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Nicky Spivak oral history interview by Mark I. Greenberg, December 11, 2003

Nicky Spivak (Interviewee)

Mark I. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
Oral History Program
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Current Position: Director of Hillel at USF

Interviewer: Mark I. Greenberg
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Where did he grow up?

Mr. Spivak was raised in Louisville, Kentucky, where he spent most of his childhood years. He went on to college at the University of Maryland, taking a year off to travel to Israel where he worked in cancer research with the intention of becoming a doctor. Upon his return, he transferred to the University of Louisville, where he became more involved with Jewish life on campus.

Continuing education

His formal academics ended after he left Louisville. Most of his background in Jewish studies was experiential, spanning from childhood through his college years. After graduation, he went to work for Hillel at the University of Cincinnati, where he spent three years.

How did he learn of USF?

After a range of experiences around the country, he learned of a position opening up in Tampa and decided to make the move in July 2000. The warmer climate and reasonable cost of living were powerful incentives in his decision to come to South Florida. What most attracted him to the university was the prospect of building an entirely new facility, in addition to a large student population and growing metropolitan area.

Arrival at USF

At the time he arrived, Hillel was operating out of a three-bedroom apartment just off campus. Although things were largely staff-driven, he quickly took note of some wonderful students.

Initial goals

The university was putting significant pressure on Hillel to build on their land or risk losing it. Thus, it became a major part of his focus for his first couple of years here. He hired a programming staff to help develop the project, and last year the organization moved into their new building.

Vision for the new building

Upon arrival, his first priority was only in securing a structure for the organization. It was important to be a visible part of campus life accessible to students, growing with the university. “We [now] have a beautiful structure that students have really been enjoying.”

Description of the facility

The building includes a comfortable student lounge where a weekly “bagel brunch” is held. Sabbath services are conducted in a large multi-purpose area, where dances and speaking events are also conducted. The structure also includes a student library, offices, a conference room, and a small kitchenette.

Fundraising

The fundraising goal is one million dollars, an expectation that they have not yet met. However, they were able to acquire a loan from the bank in order to begin construction on the new building. What most helped the fundraising campaign was a sense of urgency within the community when they learned that the land might be lost if not utilized. “It is still a struggle because a lot of people did not believe that this building was going to be built because they had been hearing about it for so long.” Though the structure is complete, they still continue their fundraising efforts.

Supporters

Support came largely from the local Jewish community in Tampa. They contacted alumni, parents, and different Jewish community foundations to solicit as much support as they could.

Mission of Hillel

It is an international organization originally founded in the 1940s as part of B’nai Brith, a larger worldwide Jewish organization. The mission is to “maximize the number of Jew doing Jewish with other Jews.” “Doing Jewish” includes religious and educational functions as well as social and cultural services and community leadership programs. It is important because Jews have so many more options in society, and it is important to keep Jewish students involved with their Judaism at this stage of their development.

Early years

Hillel was formally established at USF in 1976, there was a Jewish student organization well before that. He notes that there has been tremendous growth at the university, and the membership at Hillel reflects that. While it took fifteen years to get the building put up at USF, many alumni members have commented that they were “waiting forty years” for a formal Jewish center on campus.

Judaism in society

Within the past twenty or thirty years, he feels that the Jewish community has become more widely accepted. “Because of that, assimilation has increased dramatically.” Whereas the state of Israel was important to Jewish students when he was in school, it is no longer a priority among many of them. The development of the *Inter Fada* puts a new face on contemporary affairs in the region. “Only those students who have been to Israel

and have a sense of what [it] means to the Jewish people are the ones who get upset about the issue.”

Hillel and politics

He asserts that the organization makes an effort to educate students on “all sides of political issues that relate to either Israel or the American Jewish community,” without imposing a particular standard or mindset. What is most important, he suggests, is to educate the students so that they can make up their own minds.

Provision of services

They view themselves as being pluralistic, so they welcome all forms of Judaism at Hillel; from Reformers to Orthodox, “they can find a place at Hillel.” On holidays, the organization provides celebratory services and outreach programs to university students. They offer services for the full-range of Jewish holidays.

Hillel staff

Mr. Spivak’s primary responsibilities are fundraising, supervision of staff, and the arrangement of campus outreach programs, among other responsibilities. He employs a Jewish Student Life Coordinator (Program Director); a Jewish Campus Service Corp Fellow who goes out to meet the students where they are, meeting with fraternities and sororities, and setting up at Bull-Market on campus; a part-time Special Events Coordinator; also a few students are hired to do light office work during the week. The staff is responsible for providing the “content” of Judaism to the students.

Projects

The Jewish Adventures Club provides events to get students together in various capacities, be it through horseback riding, canoeing, or other activities. The programs also include some educational aspects, though the emphasis is on community and fellowship. They also work to promote a program called Birthright Israel, which provides free trips to Israel for all interested Jewish students. Another organization is Jews in Greek Life, which seeks to engage fraternities and sororities in Jewish activities and community services.

Integration of Hillel among other student organizations at USF

The Hillel students are very enthusiastic about participating in activities and becoming a part of campus-life. Hillel often sponsors speakers through the University Lecture Series, supports Volunteer USF, and has a number of members who participate in student government. Their resources are available to students and faculty alike who are interested in Israel and/or Judaism. “We try to be a part of the entire campus community.”

Education within a wider university context

“Some of our best outreach projects probably reach more non-Jews than Jews.” They try to approach people with the basics, introducing and engaging students initially with elementary knowledge of Judaism. “Judaism isn’t out to convert anybody.” He suggests that a better community-wide understanding of the Jewish faith will promote good will among people of all faiths.

Political conflict on campus

There are often times arguments between Jews and others over politics in the Middle East, though he believes that things have largely been kept “civil.” In contrast, on other campuses around the country, tensions have resulted in armed conflicts between oppositional groups. Neither Hillel nor its staff has been the targets of any animosity on campus since Mr. Spivak took the position.

Future of Hillel

One of their primary goals is to increase visibility on campus. While Hebrew is taught as a credited course on campus, Hillel also works closely with the academic departments to promote additional Jewish studies programs. In terms of the facility, he jokes, “It took fifteen years for us to get this [building] built, hopefully it won’t take another fifteen years to expand.” He does hope to get a full-service kitchen installed in the new facility, suggesting that it helps to better engage the students. He would like to see Hillel as a “common” presence among students at the university within the next ten or fifteen years. He believes the Big East affiliation will do tremendous things for this campus, and hopes Hillel will benefit as well.

End of Interview