Our Jewish Life

Special Hanukkah Issue:
Get to know our Jewish students!

Melissa Ross ‘16

My name is Melissa Ross, and I am a senior at University of Richmond. This university provides us with more opportunities than any single person could ever take advantage of, and I’ve been fortunate enough to become involved in many organizations on campus and in the Richmond community over the past four years. Two of my favorite activities are volunteering in the Child Life Department at St. Mary’s Hospital and being a four-year member of the varsity Spider Swimming and Diving team. Additionally, I am a member of Alpha Phi Omega service fraternity and work as a tutor in the athletic department. I am also co-Director of Richmond’s chapter of Camp Kesem, a national nonprofit that supports children who have a parent with cancer by providing them with a week of free summer camp each August. Lastly, I spent two summers working in a cancer research lab in Philadelphia, studied abroad for three weeks in Australia and am currently in the process of applying to medical school.

While all of these things certainly keep me very busy, I do my best to make time to welcome Shabbat with Hillel whenever I can.

I love being able to take a few minutes on Friday night to reflect on my week and catch up with my friends and Rabbi Goodman. Watching Hillel grow and thrive during my four years here has been wonderful. It has been incredible to see Hillel’s presence grow both on campus (we even have a group text message with more than 50 people!) and in the Richmond community. Plus, Rabbi Goodman makes sure that we always have the best challah in town.

My Jewish identity definitely impacts everything that I do. Judaism teaches us that we must continually question the world around us while doing everything in our power to make it a better and more equitable place for all. Being raised in a Jewish household instilled in me from a very young age a strong sense of intellectual curiosity and social justice. My parents taught me to appreciate the things that I have and to use my education to do everything I can to help those who have less. Everything I do is in pursuit of using the opportunities I have been given to make this world a better and fairer place — a goal that has been heavily influenced by my Jewish identity.
As a young Jewish student at the University of Richmond, I find myself loving the Jewish community both on and off campus. Every week I enjoy going to the Welcoming Shabbat put on by the University of Richmond Hillel. In these services, we all sing the Shabbat blessings together and eat challah. Additionally, for the High Holy Days, I signed up to attend services for Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur at local synagogues in Richmond. This has helped me stay connected to my Jewish faith since moving away from my hometown in California.

In addition to Hillel, I have found many ways of being involved on campus. I am part of the Bonner Scholars Program, which comprises 100 undergraduate students, 25 from each class year. Each of these students, including myself, volunteers around 10 hours a week at various locations and our main sites. I spend most of my time at my main site: the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement.

Although I have only been with this site for about a year, I have acquired many responsibilities through my position. My primary responsibility is to manage and organize the Pathways to a College Experience program, or PACE. The PACE program encourages elementary and middle school students to attend college after high school by having volunteer tour guides give tours of the academic buildings on campus. Many of the local youth in Richmond have parents who have never attended – or even thought of attending – college. However, I hope that after they experience their first taste what college is really like and how a college education can help them in the future, they will have dreams of earning their degree. My Jewish education has taught me to help others in any way possible, and through my position with PACE, I believe I am doing just that.

Beyond my volunteering, I strive to incorporate my Jewish identity in my role as a resident assistant. As a resident assistant, I promote a safe and welcoming environment for the residents living in the dorm. I create this by organizing weekly and monthly events, such as making pizza or game night, to establish a strong sense of community and friendship among all of the residents, especially in my hall. This idea of community relates back to my past summers at URJ Camp Newman, a Jewish summer camp. As cliché as it sounds, I have learned that friendships are forever, and my lessons from Judaism can be applied to all aspects of my college career.
David Yarmark ‘16

My name is David Yarmark, and I am a senior majoring in Biology here at University of Richmond. I plan on following a different career path than I had initially intended when I was a freshman. I am currently applying to dental school rather than following in my father’s footsteps and becoming a medical doctor. I have had many incredible opportunities at Richmond that have helped me along this journey. I am the president of two organizations on campus: TriBeta Biological Honors Society and the Pre-Dental Club. Both groups have been very important parts of my time at the university as they have gotten me closer with my peers through various volunteer events and club meetings. I am a strong believer in volunteerism and have enjoyed my time assisting Crossover Clinic, a multi-specialty non-profit in Richmond for patients who are unable to afford suitable care. Additionally, I am a member of University of Richmond’s ACHA Division III Club Ice Hockey team. The team is a big part of who I am, and I consider my teammates to be my Richmond family.

Judaism is also an important part of my life. Although I have not been very active in Hillel since coming to college, I have still felt very connected to Judaism throughout my four years in Richmond. A big reason for that can be attributed to my Birthright trip to Israel in 2013. Birthright helped me appreciate and learn more about my Jewish identity, Israel and Judaism in general. Praying at the Kotel, or Western Wall, and our day at Yad Vashem were experiences during the trip that left me absolutely speechless and have left lasting impressions. In addition to what I learned, the places we visited were simply amazing. I have yet to visit anywhere in the world that has been as beautiful as Israel. I believe that every Jewish student should take advantage of such an incredible trip, and I hope one day that I can return to see the many stunning sites again.

I am very happy that there are so many opportunities for Jewish students at University of Richmond. I was raised in a Conservative Jewish household, and it was important to my parents that I consider myself to be a representative of the Jewish community in all that I do. The tenets of Judaism that most strongly shaped my identity are Midor L’Dor (history), Tikkun Olam (repairing the world), Tikkun Middot (self-improvement), Tzedakah (charity), Tzedek (justice) and Kehilah (community). The direct link between my faith and my actions is clear in my membership in Hillel, Multi-faith Student Council and Alpha Phi Omega service fraternity. Through these organizations I can foster a community with other Jews, discuss history, repairing the world and self-improvement and participate in philanthropic endeavors in the Richmond community. Indirectly, my religious identity caused me to seek membership in other social groups that shared the values I hold. I was recently initiated into the founding class of the Kappa Delta sorority chapter at Richmond. I chose to join Kappa Delta in large part because its members value the same things that I do. The sorority values tradition and history, philanthropy, confidence and individual growth and community. Lastly, I am on the executive board for The Vagina Monologues, an organization that helps to raise awareness and funds to end violence against women and girls. I consider this involvement to be part of my efforts to repair the world and engage in philanthropy.

Mariah Genis ‘16

I am involved in a number of organizations on campus, and I believe that my Jewish identity and upbringing has played a role, either indirectly or directly, in my decision to join each one. I was raised in a Conservative Jewish household, and it was important to my parents that I consider myself to be a representative of the Jewish community in all that I do. The tenets of Judaism that most strongly shaped my identity are Midor L’Dor (history), Tikkun Olam (repairing the world), Tikkun Middot (self-improvement), Tzedakah (charity), Tzedek (justice) and Kehilah (community). The direct link between my faith and my actions is clear in my membership in Hillel, Multi-faith Student Council and Alpha Phi Omega service fraternity. Through these organizations I can foster a community with other Jews, discuss history, repairing the world and self-improvement and participate in philanthropic endeavors in the Richmond community. Indirectly, my religious identity caused me to seek membership in other social groups that shared the values I hold. I was recently initiated into the founding class of the Kappa Delta sorority chapter at Richmond. I chose to join Kappa Delta in large part because its members value the same things that I do. The sorority values tradition and history, philanthropy, confidence and individual growth and community. Lastly, I am on the executive board for The Vagina Monologues, an organization that helps to raise awareness and funds to end violence against women and girls. I consider this involvement to be part of my efforts to repair the world and engage in philanthropy.
Ivan Wolozny ‘16

Being a part of University of Richmond is an opportunity that not everyone gets, and I am proud to be a member of this unique community. What I contribute to this university is support – unconditional and undivided support to anyone who needs it. During my first two years here at Richmond, I went through troubled times, and I would not have made it out of that without the love and support of those who I have grown to love and call friends. I want to give back what was given to me and never allow anyone to go through hardships by themselves. Everyone needs a helping hand, and I am more than willing to give mine.

As a Jewish international student from Honduras, I have not had the chance to truly explore my religion and what this means to me. However, my spiritual connection with God has never been stronger. God has always been there for me through thick and thin, and, as a Jew, I try my hardest to make sure that everyone, regardless of religion, is allowed to express his or her opinions about faith in a safe environment free from judgment. We as Jews have a long history fighting animosity, and I feel that allowing this kind of expression is the best way to improve that situation.

What makes me unique? This has always been a tough question to answer. So many of us see this type of question as an opportunity to elevate ourselves above others in order to achieve something before our competition does. I am nothing but a guy who will stop at nothing if he sees a friend is hurt or in need of help. I am a friend and I care about your life, regardless of who you are. I dislike praise for I see it as something distracting me from the true purpose of my actions: to do everything I can for others, and feel true happiness as a result of these decisions. What makes me unique? I don’t know for sure, but what I do know is that I will always be there for the person who needs me, whether family, friend or stranger.