

Mountain High Aspirations

Lauren Allen

Just a short jaunt off the Karakorum Highway sits the Kaghan valley nestled among soaring mountains, lush green landscape, and the beauty of a small river that peacefully carves its way through the mountain peaks. Almost barely notable is a village called Kawai, a whistle-stop for any tourist venturing to bigger and better known destinations up in the northern mountains of Pakistan. For me this is where the journey ends. Each morning I enter the school with the red roof as a hundred and thirty children scale the mountains from every direction, hoping to arrive at school in time to say “good morning, Teacher” before the morning assembly.

Thirty two little bodies occupy my classroom each day. Sixty four eyes stare up at me as I give my lessons, the same eyes that not so long ago filled with tears at the anguish of losing loved ones, shelter, and livelihoods in the devastating earthquake of 2005. It is truly breathtaking, the paradox of the natural beauty against the devastation caused by a geologic movement beneath the earth’s crust. Three hundred and twenty tiny fingers cling tightly to their pencils and paper, as if these meager school supplies are the only things that can sustain them in life.

Each day, I feel, we come closer and closer to the goal for these precious little souls- freedom through education. While they have a far way to go from grade 1, I can’t help but think that these fundamentals will set the pace for the rest of their years as students. Letters, numbers, sharing, how to brush our teeth and wash our hands--these are the practices that I am privileged to be able to share with all thirty two children as we learn together under the red roof. They relish every moment of attention given to them, the smallest encouragement translates into a fierce source of joy in their eyes. The small day to day victories spur me on in hopes that they will recognize the value that rests inside of them.

Finally, today, we had another victory in class 1B. It may be small by some standards, but I could not contain my excitement as I leapt up and down, clapping and yelling “good job”. Ranish wrote his name. Every other child can write their name, but Ranish has not even seemed able to recognize any letters yet. Today, with a little encouragement, but no help, he wrote his complete name.

It is not only that Ranish was able to write his complete name today, but the fact that I saw a confidence in him radiating in a way that was unseen in this student before. His eyes shown with excitement knowing that he had done something praiseworthy- that he is capable of conquering challenges (however small) that may lie in his path. My hope as an educator is to nurture and feed that spark, not only in Ranish, but into the very character of all thirty two children. My aspiration is that one day they will know their worth and be able to recognize the worth in others, having overcome the obstacles of growing up in a once-forgotten, earthquake devastated village called Kawai.

The author is an American who came to Paksitan in 2009 to volunteer as a primary school teacher at the Kaghan Memorial School, a project of the Kaghan Memorial Trust.