



Gratz Insider, July 2012 - Story Continuation

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JCHS Commencement: Kudos to the Class of 2012

Filing across football fields and school auditoriums, processions of giddy teenagers marked a rite of passage last month as they participated in high school graduation ceremonies across the country. On the surface, the scene at Gratz's Jewish Community High School on June 3rd was no different. But beneath the veneer of ceremonial pomp, proud parents and smartly dressed students, there was a striking difference: unlike secular school attendance, pursuing a Jewish education at Gratz was a commitment that these students *chose* to make.

"Were we hypnotized? Bribed? Held at gunpoint?" joked Gratz JCHS student Caroline Hirsh in her graduation address. No. "From its thought-provoking classes to its worthwhile discussions to its opportunities for personal growth, Gratz prove[d] over and over again that it [was] worth it," Hirsh concluded.

Worth it, not only because of the academically rich experience that the students had while at Gratz, but also because of the now-relevant practical benefits of their education: a large percentage of JCHS graduates teach at synagogue schools while in college and take leadership positions in Hillel.

Even among the network of Jewish supplementary high schools, Gratz is special. According to JCHS acting director Ruth Schapira, within the North American Association of Community and Congregational Hebrew High Schools, Gratz is one of fewer than 40 "community schools," meaning that it is unaffiliated with a particular synagogue or movement. Of these schools, almost half have fewer students in their entire student body than the 102 graduates in the Gratz Class of 2012, a class that included a number of children of Jewish educators and community leaders.

The June 3rd graduation ceremony was a microcosm of what life was like for this graduating class during its five years at Gratz. Student Natan Weinberger literally spoke to the quality of the Hebrew instruction by delivering his entire commencement address in Hebrew. Caroline Hirsh, in a comment projecting wisdom beyond her years, spoke to the quality of other aspects of the Gratz curriculum: "We became part

of a community of ancient scholars and gained a powerful and enduring sense of ethics and accountability,” she said. “By learning to see the world through a Jewish lens, we were able to see ourselves through a Jewish lens.”

As it does at JCHS, artistic creativity flourished during the commencement ceremony as well, with graduates Ariel Godel and Jeremy Goldsmith performing the Gratz rap, an original number that they had created for a student Purim program. The ceremony also included a performance by the Jews Brothers, a band formed by students taking klezmer as an elective at the Gratz branch in the western suburbs. Finally, there was a performance by the international Jewish youth choir HaZamir, including JCHS graduate Leila Neitove.

In the English translation of his commencement speech, Natan Weinberger simply summarized the Gratz JCHS experience this way: “The combination of dedicated teachers and motivated students is a powerful thing, and it is part of what makes Gratz such a special place.”

Congratulations, Class of 2012!