

Liz Caile Essay Contest 2011

2nd place **Teagen Blakey** age:16

## "A Link of Peace"

Mahatma Gandhi, perhaps the most iconic symbol of peace, never won the Nobel Peace prize, despite five nominations. Today few would look to unsteady Pakistan, once part of the British dominated India that Gandhi sought to free, as a region where a Nobel Peace prize candidate could once more be found. Yet it was in this restless country where Greg Mortenson began a project seventeen years ago that has now spread throughout Pakistan and Afghanistan stone by stone.

While staying in the village of Korphe in 1993 Greg Mortenson watched as children, unable to attend a non-existent school, sketched in the arid sand of northern Pakistan with their sticks. In a world where many promises are made one year and then broken the next it wouldn't have been much of a surprise if Greg had later dismissed the resolution he made that day in Korphe. Instead Greg returned a year later to build the school he had promised. One school for the thousands of Pakistani children without means to an education was not enough for Greg Mortenson though.

Year after year more schools rose from the sand and stones of rural and sometimes volatile Pakistan. Then they extended into Afghanistan, despite the country's reputation as unstable and often violent. These two Islamic countries became a second home for Greg. After traveling through many different regions he came to know by heart what two answers the Islamic mothers would give him when he asked what they longed for most. They did not yearn for a luxurious life, or an encounter with Allah. They did not even wish for anything for themselves. All they hoped for was the fulfillment of two fundamental desires: for their

children to survive to adulthood, and for their children to be educated. This last answer encouraged Greg to strive further in the effort to build more schools and bring this basic wish to fruition.

The steadfast knowledge that what he was doing was right must have been something that Greg reminded himself of often for several years beginning in late 2001. At that time Greg Mortenson began receiving threats from his fellow Americans because of his efforts to build schools for Afghan children. Over the years Greg spent in Afghanistan though he learned what many Americans failed to realize as American troops deployed to Afghanistan. In essence he learned that "an eye for an eye only leaves one blind," as Gandhi once said in one form or another.

In Afghanistan, as civilians died at the hands of American troops, young men blinded by the desire for revenge joined the Taliban. However, it's considered a shameful deed for a man to do so without the blessings of his mother. By fulfilling one of the dearest wishes of thousands of Islamic women Greg likely influenced them in discouraging their sons from joining the Taliban.

While conflict only increased Taliban strength, Greg Mortenson's schools endeavored to bring peace. However the fact that roughly of eighty percent of the 68,000 children, who attended the new schools were girls, was not always one to be taken lightly by a strongly Islamic culture where women are subordinate to their male counter parts.

After the proposal to build a new school in a conservative area of the region, a group of armed tribal leaders arrived at one of Greg's previously constructed centers of education. Superficially, Greg calmly showed the men around the school, and ended their tense tour by taking them out to the small playground behind the building. At the sight of the still swings standing amid the expansive sandy landscape the men tossed aside their weapons and acted for all the world like young, carefree school boys as they swung through the air. By the end of their visit they

told Greg they would not only allow the proposed school, but that they would welcome it. The only condition was that the playground would be built first.

Not all of Greg's experiences have been as peaceful in this restless and sometimes hostile region of the world, but the people as a whole have greatly respected Greg's untiring efforts to build schools of peace throughout their countries. In 2009 Pakistan awarded Greg their highest recognition: the "Star of Pakistan." As a link of peace between the Western world and the Middle East it seems only fitting that Greg Mortenson should receive the Nobel Peace Prize as an international recognition for his work.