

Local students turn pocket change into big change in Afghanistan



Bill Wagner / The Daily News: Columbia Heights fifth-graders who organized the school's Pennies for Peace drive surround Sara Penny, the one who got the ball rolling. From left: Hannah Anderson, Jayzee Ziegler, Kiara Pereault, Samantha Berglund, Sara Penny, Alexis Troy, Madison Mosier and Sarah Russell.

By Cathy Zimmerman / The Daily News | Posted: Sunday, February 20, 2011

When girls get good ideas, they can move mountains. Or better yet, build schools for other girls in rugged mountain villages half a world away.

A true story here in Longview shows that girls and mountains meet up in uncanny ways.

One day, Sara Penny sat outside the principal's office at Columbia Heights Elementary School, waiting to see him.

Sara had an idea. She's kind of shy, so she brought along a friend, Samantha Berglund.

Inside the office, Principal Jay Opgrande had just received information from the district about Pennies for Peace, a world campaign that collects loose change and funnels it to a project that builds schools in Afghanistan.

Opgrande, who was trying to figure out just what to do with the information, set it aside and called in Samantha and Sara.

In her quiet voice, Sara told Mr. Ogrande she wanted to do something for the people in Afghanistan.

"We couldn't believe it," said the school secretary, Jennifer Robinson.

In no time at all, Sara and Samantha were joined by six other friends from their fifth grade class. Together, they coordinated placing jars in each classroom and every day, collecting the pennies, dimes and quarters put inside for Pennies for Peace.

"This project is for girls and boys in Pakistan -- especially girls, to raise money so they can have a good education just like the boys," said Alexis Troy, a member of the group.

"It will go to Afghanistan, too," added Kiara Pereault.

How will the money get all the way to Asia?

"We'll transfer it to a bank check, and give it to Greg Mortenson," said Hannah Anderson.

And Sara supplied the finish: "He uses the money to buy supplies to make schools for girls."

"We don't know how lucky we are," said Madison Mosier. "They don't even have pencils. They have sticks in the dirt" to do their lessons.

"They could not even afford a teacher for a dollar a day there," Alexis said.

The girls got the concept of small change making big things happen. To round up change, "We asked our parents, first," said Jayzee Ziegler.

Fanning out into the community, the girls put jars in their parents' workplaces — dental offices, hair salons, Rotary clubs. They also collected money every day from jars placed in every classroom of their school.

Last week, they were bursting with pride at the amount Columbia Heights has raised.

They were also pumped because it's a contest: Mortenson is coming to Longview March 1, and whichever school raises the most for Pennies for Peace gets to send a student delegation to meet him and give him the final amount collected from numerous schools.

'Pass it on'

Greg Mortenson built his first school before the Columbia Heights girls were even born.

A mountain climber as well as a nurse, Mortenson was rescued by villagers after he got lost descending from Pakistan's K2 in 1993. To thank them, he promised to build a school — one that would enroll not just the boys, but also the girls he had seen doing arithmetic in the dirt.

Over the next 17 years, Mortenson "built more than a hundred schools," said Samantha of the Columbia Heights fifth graders.

In fact, Mortenson eventually constructed 145 schools that have educated 64,000 children. Although girls were not previously allowed to go to school in the remote region, girls have been allowed into Mortenson's schools because even the Taliban came to respect him.

His peace-making efforts, chronicled in the books "Three Cups of Tea" and "Stones into Schools," netted Mortenson a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize and inspired millions to support his efforts.

Pennies for Peace represents the student part of that campaign.

The project includes curriculum guides for all grade levels, lessons on history, politics and philanthropy; a CD and video presentation, book and movie lists and a website.

Just as a penny will buy a pencil that eventually propels a teen girl to become a nurse in Afghanistan, so Longview fifth graders can connect themselves to the wider world. Local

students learned that when a girl in rural Afghanistan goes to school, it benefits the whole community.

"Boys go to school there, and they go get jobs," explained Jayzee.

Girls can't get jobs, Sarah Russell added, "but when they go to school and get educated, they pass it on."

"Everyone has more knowledge," Alexis said.

What if these girls are the ones who get to meet Mortenson?

Kiara would say, "You're a nice person to change the lives of people in Afghanistan and Pakistan."

Samantha would say, "Wow, you built a lot of schools. That takes a lot of hard work."

Sarah would tell Mortenson she had fun collecting pennies, "and it's good to know we did it."

"I would say, 'Thank you so much,' " said Madison. " 'One person can make a big difference in the world and you've done a lot.' "

[Pennies for Peace Campaign](#)

- Thursday is the last day for contributions to the Pennies for Peace campaign in Longview public schools.

Anyone can drop off a donation at any neighborhood school.

- Greg Mortenson, Nobel nominee and author of the bestselling "Three Cups of Tea" and "Stones into Schools," will speak at 7 p.m. March 1st in the R.A. Long High School auditorium, 2903 Nichols Blvd., Longview.

The Lower Columbia Community Action Program (CAP) is sponsoring Mortenson's appearance here as part of Celebration of Literacy Week.

Tickets are \$35. Tickets can be purchased at www.lowercolumbiacap.org, at the CAP office at 1526 Commerce Ave. or by sending a check to CAP at P.O. Box 2770, Longview.

Tickets for a Sponsor's Reception from 4 to 5 p.m. March 1st cost \$500. Attendees will be able to meet Mortenson personally and get an autographed copy of "Stones into Schools." They also get a reserved seat for the 7:00 p.m. talk. For a sponsor's ticket, call Ilona Kerby at 425-3430.