

NORTHERN VIRGINIA JEWISH LIFE

Jewish college life growing in Northern Virginia

by Eric Hal Schwartz
Staff Writer

Northern Virginia might not be what comes to mind when parents and students looking at higher education think about Jewish life on campus, but there are actually many opportunities for Jewish engagement and community at schools in the area, aided by groups pushing to improve and expand Jewish life on campus.

"We're focused on empowering Jewish students," said Ross Diamond, executive director of Hillel at George Mason University.

Diamond, currently finishing up his first year at GMU, said there are about 1,200 Jewish students at GMU, and about 250 will attend a Hillel event at some point in a year.

"About 100 are really involved," he said.

Farther south, the University of Virginia has also seen notable growth in Jewish student size and engagement.

"To be a Jewish student has changed dramatically in the last seven to 10 years at UVA," said Rabbi Jake Rubin, executive director of UVA's Hillel.

Rubin said he now routinely sees 175 students or more of UVA's approximately

2,000 Jewish students involved in some sort of Jewish activity compared to the maybe 35 who used to appear for events.

"Jewish life has really blossomed," he said.

To the west, Virginia Tech sees more than 800 of its own 2,000 or so Jewish students participate in Jewish activity over the course of the year, mainly through their own Hillel organization according to executive director Sue Kurtz.

"It's an amazing growing organization," Kurtz said.

Highlighting the opening of its first permanent home on campus this year as an example, Kurtz explained that Virginia Tech (officially the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University) has seen explosive growth in Jewish student numbers.

"It's partly because the reputation of the school is improving," she said. "Now it's a destination for Jewish students."

As for what students can do once they join Jewish groups, it is entirely up to them.

"They learn how to navigate a Jewish community," Diamond said.

Jewish life at GMU is expanding rapidly, with numbers of Jewish students growing, and plans for a permanent Hillel building



The Virginia Tech Hillel building.



Virginia Tech Hillel students pose for the camera at a Chiddy Bang concert in March 2011.

starting to get developed.

"There's a whole new wave of Jewish students," Diamond said. "We're at the beginning of a very big arc."

Diamond spoke about the success of events like a Holocaust education week, b'nai mitzvah program and other chances for Jewish students to engage with their community as well as the larger campus.

"This is a place where passionate Jews get together," he said.

Peer network engagement and reaching out to unaffiliated students is important to the kind of communities built on campuses and have been extremely successful. At a recent special Shabbat event with 300 attendees including the president of UVA, only the size of the venue kept even more students from coming, Rubin said. That's a huge difference from the time when Jewish students attended UVA in spite of the Jewish life there, not because of it.

"It's been a pretty remarkable change," he said.

Student leadership now and in the future

is vital to the Jewish life on campus, all the directors agreed.

"There are very few things that we as a staff do that don't come from the students," Rubin said. "They can create the Jewish life they want."

Student leadership boards and committees plan events and talk out bigger ideas as well, planning long- and short-term goals.

"The staff supports students and what they want," Kurtz said.

Northern Virginia's friendly climate to Jewish college students feeds on itself, as the numbers eloquently attest, and with new and expanding choices, Jewish high-school students and their parents in the area and nationally seem likely to continue to examine the choices available to them, something the organizations on campus look forward to.

"We're excited about the growth," Kurtz said.

"Jewish life is on the rise," Diamond said.



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