

Bringing Life Back to a Jewish Club

Josh Schultz did not despair when his school's Jewish Student Union (JSU) lost its vibrancy. In fact, it was the club's waning existence in 2002 that drove him to give it a much-needed facelift.

"I knew that if I wanted to create a meaningful Jewish experience for myself and other Jewish students, I would have to take on some leadership responsibilities," reflected Schultz, a senior at Phillips Andover Academy in Andover, MA.

Bringing new life to the JSU was important to Schultz, who grew up in a rich Jewish environment and wanted to maintain his connections to Judaism once in school. But, he found that at Andover, where only 10% of enrolled students are Jewish, the Jewish community he sought was "rather lackluster," according to Schultz.

So, Schultz drew on his Jewish background and called upon The Curriculum Initiative (TCI) to reshape Andover's JSU, steps resulting in a now active club, which runs weekly meetings, engaging Friday night Shabbat services and special events that always draw a crowd.

A Small but Strategic Start

When he was a freshman, Schultz began revitalizing the JSU by taking on the role of the Shabbat service leader. "I immediately began a major overhaul of the service," said Schultz.

He spiced up the somewhat listless Friday night program by first swapping a few Hebrew prayers for their English versions, making them accessible to non-Hebrew readers. Then he added more songs to the service, giving it a stronger musical element that would entice his peers.

"I did these things," explained Schultz, "because I found that many Jewish students at Andover had grown up in secular households. They liked the Friday night service, but its traditional structure and the Hebrew discouraged them from coming," he added.

Schultz noticed that just these small changes increased student participation. By his sophomore year, the service was popular among a regular group of enthusiastic attendees.

Schultz admitted that the Tuesday night club meetings were tougher to tackle. Making them more exciting and meaningful took a lot of time away from his schoolwork. Rather than abandon his cause, Schultz invited Andover's rabbi to lead text study during the weekly meeting, enabling Schultz to focus on his academics, and to take a small step back from the JSU.

TCI on the Scene

During his hiatus from the JSU, Schultz came upon TCI, which was holding Jewbilee 2003 at Andover. Jewbilee is an annual gathering for Jewish students from independent high schools. Schultz was committed to the JSU, but was frustrated by the work involved to make it successful. He thought Jewbilee might reinvigorate his passion.

And, it did. Schultz said that Jewbilee validated his dedication to the JSU. "I realized that many Jewish students at other prep schools were also struggling to create a Jewish life for themselves, and I got some new ideas for improving the JSU."

After Jewbilee, TCI and the Andover JSU partnered to strengthen the weekly meetings and organize exciting activities, including a Jewish film festival, Shabbat dinners and a *hamantaschen* bake. Just recently, the JSU, with TCI's assistance, sponsored a joint Shabbat dinner for students from the nearby Brooks School, an Episcopal independent school in North Andover. In January, the JSU will host Andover's Jewish Cultural Weekend, an annual event that invites the entire school to appreciate the Jewish heritage.

The JSU, Today and Tomorrow

Today the JSU, of which Schultz is president, is a welcoming place for new Jewish students at Andover, making it easier for them to acclimate to their new academic and social community.

"On the first Friday night I had few friends here; I knew that services would be a comfortable environment that I could handle," said first year Emma Goldstein.

Naomi Sobelson, a senior, feels at home with the JSU. "My transition from my temple at home to Andover has been a wonderful learning experience for me," said Sobelson. "At Andover, I am exposed to kids with many different backgrounds and traditions, but we are still able to share our faith and similar Jewish values," she added.

Schultz knows that the JSU's future is bright. He is proud of its enthusiastic board that has proposed exciting new programs and activities. He is confident that the board and TCI's JSU coordinator, Rebecca Rubin-Schlansky, will be able to find the right person to take his place.

"I look forward to finishing out this year as the president and service leader for the JSU, as well as watching the new board take full control of the JSU and continue to improve it," Schultz concluded.