Brighter Horizons For Local Schoolchildren

Margie Elsberg, a founding member of the Chestertown Havurah and a supporter of Washington College Hillel, directs the swim program for the local chapter of the Horizons program, which provides academic and cultural enrichment to local public school students from low-income homes. Washington College is now an official host site for Horizons’ middle schoolers. Shalom asked Margie to describe her experience with the children.

When I first heard that Horizons was looking for a swim program director, I couldn’t raise my hand fast enough. Semi-retired, I could relive the fun of summer camp and teach the important life skill of swimming. That was five years ago and, at 71, I’m still at it.

I learned to swim at camp in Maine when I was six, in 1950, and I can still feel the cool water of Trickey Pond. I was a camper, then counselor, until I was in college. I knew all the strokes, dives, and water ballet moves, and I was an American Red Cross Water Safety Instructor.

I taught swimming to day campers, adults, and blind children in my hometown of Washington, DC, then let my WSI certificate lapse when I married and started a career and a family. By 1997, our three sons were on their own, my husband and I had moved to Chestertown, and I was eager to get back to the water. Washington College was there to help.

I joined the masters swim team at the Casey Swim Center, and when I signed on with Horizons, I took the Baltimore Jewish Community Center’s five-day WSI course (I was 67; my classmates were 16) and Kim Lessard’s lifeguard course at the College (I was 68; my classmates were 15).

This summer, I taught 98 kids, from Pre-K to 8th grade, at the Kent County Community Center pool, and 30 K, 1st and 2nd graders in a backyard pool in Queen Anne’s County. In a community surrounded by water, where accidental drownings are an ever-present danger, our kids are usually the first in their families who know how to swim. And for some, swimming has already led to terrific opportunities.

Five kids are thriving on the Sho’men community swim team, two are on the high school swim team, and three are lifeguards earning well over minimum wage.

Summer camp in Maine is where I learned to swim, but Maryland’s Eastern Shore is where I’ve really jumped in. My plan is to keep teaching Horizons kids for years to come, at least until one of them takes my whistle and makes the program even better.
I was a freshman in high school when I first learned about the Holocaust and the devastation it brought to the Jewish people. That was the moment when I became interested in Judaism. A trip to Israel with Professor Prud’homme three years ago ignited my interest in the Middle East, and my involvement with Hillel further fueled my passion for learning more about the region.

Joining Hillel in my freshman year, I have served on the Hillel board as the media and communications chair, all the while learning about the Jewish faith and culture from members of the Chestertown Havurah and other students involved. I’ve gained more knowledge about Judaism than I’d ever imagined possible, and met some incredible friends and community members along the way.

After the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, I was the first Washington College student to attend the American University in Cairo (AUC) in almost four years, which was pretty intimidating at first. Within the Middle East, AUC is known everywhere. Diplomats, heads of states, and even John Brennan, the current director of the CIA, have studied at AUC. I’ve had opportunities here that I would never have elsewhere, including studying in one of the top Arabic programs in the world, attending lectures by world-class professors, and witnessing first-hand a post-revolution Egypt.

Although I’ve traveled extensively throughout the Middle East — Israel, the West Bank, Turkey, and Jordan, to name a few — Egypt is a probably one of the hardest, yet most incredible travel experiences I’ve had yet. Every day brings a new challenge, which is one of the things I’ve come to love about this country. Although Egypt has its share of political problems, it also offers an incredible array of cultures, religions, and people.

I’ve always been interested in the effects of war and its toll on human welfare, especially in regards to genocidal acts against a population. While studying in Cairo, my passion for these areas has grown even more through coursework in Elementary Arabic, International Politics in the Middle East, and a graduate-level class on the terrorist organization ISIS. With my studies in Egypt coming to an end, I recently accepted an internship at the United States Holocaust Museum as part of its Genocide Prevention department. I hope to learn more about effective methods of genocide prevention and apply what I’ve learned in Cairo to what awaits me in DC.

A senior from Chicago, Katie Wellington ’16 hopes to work in Middle East affairs.
Jewish Millennials and American Politics

The Roy Ans Fellowship is intended to encourage and recognize the study of the American Jewish Experience. The grant is awarded annually to a student and a faculty advisor who work closely on a topic exploring Jewish life and thought in the United States. For his project, Kyle Sepe ’15 worked with political science professor Melissa Deckman to examine the historic connection between American Jews and the Democratic Party, and considered why young Jewish-Americans today seem to have a greater affinity for the Republican Party. We asked the political science major to discuss his thesis, “The Chosen People Choosing Which Party?” and explain his findings.

Why this project?
In my preliminary research while I was at Oxford, I was struck by how Jewish Millennials were the least religiously observant Jewish age cohort, but polls suggested that Jewish Millennials were also more likely to identify as Republicans. This seemed paradoxical to me because if one is not very religious, he or she is more likely to identify as a Democrat than a Republican. Since 1992, Jewish support for Republican presidential candidates has slowly but consistently increased. Republicans have nearly tripled their support among Jewish Americans since 1992.

This research is significant because many Jews are concentrated in electorally significant states, such as Florida, and if there is even the slightest change in voting behavior in a historically solid Democratic constituency, then this could impact a presidential election overall.

What did you hope to learn through this project?
I wanted to see if there was a statistical relationship between Jewish age cohort and various religious and political dependent variables. I used the 2012 Jewish Values Survey released by Public Religion Research Institute in SPSS to conduct a bivariate analysis.

Additionally I conducted two open-ended interviews with Congressman Leonard Lance (R-NJ), hoping to add a political perspective from a member of Congress whose district is home to Jewish congregations of various sects. I interviewed Reform Rabbi Randi Musnitsky at Temple Har Shalom in Warren, New Jersey, hoping to add a religious perspective to my thesis.

Overall, my findings suggest that Jewish Millennials are driving Jewish Americans to trend more Republican, particularly because of their views on economic issues and low religious salience.

What specific conclusions did you draw?
1. Jewish Americans are overwhelmingly Democratic in their views on political issues and in their voting behavior, but younger Jews are statistically more Republican than other Jewish age cohorts.

2. Jewish Millennials are most likely contributing to the success of Republicans gaining Jewish support in the past few presidential elections.

3. Jewish Millennials are more conservative in their economic views than other Jewish age cohorts, are very liberal on social issues, and are the least religiously observant.

4. Jewish Millennials overwhelmingly oppose the establishment of a Palestinian state, in contrast to most Jews overall who support the establishment of a Palestinian state.

5. Jews could be losing progressive Jewish values and the historical link between being a Democrat and being Jewish. Religious and political scholar Robert Booth Fowler suggests there is a link between religious salience and traditions and voting behavior. Therefore, if Jewish Millennials are the least religiously observant, then they are most likely losing these progressive Jewish values and are potentially open to Republican ideas.
Poet Jehanne Dubrow’s Latest Collection Wins Accolades

Poet Jehanne Dubrow, director of the Rose O’Neill Literary House at Washington College, has published her fifth collection, a book of prose poems praised for their searing insights about the lasting impact of trauma and the complexities of marriage.

The Arranged Marriage (University of New Mexico Press, March 2015) is based on several years’ worth of interviews with Dubrow’s mother, who shared stories from her Jewish-Latina childhood and early adulthood in Honduras and El Salvador. It is the first collection of prose poems from a poet who usually works in traditional verse forms.

“For this book, I felt that the prose poem would be the most effective form for exploring the themes of violence, captivity, and different kinds of forced intimacy or closeness,” she says. “On the page, the poems in The Arranged Marriage are narrow, like newspaper columns; they speak in a detached manner, allowing me to engage in a kind of reportage and to write about my mother’s experiences in a way that is simultaneously personal and clinical.”

Fellow poets had strong praise for the new collection. Poet and editor Kevin Prufer wrote, “Jehanne Dubrow has a storyteller’s gift for suggesting, with enviable economy of language, the complexities of our relationships with those we love and the inescapable past that surrounds us. Elegant, intimate, and unsettling, The Arranged Marriage is a terrific—an important—book.” And Hilda Raz, Mary Burritt Christiansen Poetry Series editor and former editor of the literary journal Prairie Schooner, said Dubrow’s book “tells us a story so compelling that we put down our tasks and turn to her voice.”

While still in manuscript form The Arranged Marriage was honored as the recipient of the 2012 Poetry Society of America’s Alice Fay di Castagnola Award. In her Judge’s Statement for the book, nationally known poet and playwright Claudia Rankine wrote, “Details in these stunning prose poems are presented like mini still lifes creating patterns of preparation for victimization, retaliation, or escape. … Dubrow understands that before the moment of trauma, the break in time, there was a thing or a thought put in place. The poet here is positioned to observe, to picture, and to record in order to communicate coherence in the face of incoherence.”

Dubrow says being honored by Rankine was a great encouragement, “a message that I should keep writing these poems.”

More reassurance came when three poems from the collection were awarded the Anna Davidson Rosenberg Prize for Poetry on the Jewish Experience.

Jehanne Dubrow, associate professor of English, is director of the Rose O’Neill Literary House and editor of Cherry Tree: A National Literary Journal @ Washington College.
Observing Holocaust Remembrance Day

In partnership with the Institute for Religion, Politics, and Culture at Washington College, the Hillel House welcomed Peter Hyman, the rabbi of Temple B’Nai Israel in Easton, to campus in April to remember those of the Jewish faith who were sent to their deaths under Nazi aggression, and to consider how to stave off similar modern-day atrocities. Rabbi Hyman led an in-depth conversation about the Holocaust and the need for interfaith solidarity to combat genocide, hate crimes, and discrimination.

The April 15 event was a fitting commemoration of Holocaust Remembrance Day, noted Joseph Prud’homme, professor of political science and director of the IRPC.

“The rabbi spoke to students of the need to embed memory of the Holocaust in everyday life and spoke of the special power of religious liturgy to form habits of remembrance. He and a diverse array of students had a deeply engaging conversation on the best ways religious communities can foster the remembrance of atrocities but can do so in a way that leads to constructive action.”

Demonstrating their commitment and desire to see the Hillel endowment reach its goal of $200,000, twenty-one of the original donors made repeated gifts to this effort. Thanks to all of the donors listed below, we have raised gifts and pledges of $87,652 toward our goal. To make your gift to Hillel, please visit give.washcoll.edu or mail your check to the Office of Advancement, Washington College, 300 Washington Avenue, Chestertown, MD 21620.

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Passover Celebration

Washington College Hillel held its annual Passover Seder, commemorating the liberation of the Jewish people from slavery in ancient Egypt, as well as their freedom under the leadership of Moses. Gathering in Hynson Lounge, friends and members of Hillel and the Chestertown Havurah celebrated the joyous holiday of Passover with songs, recitations, games, and traditional Jewish foods. Cantor Gary Schiff headed up the event with assistance from Hillel Co-President David Baulsir ’18.