

Local non-profit fights extremism with schools

Offers insight on "Three Cups of Tea" scandal

By Terray Sylvester
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In 2007, long before allegations of financial impropriety and fraud began to surface, author, mountaineer and acclaimed activist Greg Mortensen visited Carbondale as part of the annual One Book, One Town community reading program organized by the Friends of the Gordon Cooper Library.

The community responded enthusiastically. A total of more than 700 people turned out to hear Mortensen speak at Colorado Rocky Mountain School and Roaring Fork High School, recalled Joan Lamont, of the Friends of the Library. She said Mortensen's first book, "Three Cups of Tea," proved to be the most popular work the Friends have chosen in the 10 years since they started One Book, One Town.

"We were so fortunate he was able to work it in," she said. "He walked away from our little town of 6,000 [people] with \$33,000, which we were so proud of."

Lamont said \$2,600 of that sum were gathered by local students as contributions to Pennies for Peace, one of Mortensen's programs.

Carbondale's hearty reception was just a flicker of the passion Mortensen has ignited globally from donors eager to embrace his nonviolent work in war-torn Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Central Asia Institute, which he founded, reportedly received about \$23 million in donations in 2010 and, according to its Website, has built more than 170 schools.

But in April, journalist Jon Krakauer and CBS's "60 minutes" reported Mortensen had blended his own finances with those of the Central Asia Institute to the tune of millions of dollars and lied about some pivotal events in "Three Cups of Tea," all while a significant portion of the schools he has helped build are sitting empty, among other alleged misdeeds.

A local perspective

For a perspective on the allegations against Mortensen, as well as the promise and pitfalls



Stainton (second from left) and Fischer (third from right) with faculty and staff of the Marshall Direct Fund school in Sheikhpura, Pakistan, near Lahore. The photo was taken in October, 2010. Courtesy photo

of humanitarian aid in Pakistan and Afghanistan, The Sopris Sun caught up with Carbondalians Silbi Stainton and Jodi Fischer. In 2007 Stainton founded the Marshall Direct Fund, a non-profit organization that has established two schools in Pakistan over the last several years. The group is currently working to set up a third, while also exploring ways to provide vocational training and business opportunities to adult Pakistani women. Fischer is employed as program director for the Fund. She has worked for USAID and currently also works for the Roaring Fork Business Resource Council.

Like the Central Asia Institute, the Marshall Direct Fund strives to provide an education to children, especially girls, who might otherwise not receive one. But unlike Mortensen's organization, the Fund was created specifically as a means of combating terrorism and the spread of extremism. Stainton, who studied international security and Southwest Asia at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and elsewhere, said she decided to organize the Marshall Direct Fund because she was frustrated by the predominance of force in the United States' counterterrorism strategy. She thought a more balanced approach would prove more effective.

"We certainly don't believe that it's the

end-all-be-all one solution that will solve everything," Stainton said. "It's just a matter of having the right balance. And that's where I saw a weakness."

According to statistics provided by the Marshall Direct Fund, two thirds of Pakistani women are illiterate and 2 percent of U.S. foreign aid supports education and development while 96 percent pays for military efforts.

The Marshall Direct Fund is considerably smaller than the Central Asia Institute. Its 2009 budget was just over \$100,000, and included one paid staff member, Fischer.

The schools sponsored by the fund are located in a slum named Barakahu in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad, and in an area named Sheikhpura near Lahore. About 130 boys and girls from pre-school to fifth grade attend each institution, Stainton said, and dozens of others are on waiting lists. With enough funding, the Marshall Direct Fund hopes to expand its current schools and establish a third in a rural area named Karahi, outside of Islamabad. Stainton and Fischer said they are also working to partner with other non-governmental organizations to set up vocational training facilities in each school. A portion of the proceeds from those businesses would ideally support the schools, they explained.

Stainton and Fischer also coordinate a

program called Global Kid Connect, through which students at Crystal River Elementary School in Carbondale, Sopris Elementary School in Glenwood Springs and Aspen Country Day School share a blog with students in Pakistan.

Sopris Sun: What was your sense of Greg Mortensen's reputation among the non-governmental organizations working in Southwest Asia?

Stainton: Certainly I think people appreciate the attention he has brought to the need to educate girls and to what schools can do in terms of helping create peace in that part of the world. I think that's been a big positive.

I think one area that has been of concern for some people in the development community has been the concept that building the building itself is the same as building a school - that you can ensure that a building, once you leave that town or that village, is going to stay utilized as a school. That's not usually how it works in the developing world.

A lot of organizations really follow a different approach, that bricks and mortar are really not the best investment. Specifically, whatever you can do to not invest in bricks and mortar and instead invest in human capital - save the money on the building and invest in teacher training or better books and curriculum and lunches to keep the kids coming and a manager who makes sure things are moving smoothly - that's the highest return you can get on investment.

Sopris Sun: Has the Marshall Direct Fund ever partnered with the Central Asia Institute?

Stainton: We did reach out to [the Central Asia Institute] early on but they were not interested in any kind of partnership. This is the story I've heard from a lot of NGOs: that [Mortensen] just wasn't interested in partnering with any other NGOs. Sometimes he'd work with some in Pakistan, but otherwise he wasn't interested.

Sopris Sun: It sounds like the Marshall Direct Fund and the Central Asia Institute pursue different strategies in different areas. Where the Central Asia Institute has worked in mostly rural regions, MDF focused more directly on combating extremism through ed-

Pakistan exchange an eye-opener for local students *continued from page 3*

ucation, and as a result works in larger population centers.

Stainton: We wanted to work in more of the areas where recruitment was happening. So we had to work with different strategies from the get go. It's definitely easier to lease when you're in an urban area. We found ... that we can use our resources more effectively and reach more children if we lease a space. A building to rent in an urban area - it's not a pretty building but it's a building, and they're just happy to have a school - is about \$125 per month for a five- or seven-classroom building.

Sopris Sun: Why focus on urban areas?

Stainton: Most of the recruitment actually happens in the urban areas. ... The poverty in the developing world is usually worse in the rural areas, but sometimes there's less dire frustration. I think because sharp discrepancies in wealth are not right in people's faces. Packing people into urban centers creates an environment where extremist groups can capitalize on the sentiment and recruit.

Sopris Sun: In a written response to questions from "60 Minutes," Mortensen describes the difficulty of working in Afghanistan and Pakistan, from language barriers to shifting allegiances to corruption. What's your take on that description of circumstances on the ground?

Stainton: I have never encountered anything, other than maybe being a mother, that's as challenging (laughs).

It's really hard to work over there. It's

highly challenging, and I think that's why it's good for donors to ask themselves, "Does the organization have the support it's going need in order to manage their investments?" There is no way, even if he was a perfect human being, that all the schools would perform well given the limited staff and large number of schools he had.

Sopris Sun: How do you think the allegations against Mortensen will affect the work of Marshall Direct Fund and other development groups in the region?

Stainton: I think people are smart and in particular I think the American people are smart. I think just reading the books that he's put out has helped educate the public on the need for this kind of work, and has helped the military see the benefit of having schools and promoting education in that part of the world. I think it's going to be OK.

It's certainly made some NGOs a little bit nervous, but I think what we're trying to do is band together to help make sure that doesn't happen to other organizations, because nobody would want to see these children lose their schools.

Sopris Sun: In a nutshell, what's the link between education, particularly for girls, and the threat of terrorism?

Stainton: If you look at the high-jackers who flew the planes into the World Trade Center ... many of them actually did go to school, but none of their mothers were literate or had gone to school. This is very common in the world of extremism. Mothers

have a very important role in the direction their child takes - if they have fewer children and keep their eyes on the ones they do have and feed them or send them to school rather than having seven children and they can only send one kid and have six running in the street. Girls in Pakistan will normally have about four kids but if they go to school for five years they'll only have about two. So it has to do with their future role and influence as a mother. That's where you get the long-term payoff in preventing violence.

The Brookings Institution put out a report last year and it showed that in Pakistan, none of the children who went to NGO schools had so far been arrested for being in the Taliban. It was only children not in school, children from government schools, or children in madrassas that were involved. ... That shows it's not only about having them in school, it's about having them in the right kind of school that teaches them the thinking process to be critical, to make good choices.

Sopris Sun: Flesh that out a little. What's the importance of teaching critical thinking?

Stainton: [This] is one of the major problems in Pakistan: Their education system relies so much on rote learning. It's not enough just to teach skills to read or to teach math. The government schools sometimes will do that, but the government system is not teaching them to think and to think about problem solving. It's kind of creating generations of yes men instead of generations who will think, "Well, this is certainly not working and what can I do to change it?"

Fischer: Not all the madrassas in Pakistan are breeding future terrorists, but all of them are focusing on religious studies. So students are not learning science. They're not learning math. They're not learning critical thinking skills. They're memorizing the Koran. When parents are given a choice between religious schools and nonprofit schools like ours, nine out of ten don't necessarily want their children to have over 50 percent of their learning be religious studies. It's about choice. When parents are given a choice between a madrassa and a school like ours, they inevitably do [choose ours].

Sopris Sun: It sounds like the Global Kid Connect program offers a fresh perspective to the students who participate.

Stainton: Sometimes the kids will come to us straight from the battlefields of the Pash-tun areas. They come down to the cities and they've been driven out because of the [U.S.] drones attacking or the wars with the Pakistani Army fighting the extremists. At the beginning of their class these kids [are asked], "What do you think of Americans?" One of the boys who just had started the school said, "Oh, I think they're our number one enemy, and I think they want to kill us. They are trying to bomb us." This happens every year, but at the end of the program they say, "I didn't know I had so many friends in the U.S. and they want to help us."

It's eye-opening. Same thing with the Americans. It's eye-opening for them that they have so much in common with their peers in Pakistan.