



# in the crossfire

As director of the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, Julia Freedson '95 works for the survival and recovery of children all over the world who are caught in the crossfire of political conflict.

BY CHRISTINE PALM



It's not always easy to articulate what we'd change about the world if we could, but Julia Freedson '95 has no trouble summing up her priorities: her work takes her "wherever children are being killed, maimed, tortured, raped, abducted, and violated just because they are unfortunate enough to be caught in the middle of adult wars."

Freedson is director of the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, an international network of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that track and combat atrocities committed against children living in war zones around the world, including Sudan, Liberia, Colombia, Afghanistan, and many others. Through a combination of strategy, grit, and passion, Watchlist uses its expertise to influence major policy makers, including the United Nations Security Council, with the single aim of protecting children's safety and rights.

The network—which is the only one of its kind in the world—includes local, national, and international organizations and is managed by a steering committee whose members represent Care International, the International Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, International

Save the Children Alliance, the Norwegian Refugee Council, World Vision International, and the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. It is housed in New York at the Women's Commission offices.

## The years at Trinity: academic rigor and personal attention

Freedson traces her passion for this grueling, often heartbreaking, but ultimately rewarding work to her time at Trinity College, from which she received a degree in international affairs (then called "area studies") with a focus on the Middle East.

"I know I wouldn't be on the same path I am now if I hadn't gone to Trinity," Freedson says. "The most important academic experience I had there was the opportunity to interact personally and regularly with my professors. Because my major was very focused and there were few other students on the same track, I received tremendous personal attention and commitment from several professors who helped me to follow my interests without letting me stray too far." Freedson mentions in particular professors Ron Keiner, Sam Kassow, Levana Polate, and Clinton Bailey.



“I think of them often and am grateful for the commitment each of them made to my personal and academic growth,” she says, citing such invaluable contributions as “pushing academic rigor, encouraging me to study abroad, and even driving me to New York for an important job interview.”

After leaving Trinity, Freedson received a master’s degree in international affairs (MIA) with a focus on human rights and humanitarian affairs from Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs. Before joining Watchlist in 2001, she worked for the Anti-Defamation League and the U.N. Mission in Kosovo.

She began working as a consultant to several NGOs that had the idea of developing a network. Eventually, it became Watchlist, and she has guided it from its austere beginnings to its position today as an influential group with an annual budget of \$700,000.



### A direct impact on children’s lives

Freedson has published widely on the impact of armed conflict on young people, and her research into such atrocities as killing, forced displacement, maiming, gender-based violence, and the effects of HIV/AIDS has earned her the respect of human rights advocates around the globe. Watchlist’s work is widely covered by media, from the New York Times to BBC News and National Public Radio.

Freedson, who grew up in Swampscott, Massachusetts, admits that directing a global effort and dealing with large governmental bureaucracies can sometimes dilute the immediacy of her group’s work.

“Because much of our work is done on the international policy level, the changes we’re trying to



achieve often get intertwined with bigger geopolitical dynamics, so it’s important to stay focused on the fact that our efforts really do affect the lives of children who have suffered some of the most grave human rights violations imaginable,” Freedson says. “The most gratifying thing for me is the privilege of working with the real frontline human rights defenders. These are people who work—often at great personal risk—to protect the children of their communities and countries. I have a colleague in the most remote, war-torn area of the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo who himself treks into the bush to negotiate with rebel commanders to release child soldiers under their command. After obtaining the children’s release, his organization works to reintegrate them into their communities—remember, these are children who may have suffered the terrors of the battlefield, heinous sexual violence, starvation, abuse, and other atrocities. Most have lost out on years of education, proper nutrition, and regular childhoods. Many are child mothers caring for their own children born of rape. Often, they live in far-off places even the U.N. doesn’t reach.”

There is no way any of us could face these atrocities on a daily basis and not be affected, and yet for Freedson, there is also great joy in the work.

“It’s so satisfying to see Watchlist’s initiatives directly reflected in the work of the U.N. Security Council, and then to see the council’s words on paper translated into action,” she says. “And while there’s no doubt that high-level policy-making bodies move infuriatingly slowly, it does help me get my work done when I’m able to see that our efforts have a direct impact on children’s lives.”

Freedson is quick to redirect the accolades to her unheralded colleagues in the field.

“If it weren’t for the dedication of activists, these children would have little hope for survival or recovery. I feel so privileged to work with colleagues like this and I’m inspired by them every day.”