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Date Submitted

13 November 2023

Date Published

23 November 2023

Guest Editors

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How to cite this contribution

Kotze LJ "My Mentor" *PER / PELJ*
2023(26) – DOI
<http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/1727-3781/2023/v26i0a17243>

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DOI

<http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/1727-3781/2023/v26i0a17243>

Willemien du Plessis: scholar, friend, mentor, *Mensch*. The mother of South African environmental law. Unparalleled in her ability to give, her capacity for kindness, her uncanny awareness of the imbalanced and imperfect world we live in, and her tireless efforts to address this perduring and unjust imbalance.

I first met Willemien in 1996 as a first-year student at the then Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education where she taught me legal history. I was one of a few hundred students, usually sitting at the back of the auditorium to avoid drawing too much attention to myself. We only had notebooks and pens then, and I furiously scribbled some nonsense whenever she looked my way, pretending to care and to be interested in the historical foundations of South African law. I never was, to be honest. I think she knew we rather wanted to be outside, smoking, drinking coffee, fully emersed in the exhilarating carefree bliss of student life, talking excitedly about the seemingly endless opportunities that both a "new South Africa" and youth presented at the time. Little did we know then that the "new South Africa" would become unrecognisably old and plundered (to borrow from Antjie Krog), as we inevitably also became. That is the thing about time, isn't it? It passes before you know it. No doubt Willemien will also remember her student years; it must have seemed improbable for her at the time to think she will ever read a special journal issue celebrating her life and work. And yet here we are.

The university did not offer environmental law back then and several years passed until we met again when I realised I haven't quite had enough of varsity life. I took the brave step and entered her chaotic office with books, journals and scripts strewn everywhere, also on the chairs, and often piled dangerously high. It was a safety hazard to be sure. You had a choice: either politely clear a chair or sit on a few volumes of *Fundamina*. I did neither and instead found myself staring at a large poster of the German city Heidelberg on the wall next to

her desk. It was the most beautiful place I had ever seen, and she told me about her time studying there. "Jy moet hard werk Boet, dan kyk ons of ons jou daar kan kry", she said. I was sold and asked her whether she would supervise my doctoral thesis. She said yes, very likely to her own detriment. I got up to leave her office and she told me to hang on while she looked for a few books on her shambolic bookshelves that she thought might interest me. She knew exactly where each book was

For me an exciting adventure started, first painstakingly slowly, and then gathering more pace as she carefully, but determinedly in her subtle way, managed to prod me to be bold, more confident and exploratory. Although I eventually did finish my doctoral thesis, I cannot say with certainty that I accomplished much academically in the sense that I "solved a scientific legal problem". Perhaps I did, to some extent, but much more importantly, I think, she showed me what it requires to engage with people and knowledge, how to supervise with care, how to care for a cause, and how to guide, to challenge, and to be patient. While I often fail at the former, I am terribly impatient, as she will no doubt confirm. I only realised later that Willemien shaped some of her academic self on the image of her mentor, the late Lourens du Plessis, a great giant of South African law, literally and figuratively. And so, we transfer experiences, learning, skills and knowledge from one generation to the next, and she has decisively played her part to make this happen.

After my doctoral studies, I suddenly found myself in a terrible predicament: too old (and poor) to study further, and too young and inexperienced to face the "real" world. I received a kind offer from a friend of my father to become an environmental compliance officer at a mine in the very northern Northern Cape. I was born and raised in a mining community that I instinctively fled from as soon as I could; a complex environment characterised by abundant cheap black labour for our gardens, many blocks of uniform red-brick-corrugated-iron-roof mine houses, a foreboding tremor once in a while that widened the cracks, and whites who spoke *Fanagalo*. Yet, having a salary was tempting and I was inclined to take it. But then Willemien and her husband Johan Nel intervened, much more forcefully than is usual for her, intuitively realising as she did that I would unlikely survive there. She *knew* people well enough to *know* that, you see? And that is when I became an academic, at that precise moment when they convinced me to stay and apply for a junior lecturer position at North-West University. I am still here.

Environmental law became the new kid on the block and Willemien and I curated and offered one of the first LLM programmes in environmental law

in Africa. The South African environmental law community grew rapidly, and we went on countless conferences thanks to Willemien's seemingly unlimited research funding that she rarely spent on herself, graciously dishing out money to allow students and early career scholars to immerse ourselves in and explore the fascinating new world of environmental law. I met my footnotes at conferences and thanks to her, nurtured my passion to discover the world, engage with interesting people and experience new perspectives. I became a cosmopolitan, living nowhere but everywhere. It was around that time that she said to me, "Ag nee wat Boet, sê nou vir my Willemien"; and we became colleagues, and more importantly, friends. We still are.

As time went by, I gradually went my separate way professionally, as one inevitably does, but always returned "home" to her to have a cup of coffee and a lekker long chat. It was during one of our regular coffee breaks – she is hopelessly addicted to caffeine – that she said to me in her graciously humble way, "Boet, jy het my nou verbygevat". But the truth is: I never did, and never will. And this thought is as reassuring as it is knowing there is something constant to return home to: the sage caring person in the chaotic but perfectly ordered office. I will soon not be able to physically return home to that constant anymore, because she will be gone. Her office will be cleared, boxed up and freshly painted, possibly even divided in two to make more space for whatever. The Heidelberg poster will be rolled up to lie somewhere in a closet as a dust-gathering distant dream of something that briefly was. But the mere thought of Willemien and the indelible marks she has left on my life and so many other lives, will always be a constant.

Time is the most precious thing we can give because we have so little of it. Willemien always gave her time, to everyone, in abundance, as she still does. It is often difficult to care in this tumultuous world we live in, but Willemien always cared, and continues to do so. It is sometimes difficult to be kind to others amid seemingly endless societal upheaval, but Willemien has always been kind, and still is. This is Willemien du Plessis. My mentor.¹

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