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## Valerie Schnapp Reflects on Hillel International Peer Engagement Institute

*This post is featuring guest blogger Val Schnapp who is the daughter of temple members Heidi & Rob Schnapp and is about to start her second year at Virginia Tech.*



This trip is what I have been looking forward to all summer, going to the Hillel International Peer Engagement Institute in Saint Louis, Missouri. Not only was I going to see my friends from Virginia Tech, but I would go meet hundreds of Jews with similar values and motives to my own.

My trip started when I got to Newark Airport. Immediately at the gate, I noticed a girl wearing a Birthright shirt, so I asked her if she was on the trip. Within a span of 30 minutes, we were sitting at the gate with a group of strangers who were going to be on the trip as well. This really set the tone of the trip for me because right away, I was meeting new people who are just as passionate about Hillel as I am. Meeting these people definitely made the plane ride much more enjoyable! It's always cool to experience the instant connection Jews make with other Jews.

Once we got off the plane, I went to find my Virginia Tech friends to ride over to the Washington University in Saint Louis campus.

The first night was a great starter where all of the students from all the schools went to the auditorium and we had an introduction to what we were there for, and giving us the importance of engaging Jewish students in universities to participate in Hillel or other Jewish organizations. After that, there was an ice cream social and time for us to go around and meet other students. It was like one big game of Jewish Geography whenever hearing where someone was from and then saying, "Oh, do you know...?" I found many connections that night, and enjoyed feeling like a part of the big community we were, even being strangers.

The next morning, we were up early, ate breakfast, and started doing workshops in school groups. There were 12 of us Virginia Tech students, and we were also with three Florida State students. In the group, we wrote out all the groups we are in on campus to see what connections we had, as a whole, to engage non-active Jewish students. I feel like this is important because I found that for myself, having this Jewish community really helped me adapt to college life. I have always been used to being around large Jewish communities, so having to find one for myself was what made my school more of a home, with a family I can rely on. After this workshop, we had another auditorium meeting where we learned about social media and how to make connections through that. It was very informative and taught us life skills as well about using social media.



The night we had was very emotional. The 12 of us Virginia Tech Students, and our three supervisors sat in the dark for something called "Breaking the Boundaries." We were asked really tough, personal questions that everyone had to answer ever one of them. The questions went deeper and deeper over the two hours, and we all felt closer to each other after opening up. Something I love about Judaism is we don't learn our history, or forget our pasts, we remember. Judaism has a lot to do with remembering because the only way to prevent things from happening again is remembering the past, and taking action on the future. "Breaking the Boundaries" showed me how important remembering is, whether good or bad, because it is a part of our lives.

Friday morning came so fast, and was definitely my favorite day. After more morning workshops, we were given free time to explore the city. The two options were going to the zoo or an art museum, but instead, my friends and I decided to go see the Arch in Saint Louis, and I am so happy we did. We rode the metro, saw the arch, and got to bond over exploring the city together.



We got back to campus, and it was time to prepare for Shabbat! We discussed with partners what we wanted

to achieve this Shabbat, and this year. I was put with a very close friend of mine, and our conversations lasted 30 minutes more than it was supposed to, but we were comfortable talking to each other and really opening up.

The craziest thing happened as we walked back to the dorm, I ran into my cousin, Billy, who was at the conventions with NYU! I was so surprised seeing him, and it made me think of how small of a world we live in, especially being Jews. I find it amazing that we can run into family or friends in strange places, just another reason I love being part of this community.

Shabbat was a very reflective time at the convention. I chose to go to the Reform service option to bring in Shabbat. The songs reminded me of the ones we did at Emanu-El when I was a child. It brought me back to Hebrew school, and made me appreciate our temple so much more than I ever had. The night was so peaceful, especially being around so many teens similar to myself.

Saturday was mostly a free day. I went to a yoga service in the morning to see what that was about, and it was a lot of fun. We prayed by our bodies, and is something I would want to try again someday. Later in the afternoon, we had another workshop where we were given a partner from a different school to discuss passages that connect ancient Judaism to present day. We had 40 minutes to discuss, and the time just flew by as my partner was enthusiastic and easy to talk to. The last activity of the convention was Havdalah, my favorite Jewish tradition ever since I went to camp. The entire convention gathered together to sing and dance outside, and it was truly magical. I felt so privileged to be there, and lucky to be Jewish.

I took away a lot from the convention: speaking skills, listening skills, how to engage others. But the main thing I took away with me is that our community is one to be proud of. Being surrounded by this community is where I can mostly be myself. As a college student, everyone always talks about trying to find themselves. I could never have found myself without the help of Hillel. If you have a child that is going away to school, I urge you to lead them in the direction of Hillel. This organization is not about religion, or praying, but coming together as a community with similar values and backgrounds.

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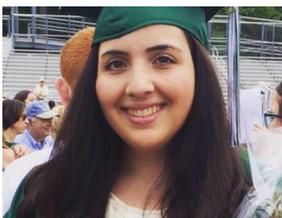
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