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Taking initiative: Texas Hillel engages Jewish students with unique activities

By Debbi Wolfson
 Special to The Jewish Outlook

In August, Texas Hillel at the University of Texas-Austin welcomed Devora Brustin as its senior Jewish educator. Hillel's Schusterman International Center chose Texas Hillel as one of the first of four Hillels across the nation at which to institute this position. Now, the position exists at 10 campus Hillels across the nation, aiming to provide motivation for Jewish education by meeting an assortment of student-driven interests.



Brustin came to Texas Hillel with the mission of creating unique activities in an effort to engage otherwise uninvolved Jewish students. Whether it's discussing students' relationship to Jewish life on Sundays at Hamsa Yoga or merely connecting Jewish business students through J.O.B.S. (Jewish Organization at the Business School), each initiative incorporates aspects of Judaism allowing students to integrate their interests with their heritage.

"(An initiative) has to be something current and relevant, something that impacts people's big questions that they're asking themselves at this time in their lives," Brustin said. "For any of the initiatives, two concepts are brought together where our students are able to recognize that Judaism exists in any aspect of their lives. It's not about stopping the action for Jewish learning; it's about living an authentic Jewish life — taking our Jewish heritage and infusing it into life today."

Each initiative actually stems from the Campus Entrepreneur Initiative interns, who dedicate themselves to creating an initiative that they believe will attract Jewish students whose interests have not yet been met. It is the responsibility of these interns to observe the community, see what activities students lack, and develop a group that will fulfill the desires of those students looking to be included.

"Our focus is on individual students, meeting them where they are, and building the kinds of relationships that increase the likelihood that they will make enduring commitments to Jewish life," said Texas Hillel's executive director, Rabbi David Komerofsky.

"We know that we are not reaching nearly as many students as we can with our usual activities, so these initiatives are invaluable in our attempt to reach every Jewish student on campus. Rather than putting something on the calendar and waiting for students to come, we let the students' interests drive what we do. We provide the content and they provide the enthusiasm and interest."

The Garden of Eatin': Texas Hillel's Community Garden Club and the Shabbat Club are just two of this year's most recent initiatives in which Texas students have opted to engage. These clubs provide an opportunity for a variety of students to collaborate and connect while maintaining and building relationships relevant to their culture.

"Texas Hillel is a welcoming place; you can walk in the building and make it anything you want it to be," said Danny Korin, a former Campus Entrepreneur Initiative intern and founder of the Garden of Eatin'. "There are endless opportunities for personal growth and different types of people. Anything you want to accomplish you can do it here."

The Garden of Eatin' prides itself on tying Jewish holidays and Judaic importance of the seasons into their Sunday meetings. Each meeting begins with a potluck lunch where members talk about the connection to Judaism. After this discussion, they work on the garden, where they grow various herbs and vegetables, such as Brussels sprouts and even a pomegranate bush.

"The garden club has started to 'greenify' Texas Hillel," Korin said. "We have used some herbs and vegetables in a Friday night dinner already. The plants are really starting to take shape and people are noticing them. There have been a few people who, if it weren't for the garden, wouldn't be as involved in Texas Hillel."

Similarly, the Shabbat Club has offered Jewish students an alternative way to build relationships while practicing Judaism in a less traditional and structured environment. Catie Ginsburg, the Campus Entrepreneur Initiative intern behind the club, wanted to offer students an alternative to a large Shabbat dinner at Texas Hillel that may be intimidating for first-timers. Instead, a student in the club volunteers to host a monthly potluck dinner at their apartment for the group. Ginsburg organizes the dinner and brings the necessary elements, such as wine, challah and candles, to ensure that the students will be able to celebrate with the essentials.

"The dinner is more intimate than what you find in an institutional setting. It's much more comfortable to go to someone's apartment where everyone cooks and you get great food — it's more like being at home," Ginsburg said. "It gives students the confidence to host their own dinner as well as a sense of accomplishment."

The array of initiatives offered at Texas Hillel gives students various ways to connect with one another and develop an in-depth knowledge of Judaism while maintaining their interests. By engaging in these initiatives, students are encouraged to create positive Jewish memories, enhance their knowledge, and gain self-confidence to continue taking the initiative as adults after graduation.

"Shifting from program-based events to relationship-based engagement opportunities is a demonstration of a paradigm shift that Texas Hillel has embarked upon in the past year and a

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half," Brustin said. "Texas Hillel is no longer just about building programs and Shabbat experiences; that's just one array of tools. Initiatives and micro communities allow people to connect Jewishly in a way Texas Hillel never previously offered."

Debbi Wolfson, senior Jewish educator intern at Texas Hillel, is a sophomore in Plan II Honors and journalism at the University of Texas-Austin.



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