble beginnings in 1994 at Westside Elementary School in River Falls, Wisconsin — where Greg's mother was principal and her students collected 62,345 pennies to help Greg build his first school — the program has grown to encompass thousands of schools and tens of thousands of students around the world. In 2008 children raised more than \$900,000 in pennies.

Bringing Greg to Viterbo University

After reading Greg Mortenson's book, *Three Cups of Tea*, I was determined that Greg would come to Viterbo University to address our community. I then began the quest, filling out the on-line application just like it said to do at the back of his book. A few months later my first e-mail rejection arrived. Undaunted I sent in another e-mail application and another and another



until after 18 months I had seven rejections, all along knowing that eventually Greg would stand on the stage at the Viterbo University Fine Arts Center and tell his story. I just had to somehow connect with a real person instead of a computer.

Then my break occurred. This past November 2008, I received a call from the [University of Wisconsin](#) professor who runs the [Wisconsin Council for the Social Studies Conference](#) in Madison asking me if I would do a Holocaust presentation at the conference in March 2009. In our conversation he casually mentioned that Greg Mortenson had been his keynote speaker in 2008. I said, "Then you must have contact information for Greg." He said, "Yes I do!" I told him I would do his conference if he would give me that information. He gave me Greg's mother's phone number, and the rest is history.



Apropos Photography, Diane Knothe; used with permission.

Greg speaking at Fine Arts Center.

Inspired by Greg and his Mother

When I called Greg's mother, Jerene, asking for assistance to bring Greg to La Crosse, she promised me that she would come when Greg came. She was true to her word. Greg Mortenson spent Sep-

tember 29, 2009, in La Crosse and gave three presentations at Viterbo, one to 4th-8th graders in the morn-



Bruce Defries Photography; used with permission.

Darryle and Greg visiting in her home.

ing, one to the Viterbo students and staff in the afternoon, and another to our community that evening.

Not only did Jerene come that day, but she spent the next day visiting schools participating in our local Pennies for Peace campaign. She returned two more times to visit more schools. She is a lovely lady who speaks widely on Greg's humanitarian efforts. Having spent a considerable amount of time with Jerene both in our home and visiting schools with her, I can see where Greg gets his enthusiasm and spirit.

Worthy Award Recipient

One of the best ways I have heard Greg described is that he is a cross between Mother Teresa and Indiana Jones. Greg's list of humanitarian awards is over three pages long so I will just mention two recent ones. On January 7, 2009, a bipartisan group of U.S. congressional representatives [nominated Greg for the Nobel Peace Prize](#). In March 2009, Pakistan's government [presented him](#) with its highest civil award, "The Star of Pakistan," which has only been won by three foreigners, for his courage and humanitarian effort to promote girls'

education and literacy in rural areas for the last 16 years.

I was privileged to spend 14 hours with Greg when he was in La Crosse including entertaining him in our home. He is one of the kindest, most genuine people I have had ever met. I sat with him for two and a half hours at the book signing when he spoke to the community at the evening presentation. He was as kind to the last person to go through the line at 11:30 pm. as he was to the first person to go through.

Ordinary People Accomplishing Extraordinary Things

Something I know for sure is that ordinary people can accomplish extraordinary things if only they have passion and a dream and are willing to work hard to make that dream come true. Greg Mortenson is an ordinary person who has become a living legend by making a tremendous difference in this world.

It was my wish that every one fortunate enough to have heard Greg's message went away inspired that they too could make a difference. From what I have heard since Greg's visit, my wish is coming true.

Postscript

The [American Association of University Women \(AAUW\)](#) and [Western Wisconsin Education Conference](#) are coordinating the effort for schools in [Wisconsin's CESA 4](#); [Houston County, Minnesota](#); and [Viterbo University](#) to participate in Pennies for Peace. The total amount of money raised by the [7 Rivers Region Campaign](#) will be announced February 19th, 2010, at the Western Wisconsin Education Conference. Over 50 schools have signed up, and the goal is to raise enough money for Greg to build another school.