

John Prendergast

ON THE

'responsibility to protect' moment

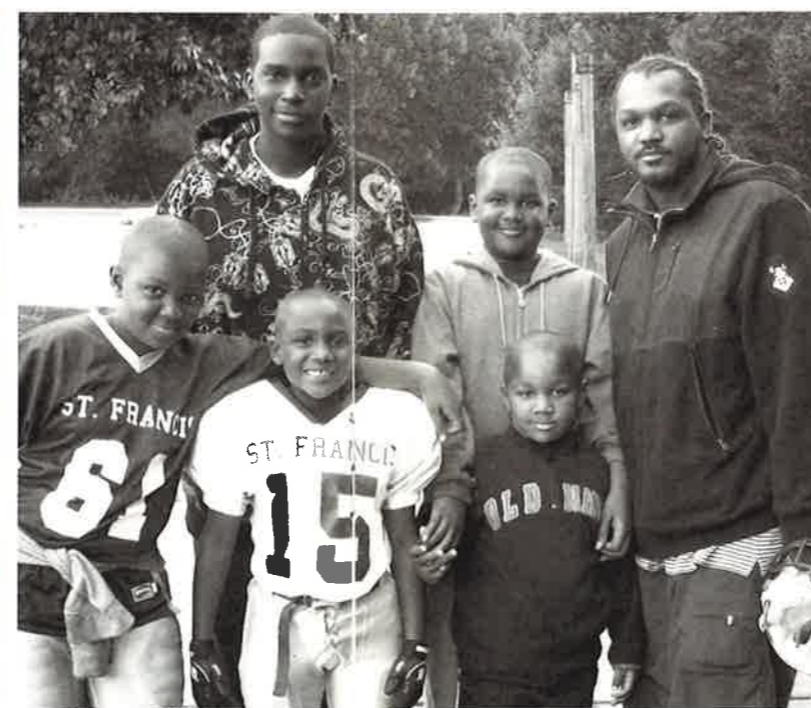
Charlotte Tucker

John Prendergast was 21 and a Temple University undergraduate when he took in three brothers in need of a place to stay. Their mother was going through tough times and the boys, ages 7, 6 and 5, needed a stable living situation and a male influence while she looked for work and a permanent place to live.

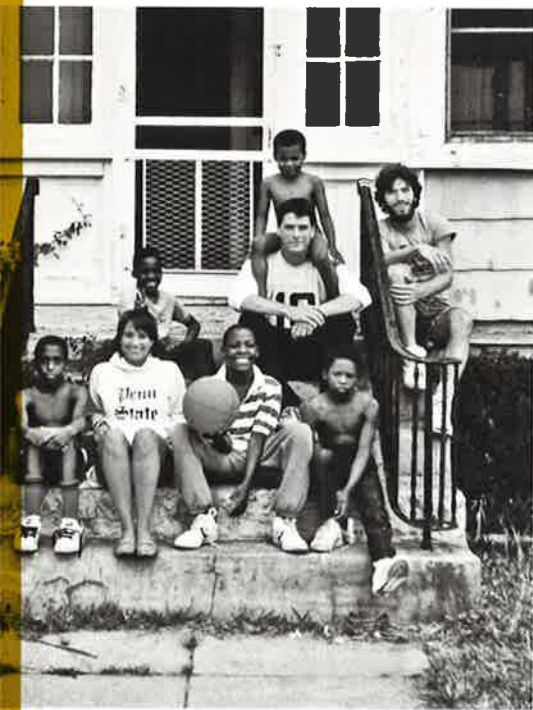
It was an unconventional choice for a college student and one that set the stage for Prendergast — who describes himself at the time as an itinerant trying to “gather no moss” — to become one of the loudest and most dedicated advocates for social justice.

Today he is the author or co-author of 11 books and drops names like George (Clooney) and President Clinton into conversation. He’s also the co-founder of the Enough Project, a human rights group based in Washington, D.C., that aims to build a permanent constituency to prevent genocide and crimes against humanity.

Temple was the fifth college Prendergast attended, and by taking a few classes and



Clockwise from top left: A family scene taken from John Prendergast's latest book, *Unlikely Brothers*; Prendergast doing field work in Southern Sudan ©2010 Tim Freccia/Enough Project; Prendergast, brother Michael Mattocks and his sons Marco, Ginino, Arturo, Mike, Rolando, courtesy *Unlikely Brothers*; A field work project in Africa, courtesy the Enough Project, Jim Trussell.



amassing internship credits, he received his BA in urban studies in 1986.

"I really feel that was my incubation period for my social justice career," he said. "Those years at Temple and with the boys that summer was what began my lifelong commitment to social justice and human rights."

His relationship with one of those brothers, Michael Mattocks, is the basis for a book published in May. Titled, *Unlikely Brothers: Our Story of Adventure, Loss*

and Redemption, the book is a dual memoir that follows Prendergast and Mattocks through their first meeting and the intervening years. Their paths diverge and meet again as Prendergast works toward preventing genocide and Mattocks enters the world of drug dealing before eventually moving on with Prendergast's help. Prendergast — JP to his friends — said the book seeks to show people the value of mentor relationships.

It was while he was getting to know Mattocks and his brothers that Prendergast first became acutely aware of the suffering of people in Ethiopia during that country's 1984 famine.

"I was shocked by the enormity of the human suffering," he said. "As an American coming from a place of relative prosperity, I didn't understand how this was happening."

He was still working with Mattocks and his family when he got a visa and set off for Africa, a decision he now calls "foolhardy." He had never so much as read a book about the political situation in Ethiopia, Prendergast said, but his life's path was set.

"It was a strange brew of two separate paths that led me to where I am today," he said. Working with Mattocks and his family and seeking social justice in Africa are similar in

that "they're both about the ones who get left behind — the people society abandons."

Prendergast's admittedly broad goal in going to Ethiopia — which he continues to pursue even today — is to build a constituency of people working to end human suffering.

"It matters to me that we do all we can," he said.

Some of Prendergast's most visible work has been in Sudan — both in ending the genocide in Darfur and preventing war after a vote in January 2011 for South Sudan to secede from the North. He is an agitator for peace, in a sense, calling attention to issues in countries that are often ignored by the West and force politicians to use diplomacy to advocate on behalf of people whose voices might not otherwise be heard.

He does not advocate sending in troops to these situations. Rather, through the Enough Project, Prendergast aims to build the political will to intervene diplomatically. He believes war and genocide can be prevented if the right people speak up and demand it.

"If there are thousands of people clamoring — people saying to ignore the isolationists and act — then governments can't ignore that."

He sees students as the key to the movement. They are often the most engaged and the ones who are most likely speak up, as they did during Darfur, he said.

During a speech delivered to members of STAND, the student-led division of the non-profit group Genocide Intervention Network, Prendergast said he wished STAND had been created when he was in school.

"I'd have gotten my [stuff] together a lot earlier," he said.

He spoke to the group about the work they're doing to prevent genocide.

To those who doubt the ability to prevent war and genocide, Prendergast said they need only look as far as the January referendum in Sudan. In the year leading up to that vote,

in which the oil-rich South, which contains about 80 percent of the future revenue streams for the country, seemed poised to vote for secession from the North. Intelligence agencies around the world predicted wholesale war if that happened.

"It would have been a very dangerous moment to turn away," Prendergast said. Instead, he and George Clooney embarked on a media blitz. They appeared on more than 20 national television programs, urging the U.S. and other governments to take action.

He makes no apologies for teaming up with celebrities as part of the cause.

"I say ally yourself with people who have a big stage," he said.

During that media blitz, the goal was to inform the general public about the predictions for Sudan and urge them to contact their elected officials to urge that something be done.

"We always show up late," Prendergast said, referring to the tendency of the government



John Prendergast, Kofi Annan, George Clooney and President Jimmy Carter discuss the importance of maintaining momentum in efforts to keep attention on Abyei and Darfur, on the second day of voting in South Sudan's bid for independence. ©2010 Tim Freccia/Enough Project

And slowly the wheels began to turn. Their work began to pay off. The United States and other governments — the British and the French, as well as the Arab League — made it known that the referendum had to happen on time. They deployed leverage and that leverage worked.

"This is our responsibility-to-protect moment," he told the students at STAND. "Sudan demonstrates that soft power, nonmilitary power, the introduction of nonmilitary tools can actually avert conflict."

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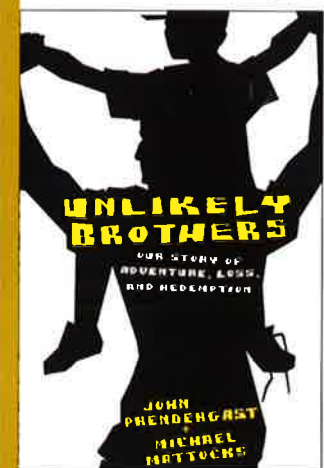
to try to put out diplomatic fires rather than preventing them. "We said, 'This time, let's prevent it.'"

The media blitz was also a diplomacy blitz. Prendergast and others reached out to the Obama administration; turning to diplomats they had come to know over the years and beseeching them to not turn a blind eye on Sudan in the run-up to the referendum. They met with Obama himself, and everywhere they asked the same question: If you knew the genocide in Darfur could have been prevented, what would you have done?

In January, South Sudan voted with a greater-than 98 percent margin, to secede. The vote was peaceful, and according to media reports, Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir said he welcomed the results.

Prendergast said the region is not out of the woods yet but that the effort should be applauded.

"When in one quarter of one year, we saw the international community come together to prevent mass atrocities. It is literally an unprecedented moment." ENOUGH PROJECT



Above: Photos from Prendergast's *Unlikely Brothers*. The book follows Prendergast's relationship with Michael Mattocks and is meant to inspire others to become mentors.