

Wendy Chamberlin spends a day trying to redesign her website. The Middle East Institute has a large educational arm, where anyone off the street can learn the region's languages or get cultural acclimation, and she's looking to expand those programs. Online is the way to go.

On this late spring afternoon in 2008, after her assistant has left, she finds herself thinking about the big idea, the way to transmit to the world what she considers true American values—values, she feels, that have been twisted in this era by the plans and prerogatives of official power. Over the past months, she's sketched out this idea or that, some combination of the Marshall Plan and the Peace Corps, but different—tailored, somehow, to what's needed now.

And today, like other days, she keeps coming back to the same moment, something that happened in 2005 that changed her.

On that spring day almost exactly three years ago, her helicopter left at dawn from Khartoum, Sudan—the headquarters, in the mid-1990s, of Osama bin Laden—headed for an enormous refugee camp in Darfur, three hundred miles west.

Chamberlin, then the acting UN High Commissioner for Refugees, had a meeting at the camp with UN officials and representatives of the Sudanese government. Such meetings were always tense. The situation in Darfur was worsening by the day—and it was the kind of crisis she was convinced the world would be seeing more of. The immediate cause was climate change, a rapid rise in temperatures that had turned northern Darfur, the western edge of Sudan that borders Chad, into a wasteland. Most of Sudan's 40 million people were Arabic-speaking Africans, including northern Darfur's African Arab tribes, who were forced by drought to migrate south with their cattle. They began to fight with non-Arab Africans in southern Darfur—a group that had long sought independence—in a conflict that rapidly escalated in 2003, when the Sudanese government began arming northern Darfur's brutal Janjaweed militias. By 2004, as the slaughter—and the displacement of millions—was well under way, Colin Powell called it genocide, “a consistent and widespread pattern of atrocities.”

A year later, Chamberlin arrived at an enormous tent city of fifteen thousand refugees. In the few hours before her meeting with government officials, she realized that the entire refugee camp was run by a twenty-seven-year-old American, a young man just four years out of college.

Among the dizzying problems at hand was the matter of how women who had to leave the refugee camp to collect firewood were being raped and murdered by Janjaweed militants. The young man, who worked for an NGO, Refugees International, had negotiated a tenuous truce with

the government so that representatives of the African Union—sort of a mini-UN, representing fifty-three African countries—could accompany the women.

"This one kid had to be the liaison to the government, which was hostile—they'd burned all the villages in this region, which had created the camp—while making sure all the food and water actually made it to the people."

In the big tent at midday, the arguments about the attacks on the women raged between Sudanese officials, Chamberlin, and a representative from the UN Human Rights Commission stationed at the camp. The young man was silent.

Afterward, he and Chamberlin stood outside in the 120-degree heat.

"Why didn't you say anything?" she asked.

"If I say anything too strident to the Sudanese officials," he explained, "they'll just kick me out. They'll declare me persona non grata, and then who will do what I do now?"

"I realized," Chamberlin recalls, "that the guy from the UN Human Rights Commission, who was fairly ineffectual, had his role: to wave his finger in the faces of the Sudanese about the women or delayed shipments of food and water. You needed someone with a diplomatic presence, who had some protection.

"But it was the kid—this American kid—who was holding it all together."

Chamberlin remembers standing there, speechless, feeling, she says, the young man's "vulnerability and responsibility. I asked him 'How are you managing this?' "

He didn't say anything for a minute, as though no one had ever asked him this.

"I feel responsible for the lives of these people," he said.

Two years later, sitting in her Washington office, Chamberlin can hear his voice, and see him standing there.

"I'll bet every one of those fifteen thousand people knew that kid, who, without preaching to them or telling them what to do or how to be more like us, was their lifeline. And none of those people he managed to keep alive will ever forget that. They'd met an American."

Today, as she packs up her briefcase, Wendy Chamberlin—who, like so many other characters in this American drama, simply wants to feel the surge of moral energy again—has her program, her big idea.

"I want to multiply that kid by a thousand, by ten thousand, and give him anything he needs."