



Gratz Insider, Summer 2014 - Story Continuation

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'Shalom, Y'all!': An Inside Look at the Institute of Southern Jewish Life

The ISJL was founded in 2000 by Macy Hart, whom Gratz College's Dodi Klimoff describes as "a force with a grandfather's warmth." As director of the Henry S. Jacobs Camp, a Reform Jewish camp in Mississippi, Hart spent 30 years traveling throughout the South recruiting campers. During these visits, people lamented about their declining southern Jewish communities, with some families even giving him ritual objects from defunct synagogues. Intent on protecting and displaying these relics of southern Jewish history, Hart created the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience in 1986.

However, it soon became obvious to Hart that the museum alone was not enough. He realized that during the school year, many of his campers did not live the vibrant Jewish lives they had experienced over the summer. As a result, he needed to find a way to bring Jewish spiritual, cultural and educational experiences to the campers' communities throughout the South. With these goals in mind - and with the support of generous donors - Hart eventually evolved the museum into the ISJL. Among other offerings, the ISJL provides rabbinic services, Jewish cultural programming and educational support to underserved congregations.

From Lafayette, Louisiana, to Blacksburg, Virginia, ISJL rabbis and educators traverse the South. Hart emphasized the importance of such personal visits when he said in an ISJL publication, "[O]ur success will be built upon the road trips of our staff." (CIRCA, 2003) Indeed, the two dozen staff members of the ISJL now deliver programs and build relationships across their thirteen-state territory and beyond.

The ISJL's approach to Jewish education is unique. The organization developed a curriculum with scripted, user-friendly lesson plans for religious school students from pre-kindergarten through high school. The curriculum is distributed to partner congregations at the ISJL's annual education conference in June. To assure ongoing support, each congregation is assigned an Education Fellow, who is responsible for making three annual onsite visits, as well as being available by phone or email for

additional programming needs. In August 2006, The Forward aptly described this approach to Jewish education as "[a] mobile, Jewish version of Teach for America."

Although the ISJL is located in a uniquely southern setting, its regional approach addresses issues that are not specific to a single geographic area. Jewish communities across the nation can benefit from this same model of small and large congregations partnering and coming together to share in trans-denominational programming and resources.

Gratz has both a historic and a current connection with the ISJL education program. More than a decade ago, a Gratz College graduate student in Jewish education was among the interns who designed lesson plans for the first draft of the ISJL religious school curriculum. In addition, for the last several years, Gratz has been a fixture at the annual education conference in June. With an extensive menu of online programming, Gratz is able to support the ISJL in bringing Jewish education directly to the people who need it, particularly to Jewish professionals.

For example, there is Rabbi Holly Cohn in Albany, Georgia, who learned about the Gratz Midcareer Fellowship program at the 2013 ISJL education conference. Rabbi Cohn is now earning a Master of Arts in Jewish Communal Service from Gratz, with a specialization in nonprofit management. Given the online format of the class, she says, "Even though I am in school, I can continue to serve a congregation full-time." (ISJL E-News Education, Spring 2014)

Then there is Dr. Eliyahu Krigel, director of education for a congregation in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Dr. Krigel is a student in the Gratz doctoral program in Jewish education. Both he and Rabbi Cohn describe their Gratz experiences in the [spring 2014 issue](#) of the ISJL education newsletter - an issue devoted to the topic of distance learning.

As the ISJL staff continues to crisscross the South, Dodi Klimoff, the Gratz representative to the annual education conference, has long since packed up and returned home. But before traveling north from Mississippi to Melrose Park, Klimoff promised to return for the ISJL conference next year.