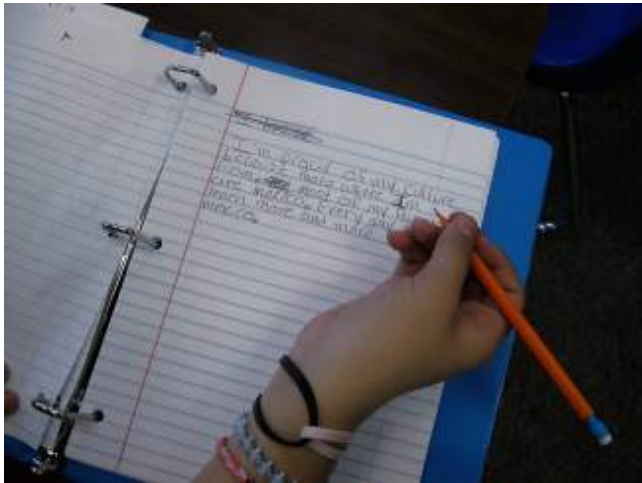


**Michael McLaughlin**  
**The Aspen Times**

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## Bringing it Home: Basalt students make Pakistan connection



Gabriela Magana, a sixth-grader at Basalt Middle School, works on a draft of a letter about her Mexican ancestry she hopes to send to her pen pal in Pakistan.



The students in Kristen Zodrow's classroom were enthusiastic about participating in the Global Kid Connect program and having fun preparing letters and posters for their pen pals. Pictured left to right are Tessa Conrardy, Lily Wood, Sammy Alberto with his fist in the air, Zodrow and Taylor Glen with the blue glasses.

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## Marshall Direct Fund

During her time at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Silbi Kelly Stainton studied international security focusing on terrorism and asymmetric threats in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. She quickly became disillusioned by what she saw as a failure to fully deploy all of our country's diplomatic and economic power to help eliminate the fertile ground Islamic extremists had in recruiting young people in the region.

Disappointed by what she saw as a lack of full commitment to use all arms of statecraft, including diplomacy and economic power, Stainton decided to do something and founded the Marshall Direct Fund.

The Marshall Direct Fund is named in honor of the Marshall Plan. Just as George Marshall, the former Secretary of State and Nobel Peace Prize winner, recognized the great need to invest in war-weary people and ventures abroad, the Marshall Direct Fund gives the same opportunity to invest in people who are in desperate need of educational and economic opportunities so that they can choose peace and prosperity over violence and despair. The "direct" part is exactly what it implies. Donors to the foundation directly assist communities abroad without the middlemen of government institutions.

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Editor's note: "Bringing It Home" runs weekends in The Aspen Times and focuses on state, national or international issues that have ties to or impacts on the Roaring Fork Valley.

When Kristen Zodrow was a student at Villanova University, double-majoring in political science and Arab Islamic studies, she had an opportunity to travel to the Middle East. Once she began meeting people on a personal level, it didn't take long for Zodrow to fall in love with the people and their cultures, customs and backgrounds.

When she returned to the U.S., she came back with a different view of life in that region, one she wanted to share with others.

Zodrow began teaching sixth-grade math and science at Basalt Middle School in the fall of 2012, the same time an organization called Global Kid Connect was pitching a program to Principal Jeremy Voss that would facilitate a dialogue of cultural exchange between students in Pakistan and students in the Roaring Fork Valley.

Jodi Fischer is the executive director of Global Kid Connect, one of three programs run by the nonprofit Marshall Direct Fund.

“We started off by helping provide educational tools in Pakistan,” Fischer said. “We eventually saw a need to make a connection with our kids and the kids in Pakistan and came up with the Global Kid Connect program. It opens the mind to a whole new world of possibilities and understanding. The object is to improve relations and help understand we may have a lot of differences, but we also have a lot in common.”

With no hesitation, Zodrow volunteered to lead the program at Basalt Middle School.

“I figured it was right up my alley,” she said. “Many people in Pakistan share a similar background and religion with other countries in the Middle East. I saw it as a great way to tie in everything I studied and bring it to my own classroom.”

The first year of the program went very well, according to Zodrow. The kids exchanged two or three letters and either pictures or a short video, but Zodrow and her students wanted to do more and raised the communication bar.

At the middle school, one of the main themes the kids are learning about is H.O.T. — honor, ownership and tolerance. Zodrow challenged her students to put into words, pictures or videos just what H.O.T. meant to them. The kids put together several videos of students saying something in English and then in Spanish so the Pakistani kids would be exposed to the reality that many of the Basalt students are bilingual.

“It allowed some of our kids to share their roots,” Zodrow said. “It was another way this program is opening doors to some real cultural understanding.”

This year, the exchange has been upped to six or seven letter exchanges and a video. Kids are paired with a pen pal, and the dialogue has been fascinating.

The Basalt kids learned about a female Pakistani student named Malala, who was shot by members of the Taliban for her stance on education. Zodrow challenged her students to make posters to send to their pen pals based on what they would be willing to stand up for here.

The kids chose topics like gay marriage, animal rights, gender equality in sports and immigration rights.

“Our kids really took this to another level,” Zodrow said. “This program is opening their eyes and making them think in different ways.”

Through their one-on-one exchanges with their pen pals, the Basalt kids learned that many Pakistani kids thought all American kids were rich and were concerned that Americans thought all Pakistani people were in the Taliban.

Tessa Conrardy, 11, is a sixth-grader at the middle school and was prepared to learn how different she was from her pen pal, an 11-year-old girl named Maira.

“It’s crazy,” Conrardy said. “We aren’t that different at all. In fact, we have a lot in common. We’re both learning that we’re all pretty much the same, no matter how much money a person has or where they live. As long as we keep developing this connection, I can see Maira and I being friends forever.”

Nils Morlind, 12, has a pen pal named Riggan, 11. He didn’t expect the exchange of letters to be much fun, but he admits he was wrong.

“It’s so cool to learn about kids in Pakistan,” Morlind said. “Riggan and I have a lot in common. We both like sports, food and playing video games. I assumed Pakistan was a war-torn country and all the kids were poor, but after communicating with Riggan, his home sounds no different than here. I told him we’re just a small town in Colorado. We’re not a big town like Snowmass or Aspen.”

Voss, now in his sixth year at the middle school, said there are so many things right about the Global Kids Connect program.

“It’s amazing to have students who are breaking down cultural barriers,” he said. “They’re also learning to speak and listen with a real audience. We’re very proud of what the kids are accomplishing and the work they’re putting into this. The program has gone well beyond my expectations.”

Zodrow hopes the next step will be communication live via programs like Skype. She said some of the kids who were part of the program last year are still communicating with their new friends halfway across the world.

She shared a story of girl in Pakistan who was pulled out of school early to work at her family’s business. When the girl’s father saw a letter from her pen pal in Aspen, he couldn’t believe someone who lived so far away was concerned and supportive with his daughter’s education. He was compelled to reinstate his daughter back in school.

“Talk about making a difference in someone’s life,” Zodrow said. “What an amazing success story.”

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