



For those with high expectations.



**SIGNATURE**  
TOWER

Now accepting reservations.  
[www.SignatureTowerNashville.com](http://www.SignatureTowerNashville.com)  
615.254.2289

## Star of David, Rising

As Vanderbilt's Jewish student population grows, so, too, does the challenge of making religion relevant in daily life. BY ARI DUBIN

**W**HEN I TOOK THE JOB of executive director of the Vanderbilt Hillel in the summer of 2005, I expected perhaps 450 or

500 Jewish students on campus. Instead, the undergraduate student body last year included nearly 700 Jewish students. About 15 percent of last year's freshman class was Jewish, an amazing statistic when you consider that just four years ago, the population of undergraduates was only about 3 percent Jewish.

The most significant factor in this increase has been the Ben Schulman Center for Jewish Life, a 10,000-square-foot building located at the heart of campus. Dedicated in 2002 and named for Vanderbilt alumnus Ben Schulman, BA'39, who contributed \$1 million toward its construction, the Schulman Center houses the Vanderbilt Hillel, the popular Grins kosher vegetarian café, and space where all kinds of groups, Jewish and non-Jewish, come together.

Hillel is the largest Jewish campus organization in the world, with a presence at more than 500 colleges and universities. Hillel takes its name from a first-century Jewish sage whose message was the love and pursuit of peace.

My phone conversations with Jewish parents who are considering sending their kids to Vanderbilt invariably include four questions: Is there a Hillel building? How many Jewish students are there? Do you have a rabbi? Do you have kosher dining?

Many parents do not expect their children to go to Hillel every week—but they want their kids to have the option to explore, to

get involved, to experience being Jewish.

For a smaller group of students who are very committed to a specific kind of Jewish life, Vanderbilt has been steadily building the support system they are looking for on campus. For the vast majority of Jewish students, though, what we have at Vanderbilt now is more than sufficient.

The sheer growth in numbers has also presented challenges. One example is our Shabbats—our Friday night Sabbath dinners. A few years ago they were held perhaps once a month. Then two years ago Shabbats were offered every week, alternating between a more traditional service and a less traditional service. Now we offer both services simultaneously, followed by dinner. In the past, somewhere between 20 and 40 students might have attended. Last year between 60 and 80 students attended each week. This year we have had more than 100 students every week.

Our social and cultural programs, pizza parties and bagel brunches have brought in many students we hadn't seen before. And we're going where the students are. When we organized a comedy night with a Jewish comedian, we originally planned to have it in the Schulman Center, but we brought in more students by having it at the Overcup Oak pub in the Sarratt Center instead.

Having Grins, the kosher vegetarian café (it's pronounced "greens" and means "vegetables" in Yiddish), in the Schulman Center brings people from many parts of campus into the building. Few Hillels in this country can say that virtually every Jewish student on campus will come into their building over



JIM HSEH

the course of the year. For us to be able to make that claim is a source of pride. But that doesn't mean we necessarily touch those lives in a Jewish way. We're always trying to find ways to reach out to Jewish students on campus and to get them involved.

Religion ought to mean more than going to synagogue on Saturday morning or to church on Sunday morning. When we compartmentalize religion, when we only let it touch us during those specific ritual moments until we have to pull it out again, then we aren't really experiencing religion in our daily lives.

For a minority group in any culture, the influence of the majority culture is enormous. We try to show students that religion can touch multiple aspects of their lives. If our students are into poker, we're going to figure out how to get involved with that experience: Can we do it as a charity tournament or a fundraiser, and somehow connect it back to Katrina or the tsunami or something related to Israel?

Last year during High Holy Days in October, those of us who work in the Schulman

*continued on page 83*

**VJournal** *continued from page 9*

Center arrived at work one Monday morning to discover a pig's head on our patio. What first appeared to be an act of anti-Semitism turned out, apparently, to be done out of ignorance rather than malicious intent: Sigma Chi fraternity, whose house is across the street from the Schulman Center, had held a pig roast the previous weekend, and somebody got the bright idea that it would be a great prank to leave a pig's head outside the vegetarian restaurant, without any appreciation for how that might be perceived by Jews.

That event and the ensuing publicity showed me something I hadn't really considered before. Here was this fraternity right across the street from the Schulman Center. Every day, they walk in and out of their fraternity, we walk in and out of our building, and we aren't even the kind of neighbors who wave from across the street or greet one another as we're driving past.

Given a situation in which you're not communicating with your neighbors, eventually something unfortunate happens—whether it's a miscommunication, whether it's mischievous, whether it's malicious, a problem will inevitably arise, and when it does, you don't have a relationship you can fall back on to help resolve problems.

Before I came to Vanderbilt, I was director of the Freeman Center for Jewish Life at Duke University. While I was at Duke, there was an anti-Israel conference that a student group brought to campus, not something the university endorsed. That could have been a terrible experience for the Jewish students on

campus, and it was, in fact, a very difficult one. But we had put a lot of time into developing relationships across all faiths, and when it became clear that the conference was coming to campus, I was able to pick up the phone with various groups on campus representing different viewpoints, people with whom I was on a first-name basis, to say, "Let's talk about this." It made a huge difference in the way the campus experienced it.

Part of Hillel's goal at Vanderbilt is to have activities and dialogues with Christians and Muslims and whatever denominations are on campus. The idea that Hillel might be involved in bringing a Christian conservative or a staunch Republican speaker or group to campus, for example, can be uncomfortable for liberal Jewish students, but we try to provide programs that touch all our Jewish students. Some Christian groups on campus use the Schulman Center for their weekly meetings, and we try to open up our experience to different faiths. And it's not just interfaith; it's also intercultural. It's Latino, it's gay, it's any kind of group on campus.

Although the number of Jewish undergraduate students has grown dramatically at Vanderbilt, our graduate student population is only now beginning to see significant growth. This may be because Jewish students who didn't consider Vanderbilt when they were choosing an undergraduate school are unlikely to consider Vanderbilt when they're looking at graduate schools, and based on the growth of this year's graduate student population, this does appear to be happening. My hope is that,

as we move forward, the people who thought about Vanderbilt for undergraduate school will also consider it for graduate school.

In a short time Vanderbilt has put itself on the map in the eyes of the national Jewish community, and now Jews all over the country are looking at Vanderbilt as an option. It's an exciting time to be here.

Over the last year I've met many people in the Jewish community who have told me, "I love Vanderbilt, and it always made me sad when friends and family around the country would call me and say, 'We're looking at Vanderbilt. Is it a good place to send our kids?'" These people have told me how unhappy it made them to have to answer no. Now these same people tell me how gratifying it is to be able to recommend Vanderbilt to others. The excitement on their faces and the comfort it gives them are gratifying to me, too. ▼

**Vanderbilt Holdings** *continued from page 23*

Other German woodcut artists represented in the collection include Erich Heckel, the Expressionist, whose print of a young girl was reproduced in the first issue of the magazine *Genius* in 1920, and Gerhard Marcks, the Bauhaus artist. Of contemporary living artists, the most arresting work is by former East German Christiane Baumgartner, whose series of prints, *1 Sekunde*, represents one second of video shot during a road trip on the Autobahn translated into 25 individual wood engravings.

Taking the woodcut medium one step further in the direction of film, during February and March the Fine Arts Gallery will exhibit the work of American renaissance man Jay Bolotin, a writer, composer, performer, stage and set designer, choreographer and visual artist whose latest work is an animated film made entirely of woodcut prints. In a collaborative programming effort, the Fine Arts Gallery will exhibit the prints, while Sarratt Gallery and Cinema on campus will screen the film and exhibit studies and precursors to the completed portfolio.

All of which proves that even with the oldest print medium known, there are always new paths on which to collaborate and explore. ▼

**Sports** *continued from page 18*

freshmen who were all very experienced bowlers," says Williamson, "but Michelle had never bowled on a team. Anytime you do anything that's team oriented, it's a different atmosphere. This year I'm expecting a lot more from them because they've experienced those things. It should no longer be new to them."

The players now count on the coach and each other to keep things in perspective and in focus. There are times, Peloquin says, when in the middle of a game, "you think what might be happening on the lane is not actually what's happening. It's nice to have extra

sets of eyes behind you. It's not really an authoritative type of system. It's an exchange, and being able to talk it out helps a lot.

"I went to the Junior Gold Championships this summer, and they're completely individual," she says. "So that was the first event I had attended by myself since being here. The first shot of the tournament—I'm pretty sure I struck the first shot—I walked back thinking, 'Where are my high fives? Where is everybody?' You get used to that. It's so supportive. For the first time not to have it, I definitely missed it." ▼