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"Hillel's Angels"

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A group of cross-country motorcyclists stopped for a meal at the Malcolm Rosenberg Hillel Center at Virginia Tech in May. And what better phrase could have been coined for the event but "Hillel's Angels."

Photo courtesy of Hillel at Virginia Tech

Early last month, Isaac Cohen, of New Jersey, the leader of a group of bikers traveling across the country, reached out to Sue Kurtz, executive director of the Malcolm Rosenberg Hillel Center at Virginia Tech. The travelers were kosher, and being able to eat meat (which has to be prepared according to kosher rules) was important due to the demands of riding all day. He asked Kurtz: Could the gang send meat ahead and share a kosher meal on their next cross-country tour?

"When they first contacted me I was like, 'Jewish bikers? How do I know you're for real? May I call your rabbi to verify?'" Kurtz recalled. "And then Isaac went out of his way to help us get to know him and his group. By the end I had to say, 'You know what, you really do seem like a nice Jewish boy, I trust you. Let me check my freezer and see how much brisket I have. We'd love to have you.'"

Kurtz has been a part of Hillel at Virginia Tech for the past 16 years. Years ago, she was giving art lessons to a student from Israel whose mother was making a Shabbat meal and delivering it to a group of Jewish students on Fridays, where they ate together in a church basement. One night the student's mother asked Kurtz to fill in and make dinner for the students. Pretty soon Kurtz was making dinner every Friday and bringing her family to observe Shabbat with some of Tech's Jewish students.

Kurtz embraced the Jewish value of “radical hospitality” as one that she and the students shared. To search the term online is to unearth thousands of references to the concept’s spiritual roots. The site Jewish Virtual Library (www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org) states:

“In ancient Israel, hospitality was not merely a question of good manners, but a moral institution which grew out of the harsh desert and nomadic existence led by the people of Israel. The biblical customs of welcoming the weary traveler and of receiving the stranger in one’s midst was the matrix out of which hospitality and all its tributary aspects developed into a highly esteemed virtue in Jewish tradition.”

Hillel at Virginia Tech has come a long way from that church basement. It now has its own building on Toms Creek Road, with the only kosher kitchen for hundreds of miles. What better way to be radically hospitable than to host a biker gang for a kosher dinner?

On May 7, Cohen and seven other bikers joined Hillel staff and a few students for a meal that included food the group had sent ahead frozen. The protein — chicken and beef — was the most important and hardest to get kosher while traveling. After dinner, they were able to take the rest with them on their trip.

“Even in the midst of finals week, it was a great opportunity for us to practice radical hospitality,” Kurtz said.

The visit from the bikers exemplifies the best of Hillel and the best of Virginia Tech. Those involved even came up with the perfect headline for their experience: “Hillel’s Angels.”

Submitted by Meredith MacKenzie

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