

VOX

INTERVIEW
SPECIAL

**'I am sometimes
an extroverted
showman'**

Tom Verstappen of collective
De Naakte Waarheid

ENGLISH EDITION

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FOREWORD BIG STEP

It's not as easy as it looks. The thought always crosses my mind on the first day of the Intro week at the Sports Centre, where students from Mexico, Turkey, or India get the keys to their new room. It must be scary to take such a big step to a city where you don't know anyone. For first-year students from Uden, Aalten or Deest, the leap to Nijmegen is just as intense. Especially if they are the first in their family to go to university. Meeting peers whose parents are doctors or lawyers can be quite intimidating. Coming as I was from a small village in the Flemish Hageland, it also took me a while to find my way in my first year at KU Leuven. Having lived in Nijmegen for several years now, for this Vox, I went to visit Brother Stefan Ansinger in Fribourg, Switzerland. He knows what it means to start over, having plunged into a new life in another country on several occasions. As this Vox rolls off the printing press, the Catholic former, Radboud University student is relocating to Rotterdam. All these impressions and encounters make him who he is. This applies equally to Marc Van Ranst, the Belgian face of the COVID-19 pandemic, who will soon receive an honorary doctorate from Radboud University. And to all the interviewees in this special edition. For most people, Nijmegen is just a station along the way. Except for stage animal Tom Verstappen (cover), who never wants to leave.

*Ken Lambeets,
Vox editor*



Members of right-wing student association harassed at Intro Market

Three members of the new right-wing nationalist student association GNSV (Groot Nederlandse Studentenvereniging) were injured during the Intro Market on 21 August. A fight broke out even before the event started and the police arrested three men. Before the start of the market, a commotion had already arisen concerning the presence of GNSV, due to the association's right-wing character. In response, the Executive Board had issued a statement saying that they considered expressions of discrimination, racism, and physical or verbal threats unacceptable.

The GNSV calls itself a political association for 'right-wing students with a critical perspective on society' who are 'fed up with the left-wing curriculum in the lecture halls'. The association honours the idea of the Greater Netherlands, the merging of Flanders with the Netherlands, and already has a branch in Leiden.



In gown across the Via Gladiola

President of the Executive Board Daniël Wigboldus walked the Four Day Marches this year to raise money for Radboud100, a new initiative by the Radboud Fund to invite donors to contribute to Nijmegen research and teaching. Wigboldus, who completed 40 kilometres four days in a row, walked the final kilometres along the Via Gladiola wearing his academic gown.



SAVE MONEY!

Tip for new students: **check whether you are entitled to a supplementary grant.**

You can check this easily via DUO. The supplementary grant is a monthly allowance in addition to the basic grant and can amount to a maximum of €416 per month. See the *Vox* website for this and other financial tips.



85 COUNTRIES

The students taking part in the Intro Week in late August came from 85 different countries. After the Netherlands (3225), the best represented countries were Germany (161), Spain (65), and Italy (48). There were also 30 participants from Poland, 29 from China, 26 from Romania, 25 from Turkey, 28 from Greece, and 19 from India.



NOTE TAKEN

'In terms of role models, it's probably a good thing that the Nijmegen Rector is a woman for once, but above all I hope that we're moving towards a time **when it no longer matters** what a person's gender, origin, or any other characteristic is.'

José Sanders (1965) will start her job as the new Rector in October. The Professor of Communication in Organisations will be the first woman to occupy this position. In a written response to voxweb.nl, she described herself as an administrator

with a practical mindset, who can be principled if necessary. 'As Rector it's important to get across the message that every student and employee should feel seen at the University.' Sanders has been Dean of the Faculty of Arts since February 2022.





PHOTO: JOHANNES FIEBIG



IN THE PICTURE

DOTS AND STRIPES

Artist Richard Bolhuis is working in front of the Erasmus Building on a work of art intended to fill the entire square. His work is part of the Valkhof Museum's Into the Black Hole exhibition, which is inspired by black holes and aims to bring together art and science. Bolhuis will also be working around the Maria Montessori Building, and on the Keizer Karelplein. He expects his drawing installation will take seven months to complete.

IN THE NEWS

SHORTS

Low tuition fees rate for Ukrainian students

In the 2023/2024 academic year in Nijmegen, students from Ukraine will once again be charged the same tuition fees as European students (€2200). At many other Dutch educational institutions, in the coming academic year, Ukrainian students will have to pay the much higher fee for non-European students, amounting to approximately €10,000. The University is expecting to welcome some 45 students from Ukraine.

Rob Jetten top candidate for D66

Rob Jetten is D66's top candidate in the upcoming elections. He will succeed Sigrid Kaag. At the moment, Jetten, who studied Public Administration at Radboud University, is still outgoing Minister for Climate and Energy. 'The concerns of the general public should play a



PHOTO: MARTIJN BEEKMAN

greater role in The Hague,' he said earlier in an interview with Vox.

Two students in one room

The SSH& is launching a trial with shared rooms. The housing shortage is so severe that international exchange students are being housed together in one room. The experiment involves ten rooms at the Boeckstaetehof complex, each measuring 18 m². If the trial is a success, SSH& may start offering more shared rooms.

Between January and July, nearly 5,300 students registered for a room at SSH&.

Silver medal for Radboud judoka

At the World University Games, at the end of July in Chengdu, China, Amber Gersjes won a silver medal. The Public Administration student competed in the final against Japan's Hikari Yoshioka. Gersjes spends most of her time at top

sports centre Papendal. She studies in the free hours she has between training sessions. 'But my exam weeks look exactly like those of other students.' See voxweb.nl for a video of how Gersjes prepared for the WUG.

Wilma de Koning to Tilburg University

Wilma de Koning has been appointed Vice President of the Executive Board of Tilburg University. From 2013 to 2021, De Koning was Vice President of Radboud University, before being appointed General Director of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW). In a farewell interview with Vox, she said she was looking forward to staying out of the spotlight. She didn't make any promises, though: 'I wonder whether I'll be able to do this!'



PHOTO: JOHANNES FIEBIG

IN THE PICTURE





CALM BEFORE THE STORM

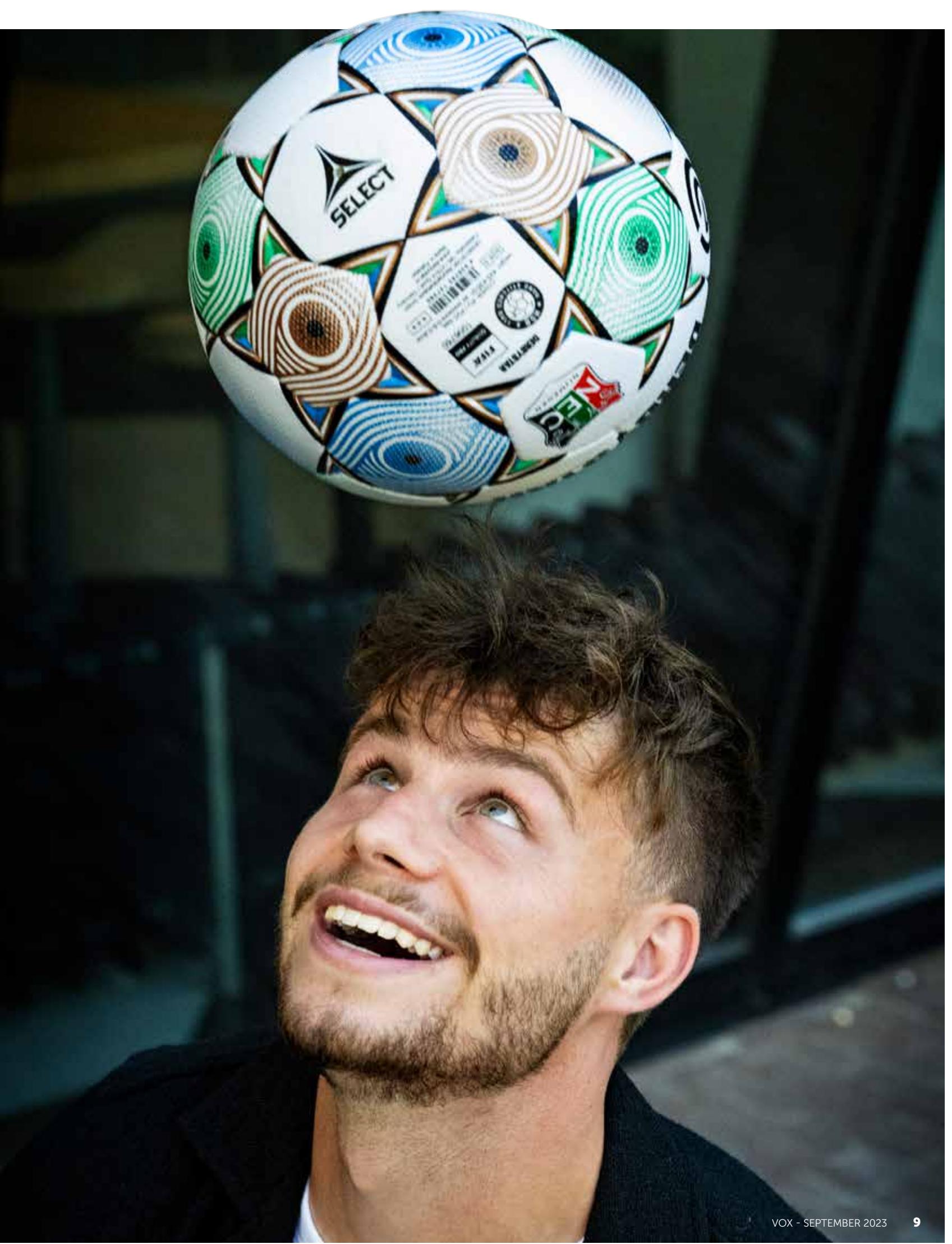
More than 8,500 students and 2,500 mentors moved into Nijmegen at the end of August. The Intro weeks of Radboud University and the University of Applied Sciences coincided once again, resulting in a city bulging at the seams, and parks filled with coloured T-shirts. Calm will return in September once students exchange the city centre for the lecture hall.

Photography: Johannes Fiebig

THE TWO WORLDS OF A TOP FOOTBALL PLAYER

Dirk Proper (21) was considered a discovery in last year's Dutch premier league. The young football player from Elst grew to become a first-team player at NEC and attracted the attention of several top clubs in the Netherlands and abroad in the past. He recently extended his contract while completing his second year of studies at Radboud University. *Vox* spoke to him about his study programme in Psychology, friendship and, of course, football.

Text: Dirk Lotgerink / **Photography:** Bert Beelen



've played football on better pitches,' says Dirk Proper with a big grin. He stands in front of the Berchmanium administration building, holding up a ball. The remark is an understatement, as Proper plays every week on the best pitches in the Netherlands. He made his debut in 2017 at the age of 17 at NEC, the club where he has played since age 11. He has since become an important first-team player and was voted 'man of the season' by the Goffert club supporters.

Three years ago you were considered a talent, but now we're talking to NEC's most important player of last season..

'I do think I've made good progress,' Proper says modestly. 'This season was definitely a big leap in my career. I want to take that a step further next year, of course.'

He dribbles the ball as we take a walk around the campus. To have more control over the ball, he hands over his personal belongings: his phone and keys. Since last year, he has been living in Nijmegen-West, where he bought a flat that he shares with his brother Gert. He commutes between home, the football club, and the University.

Do you come here often?

'To be honest, I spend very little time on campus. I watch all the lectures at home because they're available online. My study programme has very few contact hours. Ultimately, I do everything other students do, just at my own pace. Other students are more likely to attend tutorials that aren't compulsory. For me, it works differently; I prefer to pass on those tutorials because I find it hard to combine them with football.'

Do you get exemptions as a professional footballer?

'In principle, I don't get preferential treatment, nor do I want it. During the pandemic, the Binding Study Advice didn't apply to anyone, so I could easily move on to the second year of my study programme. Other than that, they're quite strict here, which is good. Obviously, I think it's important to attend lectures. But if I communicate in

'STUDYING IS A FORM OF RELAXATION FOR ME'





3 QUESTIONS FOR DIRK

What did you want to become when you were little? 'I always wanted to become a professional football player. I've been busy with football since I was a kid, so I never really doubted that.'

Where did you go this summer? 'With some friends, I went on holiday to Ibiza.'

Who do you admire? 'Andrés Iniesta, former Barcelona and Spain football player (who is

a midfielder, like Proper, and also cannot rely on his height: With his 168 cm, Proper is still three centimetres shorter than the Spaniard, Eds.).'

a timely and clear manner, lecturers and student advisors are happy to help me out. Jorijn Verbruggen is now my student advisor. Her young son plays football in the same team as Édgar Barreto [former teammate at NEC, Eds.] and I get on with her really well. She says: 'You can't get exceptional treatment, compared to the other students, but we can see when we can schedule your tutorials, for example, so you can still attend.' And that's how I prefer it too. I want to do my best on the programme and earn all the study credits fairly. In terms of deadlines, I don't get any slack. It's mainly about mandatory attendance, which I also have to comply with, of course.'

How far along are you now? Dribbling through the study programme as easily as you pass opponents in the premier league every week?

'I'm now four years in and I've just completed the second year. So I'm on schedule because I do one year in two. It helps that I enjoy studying; I see it as a form of relaxation. When I get home after training at NEC, I obviously can't go out to train again, or challenge my body even more. Studying involves no physical effort. Besides, I like being in circles other than the football world for a change.'

Can you talk to other players about your studies?

'I guess I could, but I think there aren't many workplaces in the world where people move around as much as in football. That makes it difficult to build connections that you keep for the rest of your life, so friendships can sometimes be more superficial than elsewhere. But there are always guys you get along with that bit better. Mattijs [Branderhorst, former goalkeeper at NEC, Eds.] has become a true friend. We have lots of fun and I really enjoy life as a professional football player, but it's also nice to be among students and talk about things completely different to football.'

So what do you like to talk about, and what are the differences between students and professional football players?

'About the study programme, and things students are concerned with. Housing and going out, for example. It's the variation in particular I enjoy. The two worlds have very different dynamics. I like spending time with football players, but in professional football it's also normal to make fun of each other a bit. It's highly competitive. Teammates try to put you on the spot, while students are different in this respect. They're a bit more social, calmer, and empathetic. Locker-room talk is fun and you have to be able to take a hit. Football is a macho world, and you don't see that as much with students.'

'Everyone is themselves here on campus,' Proper says almost philosophically as we proceed with our round. 'Of course, in a football team you are selected based on your football skills. But that says nothing about who you are as a person. University is about commitment, a certain level of intelligence, and personal interests.'

Do you still have the same study friends you had when you first started?

'Students have a tendency to accrue study delay, so I'm still in sync with some friends from my first year.' He laughs: 'You could say that they're following in my tracks. Of course, most do finish faster. Sometimes I have tutorials that I can schedule in the afternoon and then I'm fortunate to have a lot of contact with lecturers and fellow students. I do like going out, but I don't go to student parties very often. I have to be fresh on the training pitch the next morning.'

Proper walks between the administration building and the Erasmus Tower. It's quiet today. The popular midfielder isn't recognised by any of the students we meet. As a cyclist passes by and a man walks his dog, Proper says



'FOR A LONG TIME THERE WAS A **TABOO** SURROUNDING PSYCHOLOGY AND MENTAL COACHING IN THE SOCCER WORLD'

he chose his study programme because he finds the workings of the brain interesting and he enjoys talking to people.

What do you hope to achieve with your study programme?

'I don't know yet. I find a lot of components in the study programme interesting. Within Psychology, you have three specialisations: brain and cognition, development, and behaviour and environment. I like them all, and I don't really have a preference yet, so even in the third year I want to choose my modules as broadly as possible. I want to keep all my options open, for example so I can become a psychologist in healthcare later on.'

Do your studies help you on the pitch?

'I find the Sports Psychology module interesting, and maybe I already use some of it subconsciously here and

there. Because there are so many different personalities in the locker room, you need to know how to trigger someone. It varies a lot from person to person. Sometimes I might have a better sense of how to talk to someone. One player likes it when you call him out hard in the group, while another prefers to have a one-on-one chat after training. People sometimes think of psychology as learning tricks you can apply in dealing with people, but that's not what it is at all. For a long time, there was a taboo surrounding psychology and mental coaching in the football world, but fortunately it's now being used more and more. A key question is: How do you deal with pressure? But also: How do you make a team work, what personalities do you have within the team? I also think about these questions in my work as a professional football player.'

It's all very practical. How do you feel about the academic side of studying?

'If I'm honest, my passion doesn't lie with research. I'm more interested in the knowledge courses, and they're clearly more practical. Think of interview skills. How do you handle sensitive information? What can you say to a client and what is better left unsaid? I've learnt that there's much more to a conversation than just the words of a psychologist or patient. How does something come across? You should never lie and you should know how to build a conversation. I think it's really cool to share this new knowledge with fellow students and practice having such talks straight away. That's where my passion lies, rather than in writing papers or publishing knowledge. Of course, it's important to know how to deal with academic papers, but doing research doesn't appeal to me so much at the moment. Maybe I'll be more interested in it in a couple of years.'

As we near the Cultuurcafé, a push message appears on our phones. 'Dirk Proper to AZ,' it says. Apparently it's just a rumour spread by Voetbal International magazine, but the message is a good pretext to ask him about his future.

What do you want to achieve by playing football?

'Football is a hectic world: you have to take it day by day. I don't know anything about AZ, and right now I'm happy at NEC. Above all, I want to perform well again this season, and who knows what will come my way after that. Of course, it's my dream to play in the big European leagues one day: England, Germany, Italy, or Spain. Who knows, maybe it will happen. Or maybe I'll just keep playing football at NEC until I turn 38 and then become a psychologist. That's certainly a possibility.' ★

'YOU ACHIEVE VERY LITTLE BY JUST SMILING'

Samira Azabar (38) is known in Belgium as the figurehead of BOEH! (Baas Over Eigen Hoofd, Boss Of Your Own Head, an action group defending the right to wear a headscarf). This year, she started out in Nijmegen as a postdoctoral researcher. 'People wondered: "Are you capable of doing a PhD?" Based on the idea that a woman wearing a headscarf can't possibly be objective.'

Text: Marit Willemsen / Photography: Bert Beelen



W

hen Samira Azabar started her PhD research in 2018, she discovered something about herself.

She studies political participation and perceptions of gender and sexuality among Muslims, first in her PhD at the University of Antwerp, and since March, as a postdoctoral researcher at the Faculty of Social Sciences in Nijmegen. In her doctoral research, she analyses people's behaviour both inside and outside the voting booth. What kind of action

groups do Muslims set up? How do they express themselves on social media? And how do they deal with discrimination? The latter in particular touches her personally, says Azabar. 'When I heard people in my interviews explain the strategies they use against discrimination and marginalisation, I thought: I sometimes do this too, and that's something I do very consciously.'

'I CAME HERE AND THOUGHT: OH, WOW. RADBOD UNIVERSITY IS PRETTY WHITE'

Azabar sits at a table on the terrace of a restaurant in Brakkenstein, sipping her iced tea. Her wheeled suitcase is standing next to her: she's attending a conference at the University tomorrow, and has to be there early. 'Popping up and down' to her hometown of Antwerp is out of the question, so she's spending the night in a hotel. Azabar is wearing her go-to jumpsuit, with its bright, eye-catching geometric shapes. Her headscarf is tied at the back of her neck.

'I deliberately wear a cheerful outfit like this,' she says. She also deliberately wears her headscarf knotted at the back of her neck at work. Azabar finds that this makes it easier to connect with people who are not used to a headscarf. When she first applied for a PhD position in Antwerp, an academic colleague explicitly told her: I find you more accessible that way. These are strategies that Azabar also hears from her respondents.

Azabar may not yet be a well-known face at Radboud University, but she is in Flanders. She is one of the figureheads of Baas Over Eigen Hoofd (Boss Of Your Own Head, BOEH!), a feminist and anti-racist action group that defends the right to wear a headscarf. Her social commitment did not end when she began her career as a researcher. In fact, the two go rather well together, Azabar believes.

How do you like it at Radboud University?

'I'm having a great time, and I have amazing colleagues. I did expect there to be more differences with Belgium though. In Belgium, the Netherlands has a reputation for considering diversity very important, but I see little difference. In promotional photos, the University tends to present itself as rather atypical, I think.' She laughs. 'But then I came here, and I thought: oh, wow! Radboud University – and its surroundings – are actually pretty white.'

At what age did you first feel that others saw you as 'different'?

'At a very young age. In primary school, I had to give a presentation on Morocco, even though I was born and raised in Belgium. After the 9/11 attacks in the US, I was often asked why Islam is so violent. I felt awful when





teachers or friends asked me such questions. I thought: You've known me all this time, where is this suddenly coming from? Before the 9/11 attacks, I was asked other questions: Why are women subordinate to men in your culture? Are you against gays? And all I could think was: That's not how it is at our house. I started seeking answers at a young age, so I could respond and explain why I'm a Muslim. That's why I chose to study sociology, I think.'

Azabar grew up in Mechelen in a family with five brothers and four sisters. Her parents are first-generation migrants from Morocco, and they have a different take on discrimination. 'My parents used to say: it will blow over. While I saw that discrimination was growing.' Azabar was taught at home that religion is very peaceful. 'I was brought up with anti-neoliberal ideas: the collective

and caring for vulnerable people are important.' As a child, Azabar read a lot and watched lots of documentaries. Her parents' attention was more often focused on some of her siblings. 'Now that I've got children of my own, I kind of understand it. I was always doing fine anyway.' At the end of primary school, and despite her good grades, her teachers were unwilling to send her to pre-university education. So her older sister intervened. 'She came along to the parent-teacher meeting as an interpreter, and tried to convince my parents.'

At age 10, Azabar decided to start wearing a headscarf. 'Looking back, I think I was quite young. My parents said: it will make things harder for you. But it gave me comfort, and recognition. I wore it when praying, and it felt really weird to keep putting it on and taking it off. So I thought: I'll just wear it all the time.'



At your Catholic secondary school, you had to take off your headscarf. How did that feel?

'As if I suddenly didn't belong anymore. In primary school, my classmates would sometimes pull it off, but now it had to go altogether. Things became especially difficult later, when religion started to play an even bigger role in my life. When I was 17, my brother died of a brain haemorrhage at the age of 23. That same year, the 9/11 attacks happened. I was much more focused on my prayers and ritual practices after that. That kind of thing happens automatically when you're in a grieving process.'

You mention the two events together, as if they were of the same order of magnitude.

'Yes.' She is silent for a moment. 'Yes.'

And are they?

'I don't know. The two experiences had a different, but significant impact. And both influenced me a lot. I personally suffered more from my brother's death. The 9/11 attacks impacted how people saw me. I was no longer the exotic Moroccan with the lovely mint tea, but a potential threat.'

After completing secondary school, Azabar went on to study sociology. She then worked as an educator at Motief, an educational institution focused on philosophy of life and society. In the meantime, a fierce social debate about the headscarf was raging in Flanders. In 2007, the Antwerp city council forbade the wearing of headscarves at the municipal desk. This led to street protests. In response, a number of women of all backgrounds and faiths – including Ida Dequeecker, a Flemish feminist of the first hour – founded Baas Over Eigen Hoofd (Boss of Your Own Head). A year later, Azabar became involved with BOEH! through her work. And some 15 years later, she is still involved. Last year, Azabar and Dequeecker published a book about the organisation.

BOEH! explicitly calls itself a feminist organisation. Is wearing or not wearing a headscarf the same kind of choice as wearing a short skirt?

'Of course. We're also very deliberately called Baas Over Eigen Hoofd, in reference to Baas in Eigen Buik (Boss Of Your Own Belly). Feminism is all about the freedom to make decisions. We stand for radical self-determination for women, a right they still don't have to this day. The prevailing view these days is that Muslim women are oppressed, and if we were only to free them, all problems would be solved. But that isn't how it works. The evil is patriarchy and racism, not Muslims. In places where decisions are made, it is still mostly white highly educated men who decide how everyone else should live. At BOEH!, we thought that if we simply explained that we weren't oppressed, everything would be fine.'



3 QUESTIONS FOR SAMIRA

What did you want to become when you were little?

'Doctor.'

Where did you go this summer?

'Alanya in Turkey (all inclusive) where you can simply enjoy a rest and not have to do anything for a while. When you have young children, that's absolute bliss.'

Who do you admire?

'I especially admire people who stand up against injustice and dare to dream of a just and more equal society.'

But that wasn't what happened. You quickly became the face of BOEH! and received a lot of negative media attention.

'They said: you're good at explaining it, so you do it. None of us had had any media training. So I did it, but I didn't enjoy it at all. I was very stressed and I had to voice an opinion that was unpopular. I also found it frightening to go into a TV studio. I was in my early twenties, remember!'

In 2009, in an interview on national television, well-known Flemish philosopher Etienne Vermeersch called you a fundamentalist Muslim because of your headscarf. How do you look back on that now?

'It was rough. We didn't want to just preach to the converted, which was why we wanted to enter into dialogue with people like Vermeersch or the leader of Vlaams Belang. The image of a young Muslim woman facing an older white man who wanted to dictate how women should dress helped us connect with other feminist organisations that were initially against us. BOEH! was taken seriously after that, in part thanks to those media appearances.'

Do you see similarities with the current situation in the Netherlands, where headscarves were recently banned in the police force?

'In Belgium, the discussion arose after France banned headscarves in the 1980s. The Netherlands is in turn taking over that discourse from Belgium. You can see clearly that people keep referring to a false interpretation of neutrality.'

You mean the idea that someone can't be neutral AND wear a headscarf. But do you think they can?

'Yes. And funnily enough, so does the Flemish government. On their site, it says that neutral service is not about what you wear, but about whether you can assist citizens without bias. That's the definition of neutrality.'

In the Netherlands, the ban covers all religious expressions, according to the responsible minister, Dilan Yeşilgöz.

'But the social debate always focuses on Muslims. The debate on face coverings on public transport was also only about burkas. When this kind of thing then becomes law, it should be defined in neutral terms. Antwerp's ban on headscarves also included skull caps and piercings, but people still continue to wear them.'

Did you find it hard to transition from being an educator and activist to academia?

'No. Other people wondered: "Are you capable of doing a PhD?" Based on the idea that a woman wearing a headscarf can't possibly be objective.'

'THE IDEA THAT I AM BIASED BECAUSE OF WHO I AM IS SIMPLY MISTAKEN'

Was this also due to your activism?

'My academic colleagues would say to me: activism isn't quite the same as scientific research, you know. But their objections were mostly about my appearance. Someone told me once that I would be limited in the scope of my research. In my PhD dissertation, I was asked to write a chapter on my positioning. I was very much against this initially. Other people didn't have to do it. The idea that I'm biased because of who I am, while white researchers are neutral and objective, is simply mistaken.'

Your life and your research are hugely interconnected. Isn't that relevant?

'That's often the case. In fact, I think every researcher should write such a chapter. Some of my colleagues are members of political parties while doing research on political parties. I think that poses even more of an integrity issue than me and my headscarf.'

Have your activism and background also benefited you?

'Yes. Two of the four Muslims I've interviewed so far in the Netherlands sought me out and agreed to the interview because of it. They wanted to know who I was, and what I stood for. And in my role as activist, I've learned a great deal about politics and society.'

You are still committed to BOEHI, doing your research, commuting six hours a day back and forth to the University. In an interview with Flemish magazine Ferm, you said you were 'plundering' your body. So why do you do it?

'I do it because it's necessary. My children are still seen at school as 'different', or underestimated because of their background. It makes me think: it's been two decades since I went to primary school and nothing has changed. This is also why I'm on the parents' council at their school. For a long time, I just kept on smiling and conforming, as my parents had taught me. But I've found that you achieve very little that way.' ★



COLUMN

Lucy's law

Lucienne van der Geld is a lecturer in Notarial Law and director of Netwerk Notarissen.

AI

Experts say we are on the brink of an AI revolution. So far, the rise of artificial intelligence has not had much impact on the labour market, but according to a recent report (OECD Employment Outlook 2023), this is about to change. Twenty seven per cent of jobs are at risk of being replaced by artificial intelligence. Three in five workers fear losing their jobs because of the AI revolution. Fortunately, there is also good news: many new jobs are appearing, for example for AI developers.

There are still so many legal questions around AI that, at least for now, lawyers – especially those specialising in copyright law – need not fear for their jobs. One of the issues they are grappling with is whether AI-generated articles should be seen as original work or plagiarism. A chatbot makes use of language models that are 'trained' with texts. To put it simply, this process leads to the creation of the algorithm that forms the basis for the text generator. A lawsuit is pending in the US over whether it is legal to use copyrighted texts to train language models.

Sooner or later, everyone will encounter AI in their studies or work. For students, the chatbot can be a handy study buddy. For example, by using AI-generated answers to practice exam questions to check that their answers are correct. But apart from all kinds of useful applications, AI also sometimes leads to comical situations. Secondary school teachers are demanding that pupils write their papers by hand from now on to make sure no chatbots are involved. Well, that's a 'boomer'-generation idea if ever there was one, because you can easily link a robotic arm to a chatbot and then ask it to write your paper for you. All you have to do is give it a notebook; the arm can even turn the page when needed.

And how about the fan of Frans Timmermans, who created an election poster for the 'United Left' using AI? The cheering people on the poster are enthusiastically waving... their six-fingered hands. AI can still be a bit all fingers and thumbs at times! Literally and figuratively.





'I'M NOT AN ACTION HERO'

Marc Van Ranst rarely allows himself to be led by fear. Even from a safehouse, the Low Countries' best-known virologist still confronts spreaders of conspiracies and fake news. In October, he is due to receive an honorary doctorate from Radboud University.

Text: Mathijs Noij en Stan van Pelt / **Photography:** Erik van 't Hullenaar

There is such a thing as coincidence, as Marc Van Ranst learned in June last year. Within a span of 24 hours, he heard from three Dutch universities that they were awarding him an honorary doctorate. 'My first response was: they must have agreed it among themselves,' says 57-year-old Van Ranst in the somewhat sterile lobby of the REGA Institute, the Leuven university building where he works. 'But it turned out not

to be the case. Strange, isn't it?'

He has in the meantime picked up two of the three honorary doctorates: from the VU Amsterdam and Leiden University. He will receive the third doctorate from Radboud University on 17 October, on the occasion of the University's centenary celebrations.

And once again, his parents will be sitting in the front row. 'Of course I'm honoured to be receiving an honorary doctorate,' says the professor. 'But my first thought is still: how nice for my parents!'

Father Van Ranst in particular reads anything he can find about his son. 'He's like the CIA, the FBI, and Mossad all rolled into one. I've told him countless times to stop, but he can't help it.' The honorary degrees act as an effective antidote to all the hate mail Van Ranst receives. 'Finally, my parents can read that not everyone is out to harm me.'

Song Contest

As a virologist at KU Leuven, Marc Van Ranst was one of the Belgian government's key advisors during the COVID-19 pandemic. He was a member of the Risk Assessment Group, the COVID-19 Scientific Committee and - in the aftermath of the pandemic - the group of 10 experts who were asked to develop an exit strategy. The virologist sat in at about every Belgian table where lockdowns, face masks, and access policies were discussed.

That alone was enough for many anti-vaxxers and other COVID-sceptics to hate him. It didn't prevent Van Ranst from expressing his outspoken opinions in talk shows and on social media. Twitter is his preferred platform. When he is attacked, or when people talk sheer nonsense, Van Ranst counterattacks.

He even did this from his safehouse, after ex-military officer Jürgen Conings had tried to attack him, with heavy weapons and ammunition in his pocket. 'People found it very strange that I did that. But I was just sitting there on the sofa with my family and there wasn't much I could do.' He starts laughing 'And then, to make matters worse, the Eurovision Song Contest came on TV. That was just cruel and unusual punishment.'

So yes, at times like that, Van Ranst would take out his phone and check how people on social media were reacting to his involuntary isolation. At some point, Van Ranst requested access to the Telegram group 'As 1 man behind Jürgen', where sympathisers of the ex-military officer

'THE MEDIA FELT
I WAS ASKING FOR
TROUBLE. AS IF
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TO PLAY THE
VICTIM'

were gathered online. 'I find that interesting. The fact that those people really do exist.' That night, Van Ranst passed the time messaging back and forth with people who would gladly have seen him dead. The last message he sent was 'Good night warriors!'

The fact that someone radicalises, becomes confused, and 'starts doing crazy things' is not even what surprised Van Ranst most about the affair. It was the fact that a Facebook support group for Conings attracted 50,000 members. 'Just think about it... there are 50,000 people out there who think it would be a great idea to put a bullet through my head.' He shrugs as he speaks of it.

Did you expect the social unrest and polarisation to become so intense that you would have to go into hiding with your family?

'At the beginning of the pandemic, everyone was full of praise for virologists. Society was desperate for information, and we were able to provide it. Those were the honeymoon days. People hung white sheets out of windows in support of health workers. But even back then, in March 2020, I warned that it never ends like that. When they praise you like that, they're sharpening their knives at the same time. But the fact that a military officer would eventually come after me; clearly there was no way I could predict that.'

Doesn't that make you feel really unsafe?

'I find it intriguing more than dangerous. I wanted to read with my own eyes in those groups: what's going on here? And I responded to what I read, under my own name. The media felt I was asking for trouble. As if I was expected to play the victim and keep quiet.'

Of course, you could say: you were seeking confrontation, even though you were already heavily protected.

'Why should I silently watch from the side without responding? As in: Don't feed the beast? Sorry, I don't believe in that. These people are entitled to my opinion. It's me they're talking about, after all.'

Come to think of it, why do you tweet so much? Is it an emotional response, or is there also a strategy behind it?

'There's definitely a strategy behind it. People used to send out a press release. During the pandemic, I used Twitter to achieve the same effect. You want to see something distributed, and ten minutes later, you get a call from Belga (Belgium's largest news agency, Eds.). It happens really quickly. You don't want to let the people who talk nonsense on Twitter gain too much ground.'

You do often go straight for the jugular, for example in your digital discussions with Willem Engel.

'There's no point in saying: "Well, Mr Engel, I don't agree completely with what you're saying." You can also choose not to respond at all. I did that with Engel until he started talking about me. At the same time, he was

also getting invited to appear on talk shows. At that point, some people wanted me to debate with him on TV, but that's something you should never do. Who benefits from something like that? The general public ends up thinking that the truth must lie somewhere in the middle. You wouldn't enter into debate with someone who says the earth is flat, would you?'

Why do you choose to engage in online discussion then?

'During the pandemic, there were a lot of so-called scientists who stood up and started criticising the COVID-19 policy. These were often emeriti or people from the US. It's hard for the general public to assess how much expertise these people have. After all, they do have 'professor' in front of their name. In such cases, there's nothing wrong with saying: this guy trained as a virologist 25 years ago, he has not published a single relevant scientific paper since, but he does invite donations. I think it's fair to point that out.'

Do you think scientists should speak out more often against fake news?

'If something is nonsense, you shouldn't be vague about it. When people write that they've become magnetic after being injected with a COVID-19 vaccine, I send a tweet that I've been stuck to my fridge for four hours. There are some things you shouldn't take seriously and it's good to inject some humour sometimes.'



3 QUESTIONS FOR MARC

What did you want to become when you were little? 'An astronaut: after seeing the moon landing as a four-year-old, I was completely captivated by the NASA Apollo programme. As a seven-year-old in 1972, I even tried to telephone Neil Armstrong, the first man on the moon. And I did get to talk to someone from NASA in Houston, but

the problem was that I neither spoke nor understood English.'

Where did you go this summer? 'This summer I spent two days at the Efteling. So a trip abroad! The rest of the summer, I spent mostly in Knokke, where I had my first solo exhibition with my digital art works in a gallery.'

Who do you admire? '21 July 1969 was a special day. Not only

did Apollo 11 land on the moon, but that same day Eddy Merckx won his first of five Tour de France. I promptly became a lifelong fan of this amazing cyclist. Not just because of his unique track record, but mainly because you could see that Merckx was suffering on his bike. I thought that was really inspiring.'

Don't you also partly owe your Dutch honorary doctorates to Willem Engel? The lawsuits you won against him haven't been bad for your reputation.

'You'd have to ask the universities. But would I have been awarded the honorary doctorates if I'd stayed quietly at the lab and fiddled around with test tubes? Probably not.'

Many of your colleagues are very good when it comes to content, but they tend not express themselves in the media much, if at all.

'Give them all an honorary doctorate!'

Who are your great examples?

'You are lucky in the Netherlands to have the best virologist in the world: Ab Osterhaus. Marion Koopmans also certainly deserves an honorary doctorate. And I'd like to

'BEING AFRAID IS RARELY PRODUCTIVE'

bet that a Nobel Prize will soon be awarded to the people who developed the mRNA vaccine (including Katalin Karikó, who received an honorary doctorate from Radboud University last year, Eds.). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the development of those vaccines. I expect we'll soon have mRNA vaccines against influenza, RSV, and other infectious diseases.'

Yin and yang

At the age of 12, Marc Van Ranst got his first microscope as a gift, after which he started experimenting in his own private laboratory at his home in Boom. As a 16-year-old, he knocked on the door of the local hospital to ask whether he might be allowed to use their laboratory facilities. Not long after this, he was given the key to the lab. 'My favourite time at the lab was Saturday evening. I had all the equipment to myself then.'

One of the lessons he learned during that time was that you also need a bit of luck. 'Those people could also have said: get lost, kid, we don't have time for this. Times were different then. I would visit pharmacists to collect old chemicals. They had to get rid of them, and they let me take them. There's no way that would be possible now – you need all kinds of environmental permits for that these days.'

And it's not just science that Van Ranst is passionate about. His serious hobbies are like yin and yang: stamp collecting and mountaineering. He has climbed Mount

Elbrus in Russia, Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, Mont Blanc in France, and Aconcagua in Argentina. All mountains between 4.8 and 7 kilometres high.

Is it in your nature to seek out dangerous situations?

'No, I seek out the mountains.'

Isn't it the risks and the excitement that make mountaineering fun?

'No, no. Why do you climb mountains? Because they are there. When you pitch your tent up there, you're in the most beautiful hotel there is.'

You climb mountains and don't shy away from threats.

Are you never afraid?

'It's true that I'm not easily put off by certain things. But I'm not an action hero or a thrill seeker, if that's what you think. I don't let the threats affect my life. When we were allowed out of the safehouse, I simply caught the next train to work. It doesn't help to be afraid. Yes, I love climbing mountains, and I'm sometimes scared of falling. Definitely. So I make sure I'm careful. But if you're too scared, you can't go up that mountain at all. Being afraid is rarely productive.'

You just walk around the Market Square in Leuven, despite all the threats?

'Yes, I do. But if I go somewhere on an official visit, there's often some security.'

Exhaustion

With the pandemic behind him, Van Ranst's life has moved into a calmer phase. 'My life is one big holiday now, I sometimes say. Too bad that's not true, but it sounds good.' He immediately adds: 'But it's also not like I had to work in the coal mines for years.'

He is often asked if he doesn't miss the COVID-19 crisis a bit. 'People think it must have been a fantastic period for virologists like me.' But nothing could be further from the truth. 'There was this constant exhaustion. And it just kept on getting worse. It was draining.'

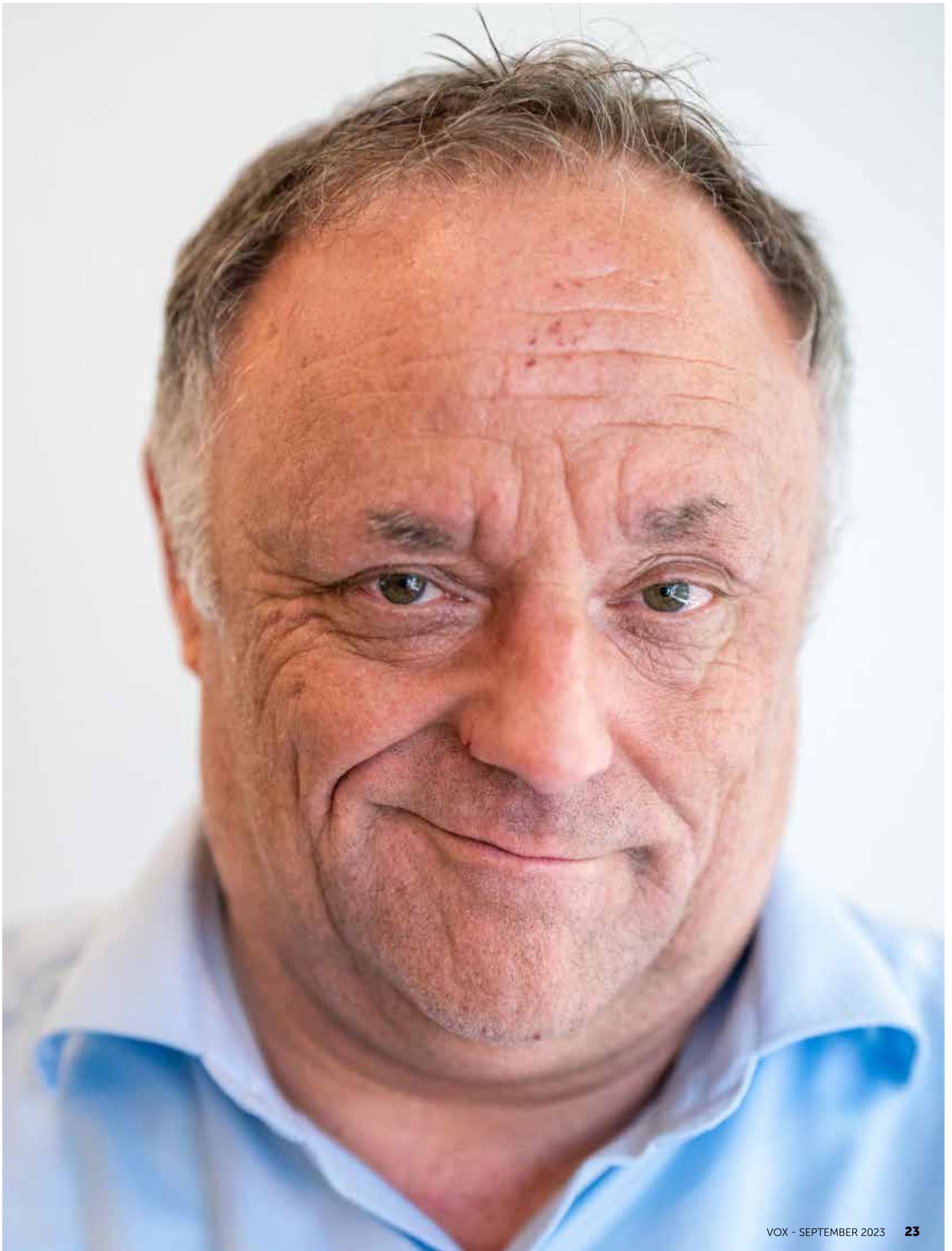
Looking back now on the government's intervention, what would you have done differently?

'If there was to be another outbreak tomorrow, we would do a lot of the same things. We were confronted with exponentially growing curves, and had to act quickly. So should you first have a broad public debate about the measures? No, of course not. Lockdowns are extremely hard, but they also save lives.'

At the end of 2022, the Netherlands was the only European country to go into lockdown one last time. Was that necessary?

'The problem was that the Netherlands had very few ICU beds. We have twice as many in Belgium, and Germany

→



has twice more still. It enabled us to say: we will get through this wave without people lying in hospital corridors. But you faced the risk of overloading the healthcare system, and people weren't willing to take that risk. The low number of ICU beds is a policy choice, but it involves risk.'

Is that the Dutch being thrifty?

'I also argued for more ICU beds in a House of Representatives Committee – at least it could have prevented that last lockdown. But that isn't going to change I think; people in the Netherlands simply deal with it differently – after all, under normal circumstances, you can get by with so few beds. The fact is that that last lockdown was very damaging to public opinion on COVID-19 measures.'

'THAT LAST LOCK-DOWN WAS VERY DAMAGING TO PUBLIC OPINION ON COVID-19 MEASURES'

Are we better prepared for the next pandemic?

'Many people think we now have a magic recipe for the next pandemic. That we'll be able to manage it away thanks to smart politicians taking the right measures based on great scientific advice from virologists. That's not the case, and that's what I want to warn people about. The only thing we can do – as I said at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic – is turn a massive disaster into a slightly less massive disaster.'

What will be the next virus outbreak?

'I'm going to give you the same answer that I would have given if you'd asked me in 2019. Probably a weird and unexpected influenza virus. Something avian flu-like perhaps – we saw more and more outbreaks of this among mammals last year. That makes you think: nature is experimenting, and that's not a good thing.'

'However, I can't say anything about the timing. People think we're fine for now, now that COVID-19 has just passed. That may be true of volcanoes, but unfortunately, it doesn't work that way with virus outbreaks.' *

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POINT TAKEN!

NEWS FROM THE UNIVERSITY STUDENT COUNCIL AND THE WORKS COUNCIL

www.numedezeggenschap.nl



Massive growth for the AOOb party

We're happy to have won the second highest number of votes in the Works Council elections, almost three times more than in the last elections. We thank the voters for their trust! The seats we won are held by people from different backgrounds, nationalities, and positions: Frank Bohn, Edita Poljac, Max Visser, Sarah Thin, and Juliette Alenda-Demoutiez. We have also given one of our seats to the PON PhD candidates' party, based on the electoral alliance between AOOb and PON. This seat is held by Jan Schoone, with whom we would like to continue working in the coming term.

What will we be doing?

What matters most to us is that people enjoy going to work. That means that we want to achieve **concrete and effective** changes, not just talk about improvements or new policies. Sometimes, it can also be helpful to broaden the Nijmegen perspective by bringing in **international experiences**. What does this mean concretely? Here are three examples:

1. Recently, there were social safety issues on campus. This is also reflected in the annual reports of the ombudsperson and the confidential advisors. Our party therefore wants to give more responsibility to **the ombudsperson**. She should be able and allowed to take more independent action, if necessary against the will of the university or relevant faculty. It is important that our colleagues are given effective help, and do not have to leave the university in frustration.

2. The **workload** has to be reduced. Task load calculations are not always realistic, and fail to adequately take into account a lot of email and administration time. Some faculties only allocate 12 hours for the supervision (and co-reading) of Bachelor's theses, which is clearly far too little. We also spend a lot of time on sometimes faltering IT facilities (e.g. Brightspace-Osiris harmonisation), and updating BASS and other portals. Researchers often have to take over administrative tasks that could be done better and faster by existing or additional support staff.

3. We believe every employee should have their **own workspace** and, if possible, their own office. At our own Faculty, the Nijmegen School of Management, it was recently decided that only four workstations were needed for every five employees. We are completely against this, as are our colleagues across the university, according to the results of a recent survey on office use. You have to allow some 'slack' in the form of seemingly unused space to make sure that people come to the university and are able to do their work there well.

In short, we are committed to defending the interests of our colleagues. If you have any ideas or additional proposals, please feel free to email us or one of the other members of our party.

*Max Visser, max.visser@ru.nl;
Frank Bohn, frank.bohn@ru.nl*

WOULD YOU LIKE TO JOIN THE DISCUSSION?

Contact us via www.radboudnet.nl/personeel/diversen/medezeggenschap/leden/ or www.ru.nl/usr/over_de/de_raad_stelt_zich_1/

TOM VERSTAPPEN



STAGE ANIMAL WITH A BIG NIJMEGEN HEART

Tom Verstappen (26) calls himself a Catholic atheist. The former Arts and Culture Studies student is hooked on Nijmegen, can express his creativity with the activist art collective De Naakte Waarheid, and makes music with his band, Misprint. He is currently working on a podcast about the 'tambourine lady'.

Text: Willem Claassen / **Photography:** Duncan de Fey

When Tom Verstappen missed the deadline for his Bachelor's thesis in Arts and Culture Studies and decided to start his thesis all over again, he and a friend organised a house party on three floors of student complex Hoogeveldt. The theme: Dante's Divine Comedy. 'We had set up the bottom floor as the Inferno, for dancing and kissing. The middle floor was all about Reflection; you could go there to drink tea. The top floor was Heaven, a space to chill out by the pool. Two hundred people attended. I almost lost my lease because of that party.'

Two hundred people attended. I almost lost my lease because of that party.'



3 QUESTIONS FOR TOM

What did you want to become when you were little?

'Rubbish collector.'

Where did you go this summer?

'I went to Amiens (France) with my girlfriend and to Slovenia, Croatia and Germany with five of my friends. On holidays, I always try to fit in as much as possible. Lots of walking, visiting museums, long nights discussing crisp flavours, and not much sleep.'

Who do you admire 'I can be shamelessly inspired by everyone around me. Mostly by people I create things with, everyone from Misprint, and four people in particular: Jens Bouwman, Willem Baltussen, Jelle Crooijmans, and Mart Bouwmans.'

Broodje Spee

The grand-scale house party says a lot about Verstappen's creativity and his drive to connect. Verstappen has since graduated and works as a programme maker for literary organisation Wintertuin, where he links literature to other art disciplines. He is also part of the collective De Naakte Waarheid (The Naked Truth) and the band Misprint, and he works to strengthen the local music scene with various initiatives at incubator De Basis.

Born and raised in Nijmegen, he has a soft spot for the couleur locale of his home city, which is why he chose to meet us at Cafeteria Keizer Karelplein. 'Look, they sell Broodje Spee here! I love that. It's a local snack, invented in the 1990s by Pieter Spee, a student. It consists of a soft, white bun with a cheese soufflé, chilli sauce, peanut sauce, and onions. They have it on the menu in lots of places. You can compare it to Groningen's "eierbal".'

On the terrace of the chip shop, watching the many cyclists and passersbys, Verstappen mentions that he spent two months this year without a bank card. After cutting his ING bank card in half on stage in front of a sold-out Merleyn, he wanted to switch to ASN, but ING was being difficult. 'I wanted to go on holiday, so I ended up having to open another ING account for a while; there was no other way.'

Cutting his bank card in half was part of the 'Benefit Night for Yourself', an anti-capitalist celebration by De Naakte Waarheid, with music, performances, and an auction. The idea was that the entrance fee and other proceeds would be shared among the visitors who stayed until the end. In the end, you could also choose to donate the money to a charity, which was what most people did.

The benefit night was one of the many extravagant projects of De Naakte Waarheid. The collective originated at the Nijmegen secondary school SSgN. In Cultural and Arts Education, Verstappen was asked to produce a social criticism paper. Together with two friends, he created a complicated rock opera on how Tinder is not about real love. 'We performed it with a whole group, all mediocre musicians. In the end, three of us remained: Jens Bouwman, Willem Baltussen, and I.'

During their studies, the collective took part in a number of music competitions, including De Roos van Nijmegen. 'We pretended to be a rock band, even though we weren't. We did give it a serious shot, though, with a lot of audience participation. The audience voted us through to the final, where we wore Jesus outfits and took a huge butterfly on stage. We'd done our very best, and came second.' Verstappen laughs. 'Some people were really angry that we'd made it so far, because we cared more about the show than the music.'

De Naakte Waarheid appeared at many festivals, but in the end it was too much. 'Our artistic principle is that every show should be different, with different dance moves and outfits. That means a lot of work, and before you know it, you're rehearsing three times a week. So we decided to slow down a bit.'

Geert Wilders

Social engagement is the collective's main drive. Verstappen himself became socially involved as early as in primary school. 'I grew up at the time when Geert Wilders entered the House of Representatives with the PVV party. That kept me busy. I was in a so-called black school. At my football club, there were lots of boys from other schools, and they found children from other backgrounds very scary. I resisted that. It made me aware of how new Dutch people are often seen.'

In secondary school, he made friends who were also very politically aware and denounced the growing right-wing sentiment in the Netherlands. With De Naakte Waarheid, they gave shape to their activism. 'It starts with believing that we can change something. If we then get a stage, we must use it for that purpose. We feel responsible.'

Since the pandemic, the collective has expanded their repertoire beyond performances alone. For example, they organised a counter-reaction to the Vizier op Links stickers. 'It was in the news a couple of years ago: radical right-wing stickers being placed on the front doors of left-wing politicians saying "observed location". We recreated the same stickers, but changed the text to: "adored location". It was a playful statement against harassment.'

During the Four Days Marches, they held a dance night at Merleyn, entitled Greetings from Zingelong. 'We created a poputopia, because we want to make the world a more beautiful place. We prefaced the songs we played with social criticism on Instagram beforehand. For instance, we posted an excerpt from Kelis' 'Milkshake' with the story that Kelis uses oat milk instead of cow's milk for her milkshake.' Greetings from Zingelong is due to return to Merleyn on a regular basis.

Verstappen takes a sip of his iced tea. He's a stage animal, he confesses. 'I can be a bit of an extrovert showman. It was the same when I was president of



'I GREW UP AT THE TIME WHEN **GEERT WILDERS** ENTERED POLITICS. THAT KEPT ME BUSY'

KNUS, the study association of Arts and Culture Studies. I like being the centre of attention. The stage really stirs something in me. It makes me want to stand out, and then I really go for it.'

This is also apparent in his other project, the band Misprint. As a singer and keyboardist, he moves around a lot during performances, and uses the entire stage. 'When I get the audience to do what I want, it makes me feel powerful, but in a good way. I enjoy the interaction.'

The band could not be more different from the collective – it's made up of three former Arts and Culture students and a bass player whom they met through their extended network. 'I can express something different about myself in both projects. De Naakte Waarheid is conceptual, while Misprint is more personal.'

They started out as an English-speaking punk band, but soon found out that that didn't work very well. 'One time, at the Cultuurcafé, we saw a band playing badly and we thought: we can do better than that. But I found it hard to write in English, and we weren't very good at punk either. We're just not angry enough. So we turned into a Dutch-language indie rock band.'

These days, Misprint is doing very well. Late last year, the band scored a hit with 'Lege koelkast' ('Empty fridge'). 'You can sing along to it, and people have shared it all over the place. It became a local hit. It was great fun to experience! Still, if I'm honest, I'm

personally more taken with our new single 'En, soms' ('And, sometimes'). That song made people cry. That's more important to me.'

This summer, the musicians performed as the opening act at the Valkhof Festival. For Verstappen, it was a dream come true. This Nijmegen festival introduced him to a lot of music. In September, Misprint will play at Misty Fields, a festival that features bands the Misprinters themselves have been listening to for a long time.

Verstappen wants to show us something. He waves the cafeteria manager good-bye, and walks around the premises towards the Quack monument. He pauses on the grassy area between the two lanes of Nassausingel. 'Have you ever noticed these sculptures before? →



'I LOVE CULT HEROES AND VILLAGE IDIOTS'

They're a bit hidden.' He doesn't particularly like them, but they intrigue him. He chuckles. 'The municipality of Nijmegen received them as a gift to make the city more attractive, but who sees these statues now? The Quack monument is also a gift, and the municipality didn't actually want it at all.'

The Nijmegen culture won't let go of him. For the past two years he's had an NEC season ticket, one of Misprint's lyrics features party artist Ronnie Ruysdael, and in a show by De Naakte Waarheid, he used a slogan from the Pierson Riots: 'Lansink's an idiot' (in reference to CDA party chairman Ad Lansink who was seen by the squatters as the person responsible for escalating the conflict). Together with Willem Baltussen, a member of the collective, he is currently working on a podcast about the 'tambourine lady', Oda Le Noble. She performed with a tambourine in the city centre for years. 'I love cult heroes and "village idiots". We are now in contact with Oda's sister and plan to pitch our idea to national broadcasters.'

Battering ram for creativity

Verstappen really wants to play a role in the Nijmegen cultural scene. At music incubator De Basis, he initiated Geluidstafel, an evening held on a regular basis where

musicians play songs to each other. 'These songs are all works in progress, and the other musicians can give feedback on them. At Wintertuin, we've organised something similar for writers for years, under the name *Literatuur-nest*. The musicians really enjoy getting together on these evenings – otherwise you're always working on your own, in isolation.'

He and some friends are also organising Rocktober for the third time this year. The concept is simple: musicians are challenged to write a new song every day during the month of October. These songs are shared via Google Drive, and there is also a group app. That way, participating musicians hear from each other what they are creating, and they keep in touch with each other. 'It acts as a battering ram for creativity. You don't have time for writer's block. It releases something. During previous Rocktobers, I ended up writing songs for Misprint, and I also collaborated a lot with other musicians. And if you don't get a song out of it, you might learn something about recording, for example.'

With Geluidstafel and Rocktober, he wants to connect people and help develop the Nijmegen music scene. 'A close-knit community is forming. People attend each other's performances and help each other out, which is really nice. But I also benefit from it myself. I couldn't manage to write songs for an entire month if I was on my own. I need the pressure from people around me.'

Verstappen won't be kept away from his city. 'I've never wanted to leave here. I love the left-progressive, anti-Randstad sentiment. I see myself as a Catholic atheist, with the Catholic sociability and atheist mindset.'

He points to the Stadsschouwburg. 'There's another wacky building. The foyer overlooks the Keizer Karelplein. It was probably a nice idea on paper, but because it is suspended so high above the ground, there's also something vaguely elitist about it. It's ugly, but I like that.' ★

Twenty-one years ago, physician Tanya Bisseling identified the first Dutch patient with a rare form of stomach cancer. The patient was herself, and she was pregnant at the time. To save her life, her stomach was removed. Recently, the same surgery was also performed on her daughter, a medical student at Radboud University.

Text: Antonia Leise / Photography: Erik van 't Hullenaar

THE GI DOCTOR WITHOUT A STOMACH



Tanya Bisseling is sitting at her kitchen table in Nijmegen, a mug of coffee, and several black-and-white photographs spread out in front of her. It's Wednesday morning, just after eleven, and Bisseling's dogs start barking. 'Sorry, they react to everyone who goes past the garden,' she says.

It's unusual to find Bisseling not working on a Wednesday like this. Normally, the gastroenterologist would be doing paperwork, responding to patients, and giving lectures at the university.

'I should probably take better care of myself,' she says. 'I really do work a lot.'

Bisseling is a world-leading expert in a rare hereditary form of stomach and breast cancer caused by a mutation of the CDH1 gene. It's a mutation most people have never heard of. Bisseling suspects that no more than 30 or 35 families are affected in the Netherlands. Twenty-one years ago, she identified the first Dutch patient: a medical student in her early thirties, twelve weeks pregnant, with an early form of aggressive stomach cancer. Herself.

Gastrectomy

Twenty-one years ago, a pregnant Bisseling underwent a gastrectomy, removal of the stomach, that stopped her cancer from spreading and saved her life. Her youngest daughter, Jasmijn Olde, who she was pregnant with at the time, had the same surgery less than a week ago. Her daughter is the reason Bisseling is at home right now, on care leave from work.

When we spoke for the first time, Olde was just a few weeks away from surgery. The twenty-year-old medical student had been diagnosed with the same aggressive stomach cancer as her mother two decades previously, in late 2022. For Olde, the diagnosis did not come as a surprise. She has known for four years now that she is a carrier of the genetic mutation.

'Usually, you don't test before someone turns eighteen,' her mother explained when we met before the surgery. 'But she was very mature for her age, and the three of them, my oldest daughter, my son, and Jasmijn, wanted to be tested together.' Both Olde and her brother turned out to be carriers. Last year, her brother had his stomach removed.

Priorities

Jasmijn Olde, a medical student at Radboud University, now joins her mother at the kitchen table. She was released from hospital a few days ago and is slowly adapting to life without a stomach. 'The pain is getting less,' she says. 'But I have a lot to think about now.'

Losing a stomach shifts priorities, she says. Right now, Olde's priorities are getting enough food and sleep. Neither of which is exactly easy without a stomach. The first two weeks after the surgery, she can only consume fluids, has to eat every two hours, and every bite takes time. Her friends have been visiting and she is managing to have a walk around the block: 'Maybe 500 meters a day,' she says. But everything is tiring. And every bite is complicated.

'If food doesn't enter the stomach the right way, air comes up, fighting with the food coming down, and making her nauseous,' her mother explains. And the fact that Olde's diet mainly consists of soup and yoghurt at the moment doesn't make it any easier. 'I'm really looking forward to eating normal food again,' she says. 'Especially friet speciaal.'

Relief

But eating will never entirely return to normal. For a start, when a stomach is removed, a person loses their feeling of hunger, because the proteins that send hunger signals to the brain are produced in the stomach. 'Sometimes, I feel a little bit shaky, but that's the only sign your body gives,' says Olde. For her, food will now be something she needs to remind herself about, something with a schedule attached.

'Having your stomach removed is like starting from zero,' she says. 'You lose all your health, all your fitness. A social worker I talked to before the surgery said it can almost feel like a mourning process for your old life.' Before the surgery, she mostly felt one thing: 'Really scared.'

Now that the surgery is over, this feeling has turned overwhelmingly into relief. 'I woke up after the surgery and just started crying. I didn't even think about it. It just happened.' Olde is not a person who cries easily: 'I was a bit surprised myself,' she says. Her mother was less surprised: 'I think there was tension inside of you on the run-up to the surgery,' she adds. 'You didn't allow it to come out. And after the surgery, it exploded out of you.'

Appreciation

In the weeks leading up to the surgery, Olde decided to make the most of her final days without a handicap. Going to university, to the pub, working, being out all the time. 'Until five in the morning,' Bisseling says. 'But I stopped a few days before the surgery,' her daughter replies. 'Then I felt like I should probably get some rest. It's not a good idea to go into surgery tired.' But knowing that she would lose her health, she says, has definitely made her appreciate it more.



3 QUESTIONS FOR JASMIJN

What did you want to become when you were little?

'I always said I wouldn't be a doctor. But, here I am, studying Medicine.'

Where did you go this summer?

'Mallorca, a holiday full of sun and beach.'

Who do you admire?

'I find it hard to name one person I admire, I've thought about it for a long time... but I just admire lots of people. Everyone around me, my friends, acquaintances and family, they all have some characteristic that I admire.'



'I'M REALLY LOOKING
FORWARD TO EATING
NORMAL FOOD AGAIN.
ESPECIALLY **FRIET
SPECIAAL'**



3 QUESTIONS FOR TANYA

What did you want to become when you were little?

'A doctor; it was the only thing I ever wanted to be.'

Where did you go this summer? 'Mallorca.

Nothing special – just a holiday to chill out and recover.'

Who do you admire? 'My family (my husband and three children).'

Now, the twenty-year-old will spend the upcoming weeks slowly learning to eat again and trying to come to terms with this new version of her life. According to Bisseling, patients' bodies take around two years to really adapt to the loss of a stomach.

'I think I will have to prioritise studying above student life this next study year,' Olde says about going back to university. It will probably be tough, she thinks, but she is motivated. 'I signed up for the Honours programme, I really wanted to do it, and this was my only chance.'

But right now, the tiredness is affecting her a lot. It was one of the things she thought would be most challenging before the surgery: 'Everyone around me will be twenty years old and partying, and I will be in bed,' she predicted back then. At the moment, she spends most of her time on the sofa. 'I've been watching a lot of television, especially sports programmes, which I never used to watch before.' She laughs: 'I know a lot of tennis players now.'

Death sentence

'She's not ready to hear that yet,' Bisseling says after Olde has gone to lay down again. 'But she will find a way; it will be alright. What I tell my patients is that stomach removal is like a lifelong punishment. You will always have to worry about what to eat, always have to prioritise, and you can't predict when you will have a good day – and when a less good one.'

In the future, Bisseling hopes that more stomachs can be retained until patients are in their thirties or forties. 'In some people, we remove a stomach for small indolent (early, ed.) lesions. These are malignant, but some of those tiny, early malignant lesions will never develop into invasive cancer. So, we try to identify a changing pattern and individualise the moment of gastrectomy.'

Olde's cells had already started changing into a more aggressive form. 'Not having surgery would have been her death sentence,' Bisseling says. In 1997, Bisseling's father, then 54, died of stomach cancer. 'He was a heavy smoker; he worked even more than I did,' she says. 'So, I thought, well, he smoked too much; his lifestyle caused his cancer.' Then, only a few years later, her 25-year-old sister was diagnosed with the same type of cancer, already incurable.

Hereditary

'The carriers are very difficult to identify,' Bisseling says. 'You discover the gene in the family because people die.' Like Bisseling's father and sister. The fact that she discovered the hereditary stomach cancer her family was affected by in the early 2000s is a miracle. Back then,

'YOU
DISCOVER
THE GENE
BECAUSE
PEOPLE
DIE'

genetic testing for inheritable cancers was still in its infancy. 'I discovered that it was possible to analyse this CDH1 gene, that I thought our family had a mutated variant of and that caused the cancer, in Cambridge in the UK, so I contacted them.' It took months for the results. By the time Bisseling learned that her suspicions were correct, an endoscopy had already detected cancer in herself and another of her sisters, and both had their stomachs removed.

Bystander

'The bitterest feeling is thinking about my sister who died of stomach cancer,' Bisseling says. 'Because the fact that she had an incurable stomach cancer saved the lives of my other sister and me. And she knew; she was aware of that.' The black-and-white photographs on the table in front of Bisseling are from the final months of her sister's life. Some are from the funeral.

'She never complained,' Bisseling says, looking at the photos. 'No. Until the last month, when she wasn't able to do anything anymore, she celebrated life.' How does that make her feel? 'That's the thing, I can't say,' she says. 'For my younger sister who also had her stomach removed, it was much more difficult. They were only a year apart, almost like twins. I felt like a bystander.'

There were only three months between her sister's terminal cancer diagnosis and the removal of Bisseling's stomach. At the time of her surgery, Bisseling and her husband had two young children and a third one on the



way. ‘You haven’t got much time to think about it,’ Bisseling’s husband Erik Olde says. ‘You just get on with it. And afterwards, you think, how did I manage that?’

Uncharted

‘I remember Erik being more shocked than I was,’ Bisseling says. ‘I remember myself saying, okay, if there is cancer, we have to remove my stomach. And then my gastroenterologist said, okay, but then we have to carry out an abortion first – that was Jasmijn – and I said, no, we’re not going to do that.’ Nowadays, Bisseling says, she has more patients without stomachs having babies. But twenty years ago, this was uncharted territory.

The fact that many aspects of the illness still need more research is one of the reasons why Bisseling has started talking publicly about her own story in the media in the last year. ‘I try not to let the illness interfere with my life. I run half marathons; I do the Four Day Marches. Until a year ago, only my family and friends knew I was ill – and, of course, my colleagues and patients.’ But it does have an impact – on her, her children, and other patients affected, many of them young people.

‘It’s an invisible illness,’ Bisseling says – and that, precisely, is one of its biggest challenges: ‘Even my colleagues don’t understand. People think that I’m healthy and can do anything. I look normal and I behave normally, but I’m not normal. I have a serious illness.’

Seven years ago, Bisseling had to undergo more surgery to have her breasts removed after early-stage breast cancer had been detected, also linked to the mutated CDH1 gene.

Perspective

‘In the beginning, my colleagues thought that it was unprofessional to tell my patients that I’m a carrier too,’ she explains. But Bisseling told them anyway. ‘And patients are glad to hear it. They know I’ve been through everything they have been going through. And the patients, she says, are what she truly cares about in her work. I sometimes think every doctor should have to be a patient for a week. That’s impossible, of course.’

But she thinks that being a patient has given her a different perspective on her work – and she is certain that her daughter will one day also have a different perspective than other physicians, based on her own experiences with the illness.

She talks about the day she met Parry Guilford, the biomedical scientist who first identified the CDH1 gene in the mutated variant that causes the cancer affecting Bisseling’s family. Thanks to Guilford’s publication, Bisseling was tested more than twenty years ago. ‘I introduced myself,’ she recalls that moment in 2014. ‘And I said: it’s thanks to you that I’m alive.’ ★

BLISSFULLY HAPPY AT THE MONASTERY

From celebrating mass to editing YouTube videos and from singing Gregorian chants to a motorcycle blessing. For Stefan Ansinger, no two days are the same. After studying Public Administration in Nijmegen, he entered the Dominican Order. Vox followed him for 24 hours in Fribourg, Switzerland, where he spent the past five years living in a monastery and studying theology.

Text: Ken Lambeets / Photography: Erik van 't Hullenaar



TUESDAY, 2 P.M.

In a brass bucket of consecrated water, Brother Stefan Ansinger (28) dips a brush that looks remarkably like a toilet brush. He holds it in the air, pronounces a blessing in French, and swings it down with a jerk.

The director of a Swiss real estate company and his new motorcycle get the full brunt of it. Moments later, the 15 staff members gathered in a circle around the red Ducati are also sprayed with quite a few drops of water. Everyone laughs.

'People do need to get a bit wet,' Ansinger says a little later over coffee with Nidelkuchen, traditional pastries from Fribourg. The director and his staff hang on his every word. Ansinger explains that the blessing did not give the motorcycle any special powers, but rather blessed the person riding it.

'YOU HAVE TO MAKE DO WITH WHAT YOU ARE GIVEN'

For five years, Ansinger has lived in Fribourg, Switzerland, where he studies theology at the local university. From 2013 to 2017, the Venray-born brother studied Public Administration at Radboud University.

Ansinger met the motorcycle-riding real estate agent last spring during a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The man in question, Vincent Hayoz, is President of the Section Suisse Romande of the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem, an order for lay people within the Catholic Church.

'Last week he sent me a message asking me whether I was willing to bless his new bike, and here I am,' says Ansinger. 'And so it is that every day of a Dominican's life looks different.'

'I asked Stefan because he's a young, promising brother,' says Hayoz. 'He will be a bishop one day, maybe even Pope,' he says with a smile. 'Why? Because he doesn't want to. And anyone who doesn't want to ends up becoming it. That's how it goes in the Church.'

Before the brother walks back to the monastery, Hayoz gives him an envelope containing some money. 'We'll divide it among our fellow brothers,' says Ansinger.

MONDAY, 5 P.M.

On the previous day, Brother Ansinger welcomed the *Vox* editor and photographer at the Couvent Saint-Hyacinthe, a nineteenth-century building in a neighbourhood with lots of modern concrete architecture. At first glance, the

building doesn't look like a monastery. Since 1921, it has mostly housed students of the Dominican Order who study theology at the University of Fribourg. Just like Stefan Ansinger. One more essay and he will have completed his study programme; he plans to return to the Netherlands in September.

The former Radboud student grew up in a Catholic family of six in Venray, on the border of Limburg and North Brabant, an area he refers to as Limbrant. 'There is still a real Catholic culture there, with lots of conviviality and good vlaai pastries.' His mother led a church choir, his father taught Bible studies, the six children went to church every Sunday – and are all still religious to this day.

Already at age 12, the Church was more than a weekly outing for Ansinger; he says he was struck early on by the beauty of the liturgy. 'The way the entire congregation sings the Credo together – you just know these aren't empty words,' he says. 'It was then that something clicked for me: I want to devote my entire life to this.'

As he wanted to get acquainted with the outside world first, Ansinger chose to study Public Administration at Radboud University after completing secondary school. 'Because of the political and multidisciplinary dimension,' he says. 'It's useful in the Church, where you meet people from all sorts of backgrounds.' He travelled to campus on the Arriva train every day; at home, he served mass several times a week.

But Ansinger also lived a student life. As President of Catholic Students Nijmegen (KSN), he attended drinks to celebrate the new board wearing a suit. If he missed the last train, he spent the night with fellow students. He also occasionally visited the Molenstraat, although he was never a real party animal. 'Just give me a beer with some bitterballen on a terrace.'

In a group with fellow religious students, Ansinger talked about their common vocation to the priesthood. But the diocesan seminaries in the Netherlands he visited during his studies did not appeal to him – he found them too far-removed from the world. Through a conversation with student chaplain Jos Geelen, he eventually arrived at the Dominicans.

One important reason being that the Dominicans are a social order. 'This is where we study,' Ansinger says in the library, which is housed in a bunker under the monastery, a remnant of the Cold War. 'But what is characteristic of our order is that we also go out into the world to preach.'

It is now ten past seven. In the monastery's corridors, an electronic bell announces the start of vespers – the sung evening prayers. Nine brothers in white habits walk to the chapel: a large, bare space that Ansinger doesn't particularly like. 'The altar is far too austere – it looks like an IKEA table,' he says. 'But you have to make do with what you are given.'

→





'OF COURSE, THERE HAVE BEEN **DIFFICULT MOMENTS** AT THE MONASTERY. IT'S THE SAME AS IN A MARRIAGE, WHERE YOU PLEDGE TO REMAIN FAITHFUL TO EACH OTHER'

Today, the former Radboud student is cantor. He launches with Psalm 135, marking the beat with his arm.

'*Rendez grâce au Seigneur: il est bon,*' sings Ansinger. '*Éternel est son amour,*' reply the other eight brothers.

MONDAY, 7:15 P.M., REFECTORY

Afterwards, Ansinger is not entirely satisfied. 'The brothers with the best voices weren't there today,' he says. 'In the morning it's even worse: they've just got out of bed and sing four notes too low. I usually try to warm up my voice a bit in the shower.'

Ansinger's great passion is Gregorian chanting. Three years ago, he and a fellow brother started the YouTube channel OPChant. In the videos, the brothers sing Gregorian chants according to the Dominican tradition, in special churches around the world. The channel has nearly 25,000 subscribers and some videos have been viewed more than 100,000 times.

The video channel has a crowdfunding page that has already raised more than €12,000. Ansinger re-invests this money in the project: to travel to beautiful churches in Switzerland, Italy, and Poland, or to buy a new camera. Thanks to a slider, the videos also have moving images; the brother does all the editing himself. 'There are some useful tutorials on YouTube.'

In addition to YouTube, Ansinger is also active on Instagram and Twitter; together with a former fellow student, he creates the podcast De Herbergiers. 'The Church needs to embrace modern issues,' he says. 'The Nijmegen theologian and Jesuit Petrus Canisius, who died in Fribourg, introduced the printing press here. His catechism travelled around the world as a result; it became one of the most translated Dutch books.'

The brother with whom the Dutchman founded OPChant left a few months ago, after seven years in the Order, Ansinger tells us over dinner at the refectory. On the wall is a large painting of 12 Dominicans, inspired by Da Vinci's Last Supper. The buffet includes meat roast, a potato salad, a carrot salad, and pasta. There is a bottle of red wine on every table.

Ansinger does not comment on the reason why his fellow brother left, but it has certainly affected him. 'I'm not angry at him, but it's a bit like a divorce. The brother who left was asked to send a letter to Rome, and the reason for his departure has to be investigated. He was a good singer, and that's hard to replace in a monastery.'

Ansinger himself has never doubted his vocation. 'Of course, there have been difficult moments at the monastery. It's the same as in a marriage, where you pledge to remain faithful to each other. A first crush can also be very overwhelming for a brother; it can haunt you for months. It's important to talk about it with your fellow students and the student magister. In the end, you learn that strong friendships are also very valuable.'

All the brothers have finished eating, but Ansinger's plate is still half full. 'I am the slowest eater of the monastery,' he says. 'Please interrupt me if I'm talking too much.' He laughs: 'A priest friend told me that I suffer from organised hyperactivity, but I don't feel that organised.'

MONDAY, 9 P.M., LOWER TOWN

It is already almost dusk as we walk along the old city wall to the lower town of Fribourg. The town's nickname is La petite Rome, says the brother. The study programme in theology at the secular University of Fribourg attracts not only lay people, but also Cistercians, Franciscans, Jesuits, and Dominicans, all of whom have their own monasteries in the city. 'If you're here on a Sunday, you can hear church bells ringing everywhere.'

Unlike some of the other brothers, Ansinger also wears his habit in town. 'It's our calling – it applies 24/7,' he says. 'It helps to introduce religion into the street scene. I'm often accosted or asked for prayers. You often end up in conversation, even in trains and airports.'

Peering down at low-Fribourg, Ansinger struggles to hold back a tear. 'I'm going to miss this so much. It has been so special to live here for five years. I will definitely come back soon once I'm settled in the Netherlands.'

At Café du Gothard, a brasserie with wooden tables, panelled walls, and framed mountain views, Ansinger has arranged to meet members of the Catholic student association Teutonia for an informal drink – known locally as a Stammtisch.

Ansinger orders a white beer and toasts Alexander and Richard, a German and a Swiss student who have been drinking for a while. "Zum Wohl!" Throughout history, several Dominicans have been members of the student association, and Ansinger is keen to carry on the tradition.

Alexander and Richard have occasionally attended mass at the monastery, they say. 'When he spends the night at the pub, he sings better in the morning,' Alexander says with a smile.

TUESDAY, 7:30 A.M., COUVENT SAINT-HYACINTHE

Ansinger's voice is struggling: he has to restart the morning hymn twice. 'That never happens to me,' he says afterwards. 'But it has nothing to do with the *Stammtisch*, mind you. I was in bed by midnight.'

TUESDAY, 9 A.M.

Ansinger takes us for a walk to Maigrage, a convent for contemplative nuns founded in the thirteenth century. A sister lighting a candle in the chapel smiles briefly at the brother, who seems to enjoy the order's centuries-old tradition.

From the valley, we climb to Notre Dame de Bourguillon, a chapel on a mountain popular with pilgrims. Ansinger gets down on his knees and prays silently.



3 QUESTIONS FOR STEFAN

What did you want to become when you were little?

'A priest and a musician. I was always happiest in church or in the concert hall – I loved anything to do with the human voice, the flute, and the violin.'

Where did you go this summer? 'As Dominican brothers, travelling or at home, we are always together. Therefore, for me, the ideal holiday is in another contemplative monastery. I usually go to the Benedictines in Saint-Wandrille (Normandy) because of the heavenly Gregorian liturgy combined with excellent cooking!'

Who do you admire? 'Dionysius the Carthusian (1402-1471), a learned ascetic southern Dutch Carthusian monk who prayed and worked tirelessly in the fields of philosophy, theology, and mysticism. His work breathes the various medieval theological schools.'



Peter Canisius is said to have visited this place often. Ansinger has studied the life of the Nijmegen theologian. 'Canisius preached a lot at the Fribourg cathedral; he revived the devotion of St Nicholas, and stood up for the poor. Like the Dominicans, Canisius felt that true preaching begins with good contemplation and study.'

The room where Canisius died in the Collège Saint-Michel, which is now a secondary school, is locked today. So the brother takes us instead to St Nicholas Cathedral, which houses Canisius' remains. The relic includes two thigh bones and two shin bones of the saint and is shaped like an arm holding a pen. *Nulla dies sine linea* was Canisius' motto: not a day passed when he did not write.

'THE ONLY WAY TO ATTRACT PEOPLE IS TO TRY TO STAND FOR WHAT INSPIRES YOU'

TUESDAY, 11 A.M.

On the terrace of Café des Arcades, in the shadow of the cathedral, Ansinger orders a large Coke. He moves out of the sun and recounts one of the most difficult moments since his vocation: in February, one of his childhood friends died after a serious car accident. 'When I rang his parents, all I could do was listen. Maarten had fallen into a coma right away and was transferred to Radboud university medical center. There, they soon found he was beyond saving. Via Skype, I held a prayer service in the room where he was lying.'

A week later, Ansinger conducted his first funeral as a deacon, in the church village of Oirlo. He had prepared the service down to the very last detail. 'Maarten was capable of that higher form of friendship, the selfless kind. He would hang out in a bar until the last minute because he enjoyed being with his friends. I preached that in situations like this, something of Christian love returns. During the liturgy, I remained calm, but when I had to sprinkle the coffin with water and incense at the end of the mass, I broke down completely. It was very difficult.'

Even brothers sometimes face difficult moments. 'If I'm facing a difficult period, I sometimes consult a psychologist. I've done so at times during my Dominican life, and I don't feel ashamed about it. I think it's good to hear a voice from the outside for once. This is also encouraged by the student magister.'

TUESDAY, 1 P.M., REFECTORY

How would they characterise their Dutch fellow brother? The brothers have to think about it after the afternoon mass. 'Stefan is always very cheerful,' says Brother Andreas Riis, a youthful-looking bearded 40-year-old from Denmark.

'He's a bit postmodern,' says Brother Emmanuel Durand, who has lectured Stefan as Professor of Theology at the University of Fribourg. 'Despite his busy schedule, he often attended lectures, and was very diligent.'

Will they miss him when he moves back to the Netherlands in September? 'That's how it goes at this monastery,' Riis says. 'We're very happy when new brothers arrive, but also always sad when they leave. But I'll continue to follow him on YouTube.'

TUESDAY, 1.30 P.M., MONASTERY GARDEN

After the summer, Ansinger will start working in the Netherlands, where he will contribute to the Erasmus University Rotterdam student apostolate. It is the last internship on his way to the priesthood, he says over coffee in the rose garden. 'About three hundred, mostly international students, attend the English-language mass there every Sunday. I will assist with religious teaching, help people, maybe start a choir.'

Ansinger realises that people in the Netherlands are less religious than in this part of Switzerland. The Church is getting smaller, there are fewer believers. But he isn't throwing in the towel. 'The Church has had ups and downs for two thousand years. The only way to attract people is to try to stand for what inspires you. That way you show others that it's possible to be blissfully happy in a church or in an order.' *

'BREAST IMPLANTS? DON'T DO IT!'

Manon van den Bos (25) had breast implant surgery. When the Master's student in Communication Science developed health problems as a result, her attitude to her own body changed. She became active on TikTok and now has 35,000 followers. Body normalisation is one of her main drivers, although she also talks about things like taking part in dating programme *FBoy Island*. 'I'm an open book.'

Text: Willem Claassen / Photography: Duncan de Fey

M

anon van den Bos posts on TikTok nearly every day. In her videos, she offers advice on how to enlarge your eyebrows, and shows that it is best to wear low-rise trousers if you don't have much waist. She has a tip for women faced with cat-callers, she says in one of her posts. 'Just stare at their shoes, for a really long time, as if there's something wrong with them. This makes them insecure; they think

there's poo or something else on their shoes.'

Van den Bos can rightly be called an influencer. She has 35,000 followers and a management team that helps her negotiate with companies. She views the whole thing as a nice job on the side, she explains on a sunny terrace in the centre of Nijmegen. 'I earn slightly more than the average student.'

Her income doesn't come from TikTok itself, but from advertising for companies. She does advertising occasionally, about twice a month. 'I recently reported on a paid visit to a restaurant in Amsterdam. What I do is take my followers along for a day in a vlog. I show them how I get ready and travel by train. It feels more natural to show my whole day, rather than just the restaurant.'

Negative impact

The enthusiastic Achterhoek-native found social media interesting even as a child. 'I've always loved beauty and travelling. I was also interested in the private lives of lots of Dutch celebrities. I followed everyone.' At 16, she was a fan of the handsome Dutch-Iranian influencer Negin Mirsalehi. 'I looked up to her; I wanted to be just like her.'

And that's where things started to go wrong. Social media brought Van den Bos viewing pleasure, but also had a negative impact on how she saw herself. This was reinforced by her upbringing. 'I come from an environment where people are very concerned with looks and health. I was never allowed too many sweet drinks or chips. When we went on winter sports, we were given sandwiches.'

Seemingly small comments had a lot of impact. 'When I was 12, an aunt pinched my cheek. She said I hadn't lost my baby fat yet. Later on, someone said to me: if you lose five more kilos, you could be a model.'

She smiles at the waitress who puts a cappuccino in front of her. Her whole demeanour shows that she's doing well now, but she's had some difficult years.

At 19, Van den Bos left for Indonesia. 'I went off the radar for six months to work on my body. I wanted to become the thinnest and best version of myself.' She became a sports addict and developed an eating disorder. She speaks with apparent ease, but that is her strategy for being able to talk about it at all. 'I was starving myself. When I got back, my family couldn't criticise anything about my body, although they did comment on the tattoos I got in Indonesia.'

Soon after that, she had her breasts enlarged because she was insecure about her cup size. She quickly began to suffer from shortness of breath, fatigue, joint pain, and panic attacks. 'I was heading straight for a burnout.' At first, the doctors didn't know where the symptoms came from. She was put through the medical mill, saw a psychologist, an internist, and a heart specialist. She eventually heard about research by Henry Dijkman, a lecturer and researcher at Radboud university medical center. He had discovered that all breast implants were unsafe. Soon after, Van den Bos was diagnosed with breast implant illness. This completely changed her perspective on how she was treating her body. 'I thought: I should be happy with what I have.'

Obsessed with losing weight

Two months before her implants were due to be removed, she started posting TikTok videos. To do this, she drew inspiration from influencers like Monica Geuze. 'I appreciate people who share everything, including their difficult moments.'

Van den Bos posted 'What I Eat In A Day' videos. Soon she had two thousand followers. 'My posts were mainly about body normalisation. I wanted to show that you can eat a full tub of Ben & Jerry's if you feel like it.' Many young women are allowing themselves to be led by the perfect picture, and this needs to change, she says. 'Half of my girlfriends have at some point been obsessed with losing weight.'

In April 2021, a day before she was due to have surgery, she shared on TikTok that she was going to have her implants removed. In that video, she says: 'For anyone considering getting breast implants, my advice is: Don't do it!' People loved her story and within a week she had ten thousand followers. Her story also reached the mainstream media. 'I hope I've spared a lot of women the misery.' After the surgery, her symptoms disappeared.

Van den Bos' posts are not just about body normalisation. She wants to share a part of her life, often in a light-hearted tone. When she and her boyfriend broke up, she started dating, and made videos about it. 'It's fun to share those experiences. I tell people everything - I'm an open book.' This too has won her a lot of followers.

Her participation in FBoy Island, an HBO Max dating programme, brought her additional followers. 'Because of the title, many people think it's like AliExpress' Love Island. They also think I've got no brains, to which my answer is: come and see for yourself before you judge.'

Van den Bos had several reasons for participating. 'I found it interesting to be part of this kind of production. I also wanted to show that it's fine to be a size L and 40; you don't have to be a size XS to take part in this kind of programme. But to tell the truth, it was also a distraction from grieving for my father.'

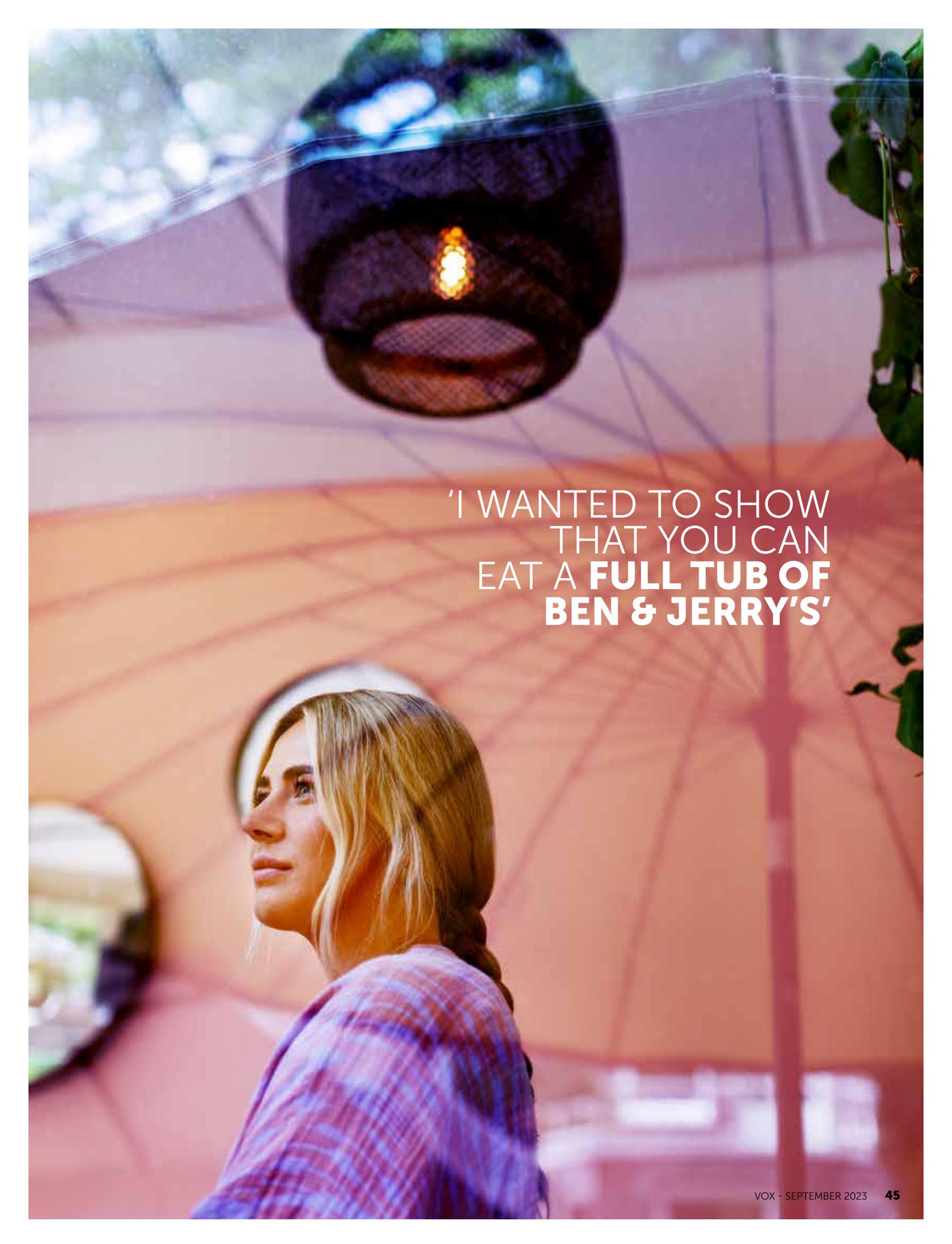


3 QUESTIONS FOR MANON

What did you want to become when you were little? 'When I was little, I wanted to be a hairdresser. I loved doing my mother's and friends' hair, braiding it and all that.'

Where did you go this summer? 'My last holiday was last spring, when I went to Bali. Bali feels like coming home because I lived in Indonesia for an extended period a few years ago.'

Who do you admire? 'Simone de Beauvoir is a woman philosopher and feminist. Her writings on feminism and existentialism remind me every day that I'm responsible for my own destiny and that I have the freedom to follow my passion.'

A photograph of a woman with blonde hair in a braid, wearing a purple and white plaid shirt, looking upwards. She is positioned in the lower-left foreground. Above her is a large, glowing, dark-colored lantern with intricate cutouts, hanging from a string. The lantern is illuminated from within, casting a warm glow. The background is a large, pinkish-orange umbrella with a visible rib structure, creating a soft, bokeh effect. The overall scene is set outdoors, likely at night or in low light, with some green foliage visible on the right side.

'I WANTED TO SHOW
THAT YOU CAN
EAT A **FULL TUB OF
BEN & JERRY'S**'



'I LIKE THE IDEA OF SETTING UP MY OWN SOCIAL MEDIA BUSINESS'

Her father had died shortly before filming began from the muscle disease ALS, from which he suffered for a year and a half. 'It was good that they had a psychologist on the set who could support me when I was struggling.'

Van den Bos is now in a different phase of the grieving process. She wants to get involved in ALS research. For example, she is taking part in the Dam tot Damloop to raise money for the ALS Foundation Netherlands. She also plans to share her story on 3FM's Glazen Huis programme this winter. 'It's great that they're coming to Nijmegen this time, and that the charity they're focusing on happens to be the ALS Foundation.'

Intensive counselling

What about her studies? Doesn't TikTok take up all her time? 'No,' she says, as she sips mint tea, 'it really is a side job. I devote 70% of my time to Communication Science, and 30% to social media.'

Her studies fit in well with her work. First she completed the university of applied science programme in Commercial Economics in Enschede, but she wanted more. 'Something more creative, with journalism, social media, and marketing. That led me to Communication Science.'

She learns most from project-based courses in which you help real companies draft a communication plan. 'Setting something up independently, going through and discussing all the steps, I learn a lot from that.'

She was offered intensive counselling in the context of her study programme because of her breast implant illness and her father's illness. 'This personal approach was really great, and it helped me a lot.'

After her Master's programme, she hopes to do some presenting, for example at BNN, or a YouTube series. 'I also like the idea of setting up my own social media business.' In any case, she plans to continue with TikTok for a while.

Sometimes people recognise her on the street. For example, some students once approached her on Nijmegen's Faberplein. And in a café, a group wanted to take her picture. 'They only approach me once they've had a drink or two, but that's totally fine by me. Students are also my target audience.' ★

THE POEM

PERFUME-LAB

Do you still wear your high school days as pit stains? Buy some new cologne at the intromarket by yourself, with new faces around, it's self-explanatory but, just in case: limited time only!

Will it be a hint of rugby? *Eau de Phocas?*
A touch of dance or a flavour of music,
a tad more study association, a reading club
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some beer spilled at the TKB
or the Culture Café.

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THIJS KERSTEN
CAMPUS POET 23/24

COLOPHON

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