Celebrating the Twentieth Anniversary of the *Tilburg Law Review*: A Look to the Past through the Eyes of Our Founder

The first issue of the Tilburg Law Review, or *Tilburg Foreign Law Review*, as it was called at the time, came out in September 1991; however, as the first editorial reveals “from idea to product [it] took a half year”. It would have been around this time of the year, at the end of the winter and at the beginning of spring, twenty years ago when two bright and entrepreneurial law students at Tilburg University, Willem-Jan van der Wolf and Anton van de Plas, had an idea: to found the first American style student-run law review in Europe. Remembering the world twenty years ago before there was Internet and email, and before copy shops became widely accessible, cannot but make one wonder how and why two Dutch students would found a law journal in the English language.

The circumstances around the founding of the journal have been unknown to us, the present editorial board of the Tilburg Law Review. We are all graduate students at Tilburg Law School, under thirty years of age, and some of us, including myself, are international students. We joined the law review not knowing much about its past, and when the twentieth anniversary of our journal came around, we started asking ourselves the question how it all began.

It seems to be the case for many things in life that finding out something need not be too difficult – when you ask. It took me three minutes by train to get to Oisterwijk, a quaint little town near Tilburg, where I met with and had the pleasure of interviewing one of the founders of our law review – Mr. Willem-Jan van der Wolf.

Talking to Willem-Jan about his life feels like talking to a visionary millionaire, except that he is not a millionaire. He is a friendly, humble man, who likes to chat away about his many projects, business ideas, and even his dreams (yes, dreams!) about the future. He runs a successful legal publishing house in Oisterwijk, but tells me that he originally wanted to become a documentarian or a journalist. Listening to him talk about his interests makes one wonder how he ended up choosing the study of law. It is somehow difficult to reconcile the notion of a serious founder of a legal journal with the image of a tanned, sunglass-wearing documentary film director.
In the process of talking to Willem-Jan, the hidden link comes to light: it is his interest in all things international.

Willem-Jan’s interest in international law started with an interest in all things international. As a child, he was interested in stories about foreign cultures and places. He wondered what life might be like in other countries, as well as about the problems in these foreign lands: poverty in Africa, military conflict. Willem-Jan craved stories, but growing up in Boxtel, in the rural South of the Netherlands, in the 1970s, he did not have many chances to travel, meet foreigners or attend events of an international character. Surprisingly, his inspiration for a career in international law came from a place close to home: his grandmother’s home in the Hague.

Willem-Jan’s grandmother rented rooms to foreign professionals and interns, working at the International Court of Justice. Those tenants, missing their own kids and families, quickly befriended the young boy. “The nice thing for me”, Willem-Jan recounts, “was that they all spoke English or German. They would join us for dinner, and then they would start talking about international things. I collected stamps back then. So when these people went back home, they would keep in touch with us, the kids, and they would send me some stamps. I got a whole collection of stamps from the people from the ICJ”.

The memories from those days and about these people came back to Willem-Jan when it was time came to make a career choice. At the time, the right choice seemed to be journalism or documentary work, and yet the career of a professional journalist, standing right in the spotlight, did not appeal to Willem-Jan. He was not interested in covering national issues, and resented the arrogance that often corrupts successful media personalities. “In high school, I was the founder of the [high school] journal and I was writing for it, but I was always interested in foreign countries, foreign people. I had the impression that when you study international law, like the tenants of my grandmother, you could see some of those countries, and tell something about them. I decided that I wanted to join the United Nations, so that I could tell people about cities and countries far away”. With these goals in mind, Willem-Jan decided that he would specialize in international law, and he enrolled at Tilburg University.

From the perspective of the average modern day student, Willem-Jan’s choice of school is incomprehensible. We, modern-day students, care about rankings very much. We email the Graduate Office months in advance, inquiring about the study facilities and the type of campus organizations. We expect events, conferences, study abroad opportunities, and, more so in the US than in Europe, a good college sports team. To the disappointment of the 17-year-old Willem-Jan, the city of Tilburg and Tilburg