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EDUCATING GIRLS – a global issue

by Stacie Charbonneau Hess

There are men with guns and money in Afghanistan and Pakistan. They bomb things to get our attention, and to promote their own twisted version of Islam. Often, they set up schools and teach young people (mainly boys) to buy into their beliefs, and the young people, whose parents are often illiterate, can't seek a second opinion about what is meant by the words in the Koran.

Extremist groups such as the Taliban need to keep people ignorant in order to proliferate. This may explain why the big, bad men with guns and money in Afghanistan and Pakistan are busy bombing girls' schools, and ensuring that women do not get an education. Why would a group of armed men be afraid of schoolgirls?

If the majority of just one generation of girls got an education in these countries, peace might be the norm instead of the exception for these war-torn regions. Extremist groups like the Taliban might disappear completely.

Education a privilege

In the United States, school children often complain about getting up in the morning to go to school. But in regions as remote and severe as those in Pakistan and Afghanistan, getting an education is most assuredly still a privilege. Getting a “balanced, non-extremist” education is even more rare.

The Central Asia Institute (www.ikat.org) founded by humanitarian and author Greg Mortensen, who wrote the *New York Times* bestsellers *Three Cups of Tea* and *Stones into Schools*, has built 131 balanced, non-extremists schools for boys and girls – most of their 58,000 students are girls – in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

And while the lives of the girls are transformed through education – some of them have gone on to college, some have become maternal health care workers – many are still imagining what they want to become. The face of the world is changing.

Educating girls around the world is not just a matter of a country or family's will, but also of available resources – money, materials, teachers. Even when a school is built and a teacher is hired, in remote regions something as small and necessary as a pencil might be difficult to procure.

Money matters

In the western Himalayas – where Central Asia Institute focuses its efforts – money matters, and a little goes a long way. For example, one penny buys one pencil. 15 pennies buys one notebook. \$20 is enough to educate a first grader for an entire year. \$340 can send a girl to four years of high school on a full-ride scholarship. \$600 is one teacher's annual salary. \$5,000

supports an existing school of an entire year. \$50,000 is sufficient to build and outfit of an eight-room schoolhouse and endow the teachers' salaries for the first five years.

In realizing how expensive it is not to education a young girl, ignorance and violence and poverty thrive under regimes where women and subjugated, pennies seem like the most innocent and easy solution to empower girls to achieve their dreams through education.

A natural offshoot from the Central Asia Institute's mission, the "Pennies for Peace" program has brought the power of peacemaking into some 4,500 schools around the world. One of these schools is Our Sisters' School in New Bedford.

A local connection

When the Marion Institute approached Lisa Yates, executive director of Our Sisters' School, and asked if she would like to be involved in welcoming Greg Mortensen to the Bioneers Conference in New Bedford in October, she answered with a resounded, "yes."

"Seeing Greg speak was on our wish list. The Board and I had been talking about this for the last three years, but as a start-up school, we weren't sure how we'd go about getting him here," she said.

Each year, Our Sisters' School, a tuition-free independent school for girls that was established in 2008, chooses a charitable cause on which to focus. The students have a say, and in previous years, they've chosen organizations such as the Humane Society.

The decision for 2010, however, was an easy one. The students would raise awareness and funds for Pennies for Peace, and present their check to Greg Mortensen when he arrived in October.

"We have the same mission, the same objectives, as the Central Asia Institute," explains Yates. "Believing in girls' education and how it relates to economic development, and reducing violence. . . the mission and objectives of the Pennies for Peace program really resonates with us."

During the daily all-school, morning meetings this fall, Yates and teachers used Pennies for Peace to teach the girls about education in Pakistan and Afghanistan, using the curriculum to start discussion points.

Minds and hearts

In an inner city school where family resources are often limited, Yates explained that the girls had tremendous empathy toward their sisters in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

"The girls here could easily understand how a family must sacrifice and compromise and work very, very hard," to send their children to school. "Every family here has chosen to come to Our Sisters' School. They are committed to their daughters' educations," she says.

The amount raised by Our Sisters' School was just under \$700. Though that may not seem like a lot of money but Yates stressed, "Every penny was an intentional gift."

The giving did not just extend from the students, but also from the community. The Chief of Police ran a simultaneous Pennies for Peace campaign and presented the money to Our Sisters' School. Many of the 100 active volunteers dropped off their change in a jar on the way into school, and members of the New Bedford Historical Society gave their spare change to the program. Pennies for Peace news reached a local Crayon Campus, and preschoolers also participated.

The pennies created an invisible bridge between girls oceans apart who seem to have nothing in common, except perhaps their age and gender. Yet one girl's peace and freedom affects another, as we inhabit the same world.

One girl's oppression can mean poverty and violence that ripples far beyond the borders of Pakistan and Afghanistan, into office buildings in America urban centers, and into families worldwide who send their sons and daughters to fight a war that we are slowly learning, is not so much about violence, territory and hatred, as it is about ignorance.

To put an end to that, a penny seems a very small price indeed.