



Mayor's Office of  
International Affairs

PRIDE MONTH 2020  
EXCLUSIVE



## ARD VAN DER VORST

Consul General of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Atlanta

The Mayor's Office of International Affairs is proud to celebrate Pride Month this year by honoring and highlighting a member of the LGBTQ+ community and Atlanta Consular Corps, whose enthusiasm and leadership has not only bolstered relations between Atlanta and the Kingdom of the Netherlands around diplomacy, trade, education, culture, and innovation, but has spurred new conversations around LGBTQ+ affairs and public diplomacy.

Ard van der Vorst began his appointment in Atlanta as the Consul General for the Kingdom of the Netherlands in January 2019, following a successful 2015 visit from Prime Minister Mark Rutte. As the senior Netherlands government representative in the Southeast, van der Vorst leads a team that promotes trade and investment with Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama, and Georgia; supports Dutch nationals; participates in public diplomacy initiatives; and supports cooperation around science and research.

A career diplomat van der Vorst joined the Netherlands diplomatic service in 1997, and previously held positions in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Before taking up his posting in Atlanta, Ard served as Head of the Spokesman Office and Newsroom at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Hague and was the Dutch Consul General in San Francisco from 2012 to 2015. Prior to his posting in San Francisco, Ard was Head of Development Cooperation at the Netherlands Representative Office in Ramallah, and political coordinator on Western Balkan Affairs in The Hague, where he worked on a range of issues linked to development cooperation, security policy, and trade in the European Union.

In addition to working with the Mayor's Office of International Affairs around trade, culture, and innovation, Ard has worked closely with LGBTQ Affairs Coordinator, Malik Brown, a member of the City of Atlanta's Mayor's Office of Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity team. Together, they hosted a memorable itinerary for Dutch artists, Léon Hendrickx and Micha Schneiderberg, who visited Atlanta to share the internationally acclaimed photography series, King & Queens, depicting drag queens from around the world posed intimately next to their everyday selves. And in celebration of Pride Atlanta, Ard joined friends and colleagues to participate in the first ever European Union float for the 2019 Atlanta Pride Parade.

Ard is the first openly gay Consul General to be posted in Atlanta. Together with his husband, the two are an energetic and inspiring force in our community that are committed to working with the City to exchange best practices around LGBTQ+ health, combating homelessness, and empowering LGBTQ+ youth. As part of Pride Month, we asked a series of questions that highlight his personal and professional journey. 🌈

**Q: What was young Ard like? What inspired him to approach a career in diplomacy?**

A: Growing up in the South of the Netherlands, in a small village, was a joy. Often, I could be seen out and about in the fields that surrounded the town, wondering what could be found beyond the horizon. In addition, I was a curious kid who was fascinated by the news and interested in nerdy stuff, like taking care of chickens, a parrot, and the vegetable garden. I have happy memories of growing up, blessed by a caring family and community. One way or another, I knew I wanted to travel, deal with the continuous hunger for everything that is new and try to understand the world better. I think I was in high school when I told the principal that I wanted to work at an embassy or be a veterinarian. Well, the ambition to become a veterinarian did not work out after my father told me I should be prepared to be on call 24/7 to take emergency calls for a sick pig. In the end, I guess I'm not so much of an animal savior.

**Q: Was there someone who played a significant role in your personal and professional life?**

A: This year we celebrate 75 years of freedom with the end of World War II. It's amazing that we can experience freedom of religion, freedom of the press and freedom to love whomever you want. We're still grateful to our liberators, including the U.S. My grandparents experienced the war. At that time, they did whatever they could to help people hide in their farms to protect them from Nazi persecution. They sometimes talked about the experience of Nazi occupation, and I think they were still bewildered how it could happen. From an early age on, I have always been interested in studying the rise of fascism and World War II. However, it also created a basis of resentment against populism and indoctrination, a mindset I inherited from my grandparents. It taught me also to value independent thinkers and authenticity, which can be a struggle as a teenager.

**Q: Do you recall the first time you came out? And what that conversation was like?**

A: I slowly realized as I was growing up that I did not have the same interests as other boys but did not think much of it. I guess my surroundings also did not make me think much of it, but there is a moment when you realize you think you are different. To realize it and accept it are two different things. The period of self-acceptance can be a nasty struggle and takes time. For me personally it was not the easiest part of growing up. I defy those who think it is a choice. There is no choice. Nobody chooses a path that easily sets you apart from society and a world that is not accepting. It took me some years to overcome my fears, but I was gradually happy to share and come out to my friends and family. All where accepting and supportive, but also concerned about the wider world and if it would negatively impact my personal and professional opportunities in life.



*The EU Float at Pride in Atlanta 2019, which included the staff from the Consulates of Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland and the Netherlands in Atlanta.*

**Q: According to Forbes, as of May 2020 it is still illegal to be LGBTQ+ in 70 countries. As you are assigned to other posts around the world, are these laws considered and safety precautions made?**

A: The Netherlands is not one of these countries and has been on the forefront in support of equal rights for the LGBTQ community. In 2001, it became the first nation in the world to accept same-sex marriage. Within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there is a contact person for LGBTQ colleagues who want to go abroad. Furthermore, LGBTQ colleagues and allies organized themselves in an advocacy organization "Out There". They do a great job by for instance assisting us in identifying possible work places around the world. It's a difficult balancing act between the freedoms we have in the Netherlands and being respectful of local customs and laws. Every embassy assesses the local situation. If it is a safe space to work for LGBTQ staff, we ask: Does the respective country recognize same-sex partnerships, and how do relevant civil or criminal laws impact your local daily life? At the end of the day and taking into account the information, it is a conversation with the embassy and yourself to see if there is a match.



**Q: With more LGBTQ+ representation within the heads of government, such as the Prime Ministers of Ireland, Serbia, Iceland, Belgium, Luxembourg, do you see a change on how diplomacy, community engagement, health, and business is taking place? What do you think the future will look like?**

A: We move forward, for sure, and it is great to see LGBTQ representation in positions, such as heads of government, in countries we considered not so long ago traditional or conservative. However, I think these are still baby steps. There is a need to be vigilant. Violence against the LGBTQ community continues worldwide. LGBTQ communities still suffer from religious bias. LGBTQ youth still struggle to find a place and be accepted in society. The fight for recognition and acceptance needs to continue by investing in conversation and trying to bridge the differences. Nevertheless, at the end of the day, the result cannot be a compromise, and I realize it will not be handed on a silver platter.



*Pride in Atlanta 2019*

**Q: Your previous post was in San Francisco from 2012 to 2015 and your appointment in Atlanta began in January 2019. How has your experience been being an openly gay Consul General in the United States in comparison to the Netherlands? Particularly in the Southeast?**

A: The Netherlands opened a Consulate General to expand its opportunities for economic collaboration in the Southeast, and we are new in Atlanta. Foremost, I represent a country that supports 825,000 American jobs related to trade and investment in the US. The Netherlands is the second larger exporter of agricultural products in the world, just behind the US. Almost 29,000 jobs in Georgia are related to the economic ties with the Netherlands. I am super proud on those strong economic ties and companies like Randstad, VanderLande and Philips Healthcare, for example, that have a major impact. Also, the Netherlands American Chamber of Commerce to the Southeast does an amazing job. They are very supportive of a Diversity and Inclusion approach when it comes to entrepreneurship. It's a much needed corporate strategy that also has a positive impact on doing business.

Upon our arrival, my husband and I always have experienced an open door. The Governor's Offices and cities in the region are very welcoming. There is always space to publicly agree to disagree. I also realize that there is a difference between what people think of us personally and the job I represent.

**Q: In early 2018 Mayor Bottoms appointed the City's first full-time LGBTQ Affairs Coordinator and the Mayor's LGBTQ Advisory Board. You have had the opportunity to work with the City on LGBTQ Affairs. Can you walk us through some of the exchanges that have taken place? And how can the Office of International Affairs continue to support these exchanges?**

A: Many cities around the world are confronted with the same challenges. It is great to see that the collaboration between cities has intensified on topics dealing with the climate, growing demographics and expanding urbanization. Also, on LGBTQ topics. Cities are confronted with an increasingly bigger group of vulnerable LGBTQ youth escaping an intolerant environment and perceiving the city as a refuge. I applaud the City of Atlanta for being very open about the topic and ready for action. The LGBTQ Affairs Coordinator brings a pro-active plus integrated approach to the table on dealing with homelessness or healthcare for LGBTQ youth. We started to work on gender identity and looking for opportunities of collaboration between the Netherlands and Atlanta on the topic. It's not like the Netherlands has the solution on how to face all the challenges, but at least by facilitating a conversation between the two regions we can make a start. The International Affairs Office is instrumental in making this happen.

**Q: Do you see this type of initiative/role taking place in other cities?**

A: I think that the major cities in the world take on the task of embracing diversity and inclusion, which is great. However, it is important not to leave the rural areas out of sight. I realize that there is an urban and rural divide and difference of opinion on many topics, also on LGBTQ issues. Additionally, I would welcome more work of cities in taking the initiative and connect at home with the surrounding rural communities. I believe that only a sustainable solution on acceptance and emancipation lies in lifting up all by including the most challenging opponents.



*Malik Brown, City of Atlanta LGBTQ Affairs Coordinator and Koosje de Vries, Deputy Consul General for The Netherlands in Atlanta*

**Q: How did you and your spouse meet and how has his experience been as he joins you in these different posts?**

A: I met my husband in Amsterdam just prior to my posting to Ramallah, West Bank. I was going to work at the Netherlands Representative Office to the Palestinian Authority. He joined me in Jerusalem. We married in 2012 and moved to San Francisco. Every spouse of a diplomat should receive a medal. It requires so much flexibility, both personally and professionally. Opening your house to unknown people, limited notification where the next move will go to, not having an infrastructure, nor colleagues available. It is not always easy for him, but he does great.

**Q: What is your advice for LGBTQ+ youth who are interested in starting a career in international affairs?**

A: We need you! The great thing is that within my diplomatic career I had the opportunity to meet many other LGBTQ colleagues from all over the world. You literally realize that you are not alone.

There is so much opportunity to give your experiences back to the world and bridge differences. The career is not about you, but the country you represent. Still, it gives you plenty of space to make it your own. Diplomacy is cool!

**Q: What is your advice/ words of encouragement to those that feel unwelcomed within their own families and discriminated against by society?**

A: You are not alone. In comparison to the past, I am super proud of those LGBTQ+ youngsters who are already out. Families that are accepting and together with friends are ready to conquer the world.

However, I am also proud of those who are struggling to accept that they are different, who feel unwelcome, or receive a harsh treatment by society. I acknowledge that this is a depressing period of your life. There is nothing wrong with the struggle, the hurt of feeling left out, being different. It's a journey that you can overcome, as long as you realize that you're not alone. If it is hard to take the hurdle, don't be afraid to ask for help. The journey is tough, but you will come out stronger and shinier. The world is waiting for you! 🌈



*Ard van der Vorst and his husband, Pieter*



*Mayor's Office of International Affairs Director, Vanessa Ibarra and Global Engagement Officer, Paulina Guzman with international partners at Pride in Atlanta in 2019*