

Climbing-inspired Non-profit Educates Girls Abroad

By Lizzy Scully



Heidi Wirtz

Climber, Yogi, Explorer

“Climbing has brought many great and wonderful things to my life. For one it has brought me a heightened sense of connection with nature and my surroundings as well as greater self-awareness, an amazing extended family of friends, happiness and tons of joy. It has also taught me how to deal with life's challenges and how to appreciate even the smallest gifts. Climbing has been the greatest school of life that I could have found.”

When Heidi Wirtz and I started Girls Education International just over three years ago, neither of us knew what we were getting into. We started from scratch, banking on a long-term desire we both had to give back to the people of mountainous areas we explored. After more than a decade of climbing together, we decided to start a nonprofit that would offer educational opportunities to under-served girls in remote regions of the world. We first sought to work in the village Khane in Pakistan, a place we visited just after attempting to climb the Ogre's Thumb, off the Biafo Glacier.

Our proposal won the Zak Martin Breaking Barriers Grant, an AAC grant that couples activism with climbing expeditions. We used that grant to pay for an assessment of the situation in Khane. We quickly began to understand that, due to political unrest in the country and local instability in Khane, we could not just sashay into the village and establish a school for girls. Without an established organizational infrastructure, such as a locally-based non-governmental organization (NGO), in place, we would never get local support for the project. Because of these seemingly insurmountable obstacles, our philanthropic endeavors for Khane dead-ended.



Lizzy Scully

Open, Expansive, Connected

“For the past 15 years my life has been wholly climbing focused. As I get older, the obsession is transforming into a more relaxed, pure love of movement in the mountains. Still, there is nothing I love more than being on the side of a 1000-foot rock face.”

As we mulled over this unforeseen roadblock, the opportunity arose to partner with a local NGO Liberia. It wasn't a region we had climbed in or that even had climbing, but the partnership unfolded so naturally that we just went with it. Our partner, the female-staffed Common Ground Society, had already developed and implemented educational programs for children in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia. Thus, as we entered the second year of our organization, we and our newly formed board of directors agreed to fund scholarships for 47 middle and high school girls in Bong and Margibi counties. The program, which costs just \$5000 per year, is nearing the end of its second year and still going strong.

Equipped with the knowledge we gleaned from our work in Liberia, we continued to seek partners in Pakistan. In the summer of 2009, after four false starts, we connected with Bedari, a Pakistan NGO that works with women and girls. Then, in April of this year, we realized our goal to work in Pakistan. Though we were unable to start a project in Khane, we established a secondary school scholarship program for 30 girls of the villages Laphi and Sar Kalan, in the Salt Range in the District Chakwal. The scholarships pay for tuition, uniforms, textbooks and the cost of daily transportation to a Government Higher Secondary School in the neighboring village of Buchal Kalan. Without these scholarships, these girls would be unable to attend school because their villages do not have secondary schools for girls and their families cannot afford to pay for the daily transportation.

Heidi and I have climbed numerous big walls together, including the first free ascent of the South Howser Minaret in the Bugaboos. We have accomplished much in both our personal lives and our careers—Heidi as a professional climber and me as a writer/editor. But, from my perspective, none of my accomplishments match providing nearly 80 little girls with educational opportunities they would not have had otherwise.

Girls Education International recently hired a new Executive Director. They seek to raise \$50,000 in the next year. For more information or to support the organization, visit their website: www.girlsed.org.