

Alumna at work: Tanja Dietrich

From biology to communications.

Interview: Bettina Volz-Tobler

Tanja Dietrich studied biology at the University of Basel. Today, she is communications director at Basel Zoo and owner of a communications agency specializing in online marketing and consulting for small and medium-sized enterprises and associations.



Tanja Dietrich

UNI NOVA: Tanja Dietrich, what made you want to study biology?

TANJA DIETRICH: Animals have fascinated me since childhood. At the time, the only animals we could keep were a cat and two guinea pigs, so I turned to books and started accumulating knowledge about all kinds of animals. I was something of a walking animal encyclopedia as a child. So it was an obvious choice for me to enroll in the Biology I course, as it was called then. Unlike Biology II, with its focus on cell biology, it included classes on vertebrate biology and systematics. The program as I knew it no longer exists.

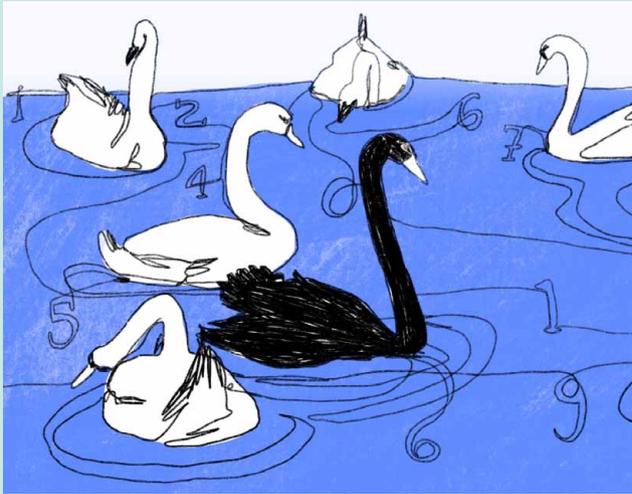
UNI NOVA: You've been head of communications at Basel Zoo for 15 years. You also run your own communications agency. How did you end up on this particular career path?

DIETRICH: For my thesis on an aspect of vision in fish, I worked at Basel Zoo and the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute. After graduating, I worked part-time at the zoo and part-time as Director of Education and Interpretation at Museum.BL. At the same time, I was engaged in voluntary conservation work. When Basel Zoo created the post of communications Director in 2004, they asked me. In parallel, my volunteer work was growing and led to more and more inquiries from small associations and organizations. I decided then to found my own agency, specializing in online marketing consulting. I give

advice to small businesses, institutions and associations that want to raise their profile and gain new clients. I show them how to use online content to attract visitors and turn them into clients.

UNI NOVA: What's your most vivid memory from your time at university?

DIETRICH: I would say the medical parasitology classes at the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute with those great big jars filled with all kinds of parasitic worms, but most of all Professor David Senn and his classes, which were always packed out. His enthusiasm for his subject bubbled over and he would often illustrate his points with spontaneous drawings on the board. His classes left a lasting impression on a whole generation of biology students. He still organizes a dinner every year for "Sennians" to meet and compare notes. ■



AlumniActuarialScience

New alumni association created.

Text:
Jolanda Bucher
Illustration:
Annina Burkhard

Actuarial science has been taught at the University of Basel for 80 years now. This makes the program one of the oldest German-language courses in the field. This year's anniversary event included the launch of the actuarial science alumni association.

On 6 February 1939, the University of Basel introduced actuarial science as a separate examination subject. And 80 years later to the day, the alumni association AlumniActuarialScience was formed. Around 90 alumni, students, university staff and guests with an interest in the program took part in the anniversary celebrations at the Old University. Knowledge and information transfer were a central theme of the event. Two students presented their recently concluded master's projects to the specialist audience. During the drinks reception and subsequent meal for the body's new members,

old acquaintances were refreshed and new contacts forged – an all-round success for the launch of the new alumni organization.

Giving something back

Plans for the new association include a yearly meeting on 6 February in collaboration with the Master's Program in Actuarial Science and an alumni group in Zurich. The purpose of the alumni organization is to support friendships, networking and contact with sponsors and industry, besides promoting teaching and research in the field of actuarial science at the University of Basel. The driving force behind the initiative is a sense of connection to the university – for alumni, it is a way of giving something back.

Before they reached Australia, the inhabitants of the Old World believed that all swans were white. This conviction was unshakeable – all the empirical evidence appeared to back it up. When Dutch explorers spotted the first black swan in western Australia in 1697, this belief was turned on its head: something previously thought to be impossible had occurred. Since then, the expression “black swan” has been used as a metaphor for a highly unlikely event with major repercussions, often causing existing theories to be revised or expanded.

Black swans aplenty

In practice, actuaries encounter numerous black swans, which have momentous effects on trends in the financial and insurance markets. The extraordinary success of Google and Amazon, the attacks of September 11, the global banking and financial crisis of 2008, the 2011 nuclear disaster in Fukushima or the meteoric rise of the World Wide Web in the 1990s are all examples of these extremely rare events with far-reaching consequences.

One of the key tasks of actuarial science is assessing the likelihood of black swans, their impact on the financial and insurance markets, and the opportunities and risks they present. Doing so enables the vast implications of these events to be taken into account in the calculation of insolvency probabilities, risk-based premiums and appropriate claim reserves – and thereby at least partially managed. Actuaries therefore not only contribute to the ongoing success of the insurance and banking industries but also play a significant role in the proper functioning of social security systems and positive economic development. ■

Anniversary
UniBall
turns 20.

Once a year, the University of Basel hosts an evening of dancing with two shows, two dance floors, a live band and a DJ. In 2020, the traditional UniBall will celebrate its 20th anniversary. As always, students, teaching staff, employees, and friends of the university are invited to dance the night away. The 2020 UniBall takes place on 25 April at the Kronenmattsaal in Binningen. The doors will open and drinks will be served from 7 pm. The ball begins at 8 pm. ■

Social Media
Increased
activity.

AlumniBasel has been boosting its presence on social media channels such as Facebook and LinkedIn, and is now also using new communication channels such as Instagram. Our motto remains: Find us, join us, follow us – and like us! ■

Collaboration
Discounted
entry to Lucerne
Festival.

AlumniBasel members can now buy discounted tickets to selected concerts at the Lucerne Festival, which takes place by Lake Lucerne. The AlumniNews newsletter provides details of relevant events in the concert hall at the Lucerne Culture and Congress Centre (KKL) and how to buy tickets. Founded in 1938, the Lucerne Festival is one of the most renowned classical music festivals and attracts famous artists and symphony orchestras from all around the world. ■



Students help refugees: the “Offener Hörsaal” team.
 (Photo: Anaïs Steiner)

Annual Giving 2019

Supporting “Offener Hörsaal”.

Text: Annalena Durrer and Timo Posselt

Money collected through this year’s Annual Giving will be donated to the “Offener Hörsaal” association at the University of Basel.

The “Offener Hörsaal” (Open Lecture Auditorium) student association helps refugees like Mehmet (35) to access university education. In Iran, Mehmet was well on his way to becoming a doctor but had to flee the country for political reasons six months before completing his medical studies. The “Offener Hörsaal” project enabled him to attend classes as an auditor and to complete a German course at the Language Center. He was accompanied by “buddies”, volunteers studying the same combination of subjects.

When he came to the University of Basel, Mehmet discovered a love of chemistry, but had to overcome many obstacles before he could join a regular study program. He had to complete a *Matura* equivalence test because his Iranian educational qualifications were only partially

recognized. He could not afford the expensive preparatory courses, so “Offener Hörsaal” put him in touch with student volunteers who helped him study for the test. Mehmet began his bachelor’s program in chemistry in fall 2018.

Volunteers from “Offener Hörsaal” help introduce people to the University of Basel via the auditor program and to make contact with students. They also help them to register for study programs and find grants and scholarships. So far, almost 70 refugees have attended classes as auditors and taken part in German courses at the Language Center.

Yet, only seven students have entered a regular study program so far. The greatest obstacle is usually that non-Swiss educational qualifications are not recognized by the university. “Offener Hörsaal” also relies on financial support in its fight for equal opportunities. It hopes that donations from University of Basel alumni will enable even more refugees to join study programs in the future. ■

offener-hoersaal.ch

Letter from Washington, D.C.

An economist against inequality.

Pia Schneider has worked at the World Bank since 2004. For the last three years, she has held a position as lead economist for health issues. She graduated in economics from the University of Basel in 1993, and holds a PhD in health economics from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

I have spent the last 15 years working at the World Bank as an economist specializing in health matters. The core mission of the World Bank, which was established in 1944, is fighting poverty and inequality. Our goal for 2030 is to limit extreme poverty to three percent of the global population, and increase the prosperity of the world's poorest 40 percent. The World Bank supports developing and middle-income economies with low-interest loans and technical assistance. This gives me a privileged insight into the workings of health systems and the socio-economic, financial and political circumstances of different countries. As a result of our analyses and funding programs, we are in dialogue with governments and involved in their decision-making – a fascinating experience.

These days, I work mostly in eastern and southern Africa, the Gulf states and Europe. We recently carried out an analysis of the health systems of Namibia and Saudi Arabia. Governments generally take our work very seriously, and often incorporate our recommendations into their programs. According to the latest edition of the World Bank's "Human Capital Index", more than half of the world's children are unable to realize their full potential because governments are not investing enough in education and health. In Europe, I am leading a study on the migra-

tion of healthcare professionals from the western Balkans to the EU and Switzerland. The labor market in the health sector is a truly global one – in the Gulf states around 90 percent of doctors and nurses are recruited from abroad in the private sector.

I wanted to work in different countries after university, so my first job in 1994 was as a delegate at the ICRC, for which I spent six months in South Africa and six months in what was then Zaire. After a short project in Basel and an internship in the administrative department of a hospital in Portland (Oregon), I worked for an insurance company and a consulting firm in the US, where I was involved in designing a pilot health insurance scheme for impoverished Rwandans on behalf of the health ministry in Kigali.

In 2004, I applied for a position at the World Bank, and was hired as an economist in the Europe unit. At that time, the reforms in eastern Europe for new accession countries were a key issue, as was the economic crisis and the resulting fallout in 2008/09. I led two evaluations on this issue in the World Bank's Independent Evaluation Group: one on youth unemployment and another on health financing. My topmost priority is providing more people from low income groups with better access to high-quality medical care. That is why I do what I do. ■



International career: Dr. Pia Schneider supports governments in shaping their health systems. (Photo: Beth Payne)