

Growing Jewish program attracts students

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growing Yaschik/Arnold Jewish Studies Program, which draws students to take classes from such disciplines as language, politics, religion, history and philosophy.

The program has a new home, a growing enrollment and a \$1.5 million endowment. The college is recruiting two new faculty members to start next fall. The program's advisory board is raising \$1 million to create a distinguished professor position. And with the start of every year, the Jewish Student Union grows larger and more active.

To all this, program Director Martin Perlmutter, smiles and shakes his head.

The former philosophy department chair took over in 1989. He still can't believe all that the program has become.

"I'm tired!" Perlmutter says with a grin. "It has so exceeded my expectations."

GRACEFUL HISTORY

The program was created by Henry and Sylvia Vlosky Yaschik, who in 1984 endowed it.

Henry Yaschik wasn't a religious Jew but was intensely culturally Jewish. He wanted to honor his father by starting a Yiddish program.

He supported the program until his death in 2000. The program's new building is named for Mrs. Yaschik.

Meanwhile, a matching endowment from Norman and Gerry Soe Arnold has enabled the program to continue its growth.

At the same time, Charlestonians and Southern Jews increasingly realized the unusual nature of their peaceful joint history. Today, the program connects the 250-year-old college with 300 years of Jewish history in South

Carolina.

Even today, the program gains strength from its ties across the Judeo-Christian divide. The unique Southern Jewish experience draws students who could attend schools with larger religious studies programs. The Jewish Studies Program works closely with the Jewish Historical Society of South Carolina, the state's largest Jewish organization.

"We really have a niche market," Perlmutter says. "Here, local history is a big part of it."

Yet, the program's hallmark is its emphasis on outreach into a Charleston community noted for its large number of steeples.

It holds ecumenical and Jewish-specific lectures, Bible studies, Jewish Choral Society concerts, Sunday morning bagels, films, three-rabbi panels, Sunday morning adult education series, brown bag lunches and "A World of Jewish Culture" at Piccolo Spoleto, all part of the program's regular fare. And each semester, rabbis from Charleston's three Jewish congregations meet to discuss matters of general interest.

Add to all that a huge boost in 2002 when the program moved into its new 12,000-square-foot Sylvia Vlosky Yaschik Jewish Studies Center, which was built with \$2 million in private donations.

The modern-looking building raised some historic Charleston eyebrows, especially given that it sits in the heart of downtown next door to Grace Episcopal Church on Wentworth Street. Where Grace is majestically historic, the Jewish Studies Center feels decidedly modern.

The center houses the Jewish Student Union/Hillel, three faculty, a Judaica library and the Jewish Historical Society of South Carolina. It also houses meeting

space and a kosher kitchen.

Speakers at its dedication included U.S. Sen. Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, an observant Jew who ran for vice president on the Democratic ticket in 2000.

JEWISH STUDIES MINOR

Keren Ben Shushan sits with a student at a round table where it's quiet enough to concentrate on the Hebrew language problem at hand.

For her, this is a dream. Ben Shushan moved to Charleston a month ago from Israel, where she taught Hebrew as a first language at Tel Aviv University. But she'd long wanted to teach it to students who didn't know Hebrew at all.

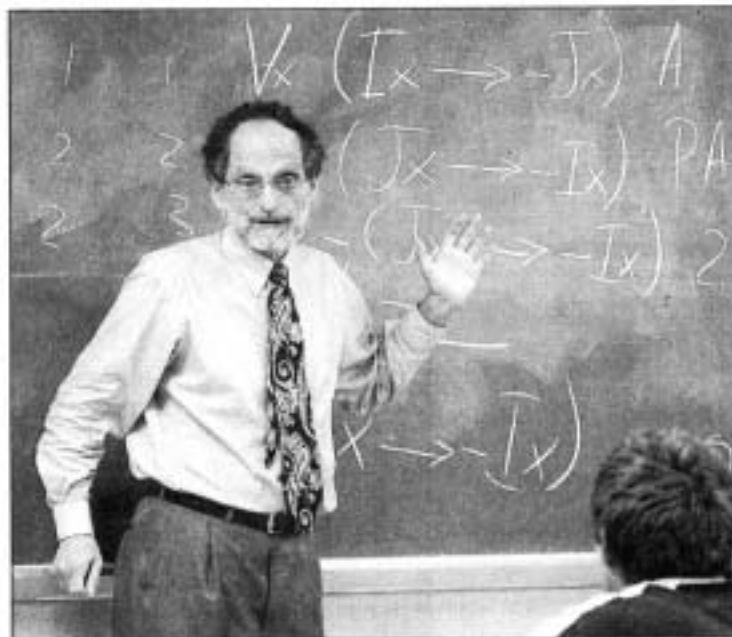
So she answered an advertisement for a teaching position in the Jewish Studies program. It's her first extended stay in the United States. She brings to students in Charleston the perspective of someone immersed in the Israeli culture and the Hebrew language. They bring to her a fresh interest in the language.

"They understand that, being Jewish, it's helpful to learn Hebrew," she says.

Her students are, by far, mostly Jewish. But in many other Jewish Studies classes, such as Holocaust and Old Testament courses, the students by far are non-Jewish.

John Huddleston, a religious studies professor, has seen the number of Jewish students increase in his classes, including students with parents from mixed faiths who are trying to learn more about Judaism.

Whether Jewish or Christian or



BRAD NETTLES/STAFF
Martin Perlmutter, a College of Charleston philosophy professor, directs the school's growing Yaschik/Arnold Jewish Studies Program.

something else, many students are away from home for the first time and grapple with religious and cultural identity crises.

"They say, 'Wow! You really opened this up for me,'" he says. "It's liberating for them because they can ask any questions they want."

Outside of Jewish schools, learning from a Jewish perspective often isn't the norm.

Even in the most tolerant of towns, the dominant culture usually gets the most airtime in the classroom. Even the Old Testament usually is taught from a Christian perspective, Perlmutter says.

"This is less a religious studies program as it is a cultural studies program and an attempt to teach

about an alternate culture," Perlmutter says.

The Jewish Studies minor requires students to take classes from a spectrum of academic areas. That includes taking Hebrew from the languages department, Jewish Tradition and the Hebrew Bible from religious studies, Jewish Thought from philosophy, Jewish History and the Holocaust from history, the Jewish-American novel from English and the Modern Middle East from political science.

"This gives students a chance to learn things they probably wouldn't otherwise," he says, noting classes such as professor Ted Rosengarten's popular Holocaust courses. "To me, that's the exciting part."

It also gives students a chance to study abroad, such as in Israel, Jordan and Egypt. Many of its students have spent a year or longer studying at Israeli universities.

STUDENT LIFE

Much of this is driven by the booming Jewish student social life on campus. From overseas trips to weekly gatherings in the Jewish Student Union, Perlmutter says, he's never seen the union so large and active.

Students gather weekly for dinner. They study together, take trips together, do outreach work together and attend Jewish discussion groups together.

Twice a month, students get together for a movie. Once a month, they hold a big Shabbat dinner. They plan trips together. Each fall, it's a camping weekend. Each spring, it's a beach getaway.

But this isn't a program just for Jewish students. The majority here are, in fact, not Jewish.

The Jewish sorority and fraternity both have members who aren't Jewish.

The program's advisory board includes non-Jews. The student union is open to all.

And not all Jewish students minor in Jewish Studies.

Like non-Jewish students, they come for a range of majors, not to mention the local beaches, history and beauty of Charleston and beyond.

"But if it weren't for the Jewish Studies program, they wouldn't come here," Perlmutter says.

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