



Gratz Insider, November 2012 - Story Continuation

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### **To Gratz and Back Again for Alumnus Michael Blum**

“As a student at Gratz, I knew everyone on a first-name basis,” says Mike Blum. “To be on staff now is an interesting circle of life. There are many things that are wonderfully familiar.”

Blum’s path to his current career actually began well before his studies at Gratz. During his senior year in high school, he participated in the Alexander Muss High School in Israel Program. He describes the euphoria evoked by that experience as having put him on a “Jew high.”

“I came back with this love for connections to Judaism—the smells, the tastes, the culture, the history. I wanted to be with a community of people with whom I could share that,” he said.

He continued to pursue this passion in college as a Jewish student leader at the University of Pittsburgh. He was a member of the Hillel board and returned twice to Israel. It was also during college that he was struck by the realization that he could make a career out of working in the Jewish community.

This epiphany led to his enrollment in the master’s program at Gratz. After graduation, Blum worked first as the Hillel program director at the University of Delaware and then as director of community life at a synagogue in Voorhees, New Jersey.

By mid-August of this year, he was back as the new director of teen engagement for the Gratz Jewish Community High School (JCHS). In this position, he is able to do what he likes best, which, as he says, is “to engage and empower Jewish students and to be a part of their Jewish journey.”

He likens his new position at JCHS to that of a student affairs advisor, whose job is to ratchet up the *ruach*, or spirit, on campus. While providing JCHS students with opportunities for social interaction, he also hopes to build on what is being taught in

the classroom, to create a feeling of connection with the larger Jewish community and to encourage students to take on leadership roles.

Just last week, Blum organized a college road trip to Temple, Penn, Drexel and West Chester so that the participating JCHS students could gain insight into the nature of Jewish life on these campuses. The students spoke with Hillel professionals and Jewish student leaders, including some Gratz alumni. When the JCHS students enthusiastically endorsed the idea of visiting other colleges in the spring, Blum knew that the trip had been a success.

Next on his agenda is the Global Day of Jewish Learning on November 18<sup>th</sup> when youth group representatives as well as a delegation from Camp Ramah will come to Gratz to lead workshops for JCHS students. Then, in December, there is the Israel programs fair that will provide students with information on opportunities for travel to Israel. Ironically, it was Blum's own high school trip to Israel that inspired him on the path to his current position.

Reflecting on the last several years, Blum says, "It is certainly an 'as the world turns,' circle-of-life feeling. I got my master's in this rather acute field, and six years later, I'm back here. It is more fun and more fulfilling to work for an organization that you care about."