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Activist to be honored for land-reform ideas

By JAKE ELLISON
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Peace, in 67-year-old Roy Prosterman's eyes, comes when the hundreds of millions of the world's poor have a piece of land to farm and call their own.

That simple vision has carried this longtime University of Washington law professor into the poorest regions and halls of power across the globe and has been instrumental in helping more than 120 million families in 37 developing countries secure rights to property.

Prosterman has twice been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, and he will be honored Monday for his work by a panel of judges that includes former Nobel winners Shimon Peres and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Prosterman and three other international activists will share \$100,000 and the Gleitsman Foundation International Activist Award, which will be given at Harvard University.

More than the honor, Prosterman hopes the international award will bring attention to issues of land reform. He believes such reforms could have derailed the war in Vietnam and may yet be the key to soothing the frustrations that fostered the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.



Meryl Schenker / P-I

University of Washington law professor Roy Prosterman has been named winner of the Gleitsman Foundation International Activist Award.

But the germ of an idea that began his lifelong work came out of the destruction and turmoil of World War II. He wondered how conflicts might be resolved.

"It seemed to me that one really needed to look to see what the roots and causes of violence were and how to deal with them," he said.

"We either had to find ways of resolving and preventing conflict on the planet within some fairly brief period of time compared to how long human beings have been on the planet or ... this might well be the last millennium," he said. "The combination of the wide spread of grievances arising in many cases out of poverty and the increasing availability and spread of weapons of mass destruction is an absolutely lethal brew for the human race."

But Prosterman has never been content with simply brooding over problems.

After all, he said, he is a lawyer, and lawyers seek remedies to problems.

His legal career started at a major New York firm just after he graduated from Harvard Law School in 1958. He spent 6 1/2 years litigating and traveling around the world to iron out contracts for

corporations.

But the relentless hours and a startling encounter with poverty in Liberia inspired him to leave the law firm and take a teaching job at the UW law school in 1965.

The poverty he witnessed in Liberia during a three-month stay in 1963 was "horrifying."

"It seemed overwhelming, but it seemed that we could not leave things that way," he said. "I do believe in the solvability of even very complex problems. That's also a reason why law was seen as a right sort of discipline for me. It was oriented toward solving problems."

Then, in his first years at UW and with the conflict in Vietnam gaining momentum, a student took an article to him in which the author argued for enforcing land reform by taking property away from large owners and redistributing it.

"I read it and thought that it looks as though the land issue is very closely associated with poverty and that it is a very serious issue and needs to be addressed, but (the author's arguments) were a very dumb way of addressing it."

So, he formulated his own approach, based on richer countries and governments buying parcels of land, then redistributing small portions along with full ownership. He published his idea.

That article eventually ended up in the hands of U.S. authorities who had been grappling with land issues in Vietnam. They hired him to work with a research team in Vietnam to examine the situation there.

Some of his reforms were adopted in Vietnam, but then the United States pulled out. South Vietnam fell. However, he said the communist government left many of his suggested reforms in place and eventually applied them to the rest of the country.

"In 1993, they invited me back," he said. "They said: 'Look. We decided family farms are a good way to go.'"

In 1981, Prosterman formed the Rural Development Institute in Seattle as a way to carry his vision to more parts of the globe. The institute is the principal foreign adviser to government officials in China on a massive rural land-reform project that has, institute documents report, provided 30-year land-use rights to 85 million of China's 210 million farm families.

Prosterman and the institute are also working in India, Russia, Indonesia and Kyrgyzstan, among other countries.

He believes that land reform remains vital and could play an important role in fighting terrorism. Huge rewards, he noted, haven't resulted in the capture of Osama bin Laden and others, suggesting that they have the support of the rural poor.

"He's escaped so far because a lot of these (terrorist) societies have significant support from part of the population," he said.

"And I see the issue of rural poverty and grievances growing out of it" as a major factor.

Prosterman hopes to continue his work through the institute and to teach at the UW for many years to come. "All with the goal of providing secure land rights to rural poor," he said.

On the Web: <http://www.rdiland.org/>

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