

# ASPEN TIMES

## **Nonprofit is trekking for peace in Pakistan**

**Basalt-based group runs schools, vocation centers for women**

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BASALT — A Roaring Fork Valley-based nonprofit organization is fighting terrorism in Pakistan, one trek at a time.

The Marshall Direct Fund is combining a trip to Nepal with a visit to schools it operates in Pakistan in May. The trip will raise money to help children attend school and teach young women a vocation.

The fund was created in 2007 by Silbi Stainton when she lived in Carbondale. She now lives in Basalt. The organization has grown each year and now has an annual budget of about \$200,000. Stainton's family handles all fundraising and administrative expenses. All of the funds raised outside the family are applied to its programs.

The trek will raise funds specifically to train young women in Pakistan in a vocation and then turn that vocation into an entrepreneurial opportunity. Financial literacy is an important part of the studies, Stainton said.

Pakistan has a strong and growing middle class that is increasing the demand for services. The Marshall Direct Fund provides vocational training in everything from running a beauty salon to creating clothing and accessories to providing dried fruit for sale.

Stainton estimated that the nonprofit has provided scholarships to 200 women for vocational training. It's helped roughly 1,000 kids attend school. Its approach is different than other organizations.

“We do not invest in bricks and mortar,” Stainton said.

A school building is costly and likely will be converted into a barn or put

to some other use a few years down the road, she said. The fund rents buildings for as little as \$150 per month in U.S. dollars and operates a facility with five or six classrooms. That allows the organization to devote its resources to teachers and support staff.

“Our staff over there is 100 percent local,” she said.

The fund also provides free lunches for students as an enticement for their families to keep them in school. Young children often are pressed into work either in a family business or as something such as a maid, Stainton said. Providing a meal alleviates some of the family's pressure for food and helps offset the lost income from a child not working. It removes an obstacle for continuing education, she said.

Stainton believes keeping children in school is one key to defeating terrorism. The Taliban and other extremist organizations target young, impoverished and uneducated people in their recruitment efforts, she said.

The fund-organized trip in May will feature a four-day visit to the organization's schools and facilities in Pakistan.

“Due to Marshall Direct Fund's tenure in the region and its 25-plus staff members, partners and board members, this is a trip that will be both safe and culturally rich,” a Marshall Direct Fund news release said. “Participants will be allowed an opportunity to do and see things the average American will not get to in their lifetime.”

In an interview, Stainton estimated that she has visited Pakistan about 10 times. She said she never feels threatened there.

“It is more hospitable than any other country in the world, and I've traveled quite a bit,” Stainton said.

As an example of the hospitality, she said an entire family will come to pick her up at the airport, even if her flight arrives at 2 a.m. The whole population of a village will help make dinner for visitors, she said.

Nevertheless, “a lot of people are nervous about going to Pakistan,” Stainton said. The fund will provide a safe way to visit the country. Its schools and vocational training facilities are in Punjab in the center of the country. Most of the violence that occurs in Pakistan is in the

northwest part of the country, she said.

Ironically, perhaps, Stainton said she has been urged by the mother of one of her Pakistani students to move to the country for Stainton's own safety.

“There's so much violence in the U.S.,” the woman told her. Pakistanis have pointed out to her that in the U.S. there is so much random violence. They say they know who their enemies are – the extremists, Stainton said.

The four-day visit in Pakistan will be followed by eight days in Nepal featuring a tea house trek in the Himalayan Mountains. Tour operator One World Trekking is organizing the trip. Participants don't have to be accomplished mountaineers, Stainton said. They will stay in guest houses and won't be required to carry all their own gear. Trip logistics are described at [www.klimb4kashmir.org](http://www.klimb4kashmir.org).

Participants can do one leg or the other rather than both. For those that do both the trip costs \$2,800 and they are asked to raise another \$2,500 for Marshall Direct Fund.

The goal is to make the fundraising adventures an annual occurrence.

More on Marshall Direct Fund's history and mission can be found at [www.marshalldirectfund.org/](http://www.marshalldirectfund.org/).

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