



Gratz Insider, November 2016 - Story Continuation

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Meet Our Gratz College Board of Governors: Professor Sharon Portnoff Comes Full Circle

In 1990, through a generous gift from JoAnn Hess Morrison, Connecticut College became the first university to have an endowed faculty chair in Elie Wiesel's name. Twenty-six years later, Dr. Portnoff became only the second professor in the college's history to hold the Elie Wiesel Chair.

As an associate professor in the Religious Studies Department at Connecticut College, Portnoff teaches a variety of courses, including "The Holocaust and Post-Holocaust Responses," "Jewish Traditions" and "Religious Ethics." She also publishes and presents scholarly work in the areas of Holocaust theology and modern Jewish thought.

Portnoff's educational credentials read like an academic pedigree: B.A. from St. John's College in Annapolis, M.Ed. from Harvard University and M.A. and Ph.D. from The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS). Before attending any of these prestigious institutions, however, Portnoff attended Gratz College. As a teenager, she participated in the Gratz high school program, traveled to Israel on a Gratz trip and *voluntarily* took Gratz summer classes. Reflecting on these experiences, she says, "The courses were serious and wonderful and inspiring. I loved it."

When she went off to St. John's College, Portnoff became immersed in the Great Books Program: All students at this small liberal arts college were - and still are - required to read a set list of classic works considered to form the basis of Western culture and civilization. However, absent from Portnoff's extensive college reading list were the Jewish texts that she had studied at Gratz. She believed that in order to fully appreciate Western culture, she would have to learn how to reconcile secular and Jewish thought. Otherwise, Portnoff said, "I felt like I didn't have the whole picture of the genius of the West."

After college, she returned to Gratz to take some additional courses, and then went off to graduate school at Harvard, followed by JTS. While working on her doctoral dissertation, Portnoff continued to struggle with the relationship between Jewish and Greek thought. As she says, "It was because of Gratz that I knew enough to be confused."

She decided to resolve this intellectually consuming issue by studying with Dr. Emil Fackenheim, a distinguished rabbi and philosopher who had escaped Nazi Germany, and who was then living in Israel after decades of living and teaching in Canada. So, Portnoff flew to Israel, knocked on his door and began an intellectual journey that led her to where she is today.

Over the years, Portnoff has had the opportunity to reconnect with Gratz, despite living and working in Connecticut. Her nephews graduated from the Gratz Jewish Community High School, and her sister,

Michelle, is the current chair of the Gratz College Board of Governors. When Portnoff's sister invited her to join the board as well, she readily accepted, describing Gratz as "a unique and wonderful place."

Asked about her goals as a new board member, Portnoff says, "to keep the rich bounty of Jewish knowledge and experience that exists at Gratz alive for the next generation."