



**Leslie Mass, Ph.D.**

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## **Peace Corps Volunteer returns to Pakistan and continues her service to education**

*"I have a new respect for the sophistication, expertise, and competence of Pakistanis trying to make a difference. [...] I look forward to many more encounters with Pakistani people and would like to continue to work with teachers and teacher trainers rebuilding the education system in Pakistan."*

**Leslie Mass** is a wife, mother, grandmother, long-distance hiker and runner. At 60, she thru-hiked the 2,000 mile Appalachian Trail and later wrote a book *In Beauty May She Walk*.

She has run several marathons, including Boston. Now retired from full-time teaching, she is once again a volunteer in many organizations including [The Citizens Foundation \(TCF\)\\*](#), the education non-profit that invited her to return to Pakistan in 2009 with Peace Corps colleagues Barbara Janes and Nancy Parlin who also served with Leslie Mass in Pakistan in the early 1960's.

These three amazing women went to Pakistan in summer 2009 to work with teachers and children in Science Summer Camps at TCF, following which Leslie published a book *Back to Pakistan: A Fifty-Year Journey* about her experiences in Pakistan and at TCF.

\* TCF has 730 quality schools for 102,000 children, half of them girls (April 2011). Enrollment is expected to be 112,000 with 50-60 additional schools in 2012.

Having been a classroom teacher — pre-school to graduate school for 28 years; an education consultant in England, Italy, Brazil, Canary Islands, Pakistan and in Native American Indian Reservations; a school administrator, and a teacher trainer — Leslie contributes a wide-ranging perspective on the challenges faced by Pakistan and its capacity to solve its numerous problems.

Dr. Mass is planning another trip to Pakistan in July 2012 to assist with teacher training. She is well-informed about the issues, including *madrassas* in Pakistan. Her passion to help in Pakistan is evident in this conversation.



*A new leaf – hope and promise of a better future*

***Based on your 2009 visit to Pakistan and interactions with people at TCF and elsewhere, you are complimentary of the abilities of Pakistanis and their capacity to solve the problems faced by Pakistan today. What is the basis for your optimism?***

It is encouraging that Pakistanis recognize and accept the problems of the educational system and are willing – and *able* – to do something about them. This is commendable and extremely important to success. The change I saw in summer 2009 is that the current East-meets-West thinking is more sophisticated and informed than I found it to be in the 1960's. As a school system, TCF is responsive to the people it serves. It operates with a sense of responsibility, accountability, purpose, and dignity at every level. Its commitment to providing good schools that are accessible and affordable in a way that includes all Pakistanis — the privileged as well as the disenfranchised — justifies my optimism.

In addition to interviews, I also had the opportunity to observe TCF workers in action. I was amazed at the efficiency and resourcefulness I saw at every level.

Requests were filled and assignments completed without excuses. The ethic of accountability and transparency touches every aspect of this Pakistani organization.



**Leslie Mass in Dhamke, Punjab (1962) as a Peace Corps volunteer.**



***For the bigger picture of national education, how would you suggest 'rebuilding' or reform of Pakistan's education system? Does TCF provide a model for national reform?***

The work of TCF exemplifies the commitment to education and educational reform that is missing from the public sector. A management system is essential. TCF offers a transparent and accountable management model that the government must follow as it begins to rebuild the public education system.

Teacher training, affordability, accessibility for students and realistic options for families are essential. TCF is built on this foundation and they are willing to share their expertise with government and non-government organizations. This must be done. US foreign aid dollars should not be given *carte blanche* to the government education system because the government system of education does not reach the people for whom it is intended.

Instead, aid should go to the successful private systems like a consortium of successful NGOs with the stipulation that these private systems work with the government to rebuild a public school system from the ground up.

In my view, the re-training of all government teachers, principals and school administrators to be responsive and accountable to their constituents, holding teachers and administrators responsible for their actions, providing well-equipped school buildings in all areas for both girls and boys, providing for adult education, and creating an ethic of concern for the community and citizenship for the nation — these are all essential to education reform.

Once these basic building blocks are in place, a review of the national curriculum would be in order. Rote memorization of material does not educate the student to think critically.

For an educated citizenry, even the least gifted can be taught in such a way that they can make informed decisions and be independent thinkers.



***You have done a fair amount of research into madrassas. What is your assessment of the 'madrassa' in Pakistan?***

I talked with a number of educators and private citizens about *madrassas* in Pakistan. I have also read a great many articles about the history, mission and current views of *madrassa* education, including the view that *madrassas* in Pakistan are a breeding ground for extremist training. Most Pakistanis I spoke with dismissed the notion of *madrassas* as jihadist training grounds. The prevailing view that I encountered was that *madrassas* have been part of the religious education system for over one hundred years and that the overwhelming majority of these *madrassas* in Pakistan focus on their appropriate role in religious education.

More than once, however, someone reminded me of the role that the CIA played in promoting jihad in the *madrassas* in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation. In my view, the idea of Pakistani *madrassas* as training grounds for terrorists is overblown by the media and not helpful in brokering understanding between ordinary American and Pakistani citizens.



**(2009) Leslie visits Mrs. Rana, her host in Dhamke 1962-64.**



### ***What are your impressions, observations of TCF — as an organization?***

For impressions of The Citizens Foundation and from my lens as a Peace Corps Volunteer of the early 1960's and a retired educator, I met and interviewed many people from every level of TCF — from its Founders to *ayaas* (maids) at TCF schools — in Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, Khanewal, Sheikhpura and Keti Bundar.

Everyone was most gracious and I came away with a wealth of information about how TCF works and an intuitive and objective understanding of why. My questions were intentionally open-ended i.e., “Tell me how you came to be involved with TCF” or “How do you think TCF will be in the future?”

The Founders talked to me about their initial involvement with TCF, their current role and the future they envision for TCF. Senior managers and directors, depending on their specific responsibilities, talked about their job descriptions, sustainability of the organization, and the quality of education they hope to deliver in the future. Regional and area managers talked about the logistics of distribution and their responsibilities with supervision and evaluation. Principals talked mostly about the many duties they perform as administrators and their roles as on-site teacher trainers; teachers talked about everyday teaching concerns and the benefits of teaching at a TCF school. The students and parents talked about their own experiences in a TCF neighborhood and the benefits of attending a TCF school as opposed to a government or other private school. The *ayaas* talked about their interactions with the children and parents and their own experiences with TCF.

I also spoke informally with the school van drivers. They were proud of the role they played in transporting teachers, visitors, and delivering supplies. I asked a lot of different people about their experiences with education in Pakistan and did a lot of listening. Most people I talked with had little respect for the government in general and no trust in government schools.

My overall impression of TCF employees is that they are happy to be part of the TCF family and are eager to show their organization off to its best advantage.



***What were the concerns you had before your recent visit to Pakistan?***

Before I returned to Pakistan in 2009, many people cautioned me about safety and were concerned that I might encounter hostile or aggressive behavior because I am an American woman.

With the exception of rude staring and intrusive attempts at conversation by some young men in public places, I never experienced a moment of inappropriate behavior from anyone. On the contrary, I was treated with extreme courtesy and gracious hospitality everywhere I went.

I had no hesitation to shop in the bazaars, eat in public restaurants, or travel on public transportation. While I did see more armed sentries and security personnel in the roadways and in front of government civil and military buildings than I had in the 1960's, I never felt afraid or in any danger.

People were curious about why I had chosen to visit Pakistan in 2009 and most expressed appreciation and thanks for my having done so. I am grateful to my hosts The Citizens Foundation and TCF-USA for making my return trip to Pakistan memorable and successful.

I look forward to many more encounters with Pakistani people and would like to continue to work with teachers and teacher trainers rebuilding the education system in Pakistan.



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