



Gratz Insider, May 2017 - Story Continuation

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### **Dr. Saul Wachs: Reflections on My Life at Gratz**

Gratz College had a profound effect on my life well before I began teaching here. I started as a student, studying at Gratz from 1948 to 1952, and putting in 16-hour Sundays. The day began with teaching Hebrew school at Temple Israel in Wynnefield, then studying at Gratz, participating in informal peer-teaching sessions and ending the evening with Israeli dancing. From serious academic studies to events like the Latke Hop and the Shushan Shindig, Gratz during those years offered me a rich combination of formal classes and informal life. Although I had already decided by that time to pursue a career in education, my experience at Gratz confirmed for me that teaching Hebrew school would be a part of my future.

Within a few years, I had decided to devote my teaching career exclusively to Jewish education and had enrolled in the Teachers Institute of The Jewish Theological Seminary. Through that program, I had the opportunity to visit Israel, where even David Ben-Gurion couldn't shake my resolve to return to the United States to become a Jewish educator. He met with our group, trying to convince us to stay in Israel. Although I loved being in Israel, I responded, "We're the Jewish teachers of the future, and we would be abandoning the American Jewish community if we stayed here."

For over two decades, I worked in Jewish education in various capacities before returning to Gratz in 1975 as the College dean. When a financial crisis forced Brandeis University - where I had been teaching as an associate professor - to temporarily terminate its Jewish education program, I felt compelled to continue working in a place where Jewish education was still central. Gratz was the obvious choice.

As dean, I introduced our first graduate programs, which changed the whole nature and direction of the College. After five years in administration, however, I returned fulltime to my true passion - teaching. Teaching is a morally significant profession, which brings me tremendous joy. In the Jewish religion, both God and Moses are described as teachers, which is a great validation of the profession.

I am very proud of our academically rigorous programs at Gratz, but I also believe, as do my colleagues, in going a step beyond academic excellence. It is my philosophy that students can't come to terms with things as professionals until they come to terms with them as human beings. In addition, it is my strong conviction that as an educator in a pluralistic institution like Gratz, it is not my role to tell our students what to believe, but rather, to provide them with the opportunity to think through things on their own, which brings me to one of my favorite Gratz stories.

Many years ago, in one of my classes, my students were working on an assignment in pairs, and an Orthodox rabbi happened to be paired with a Reform educator. As if he had had a revelation, the

Orthodox rabbi suddenly said to his partner, “You are just as serious about Judaism as I am.” And to me, that is what teaching at Gratz is all about: opening minds and opening hearts without espousing a particular path or ideology.

Teaching is an act of love - and I love my students. They have been bright and idealistic. I have had lawyers giving up the law for Jewish education and a physician reducing hours to teach Hebrew school in the afternoon. Working with so many diverse and inspiring students over the years has made the following quote in the Talmud by Rabbi Chanina really ring true for me: “I have learned much from my teachers, more from my colleagues and the most from my students.”

Finally, what is particularly unique about Gratz is the fundamental culture of respect that permeates the student body as well as the faculty and staff. Academia can be a cruel and cutthroat world, but here at Gratz, the environment is supportive, caring and cooperative - so much so that when I tell my colleagues about it at other schools, they don’t believe me.

For an institution to thrive, it must change - and Gratz has changed much over the last 40 years. On-campus learning has largely been replaced by online learning. We have expanded our selection of degree programs, including increasing our secular offerings. However, it is the soul of this institution that will not change because the leadership is committed to the values that have made Gratz a home for over 120 years.

Although I am retiring, I will always care very deeply about Gratz and will support the College in any way I can. It has been one of the greatest privileges of my life to be a part of this fine institution.

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*Prof. Wachs has been granted emeritus status by the board of governors. He will be honored with a tribute at the [Gratz College Jeffrey B. Plevan Annual Gala](#) on May 16 and with an honorary degree at [commencement](#) on May 21. Both of these events are open to the public.*