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Rutgers student's passion for Judaism guides others

A second cohort of students attend the series of classes she designed for Hillel

by Debra Rubin
NJN Bureau Chief
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When she was in high school in Union, Fedline Saintina made a "conscious decision" to embrace her Jewish heritage. But she did not anticipate then that by the time she became a student at Rutgers University, that sense of identity would grow into a passion so strong that she would work to guide other students in exploring Jewish life and values.

Now a junior, Saintina developed "Jewish Sensibilities," a 10-week Rutgers Hillel course that exposed students of varying levels of observance to Jewish ways of thinking and responding to life. Offered during the fall semester, it was based on a course of the same name developed by Hillel International, which provides suggested outlines for three different versions that can then be adapted to suit different student populations.

A second, more discussion-driven, course, titled "Jewish Learning Fellowship," began this month.

The daughter of a Haitian Christian mother and a Jewish father, Saintina told NJN in a phone interview that she was exposed to both religions. "I just always felt more integrated into the Jewish community than the non-Jewish community," she said. "To me Christianity was exchanging presents on Christmas and having dinner with my relatives on Easter," but "all my values came from Judaism."

(Rabbi Victor Appell, Rutgers Hillel's Reform community rabbi and senior educator, said that according to the Reform movement's principle of patrilineal descent, Saintina is Jewish.)

When Saintina "realized toward the end of high school the important role Judaism had in my life," the decision to embrace Judaism "was so natural."

Growing up, she attended High Holiday services at Temple Emanu-El, the Reform synagogue in Westfield. In high school, after deciding to fully embrace Judaism, she joined BBYO and the United Synagogue Youth chapter at Conservative Temple Beth Ahm Yisrael in Springfield.

When she first arrived on the New Brunswick campus as a freshman, Saintina said, she found the classes offered at Hillel to be geared to students with more background in Jewish studies than she had.

In an effort to satisfy her own thirst for a program suitable to students of varying observance levels, Saintina, with Appell's help, put her own spin on the "Jewish Sensibilities" curriculum.

Saintina explained that the curriculum and the course they developed for Rutgers are about "10 values that we should use to guide us through life as we go through tough situations."

Although the Hillel International guides did not include engaging guest lecturers, Saintina invited speakers from a range of denominations and backgrounds. For example, Rabbi Esther Reed, Rutgers Hillel's associate senior director and a Conservative rabbi, led a discussion on the relevance of Shabbat. Rabbi Tzvi Wohlgelerntner and his wife, Tali, who run the Orthodox Union-Jewish Learning Initiative at Rutgers Hillel, presented Jewish perspectives on relationships and marriage. Keith Krivitzky, CEO of the Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey, covered the topic of Jewish responsibility to others, both within the Jewish community and "in partnership with other people in the world."

Appell downplayed his role in organizing the course; when he came on staff in the summer, he said, Saintina had already laid the groundwork.

"She really took the lead, and she was fantastic," he said.

Saintina, a physics major minoring in financial economics, said she was confident that her plan would attract and engage students.

"I was so super-passionate," she said, and had definite ideas about the course. "I knew I wanted to offer food each week, and I knew I wanted to offer each student a stipend, so I began looking around for grants."

Saintina was awarded \$1,000 from the Jewish Federation in the Heart of NJ, whose catchment area includes the Rutgers New Brunswick campus, and \$750 from the Men of Reform Judaism, which awards grants to campus learning initiatives.

Through flyers and social media, she promoted the class with an eye toward attracting diverse students, encouraging those who might have thought they were not "Jewish enough or involved enough" to be eligible to take the course, said Saintina.

The 19 students who enrolled were a mixed group, said Saintina. "Some people were very involved with Jewish life growing up through their synagogues and youth groups. For others this was their first Jewish experience. Four were observant. We tried to accommodate everyone's Jewish experiences."

Saintina said she tried to make the course lively and not "too heavy" and used a variety of modes to convey information, including YouTube videos, columns from major newspapers, and passages from books written by Jews.

Another course Saintina and Appell developed, based on guiding principles of Jewish life, but described by Appell as more experiential and involving more discussion, began the week of Feb. 5 with 13 students. Funded by Hillel International, its curriculum revolves around such topics as humans being created b'tzelem Elohim (in the image of God), the nature of simcha (happiness), and — around Passover — liberation.

Melanie Hand, a senior nutritional sciences major from Tinton Falls, took the course in the fall and found it "very applicable to real life."

"I have a very strong interest in Jewish learning, and this class had never been offered before, so I was intrigued," she said.

A class on temptation that used as a springboard the story of Adam and Eve underscored the idea that "at the end of the day people do things that are wrong, but the Jewish way is to own up to our mistakes," said Hand. "That idea of taking responsibility really hit home because everyone makes mistakes."

Hand, whose family belongs to the Monmouth Reform Temple in Tinton Falls, attended the Conservative Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Monmouth County in Marlboro for six years and so had a solid educational foundation. The Jewish Sensibilities course, she said, "offered just such a cool perspective, not just on Jewish learning, but on how to use Jewish learning in everyday life."

Max DuBoff, a junior philosophy and classics major from Cherry Hill who grew up Conservative, said he found the class refreshing. "It was all about relating Judaism to the world around us," he said.

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Junior Fedline Saintina helped develop courses at Rutgers Hillel that have attracted students of varying observance levels interested in exploring Judaism from a new perspective.

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"It really got you thinking about Judaism in a new light."

Even such mainstream subjects as Shabbat were approached in an unconventional way, he said, adding, "It wasn't so much about the law, but rather the spirit of Shabbat and the importance of disconnecting."

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