

Education 2010

Jewish Kids on “BEING JEWISH”

How Jewish students fare in traditionally non-Jewish schools

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“How do you start a stampede of Jews?”
“How?”
“Throw a penny down the street.”
Growing up as a Jewish student in a non-Jewish school can be a challenge. Jewish students have grown accustomed to this type of humor from both Jews and non-Jews, and they are reacting differently depending on their academic environment, and how important their Jewish identity is to them.

“In secular schools, you can say more to a Jewish kid than you could to another minority,”

— Max Reamer

Most Jewish students regard these jokes merely as jokes and not as anti-Semitic attacks. “Students make ‘Jew jokes’ just like they would make an ‘Asian joke,’” says Dani Turner, a rising senior at Friends School of Baltimore.

“In secular schools, you can say more to a Jewish kid than you could to

another minority,” says Max Reamer, a recent graduate of Friends School. He suggested that this might be because it is hard to tell the difference between a Jew and a non-Jew based on appearance.

Mr. Reamer was at Friends for the past two years after transferring from Boys’ Latin. He says his transfer had nothing to do with an ostensibly anti-Semitic incident at Boys’ Latin four years ago. “You’re going to get more jokes because it’s an all-boys school,” Mr. Reamer says. “If you’re sensitive, you’re going to find more things at BL, only because it’s a unisex school.”

Ms. Turner suggests that ‘Jew jokes’ told by Jewish students are a result of the students’ unfamiliarity and detachment from their roots and their desire to blend in with the rest of their classmates. “People are educated, but don’t know much about their religion.”

At Towson High School, Jews make up a smaller constituency, says rising junior Marissa Feldman. “Being a minority in school is normal for me,” she says. “Most of my friends have never been to a bar or bat mitzvah.”

Although one might think Towson’s smaller Jewish population would permit more anti-Semitism, Ms. Feldman says non-Jewish students are curious about Jewish traditions and practices. “I like when friends ask me questions about my faith,” she says.

While she hears occasional ‘Jew jokes’ about ‘Jew-fros’ and ‘Jewish noses,’ Ms. Feldman says the jokes, “are not intended to discriminate.”

Many students are joining Jewish

student organizations to gain camaraderie with their Jewish classmates and to discuss Jewish issues. According to TCI, an organization dedicated to advancing Jewish education and promoting Jewish solidarity in non-Jewish independent schools, Baltimore private schools are doing a good job of nurturing Jewish students. “All of the Baltimore private schools are committed to students’ development and care about supporting Jewish students,” says Jason Benkendorf, TCI’s mid-atlantic regional director.

Mr. Benkendorf explains that TCI achieves its goals primarily by creating Jewish clubs and organizing Jewish-themed events at its partner schools. TCI works with many local private schools, including Friends, Gilman, Roland Park Country School, Bryn Mawr and St. Paul’s School for Girls. This past winter, TCI hosted a Chanukah event at Friends School and in May, the organization hosted a bowling night.

“The majority of Jews [at these schools] are active, but all programming is open,” Mr. Benkendorf says. “At RPCS, we even have some non-Jewish members.”

Jennifer Fowler, a recent graduate of Roland Park, confirms Mr. Benkendorf’s statement, “RPCS does a really good job about diversity—nobody even thinks about saying anything offensive.” She adds, “In the communities I’m a part of, religious stereotypes aren’t prominent.”

Neely Snyder, the Baltimore Programming Director of TCI, says the

Jewish organizations help students cope with anti-Semitism and their minority status. “When [the kids] are concerned, these clubs give them space to air their concerns.”

Ms. Snyder adds that students rarely tell ‘Jew jokes’ in meetings because of the diversity in the clubs. “There are a wide variety of experiences, and they negate stereotypes among students in the club. Being Jewish means a lot of different things.”

Ms. Turner is a prime example of a unique Jew. “Being Jewish is part of who I am, partly because it comes up so much,” Ms. Turner says. “When I was at Beth Tfiloh, I was different because I had a non-Jewish father, but when I came to Friends in tenth grade, I was different because of my Judaism.”

However, Ms. Turner finds that students at Friends want to learn about her differences and what sets her apart. “There are certain things I can’t eat and, when it comes up, there inevitably is a conversation about what it means to be kosher. Often, I’ll say, ‘In Jewish tradition, we’re blank,’ and my friends are excited to have the conversation.”

Mr. Benkendorf says TCI’s goal is not only to make Jewish students comfortable with themselves and with their schools, but also to encourage dialogue between students of different faiths. “The students who are active in the clubs are satisfied, and they are huge successes.”

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