



## Gratz Insider, September 2016 - Story Continuation

[To return to the newsletter, close this page.]

### Student Spotlight on Gratz Midcareer Fellow Elana Gootson

Gootson still remembers the collective gasps of shocked onlookers on that tragic day, watching in horror as people jumped from the burning World Trade Center. At the tentative suggestion of a fireman, she eventually trekked across the Brooklyn Bridge, away from the crumbling towers. Recalling the desperate pandemonium, she says, "We take for granted that there's always someone in charge taking care of the situation. All of those layers of protection were stripped away on 9/11."

Before that day, Gootson had been a consumer trends forecaster in New York, working in the youth market for companies like Adidas, Levi's and Coty Cosmetics. It was a fast-paced, exciting lifestyle, which after 9/11, seemed hollow and devoid of meaning. In pursuit of more soul-satisfying work and better quality of life, Gootson ultimately returned to her hometown in Florida. Unsure of what she would do next, she could never have predicted that one day she would be deeply involved in Jewish communal work.

Although raised in Tampa Bay, Gootson was born in Jerusalem in 1975. She explains, "My parents were crazy hippies who lived on a kibbutz." Her mother Catholic and her father Jewish, Gootson was born in a hospital in Jerusalem, while her brother was born in the predominantly Christian West Bank town of Beit Jala, where he was delivered by an Arab midwife.

The family returned to the United States when Gootson and her brother were still very young. They were not welcomed by either the Catholic or the Jewish communities. In fact, when her father tried to enroll his children in religious school at the local Reform synagogue in Tampa Bay, he was turned away.

However, Gootson says, "I always felt Jewish; I knew I had a Hebrew name; I knew I was born in Jerusalem; I always identified with the Jewish holidays and our Jewish side of the family. I am also a very strong-willed activist and a non-conformist - Jewish genetics?"

When Gootson had her own children, she was committed to providing them with a strong Jewish identity and with the opportunity to develop religious faith, which had been denied to her. She witnessed the power of faith on 9/11 when she was briefly hunkered down in an alcove with two women from Trinidad before making her trek over the Brooklyn Bridge. Remembering the women clutching their Bibles, Gootson says, "It was a gift to have had faith on that day." And, she thinks it's important for her children to have faith, when and if they want it.

However, she believed that neither her synagogue nor her local Jewish community was keeping up with the times. "Our Jewish values stay the same," she says, "but the world around them is constantly in flux. Right now there are major paradigms shifting across every aspect of our society, including education, leadership structures and communication."

In an effort to effect change, she joined the board of her synagogue and eventually accepted a position as development director at the Jewish Federation of Pinellas and Pasco Counties. She has since used her marketing expertise to help rebrand this local Federation, and is working to create innovative and sustainable revenue streams to support Federation programming.

Gootson has also taken her career in Jewish communal work to the next level by enrolling as a Midcareer Fellow in the Gratz Master of Science in Nonprofit Management. Through her courses, which are almost entirely online, she has the opportunity to delve more deeply into the issues that she confronts at work. Through the online discussion forums and the on-campus Summer Institute, she is also able to bounce ideas off fellow students, who are working in Jewish organizations in other parts of the country. The whole experience, she says, “gives me a new perspective and more depth to what I do.”

From the little girl who felt Jewish despite the lack of a formal Jewish upbringing to the young woman searching for meaning after 9/11, Gootson reflects on what has now become her life’s work: “I like to think that the work I do helps our Jewish community evolve in order to ensure the continuity of Jewish life and culture.”

---

*Gratz College Midcareer Fellows receive a 65% scholarship, which can be applied to the M.S. in Nonprofit Management, the M.A. in Jewish Communal Service or the M.A. in Jewish Education. There are a few fellowships still available for this academic year. For more information, contact the Office of Admissions or call 215-635-7300, x 140 or X 154.*