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Alumni Profile

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ALUMNI PROFILE



ROCHUS PRONK, a 1995 L.L.M. Washington College of Law (WCL) graduate, attributes much of his professional success to his time at WCL. As the founder of WCL's War Crimes Research Office and notable contributor to the *Human Rights Brief*, he has left a lasting impression on WCL.

Since beginning his legal studies at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands, Mr. Pronk focused his efforts on international human rights and humanitarian law. In 1992, his interest drove him to pursue an internship with the Legal Resource Center (a human rights law firm in Johannesburg, South Africa), where he assisted in legal challenges to the apartheid government. In 1994, as a result of his internship, Mr. Pronk worked as an election observer in Malawi and in the first post-apartheid elections in South Africa.

After graduating from law school in 1994, Mr. Pronk's interest in the newly developed international criminal tribunals of Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia motivated him to enroll in WCL's Master of Law Program as a Fulbright scholar. At WCL, Mr. Pronk soon became involved in the Center for Human Rights and

Humanitarian Law. He also joined the editorial board of the *Human Rights Brief*, to which he contributed a number of articles, including: *Toward an Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* and *Prosecutor Goldstone Offers Views on War Crimes Tribunal*, an interview with the Chief Prosecutor for the International Criminal Tribunals in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda.

During his interview with Robert Goldstone, Mr. Pronk invited the Chief Prosecutor to deliver the keynote speech at a seminar on the international tribunals. At the seminar, Goldstone mentioned the need for more academic support of the Office of the Prosecutor for the International War Crimes Tribunals (OTP) and Mr. Pronk's vision of the research office was born. Following Mr. Pronk's graduation from WCL in 1995, and with the encouragement of the Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law Directors, WCL's Dean Claudio Grossman and Professors Robert Goldman, Diane Orentlicher and Herman Schwartz, Mr. Pronk developed a project proposal for a research office to which the OTP could refer research projects. WCL faculty would run the office and students would have the opportunity to research cutting-edge legal issues. Not only did the OTP agree to submit confidential research questions, but the Soros Foundation's Open Society Institute granted substantial funding for the project, which is now known as the War Crimes Research Office (WCRO).

For the first two years of the project, Mr. Pronk acted as Project Coordinator. During that time, the War Crimes Research Office acquired responsibility for a number of research projects for the international tribunals as well as other international clients. As a result of Mr. Pronk's efforts, the WCRO offers WCL students a number of opportunities to take part in important international humanitarian and comparative law projects.

After completing his Fulbright scholarship at WCL, Mr. Pronk left Washington, D.C. to take a position with the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He worked as a trade attaché in Shanghai, China during his first two and a half years at the ministry. He spent the next two and half years in Brussels working with the Permanent Representation of the Netherlands to the European Union (EU). Similar to his position in Shanghai, Mr. Pronk's responsibilities in Brussels focused mainly on business policy. Mr. Pronk worked on internal EU legislation, covering issues from the EU internal market to agriculture, fisheries policy, the environment, and EU social policies.

After September 11, 2001, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs established a diplomatic mission in Kabul, Afghanistan. Mr. Pronk felt that this was his chance to return to his real passion, and he jumped at the opportunity to sign on for a two-year position as Deputy Head of Mission in charge of the Dutch Development Cooperation program in Afghanistan. In Kabul, he

worked to try to alleviate the immense challenges of what he still sees as a very unstable state. In his words, "Twenty-three years of war have left the country in ruins with little capacity of government and no funds to rebuild the country."

One of Mr. Pronk's primary goals in Afghanistan was to facilitate between the international and local communities and the Afghan government. Each sector had a Consultative Group (CG), chaired by the interim Afghan government, in which donors would assist in planning and policy making. "It [was] a joint effort with all countries involved," said Mr. Pronk. Mr. Pronk advised CGs on issues including: police sector reform, election planning, health care planning, education and environmental policy, demining, human rights and humanitarian affairs. Mr. Pronk's advisory duties extended to "anything you could imagine as part of a . . . government's obligations." Mr. Pronk's most significant successes in Afghanistan included improving coordination among donors in increasing the diversification of funds and resources and placing Afghans in the "driving seat" of the reconstruction.

According to Mr. Pronk, Afghanistan's security situation deteriorated over the course of his two years there, forcing him to live on protected embassy premises and travel with bodyguards almost daily. His living conditions, however, were "nothing next to that of the people we were there to help." As he puts it, "It felt like a privilege working in Afghanistan, and I did not really think about

possible security threats.”

Recently reassigned to the Netherlands Mission in Ramallah in the West Bank, Mr. Pronk’s new assignment shares similar goals to those he sought to achieve in Afghanistan. The Netherlands Mission seeks to assist in nation-building and develop coherent, coordinated efforts by the international community to support the reconstruction of a Palestinian state. Its main focus is to facilitate good governance, peace building, and institutional development. As Mr. Pronk explained, “We are trying to lay the seeds for a two-state solution in which a viable Palestinian state can co-exist peacefully next to Israel.” In Mr. Pronk’s opinion, the challenges in the Palestinian Occupied Territories are perhaps even more difficult than those in Afghanistan. “Peace in the Middle East

seems to be very far away.”

Mr. Pronk’s devotion and gratitude to WCL are evident. He attributes a great deal of his professional accomplishments to his studies at WCL and work with the Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law and the War Crimes Research Office. Mr. Pronk said that his experience at WCL is continuously relevant in his work and “absolutely a source of inspiration in my work.” He tries to maintain contact with WCL alumni as often as possible and views WCL’s alumni community as an “international network of colleagues and friends.” *HRB*

Natalie Palomino, a J.D. candidate at the Washington College of Law, covers the Alumni Profile for the Human Rights Brief.



Courtesy of Rochus Pronk

Rochus Pronk speaks with an Afghan girl during his work for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Kabul.