

Alumna at work: Gabriela Brahier Stark

A theologian in recruitment.

Interview: Bettina Volz-Tobler

Gabriela Brahier Stark studied Reformed theology in Basel while she was still a Catholic. After training as a curate in a parish in Graubünden, she converted, serving as a Reformed pastor in Reinach, Basel-Landschaft. At the same time, she obtained her doctorate, with a thesis on ethics, and was awarded a post-doctoral grant. She then moved into the private sector, where she joined a recruitment company.



Gabriela Brahier Stark

UNI NOVA: Ms Brahier, what made you choose to study theology?

BRAHIER: Right from the start, I thought that theology would be a fascinating subject to study. It deals, as they say, with “God and the world”, so it offers insights into many different areas of human life. That is reflected in the wide range of disciplines that it covers: ancient languages, philosophy, ethics and history, as well as the stories from the Bible, Christian tradition and the different forms of religious expression. The main motivation for me was an interest in these diverse human-related issues, rather than religion in the narrower sense. Theological ethics, in particular, offers answers to central questions of human existence that are important both to our society and to businesses and their development, and that can provide us with tangible benefits in our everyday lives. Although theology is often described as “dusty”, that isn’t true at all. On the contrary – it is very relevant to today.

UNI NOVA: Why did you become a recruitment specialist?

BRAHIER: For the same reason that I studied theology. The main focus for me is human beings – today, in their working environment. By filling different positions in businesses of many different kinds, I am able to work on a wide variety of issues. Filling key positions in business with the right people is challenging and fascinating in equal measure. Ideally, it also produces sustainable business structures. Through recruitment, you can actively help to shape a society.

UNI NOVA: Are there parallels with theology, then?

BRAHIER: In the first place, working as a pastor taught me at a very basic level how to approach and listen to people. In a management consultancy that operates internationally, I support firms at management level in developing their business culture. I have also run coaching sessions on leadership and personal development and conducted assessments. That showed me that, increasingly, people want their job – which takes up a lot of their time – not just to benefit them financially, but to be meaningful in some way. Theology and working as a pastor have equipped me with a valuable set of skills for the job that I am now doing: an understanding of human nature, a feeling for people and situations, a holistic way of thinking and an appreciation of social as well as business connections. I also still enjoy organizing christenings and weddings from time to time, which helps me stay true to my calling as a minister.

UNI NOVA: What are your main memories of your time as a student in Basel?

BRAHIER: The professors were extraordinarily committed. I really appreciated how they were able to communicate their subject in a thoughtful and exciting way, while at the same time contributing actively to social discourse from their perspective, through contributions in the media, interdisciplinary conferences and so on. I also remember some fascinating and educational study trips – and the extremely supportive attitude that was shown toward us as students, which opened doors for us in our subsequent careers. ■



AlumniAnthropology

Ethnology establishes alumni group.

Photo: Bettina Huber

Ethnology has existed as a discipline in Basel for over 100 years. An alumni organization for the subject has now been established.

Ethnology can boast a long history at the University of Basel, dating back to 1914/15. However, the first full professorship in the subject, which has proved a rich field of interdisciplinary work and inspired all kinds of research, was not created until 1963. A com-

parative perspective and a methodology based on participation and observation are particular hallmarks of ethnology.

Dialog and partnerships

In the University of Basel's ethnology program, there is a regional focus on Africa (especially west, central and east Africa), followed by Oceania (especially Melanesia), Latin America and Southeast Asia, although the thematic research focuses of visual culture, political anthropology and medical anthropology also play an important role. In these and other areas, the ethnology program cultivates intensive interdisciplinary and international dialog, including a wide range of partnerships.

Dr. René Egloff, Professor Brigit Obrist, Assistant Professor Piet van Eeuwijk and Sandra Burri lic. phil. have taken the initiative with regard to former students by setting up the AlumniAnthropology subject group. Together, they also make up the group's current executive. Its aims are to facilitate networking between current and former students and with other subjects, to promote and support ethnology (anthropology) as a subject and to organize events.

Annual drinks reception

In particular, there are plans to host an annual drinks reception for new graduates and former students, to give young and old a chance to get acquainted and to talk about possible career opportunities. The group also intends to organize events and lectures to inform the public about what the subject is all about – for instance, through presentations on applied ethnology or theory.

The new AlumniAnthropology subject group was launched at a successful event on November 28, 2018, which was attended by many former students. In a lecture that both current and former students found fascinating, Maya Brändli, an alumna who now works as a broadcasting editor at SRF 2 Kultur, spoke about ethnology and the job opportunities that it can open up in journalism. Former students were welcomed at the event by Dr. Roland Bühlmann, the president of AlumniBasel. Afterwards, the alumni took full advantage of the opportunity to exchange ideas at the drinks reception. Another meeting of AlumniAnthropology is scheduled for spring 2019. In short – it is worth becoming a member. To sign up, go to alumnibasel.ch. ■

New format

Get together.

The new “Get together” event format piloted at the end of 2018 for younger professional alumnae and alumni has received a very positive response. The first event proved a great success, and featured Sidonie Repond, a psychologist, mental trainer, and former Swiss figure skating champion. The format aims to examine the topics and challenges that arise in the initial years of professional life and give attendees the opportunity to talk with people of a similar age and make professional contacts. The next event will be held on Thursday, November 14, 2019, in the VERSO bar in the Kollegienhaus. ■

Fall excursion

Hiking with a writer.

In addition to the Alpine hiking weekend, this year’s program for alumni and alumnae will include an excursion in the region with Daniel Zahno, an alumnus of the University of Basel and a successful writer. Zahno is a keen hiker who has explored the Basel region and published details of his tours in a book. On September 21, 2019, he will join alumni to hike one of his routes. For details, see alumni-basel.ch. ■

Alumni travels

New offer.

An important function of AlumniBasel is to help members make contact with other alumni – for example on study trips. AlumniBasel has been working with the “rhz reisen” travel company in Zurich since 2018. The first alumni trip took place in October 2018, when participants traveled to Iran under the guidance of Basel Egyptologist Boris Schibler. Three further trips are planned for 2019. Dr. Sigrid Hodel Hoenes will guide participants through the famous desert city of Petra as well as lesser-known Nubia. ■



Projects

Funding for orchid research.

For his Master’s thesis, botanist Rafael Pulfer is tracing the evolutionary tree of orchids in the genus *Dracula* to gain insights into how their flowers have evolved. This innovative research project has attracted funding of 15,000 Swiss francs from a member of AlumniBasel.

UNI NOVA: What exactly is the subject of your Master’s thesis?

RAFAEL PULFER: In short, I’m working to reconstruct the evolutionary tree of the orchid genus *Dracula*. The method I’m using is known as next-generation sequencing, which I’m probably the first to do in this context. This involves sequencing the DNA both in leaf samples from living orchids in the Botanical Garden and in plants from the Jany Renz Orchid Herbarium at the Department of Environmental Sciences. The genetic differences between the 120 species are an indicator of how closely or distantly they are re-

lated. This method makes it possible to trace the evolutionary tree of *Dracula* orchids.

UNI NOVA: What is the aim of the project?
PULFER: My supervisor Dr. Jurriaan de Vos, who is the curator of Herbaria Basel, and I hope that the results will help answer two questions: First, to what degree the flower characteristics of *Dracula* plants are evolutionarily adaptive, and second, how quickly flowering plants are able to adapt to changing environmental conditions.

UNI NOVA: As a Master’s student, what is your perception of the University of Basel and its alumni and alumnae?

PULFER: Our Institute of Botany holds events once or twice a week, which draw large numbers of current and former students. Afterwards, participants often go to a bar together to continue their discussions. That kind of exchange between today’s students and alumni is something you don’t take for granted. I think it’s amazing and inspiring! ■

Life as a nanoscience researcher in southern Sweden.

Heidi Potts is currently a post-doc at Lund University in Sweden. Brought up in the town of Staufen in southern Baden, she studied nanosciences in Basel and Toronto before earning a doctorate at the Institute of Materials Science at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL). She has received awards for her master's thesis as well as for her doctoral dissertation on the growth and characterization of semiconducting nanowires.

After completing my degree at the University of Basel and my doctoral dissertation at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL), I moved to Lund with my husband and daughter in January 2018. This took me from the shores of Lake Geneva, where the mountains were heavy with snow and yet spring was just around the corner, to Sweden, where it was already dark at three thirty in the afternoon. The locals combat this by filling every room with about 15 lamps – now I finally understand why IKEA has such a big lighting department.

At the university here in Lund, southern Sweden, I study the interaction of electrons and their spins on quantum dots in nanowires. Our project forms part of NanoLund, the Center for Nanoscience at Lund University – where, as a nanoscience researcher, I naturally feel very much at home. I not only find the topic fascinating, but also really like the working atmosphere here. Excellent links between the research groups allow us to collaborate extensively on projects. This collaboration is undoubtedly helped by our daily coffee break (“fika”) with the obligatory cinnamon roll (“kanelbulle”).

As a young family, we benefit greatly from the way that Swedish society is set up: It's child-friendly and places considerable value on equal rights. Excellent state childcare, flexible parental leave – including for fathers – and very understanding colleagues make it easy to achieve a balance between family and working life.

But not everything in Sweden is exactly as I imagined it. For example, I've never used cross-country skis to get to work – partly because we only live two minutes away from the university, but also because there's simply no snow here in the south of the country. That being said, the seaside is easily accessible by bike and is a great place to enjoy local seafood. Cheese is also abundant here, although it's not quite the same as a fine Gruyère, so we always like to bring one or two – or maybe five – blocks of mountain cheese back from our holidays in Switzerland. ■



A summer excursion: nanoscientist Heidi Potts visiting Ystad with her family.