

Mitzvah Around the Globe

The 2009 recipient of the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences' Outstanding Recent Alumni Award, **Mara Seidel '06** personifies her alma mater's motto, *Ut Prosim* (That I May Serve), on a global level.

President of Virginia Tech's Hillel as an undergraduate, Seidel then worked for Hillel at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst (UMass) after graduation, bringing Jewish life to students. She escorted four student-trips to Israel to teach young Jews about their heritage and also led work-trips to Uruguay and New Orleans to do mitzvah, or acts of kindness.

Drawn to the elderly, Seidel has long pursued personal volunteer service that has included calling the regular Saturday morning bingo games at a retirement home. She also shared her world travels with the residents by way of slide shows. In the aftermath of the Virginia Tech shootings, Seidel organized a vigil with members of other UMass campus denominations and was a key speaker, sharing



her memories of Virginia Tech. But it was Seidel's work selling bread that drew the attention of former President Bill Clinton. Seidel, as Hillel's Jewish Campus Service Corps Fellow, decided to sell loaves of challah bread as a fundraiser for the Sudan relief fund of American Jewish World Service (AJWS). She was concerned about the 3.5 million people of the Darfur region made homeless by years of deadly conflict.

Her "Challah for a Dolla" became a regular fundraiser for Hillel and a consciousness-raiser for the plight of the Darfuri people. Volunteers made dough, then braided and baked the traditional Jewish bread; they even created posters explaining the cause. Clinton praised UMass Hillel's Challah for a Dolla program in his speech at the 2007 AJWS "Partners in Global Justice" conference.

Seidel decided to combine her interest in Israel with her concern for Darfuri refugees and began a MASA (Hebrew for "journey") internship in Tel Aviv, Israel, volunteering with the refugees in September 2008. "My 10-day 'honeymoon' trips weren't enough to really understand this incredibly confusing country," said Seidel. "I decided to stay for six months."

She engaged in fundraising and community planning, coordinated language tutoring, and taught English to Darfuri refugees in their homes, learning their culture in the process. When she left for a backpacking trip through Southeast Asia and Nepal, the Darfuri people gave her a big going-away party.

Seidel couldn't stay away from Israel for long, however. She "made Aliyah"—immigrated to Israel—in November 2009. Although she still sees her Darfuri friends, she has a job helping recent college graduates find volun-



teer placements, internships, and master's programs in Israel. She's also taking classes in Hebrew in preparation for entering a master's program in geriatrics to become a social worker at a retirement facility.

"My decision to stay and gain citizenship was not an easy one. It was largely due to my strong Jewish identity," she said. "I love the different way life is lived here. Every day is a challenge, and everyone you meet has an incredible story. I find it rewarding to live in a beautiful country of which my great-grandparents could only dream."



Seidel, as Hillel's



ON THE BACK COVER:

An architect's rendering of the \$89 million Center for the Arts at Virginia Tech. The cornerstone of the Arts Initiative, the new center is scheduled to open in 2013 at the corner of Main Street and Alumni Boulevard.