

Spreading hope



Roger Werth / The Daily News Nobel Peace Prize nominee Greg Mortenson talks about the plight of child soldiers in Africa on Tuesday at R.A. Long High School.

By Tony Lystra / The Daily News | Posted: Tuesday, March 1, 2011

The men threw down their guns. Each of them hardened fighters from the heart of Afghanistan, they had improbably come to Greg Mortenson to see about building a girls' school in their province.

But when they saw the swings on one of the playgrounds Mortenson helped build, they were sold on the idea of a school. They began to swing and smile and laugh. One of the men later revealed that he'd been orphaned as a young man and later taught to hate and fight the Soviets and anyone else who posed a threat. Here, on the swings, he could be a child again.

Millions of American dollars had been invested in the province. Thousands of bombs were dropped. But now "There is a single girls' school in that province because of a playground," Mortenson said.

Mortenson, a two-time Nobel Peace Prize nominee whose Central Asia Institute has built more than 145 schools in rural Afghanistan and Pakistan, recounted the story during two presentations at R.A. Long High School Tuesday.

Mortenson has authored two best-selling books about his efforts — "Three Cups of Tea" and "Stones Into Schools" — which have become required reading among top U.S. military commanders in Afghanistan, as well as in the nation's service academies and the capital's foreign policy circles. His trip to Longview was arranged by Lower Columbia CAP in conjunction with the local chapter of Altrusa International's 10th Annual Celebration of Literacy.

CAP executive director Ilona Kerby said her organization paid \$30,000 to bring Mortenson to Longview. The proceeds, she said, go to Mortenson's efforts to build schools in Central Asia.

Kerby said CAP nearly sold out of the \$35 tickets to Tuesday evening's presentation and had at least recouped the fee it paid Mortenson's organization — thanks in part to a \$500-per-couple private tea with Mortenson hosted Tuesday afternoon.

On Tuesday evening, two girls from Columbia Heights Elementary presented Mortenson with a check for \$4,901 — money raised at their school through Mortenson's Pennies for Peace program, which encourages kids to help pay for education abroad.

During an afternoon presentation to high school and middle school students and a longer, more sophisticated speech to a packed R.A. Long auditorium Tuesday night, Mortenson wove dozens of anecdotes of devastation, poverty, destruction and hope into a sort of pep talk. He left his audience with any number of messages, encouraging humility, perseverance, a respect of heritage and, above all, the power of education to transform war-ravaged Afghanistan - and even the U.S. military effort there.

Mortenson described how one young woman who graduated from an Afghan school for girls became a doctor, another a lawyer, and one, with a little extra training, a midwife who managed to lower the mortality rate among mothers giving birth in her province.

Overall, he said, only 800,000 kids were attending Afghan schools in 2000. A decade later that number had increased tenfold to around eight million. Instead of being housed in metal cargo containers and scratching out figures in the dirt, students are learning in brick-and-mortar buildings — and many of those students are female.

Mortenson said educated women are more likely to keep their sons from joining violent, militant movements and to help educate their neighbors. That, he said, is why the Taliban have resorted to splashing girls' faces with battery acid and bombing thousands of girls' schools to keep them uneducated.

This effort to build schools began with a terrible failure, Mortenson said. He had tried to climb K2, the world's second-highest mountain, in 1993, to honor his sister, who died of a seizure in her sleep a year earlier. But he never made the summit and, after nearly three months in the Pakistani wilderness, found himself exhausted and dirty.

A village took him in and helped him recover — so he promised to build them a school. Mortenson said he returned to the U.S. hoping to raise \$12,000. He sold his car. He wrote letters to celebrities (few responded.) And then when elementary school students learned of his plan they began kicking in their change, which made all the difference.

But the effort stalled, Mortenson said, because he was "micro-managing" the school's construction. In time, with the encouragement of the locals, he stepped back and let them do the work. Today, his organization asks communities to provide their own share of the labor, materials and land to build a school. That way the community is invested, and the Taliban dare not touch what's known to be a vital and popular community resource.

Mortenson's message for the U.S. military has been to partner with village elders, communicate openly with them, to bomb less and talk and build more. Gen. David Petraeus, the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan and former commander Gen. Stanley McChrystal have both read "Three Cups of Tea" and put its principals to use in the Afghan theater. Mortenson said he even arranged meetings for the commanders with village elders. Increasingly, the generals have agreed there is no military solution in Afghanistan. Rather, counterinsurgency has become a matter of partnership with the local leadership and educating the population.

"We cannot kill our way to victory," Mortenson quoted Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Mike Mullen as saying. "We need to listen."

For his Longview listeners, Mortenson said U.S. children should be encouraged to spend more time with their grandparents, learning about their families' and the nation's rich histories. Previous generations overcame huge obstacles, he said, and the generations to come need to learn how to surmount all that's ahead - including two wars, a troubled economy and environmental disasters.

Mortenson described efforts to bring Internet access to impoverished children and declared, "They need to go out and play!" That's how kids learn to solve problems, relate to people and build relationships. The remark drew wild applause from Tuesday night's audience of parents, teachers and community leaders.

During his presentation to students earlier in the day Mortenson told these people's children: "Just five, ten minutes a day — unplug from everything and listen to your heart a little bit."