



Passing Over religion

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Chelsea Giles, features staff writer | 0 comments

When the average student thinks of Hillel, they probably don't get past a Yiddish word or two like "tzedakah" or "chutzpah."

Hillel, an international Jewish organization, is active on over 500 campuses. Virginia Tech's Hillel group has a full schedule to recognize Jewish Awareness Month, anticipate the opening of its new facility, promote civility awareness activities, and prepare for Passover.

Passing Over religion

According to Anna Isserow, a sophomore double environmental policy and planning and political science major, as well as a member of Hillel, she

looked for campuses where Jews are accepted, not just tolerated, when she was visiting colleges.

"Virginia Tech showed acceptance, and that was important to me," Isserow said.

According to various members of the group, Hillel provides opportunity for every student on campus.

"We're really welcoming and open to everyone, no matter your religion," said Isabel Shockit, a junior interdisciplinary studies major.

Hillel has many outlets to reach out to other students and promote the group. They have an extensive website, a blog, a newsletter, a special orientation for Jewish freshmen and continuous events for Jewish Awareness Month.

To be that active, there are 35 students on the board in which each person has a committee for a different part of the group. There are also staff members to support the students, including Susan Kurtz, the executive director of Hillel at Virginia Tech. Amanda Herring, a fall 2011 Tech graduate, is the coordinator of engagements and initiatives.

Herring said she believes Hillel is rooted in culture and a way for students to be a part of something bigger than themselves.

"Hillel is a home for Jews and non-Jews," she said. "It's here for you. It's not a religion club; it's a culture club. Some people bring their roommate, some want to be a part of a community, and some are just curious."

Interns network to support partner groups and reach out to new members as well. One intern recently established a Shabat group for the Oak Lane community. The Shabat group provides Greek life members a chance to still be



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active in Hillel, beyond Alpha Epsilon Pi, which is an on-campus Jewish fraternity.

Jewish Awareness Month began the week after spring break and runs into the second week of April. There are a variety of events including film screenings and food tastings.

One of the kick-off events was a presentation by Mike Reiss, the writer and producer of "The Simpsons." He revealed the Jewish themes and connections within the show and shared his experiences of being a Jewish comedy writer.

The Reading of the Names is an upcoming event held in remembrance of the Holocaust on April 19. Students and professors will volunteer for 10-minute time slots between 9 a.m. and 7 p.m. to read names of those who died in the Holocaust.

In the midst of these activities, Passover will be observed April 6 through April 14. Those observing this holiday cannot eat wheat products, barley, rye, or corn.

Isserow is on the student advisory committee and was responsible for speaking with Virginia Tech Dining Services to discuss the plans for Passover.

"Dining Services was very open to suggestions," Isserow said. "Even though dining was going through its own changes, they were still willing to help."

According to Luther Moseley, the assistant director of Virginia Tech Dining Services, accommodating students is part of the job.

"Dining Services is a large team that stays focused, making sure we listen to our students," Moseley said. "We would be foolish not to."

Though the dining staff has organized a lot in a short amount of time for the Jewish holiday, Moseley claims that the group's current efforts will better prepare them for next year. According to Moseley, there was a gallant effort to get matzo ball soup on one of the menus, but it will have to wait until the next Passover.

Some of the venues are making substitutions while others are identifying what can still be eaten. Au Bon Pain will have specials throughout the week. Some of its options include roasted asparagus with almonds, whole-wheat matzo flat breads and shredded carrots with honey and raisin salad.

Dining Services will post signs at most of the campus food venues, which will distinguish what is acceptable to eat if one is observing Passover.

Herring and Isserow claim it is hard to eat in Blacksburg with dietary limitations. Moseley admits there is room for improvement when it comes to accommodating student diets.

"I think there's a growing need for dietary requirements," Moseley said.

Next year, the new Hillel facility will provide a kosher kitchen, which Moseley claims he looks forward to gaining access. With the kosher kitchen, gluten issues will be addressed and there will be a higher quality of meat available.

The kitchen will be in the Malcolm Rosenberg Hillel Center, which is under construction and expected to open in June. According to Herring, the development of the center has been a thorough process.

"Sue Kurtz has been fundraising for about 10 years," Herring said. "She finally got a donor."

Diane Rosenberg donated \$1 million in honor of her late husband Malcolm Rosenberg. The building is walking distance from campus across Prices Fork Road.

Hillel has been operating out of the Multi-Cultural Center and scrambling for rooms to host events. It goes to a community center for Sunday school, but Herring said it does not meet student needs. According to Herring, local Jewish families are already asking about moving their Sunday school services to the new center.

"We need a center and a life force, because we're so expansive," Herring said.

The Rosenberg Hillel Center will have a commercial kosher kitchen, a student lounge with a kitchenette and offices. Beyond the special features, the center will also serve as its synagogue.

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Herring considers the center to be a place for Jewish freshmen to go off campus and bond with the older members. The group strives to nurture incoming freshmen with its own orientation, FreshFest.

"I'm hoping to get (FreshFest) bigger this year — let them all explore the new building," Herring said.

The "Ask Big Questions" series is another branch organized by Hillel. It is an initiative to promote civility on campus. According to Shockit, the series challenges peers to question things they normally would not talk about.

The program poses questions all people can consider and answer regardless of demographic, religious beliefs, gender or age. It is open to Jews and non-Jews.

While the questions can result in discomfort, Herring said the series is held in a positive atmosphere.

"The group has the resources for students from different backgrounds to converse in a safe environment," she said.

For more information about "Ask Big Questions" or the various aspects of Hillel at Tech, visit www.hillelatvirginiatech.com.

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