Understanding a life of both place and people through the lens of an anthropologist

By Tim Wassberg
Bennington Banner

Understanding life is not just about place but people. For renowned anthropologist and Bennington College professor Miroslava (Mirka) Prazak, it is about experience, path and perception. Retiring from teaching this spring after 30 years at Bennington College, Prazak recently received the accolade as a Fellow of the Vermont Academy of Arts and Sciences. On the cusp of her final semester but also the transition into other pursuits that have defined and informed her journey from fieldwork to books, Prazak sat down with the Banner to discuss perspective, details and her love of teaching.

Born in the Czech Republic with time in her youth spent in Pakistan, Australia and Austria before coming to the States, Prazak took on her initial college experience at Smith College, barely an hour and a half from where she has taught for three decades in Bennington.

"It was really at Smith that A, I lived in America, and B, I really started to look at my life experience, and see that there could be a connection between that and what I studied." When she first came across anthropology, Prazak says it spoke to her because it was just a discipline that "embraced the diversity of experience, the diversity of ideas and the diversity of people in their background and the things that are important to them." She says people always ask her, "'How do you compare this to that... [how do you] compare the Czech Republic to Pakistan, Pakistan to Australia?' And it's like, 'Well, you don't really compare. You just experience.'" It becomes about understanding the particulars in the norms. For example, "in some ways, living in Pakistan was a liberating thing, but in other ways, it was very restrictive." She says all her early experiences came together for her when she began attending Smith. "I really liked Western Massachusetts. I had an American host family who are still my family [to this day]. They had six kids. They just took me in." She also adds that Smith is "where my Americanness comes from."

Prazak says there was something about New England from the beginning that was very appealing to her. "I think part of it is because it is not so commercialized. It is naturally beautiful and there's a sense of space and freedom here." She laughs that she can stand in her backyard, "and I can see New York — not the city, but the state."

Prazak says she ended up NYC and, for a time, she was interested in pursuing documentary filmmaking. She even took a couple of classes at NYU. "I didn't want another degree. I just wanted to get the skills. " The one thing Prazak realized about that sector is that there was a lot of fundraising involved. She says for many of these documentaries, it was advantageous to have someone with an anthropological background on the crew. "'And I thought, 'Well, gosh, I could do that.'" The reality though was that having a BA with no experience was not enough. So she enrolled in 1983 at Yale University.

Prazak applied to three graduate schools including UCLA and University of Wisconsin at Madison. She focused on these universities because they were three schools that specialized in Africa. "I went to Yale because they were very generous [in terms of financial aid]. And, at that time, my dad had stopped working for the UN and had started working for the World Bank which took him to other places. He went from Pakistan to the Sudan and then Uganda." Prazak says the first time she went to Kenya was on vacation with her parents. "But the thing is: I walked out of the hotel we were staying, walked around Nairobi, and said, 'I totally get this place. This is the place for me. I love the people. I love the way that they live.'"

When she eventually went to Yale, Prazak didn't have a field site actually picked out for her dissertation. "But I had a classmate there who was from Kenya who was actually part of the Kuria [tribe] and the Kuria are the people I have worked with ever since. [He had said] 'You tried this place and that place? Well, I have a suggestion. Why don't you study my people?'" Prazak says they are still friends all these years later. She laughs that the first time her parents came to visit her in the field, her husband picked them up in Nairobi, which is about a 10-hour drive from where her field site was. "And the last two hours of that drive are completely on unpaved, un-graveled roads. And when Robert, my husband, turned off the paved road, my mom said, "How did Mirka ever find this [place]?'"

In terms of her life path, Prazak says she didn't have a long term plan. "I made these decisions as I went along." She continues that she did her requisite coursework at Yale before she started to raise money for her field work. "And then I moved to Kenya. My husband came with me. We got married just before going into the field and then spent two years there for my initial field work before we came back to the States." She however says they did not come back to New Haven and Yale. "We actually lived in Washington, DC. Prazak finished her dissertation. Her daughter was born six weeks before she turned it in. "'Then I was offered an Mellon Foundation post-doc both at Brown and at the Australian National University. I'm an anthropologist. And I had never been to Australia. So we went for three years. My daughter was four months when we moved."

Prazak's post-doc work was in in demography which is defined "as the study of statistics such as births, deaths, income, or the incidence of disease, which illustrate the changing structure of human populations." Prazak says there was an impulse at that moment in time to introduce anthropological methods and perspectives into demography, which, she admits, is very dry and data-driven. "But that's what I was doing. She adds that she spent a year of those three in Australia actually in Kenya with her daughter and her husband doing additional field work."

Prazak says that, with any science, there's a very strict methodology, "but the initial question is absolutely qualitative. You use the data to test the hypotheses. But the question [always has to] begin with — from your experience — what are you interested in, or what has come to your attention." When they returned Stateside after completing their final year in Australia, Prazak had an interview at Bennington College. She met with the college in March, got the offer two weeks later and then they moved up to Vermont in June of that year. "And we have been here ever since." She says her original contract was for three years. "And we thought, 'We can do anything for three years.'" She began to appreciate the small town aspect of Bennington. "But, at that point, I didn't really know anything about progressive education."

Prazak adds she did have a series of very long discussions with then-Bennington College President Elizabeth Coleman. "She was this incredibly articulate, really smart woman who had this vision of Bennington College that was so profound. Her thing was, 'Look, I want you to teach what keeps you up at night.'" Prazak realized that "[I had] all the stuff that I had read in graduate school, all the theories, all of that. I had my field experience. And yet here I was in the classroom, trying to engage people to get involved in what I was passionate about."

Prazak continues that one of the most formative aspects that created her in terms of her teaching was when students came to her saying, "Mirka...will you teach a course on the anthropology of art?" Prazak says she had done a lot of photography, as well as some film in her field work. "But I thought, 'I never have really specialized in art as a subject of study.' So I thought 'Why don't I do a tutorial?'" Her students thought her tutorial was amazing. "Because for me, teaching is collaborative. I contribute. They contribute." Through that discovery process, Prazak says she and her students ended up creating a lasting course, one she has taught maybe five times. As part of the course work, she says they had a section on architecture that was based ethnographies in Mali as well as Timbuktu. "It dealt both with sort of traditional architecture and buildings from sun-dried bricks to the preservation of cultural heritage sites."

The reasoning of the course, she explains, is that "once you start looking at something very specifically, then you can bring in all of these dimensions that pertain to it." She says they would study the night plays put on in rural India. "'We brought in people like Daisy Rockwell, who is a specialist in India to explain the Mahabharata. Sue Rees at Bennington College, had worked with the Kattaikkuttu for decades, came in as a visiting speaker as well." In many ways, Prazak explains, it was about bringing in people who weren't performers but had a huge voice in analysis.

Prazak says the best thing that happened in her life was becoming involved with the idea "that you have to question authority always. The most important lessons are reached through discussion. [But] you have to be open to accepting other people's criteria. As an anthropologist, I find that ethnocentrism is the thing that I have to fight all the time...that belief that what I know or what is normal to me is the best way to know or to do something." Prazak adds that "you have to be open to the fact that other people do things differently. And that these outcomes can be just as satisfactory as what I would do."

Prazak does say "the most important thing I have done in my life, besides being a mom and all that kind of stuff, has been to teach. That is my legacy. Those pieces [of me] are now in other people, and they are carrying that forward. That is my contribution."

Prazak adds that one of the things that she always tries to impart to her students "is that you have to do things that help you align your moral compass. When my students go away and do things, I will often get emails from them saying, 'I listened to this state of address, and this is what I thought, and this is why I thought it.'" Through these interactions, Prazak sees her impact. "And my hope is that my students are making their own impact. As a teacher, you don't really necessarily get all of that recognition but what you put out is constant. Sometimes you get feedback from your students, or their parents, or people in the community." She says that's why being recognized by the Vermont Academy of Arts and Sciences shows "the contribution that I have made to education in Vermont."

Prazak explains that she is halfway through writing her next book, which is on the life history of a peasant woman from rural Kenya. At the time when we spoke in late December, Prazak was going to Britain to visit the archives of a mission who had been the first ones to visit that area. "I'm going to look for descriptions that the priests had written about what the place was like when they got there which was in the 1890s." Prazak adds that she has read through the German journals that the priests had left behind. "[And] one of the things that came across immediately was that the people who approached them from the [Kenyan] community did so because they had problems that they couldn't resolve themselves. I'm trying to get just tidbits about what it was like in those early years."

One of the course areas Prazak says she has really enjoyed as a teacher has been environmental studies. She adds that, in that way, "[I am] looking at using anthropology to understand people's relationship to the environment as well as our society's relationship to the environment." She adds that we, as people, live in other people's environments that we ourselves influence. "I think this was of particular interest to the people at the Vermont Academy in how the teaching

PRAZAK, Page 3



TIM WASSBERG — BENNINGTON BANNER

Bennington College Anthropology Teacher and Vermont Academy of Arts & Sciences Fellow Miroslava (Mirka) Prazak on the streets of Bennington.



DAVID MORELOS — BENNINGTON COLLEGE

Prazak teaching at Bennington College in February.



PHOTO PROVIDED

Prazak after the ceremony in November.

Prazak

FROM PAGE 2

that [I do] is based on my research in Africa [but also how it] translates into building knowledge in Vermont, and how it influences the knowledge base for issues that are relevant to Vermont."

One course Prazak has just finished teaching this past term is 'Studying Place by Metes and Bounds." The course itself focuses on the town of Bennington. "Its orientation is very local, but it deals with global issues as they manifest on the local level." Prazak developed this course with a number of her colleagues. It was funded National Science Foundation in 2014 "when globalization was the big thing happening in academic circles and in the world at large." The reasoning was that there was a real relevance at the time "to studying the local environment — the local setting — in order to generate grounded theory." Prazak also adds that the course had many of the central tenets of progressive education that aligned with Bennington College. "It really focused on students learning methods for studying the local environment. It also really encouraged critical thinking and problem solving skills."

Prazak explains that what they were teaching were the basic methods that one utilizes to understand contemporary society...at least from the anthropological perspective. These methods would include participant observations, doing interviews, sharing findings, discussing how the methods work, and then extrapolating what has been learned through them. "And then also how we can analyze the data?" One of the tenets, Prazak adds, of progressive education, "is that we learn by taking part in everyday life to understand what the dynamics of everyday life are." She says this is very much a John Dewey sort of philosophy "which is what Bennington College is founded on." She explains that they designed the course "to allow our students to experience Bennington as they studied about it."

Prazak says what she has come to learn over her years of experience and teaching — and given the changes in larger society, both nationally and internationally — "is that an authoritarian school environment is not adequate preparation for life in a democracy. In order to be able to exercise their rights and responsibilities as citizens of a democracy, students have to be able to understand much more deeply through personal engagement what is happening in the society around them." Prazak adds that ultimately, she and her colleagues' hope was that the students who took this course would be able to come to understand any place they would live in. In this case it was Bennington.

Prazak says another really important lesson she learned over her time at Bennington College was that certain principles continue to be important in order to build the fundamental pillars of whatever societies the students find themselves in. "You have to have the basic skills and basic understandings that will allow you to think outside the box and yet be able to critique the box." For this course regarding Bennington, Prazak says they brought in many experts to talk about the geology, the agricultural potential, the forestry and even the social institutions necessary for living in a town like Bennington. "But how do we approach topics that are socially sensitive and don't rely on stereotypes?"

Prazak adds that they actually took the students out into the community and walked around the mills. "We went to the Cabinet of Curiosity, which is the early colonial collection at the Bennington Museum." There they saw artifacts from the early 1800s in Bennington. "We were building [their view] from the ground up, which is always sort of the anthropological perspective on things anyway. [You] first try to document what the reality is." In this case, it was through the collection and documents. For this course, she says they also used the Harwood Diaries with the student. "Those [diaries] are amazing because the Harwoods wrote them every day. We can look at the weather. We can look at the climate. We can look at the crops that were being produced...even the kind of social interaction that was taking place within the town. It's from a singular perspective — but it is a perspective that is situated in place and time."



PHOTO PROVIDED

Bennington College Anthropology Teacher and Vermont Academy of Arts & Sciences Fellow Miroslava (Mirka) Prazak at The Archives in Britain researching her latest book in January.

Another course of importance to Prazak, which she says she only taught once (last spring) was called '"Encountering the Abenaki nation." She designed the course herself with the help of the Abenaki people. She adds that it was intended to answer the question: "Who were the people who lived in this area before the settlers came?" But also: "How do we know [that], given that there are no written records." She says they went through as many different sources as they could find to try to answer: "How do we know this and why do we know this, and also that it is not something else?" Prazak says that through the course she tried to guide the students through the texts. "We looked at what kinds of things we can learn from geology and how the settlement of Vermont took place 12,000 years ago during the last Ice Age. There was just ice here...totally frozen. There were two huge seas that that have now been reduced to Lake Champlain. And it was so cold that there was really no vegetation...no human habitation." She says the people who settled here came from the sub Arctic.

Prazak says one of the issues they talked about a lot was the current controversy about the Abenakis in Canada, claiming that they didn't recognize the Abenaki groups in Vermont. "Why are these positions being taken? You would think that in a state where the indigenous populations have not been recognized for so long, that once they begin to be recognized, people would be grateful and happy. But the opposition comes from other Abenaki groups, who have the First Nation status in Canada. How does this make sense? So we're dealing with issues as they come up, trying to find as much evidence as we can to understand how this became an issue. Or what led to this."

Based on the concept and delineation of these two courses, Prazak adds that "environment — to me — absolutely includes the people who live [in a place]. It is not just about plants and trees and climate. Those things are important, but so are the people and the way that they adapt to the environment." Prazak adds that this interdisciplinary aspect of her work has been profound for her right from the very beginning. "My interests are not in one silo, they're in many different areas, and the only way to get a comprehensive picture is to reach into the disciplines that deal with those elements. That's the advantage of anthropology."

Prazak also adds that one of the key elements of progressive education is being interdisciplinary. "I treat the students as people coming into a conversation with full rights of participation. My initial assumption always is that everybody has something to contribute. If they do the basic reading and the basic research that I ask of them, they should absolutely be able to talk about the questions that I pose in the classroom." Prazak continues that most of her students are 20-years-old on average. "They don't have a huge back stock of experience, but they have enough to know that some things ring right and some things ring wrong. They are in the process of forming their identities. They are calibrating their moral compasses." She says one of her jobs is to help them with those processes, and help them begin to recognize what aspects are significant to them in their life, in their future and what they want to work towards. "They're part of the Bennington community now. And in two years, they will be part of wherever they end up going to. But these skills and understandings will help them build their core sense of self."

That is why Prazak's induction into the Vermont Academy of Arts and Sciences is so rewarding. "The process is cumulative. Not only in that I have gained a lot more knowledge — my students benefit from that — but they have also gone on to gain knowledge on their own, which sometimes gets fed back to me. Teachers are not stars. We are just ordinary mortals. But I think in many ways, we all want to influence our students to do as well as they can to become responsible, dedicated and contributing citizens. I have so appreciated teaching in a school where these progressive education principles are in practice."

The big difference when Prazak retires is that she will longer be teaching. "And even though that has been an incredibly satisfying experience — and my greatest contribution — I think just not having to prepare daily for class will just give me time to focus on the things that I feel I have left undone so far."

She leaves with this thought: "One of the descriptors of anthropologists is that they're professional strangers. They're always outside outsiders looking at the societies that we live in with this kind of quote, unquote objective background that allows us this analytical lens.' Prazak has lived this life but has always found a way to connect with her students through teaching and discussion, having a profound impact on those she comes in contact with.