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In Memoriam: Peter Howard Backes 1963 - 1997

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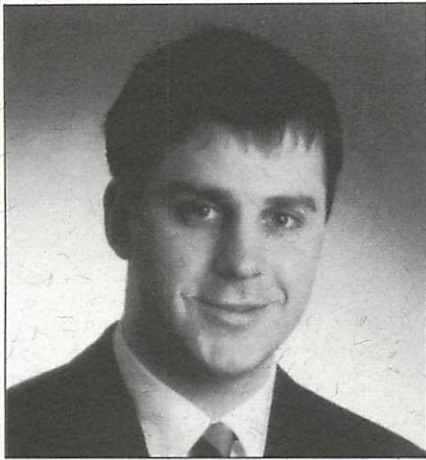
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IN MEMORIAM

Peter Howard Backes 1963-1997



The Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law and *The Brief* have lost one of their greatest friends. On September 17, 1997, Peter Backes died together with eleven colleagues from Germany, the United States, Great Britain, and Poland in a helicopter crash near Fojnica in central Bosnia-Herzegovina. Peter Backes graduated from the LL.M. program at WCL in 1995. He was a highly respected and loved alumni of WCL.

Peter truly loved Washington, D.C. He was born there in 1963, and then raised in Germany, where he also became an attorney. Many times, however, he had confided to his friends in the LL.M. program that the year 1994-95 in Washington was one of the happiest of his life. During that year he was a well-known and active member of WCL's community. He was an editor of *The Brief* and he helped organize various conferences and events hosted by the Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law. He refused to let himself be categorized in one of the four specialties of the International Legal Studies Program because he was convinced that all fields of law were interrelated. His deepest interest lay in the field of international relations and the mediating role that international law can play in solving conflicts.

On February 1, 1996, Peter became the personal legal advisor to Dr. Schwarz-Schilling, the International Mediator to the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. In that capacity, he assisted Dr. Schwarz-Schilling (a former cabinet member who

resigned from the Kohl government partly out of protest to the European Balkan policy during the early years of the conflict) on various mediation missions on the local and federal level, with the goal of ensuring cooperation and peaceful co-habitation between Croats and Muslims in the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Peter traveled to Bosnia 14 times and had begun to love the region and its people. He became so involved in the international efforts to secure a lasting peace in Bosnia, that he could often talk about nothing else. After every trip to Bosnia, he became more and more convinced of the need to arrest the indicted war criminals. Often, he would contact the War Crimes Research Office at WCL, after he had returned from a mission to Bosnia, and would explain again that there would be no peace without some form of justice and the removal from power of the criminals who obstructed progress and reconciliation. During those conversations, Peter demonstrated strong emotion and anger at the obstructionist and criminal leaders of Bosnia who are preventing the implementation of the Dayton Agreement and a process of reconciliation and reconstruction.

Peter himself had taken the initiative to go on what would be his last mission to Bosnia. He felt that it was important to witness the local elections in Bosnia on September 14, 1997. He wanted to be there, to be a part of the process. He wanted to go to the so called "hot spots" where he had previously been with Dr. Schwarz-Schilling and where they had had the most difficult meetings with unreconcilable local leaders. After having observed the elections, Peter decided to stay in Bosnia a few days longer. He joined an international team which included Ambassador Dr. Gerd Wagner and Deputy of the High Representative for Bosnia-Herzegovina, Carlos Westendorp, which would go to another region of Bosnia that Peter knew well. There, too, he desperately wanted to see if there had been any progress since his last visit. The tragic accident in the hills of Bosnia ended his mission for peace and justice.

On September 26, 1997, a memorial service was held for Peter in a church out-

side of Bonn. Hundreds of people gathered to share their grief, including several of Peter's best friends from his time in Washington. Dr. Schwarz Schilling recalled Peter as being extremely intelligent and full of ideas; irreplaceable in short. He explained that Peter Backes had become well-known in the international communities' effort's for peace in Bosnia; he was admired by many. The Rudolf-Walther Foundation which has built "Children's Villages" around the world and which was also active for children who were victims of the war in Bosnia, announced that it intended to name a street after Peter in the Children's Village in Lukavac. This project which would house 150 children and 40 elderly could not have been possible without Peter's help.

Many of us, his family, his friends, and colleagues around the world have asked the same questions: Is he really no longer with us? Why? Even though we will never be able to understand, the memory of Peter lives on inside all of us. He was a man full of humor and warmth, who treasured his friendships across borders. We will always remember his laughter and his love for singing out loud. Peter not only stood for the values which had been taught to us in law school, he lived for them. Dr. Schwarz-Schilling said of Peter: "He had a very bright mind, but was also full of modesty and "charm" as if he knew that he would precede us on that last road on which we will all finally have to go. He concentrated his passion on one goal; without fear and full of energy he dedicated himself to peace, justice and human rights . . . and thus he gave all of us something that stays, something that can not be erased . . . He will always be an incentive and example for us all to continue his struggle for a lasting peace in this war-torn country; for justice and human rights; for the values he believed in so strongly, the values that were his life." (Unofficial translation of speech by Dr. Schwarz-Schilling at Memorial Service)

The Washington College of Law has lost one of its greatest friends and we shall never forget him. ☹