



Laketown students hear from educator and philanthropist

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When visiting author Greg Mortenson asked students at Laketown Elementary School Thursday to list some of the things they have that children in Afghanistan and Pakistan lack, dozens of hands shot into the air.

The kids were well aware that they have more luxuries -- their list included Wii video games, television and lots of clothes.

Mortenson, who has established more than 140 schools and another five dozen temporary refugee schools in the two countries, described some of the difficulties children in that region of the world encounter when they try to get an education.

He said he's seen children write in the dirt with sticks because they don't have any school supplies. Some walk three hours just to get to the nearest school, he said.

Mortenson delivered a talk at the University of Illinois Springfield's Sangamon Auditorium Thursday night. Before that, he stopped at Laketown Elementary.

He is co-author of the New York Times bestseller "Three Cups of Tea," director of the Central Asia Institute and founder of Pennies for Peace.

"Three Cups of Tea" is mandatory reading for all U.S. military commanders and Special Forces deploying to Afghanistan, according to a news release. The book is about the importance of education and how forming relationships are important.

The title, "Three Cups of Tea," comes from a saying about how strangers can turn into friends.

"The first cup of tea, you're a stranger; the second cup of tea, you're a friend; and the third cup of tea, you're family," Mortenson said. "What it means is we have to build relationships if we want to get something done."

Mortenson is getting help from schoolchildren across the United States. The kids collect pennies, and the money is used to buy school supplies for students and teachers in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

"Pennies for Peace is in 5,400 schools in this country. One of the goals is to teach children that they can make a difference," Mortenson said.

Students at Laketown are involved in the program.

"We've started in many different classrooms at many different grade levels. We hope to continue for a couple of months," said Asima Rahman, a second-grade teacher at the school.

Rahman said the students have been introduced to Mortenson's work and want to help.

"It's been going wonderfully. The kids are so enthusiastic about being able to help children in Afghanistan and Pakistan," Mortenson said.

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