



Gratz Insider, March 2017 - Story Continuation

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## **Interview With Gratz's Interim President, Rabbi Erin Hirsh**

**You came to Gratz as a rabbi and Jewish educator who has worked with congregations across movements and across the country. What brought you here?**

**EH:** I came in November 2012 after the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia awarded Gratz a grant to develop an intensive professional development program for supplementary school teachers - what most people call "Hebrew school teachers." I was tasked with creating that program, which has since evolved into NEXT. Through NEXT, we have provided services for over 1000 teachers and education directors in 29 states and two Canadian provinces.

**Wow, that's impressive! So now that you've been here for over four years, how would you characterize your experience at Gratz?**

**EH:** I loved Gratz from the minute I got here. There is great warmth in the building. I have loved working and learning with people of all different beliefs and backgrounds. And I do mean learning - since I have been here, I have earned my master's in Jewish education, which gave me the opportunity to appreciate the quality of the faculty, the students and the curriculum from the perspective of a student. My whole experience here at Gratz has been very rich and rewarding.

**You came here to create a single program - and four years later, you are interim president of the whole institution. How did your role at Gratz evolve during those intervening years?**

**EH:** After I was here for two years, President Joy Goldstein decided that she needed to make significant changes to the Gratz Jewish Community High School (JCHS). While serving Jewish teens continues to be a very important part of the Gratz tradition, the program as it existed at that time was difficult to manage, both financially and administratively. So Joy asked me to step in when she consolidated JCHS.

The result was the creation of a new department that I directed, called Gratz Advance, which includes JCHS, NEXT and all Gratz programs involving supplementary school education. Combining these programs into one department turned out to be very exciting. It gave me the opportunity to hear what both teens and teachers were saying about their Hebrew school experiences, which enabled me to design courses that are more responsive to both their needs. New synergies developed that also led to the formation of creative new programs. And, because I was able to hire staff that could teach both the students in our teen programs and the teachers in NEXT, the move to a single department ended up being strategically smart.

As director of Gratz Advance, I was appointed to the Gratz College executive team. In that capacity, I worked very closely with President Goldstein and with the Gratz vice presidents, which gave me a much broader view of the institution.

**How will Gratz Advance continue to function while you are serving as interim president?**

**EH:** I have been very fortunate to have an excellent team working with me on Gratz Advance: Dina Maiben, Peter Eckstein and Luba Pridashin. They are ready, willing and able to manage the ongoing, day-to-day operations of our programs. In fact, even if the position of interim presidency hadn't arisen, I was planning to focus most of my attention this semester on developing new sources of funds and new partnerships for Gratz Advance programs, some of which I can still do as interim president. I have also hired a new staff member, Naomi Housman, to help with development and innovative teen initiatives.

**Serving as interim president is a huge responsibility and a huge honor. What was your reaction to being offered this position?**

**EH:** The first week after Joy told me she was leaving, I was very sad because I loved working with her. The second week, I started worrying about who was going to keep everything moving around here. When I learned that I had been selected for that role, I was very humbled that my colleagues believed I was the right person for the job.

When I started thinking about it, I realized that my membership on Gratz's executive team had basically been an unintended two-year training program for the position of interim president. I had already developed a great working relationship with the team and extensive familiarity with Gratz's strategic plan. I had become conversant on an incredibly wide range of issues that Gratz needs to be focusing on at this time in its history.

But what really convinced me that I was ready to take on the role of interim president was that I was more concerned about telling my husband I wanted to take the job than I was about handling the responsibilities of the job itself. (And by the way, my husband has been completely supportive!)

**For how long do you expect to serve as interim president?**

**EH:** I really don't know. The College has launched a presidential search, but the timeline for appointing a permanent president is not fixed. It is really important to me that we find the right person for the job, and I am committed to remain in this role until that match is found.

**What are your goals as interim president?**

**EH:** My goals are the goals of the College. I am here to help Gratz move forward with the implementation of our strategic plan. It's critical that we launch our new academic programs this summer and next fall, meet our development benchmarks and increase overall enrollment.

I also want to help blend our Jewish legacy, not only with our Jewish studies programs, but also with our more secular studies. Some people feel a tension - but I do not. We have actually been granting secular degrees in education for over two decades. Gratz's commitment to pluralism, which was originally conceived of as pluralism among Jews, has paved the way for being pluralistic and honoring diversity on a broader scale.

**Can you say more about how you see Gratz's Jewish identity in the context of a growing number of secular programs?**

**EH:** As a rabbi, I am confident I can help Gratz honor our historic commitment to the Jewish people and to Jewish scholarship and learning. We are the oldest independent college of Jewish studies in North America, and Rebecca Gratz, who inspired her brother to found Gratz College, is a role model of

mine. When I meet with the board, I see that Jewish ethics and practices guide many of Gratz's curricular and governance decisions.

At the same time, the second part of our legacy is a commitment to educational excellence. And that is a value that serves all of our students and faculty well. It is precisely our grounding in our Jewish heritage, coupled with our dedication to educational excellence, that makes Gratz such a wonderful place to study and work.