



Gratz Insider, Fall 2015 - Story Continuation

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### **Bringing Holocaust and Genocide Studies to an Indian Reservation in Montana**

As a young girl growing up in Cleveland, Ohio, Heather Licht had always loved the outdoors, especially, horses. By the time she was in college, her passion had become a job criterion. As a result, she spent summers working at Yellowstone National Park and later, at Lolo National Forest in Montana, monitoring trails and campgrounds and even fighting forest fires. After college, she returned to Cleveland, packed up a truck and moved permanently to Montana. To this day, she explains, “I was just drawn here.”

In Montana, her string of jobs included working in a therapeutic wilderness school with children with emotional problems, and later, in Kootenai National Forest as a wilderness ranger. After her travels brought her to a horse farm in Polson, Montana, Licht began tutoring students at Salish Kootenai College (SKC) on the Flathead Indian Reservation.

Tutoring led to teaching in SKC’s Upward Bound, a college readiness program for low-income high school students and those striving to become first-generation college students. In the fall of 1989, Licht became the director of Upward Bound at SKC and has held this position ever since.

“Most of the students I work with are Native Americans who struggle to succeed in a culture that is not their own,” she says. “I have met students deeply committed to their families and community, people who struggled to succeed in the face of great obstacles, and I understood why their commitment was so important.”

Like her students, Licht is also committed to her own culture and identity - as a Jew. Despite the negligible Jewish population on the reservation, she has worked hard to carve out a Jewish life for herself and her son, Michael. For years, she has regularly made the hour-and-a-half drive to Missoula, Montana, to connect with the Har Shalom Jewish community there. At first, without a building of their own, the group would gather at a preschool or at various churches, depending on where they could secure space. Eventually, the congregation acquired their own building, and even hired their own rabbi - a congregant in rabbinical school.

While Licht led her son on this path to Jewish identity, it was Michael who led his mother to Gratz. Michael became enamored with Hebrew after studying for his bar mitzvah and wanted to fulfill his high school language requirement by continuing his Hebrew studies. With Hebrew classes unavailable locally, Licht searched the web for an online program, and in the process, she discovered Gratz.

She also discovered the Gratz online master’s program in Holocaust and Genocide Studies. Licht had been weaving the Holocaust into her curricula for years because of its parallels with the Native American genocides. And for her, those parallels at times felt very personal. She explains growing up fearing that the Holocaust could happen again. And she admits, “I am afraid for my son, raised as a

Jew in a part of the country where the closest temple is seventy miles away. I hope that he will be able to live his life free of hate and persecution. I am afraid for the students I teach, victims of the Native American genocide who live with oppression every day.”

As she perused the Gratz website, she marveled at some of the course offerings in the master’s program: “Teaching the Holocaust,” “Transcending Trauma” and even “Native American Genocides.” Classes like these would enable her to become a more effective teacher and to enhance her own curricula. The master’s program would also increase her marketability as an educator, potentially opening up other teaching opportunities for her at SKC or elsewhere.

Now, Licht is in her third semester of the MA in Holocaust and Genocide Studies program. She is also a recipient of the Samuel P. Mandell Fellowship Award, which has significantly reduced her tuition. When asked about the relevance of the program to her work she says, “It integrates so well with the population I teach. It’s just aligned perfectly.”

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*For more information on our Holocaust and Genocide Studies programs, visit the [Gratz College website](#) or contact Mindy Blechman at 215-635-7300 x154 or at [mblechman@gratz.edu](mailto:mblechman@gratz.edu).*