



Gratz Insider, February 2013 - Story Continuation

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

## The Gratz Ed.D. program:

### For Dr. Saul Wachs, a microcosm of the Jewish community

“The excitement of the Ed.D. program,” says Professor Wachs, “is that there are academics, teachers and administrators from day schools and synagogue schools, early childhood and special needs educators. The students are Hasidic, Modern Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist and secular. The program is a microcosm of what the Jewish community would look like if it were a learning community bound together in mutual respect.”

According to Dr. Wachs, this characteristic is particularly welcome at a time when the movements within Judaism, at least with respect to learning, are ever more polarized. To fully appreciate the diversity of the program, however, it is essential to meet the students. To that end, we offer the following profiles of three representative Ed.D. students: Rabbi Eliezer Sneiderman, Mimi Ferraro and Lyndall Miller.

For the last 21 years, **Rabbi Eliezer Sneiderman** has been the Chabad rabbi at the University of Delaware—quite a stretch for the one-time prep school student who had planned on leaving Judaism and changing his name to Ted Taylor. Although Sneiderman joined a Jewish fraternity in college at the University of Pennsylvania, he ironically did not begin to embrace Judaism until discovering that he had dated the granddaughter of former Nazis. At that point, he decided it was time to learn more about his heritage, which led to his spending a summer at a Chabad Torah study program in the Catskills, where he was deeply moved by the people he met. Although he eventually abandoned his yarmulke, beard and tzitzit after returning to college in the fall, he did continue to spend Shabbats at the campus Chabad.

Seeking a job upon graduation that would allow him to keep Shabbat, Sneiderman stumbled into a position as an options trader on the Philadelphia Stock Exchange. During a hiatus from work brought on by the 1987 stock market crash, he spent a

week in yeshiva. After returning briefly to options trading, he resigned, enrolled in the Rabbinical College of America and was eventually ordained as a rabbi in a Brooklyn yeshiva. Although he had never intended on becoming a practicing rabbi, Sneiderman ultimately changed course and accepted the position as Chabad rabbi at the University of Delaware 21 years ago. Since then, he and his wife have served about 30,000 kosher meals and have taken 1200 students to Israel.

Rabbi Sneiderman entered the Gratz Ed.D. program in 2009 to enhance his credentials, satisfy his love of learning and gain exposure to other aspects of the Jewish educational world.

Unlike Rabbi Sneiderman, **Mimi Ferraro** was raised in an observant Jewish home and was committed to Judaism from an early age. While working as a music teacher at a private secular school after graduating from college, she was questioned about taking too much time off for Jewish holidays. “It was then,” says Ferraro, “that I realized I needed to reconcile my personal and professional lives.” She responded by getting a master’s degree in Jewish education from Gratz. In 1995, she was hired as director of education at the Reform congregation Old York Road - Temple Beth Am—and 18 years later, she is still there.

“I think like a Reform Jew, but I practice like a Conservative. And my husband is a Jew by choice,” says Ferraro. For her, life is all about striking the right balance. Yet how she chooses to reach that balance is irrelevant when it comes to the Gratz Ed.D. program. “One of the things that makes Gratz so special,” she explains, “is that we can come to the table and have respect for each other. The issue is about the learning, not personal biases.”

Ferraro entered the Ed.D. program from its inception as a member of Gratz’s first cohort of doctoral students. She has completed both her coursework and her comprehensive exams and has written her dissertation. If all goes as planned, in May, she will be the first to graduate from the Ed.D. program and will become what she proudly refers to as “Dr. Mom.”

Despite the differences among the students in the doctoral program, there is a definite shared trait: the love of learning. This trait unquestionably characterizes **Lyndall Miller**, the renowned expert in Jewish early childhood education, who already has three master’s degrees to her name. Explaining her philosophy of education, Miller says, “Learning doesn’t stop with a degree. In fact, having a degree makes you realize what it is that you still want to know.”

Miller is director of the Jewish Early Childhood Education Leadership Institute (JECLEI), an initiative that is funded by the Jim Joseph Foundation and that represents a

collaboration between The Jewish Theological Seminary and Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC), in consultation with Bank Street College of Education. The goal of this program, explains Miller, is “to support and develop new leaders in the field of early childhood education across the country.”

Miller brings a lifetime of experience to this position, including 11 years as an early childhood consultant at the Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education. She also developed a certificate program in early childhood education for Gratz and conducted a pilot program there, which supported the efforts of two local schools to improve their early childhood curricula.

Like Ferraro, Miller was a member of the first cohort of students in the Ed.D. program. However, with comprehensive exams in the offing, a dissertation to write and an early childhood education leadership institute to run, Miller expects graduation to still be a couple of years away.

Rabbi Sneiderman, Mimi Ferraro and Lyndall Miller reflect the professional and denominational diversity of the students in the Gratz Ed.D. program. Diversity is a plus in this setting because, as Rabbi Sneiderman explains, “the educational philosophy of Gratz is constructivist. They are not trying to recreate you in the mold of Gratz. You take the material, and you run with it.” Unsurprisingly, the students in the Ed.D. program have “run with it” in all different directions.