

Three Cups of Tea, One Vision for Peace

“Life isn’t a straight path, and sometimes the detours make for the greatest adventures of all,” Trudy Hall, head of school, has said. A fateful detour for Greg Mortenson into a tiny mountain village in the Himalayas spawned an adventure he never could have imagined in 1993, when he began a climb up K2 in Pakistan. That detour led to a life’s work and a mission of building schools and helping educate girls in Pakistan and Afghanistan. It led to a book and a Nobel Peace Prize nomination. And it led him to Emma Willard this spring, to speak about his work and his mission.

The Emma community turned out in force to hear Greg Mortenson, author of the best selling *Three Cups of Tea*. The large crowd of 1,200 filled Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute’s Experimental Media & Performing Arts Center in Troy, in an appearance made possible by gifts from Lisa Allen LeFort ’72, Jack LeFort, and Anne F. Collins ’56.

Mortenson told of what he saw that day when he entered the little Himalayan village, exhausted and disoriented from his climb. Children were sitting outside, writing with sticks in the dirt. There was no school, no books, no teacher. The villagers helped him regain his health and strength, and he vowed to help the town build a school for the children.

Since then, Mortenson has devoted his time to raising funds and building schools in the mountain villages of Pakistan and Afghanistan. He believes we can achieve peace through education, particularly by educating girls.

“The key is in empowering communities and letting go and not controlling from the top down,” he said. “We can’t solve poverty from a think tank in Washington.”

Mortenson inspired the crowd with his words, and after the talk he spent the afternoon on campus, signing books and speaking with students and others in the community.

Shibani Das ’10 and Mackenzie Smith ’10 were impressed by Mortenson’s personal knowledge of the people and cultures of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Both young women participated in the Emma Willard fund drive for Mortenson’s cause, Pennies for Peace, which eventually netted \$4,254.17.

The larger Emma community was represented by faculty and alumnae, parents, and local residents. Uzma Jamil ’95 said the talk reminded her “of how much I appreciate the fact that I come from a high school that values the importance of engaging with the world.” And Troy resident Georgia Kelly wrote to say, “It was truly an inspiring and timely message of conviction, faith, and perseverance. Thank you, Emma Willard, for embracing the community with such a vision of hope and transformation!” 

