



Jewish Studies Enters Fourth Year

by Jim Patterson

Progress is sometimes measured in unexpected ways.

Winding down his third and final year launching Vanderbilt's Program in Jewish Studies, Jack Sasson was told a secondhand story about an overhead conversation between two students.

"I guess I will see you later for services at Hillel," one student said to the other as they parted. Sasson and David Wasserstein, new director of the Program in Jewish Studies, both smile at the thought of that modest scenario.

"You would not have heard that phrase spoken here just a short time ago," Sasson said. "It's a small thing, but a good sign that Vanderbilt is coming along."

The Program in Jewish Studies has made steady progress in its three years graduating its first major, Joanna Dilts, in May, rapidly expanding course offerings and acting as a model of how interdisciplinary growth can enrich a university while sidestepping competitiveness between schools.

Shaul Kelner, new assistant professor of sociology and Jewish studies, is one example. His research on Jewish life in America will be a boon to both Jewish Studies and sociology. The search is now on for an assistant professor of Jewish literature.

"Jewish Studies is different from French studies or history or anything else," said Wasserstein, a medieval Jewish and Islamic scholar who came from Tel Aviv University to Vanderbilt in 2004.

"The character of Jewish history and experience is something that covers many different areas of life and types of experience. That fact will allow us to grow better as a program, drawing people from across the university to participate."

The Program in Jewish Studies is the result of Vanderbilt officials taking a hard look in the mirror, deciding in favor of a more diversified student culture, and then taking action. In addition to launching the program, the 10,000-square-foot Schulman Center for Jewish Life in the heart of campus was dedicated in 2002, and Ari Dubin was hired away from Duke over the summer to serve as executive director of Vanderbilt Hillel.

"I think this program and others at Vanderbilt are a sincere attempt to make students more aware of differences," said Sasson, who will return to his teaching duties at Vanderbilt Divinity School after a leave of absence. "Jews have always been part of Western culture, and Eastern culture too. And it's so easy not to realize that they've played a major role. There's also the vast Jewish experience of learning how to adapt to a pluralistic society without disappearing, to be a culture that is not the majority culture and still survive and prosper."

Course offerings in Jewish Studies have mushroomed, with classes such as Radical Jews from Karl Marx to Noam Chomsky, Music and Identity in Jewish Traditions, and others drawing interest from a wide student base. Study Abroad options currently exist in Prague, and Spain and Israel are being discussed. A Certificate in Jewish Studies was created to give graduate and professional students access to program offerings.

"It's interesting and encouraging that we have Jewish students and non-Jewish students taking our courses," Wasserstein said. "It's very important that Jewish studies as an academic discipline be attractive to all students, regardless of their backgrounds."