



Gratz Insider, February 2016 - Story Continuation

[To return to the newsletter, close this page.]

### **Meet Our Board of Governors: Kathy Elias**

Within the Jewish community, Elias has years of experience in strategic planning, board development, leadership training, project management, and of course, team-building. She has worked in Jewish community centers, at the Jewish Outreach Partnership (now called Jewish Learning Venture) and at The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USCJ).

At USCJ, she took on the particularly challenging task of creating a new department responsible for transforming and strengthening the member synagogues, as well as the overall USCJ community. In this position, she had what she described as a “continent-wide perch” for observing how Conservative Judaism is lived and practiced throughout North America.

Over the years, Elias’ life has also been intertwined with Gratz College. She sent two sons to the Gratz Jewish Community High School - and attended Gratz herself. She started with adult education courses while working at the Jewish Outreach Partnership, which was located on the Gratz College campus. Eventually, she pursued a Master of Arts in Jewish Studies at Gratz, not only to enhance her knowledge, but also, because she was contemplating a career in chaplaincy.

Although she opted for the USCJ position, rather than the chaplaincy route, Elias credits her graduate studies at Gratz with giving her a foundation in the history of Judaism. Now, ten years later, she still says, “My understanding of the arc of the narrative of Judaism itself began in a Gratz College music class taught by Dr. Marsha Bryan Edelman.”

From that point on in the master’s program, Elias developed a core understanding of Jewish history, including the evolution of Jewish movements in North America. This aspect of the program was particularly important to her because it helped her to see Judaism beyond her own experience. After converting to Judaism at age 26, she has spent almost all of her adult life as a member of the Conservative movement.

In her position at the USCJ, Elias again worked exclusively with Conservative synagogues. However, there were great disparities in practice, particularly between Canadian and American congregations. The Canadian congregations tended to be more traditional and more closely connected to Orthodoxy than their American counterparts. As a result, the understanding of denominational evolution that she gained from Gratz was instrumental in informing her interaction with the Canadian synagogues.

Elias retired from her position at USCJ this past November. Soon afterward, David Weinstein, chairman of the Gratz College Board of Governors, invited her to breakfast to talk about Gratz, and ultimately, to offer her a position on the board. Given her long history with the college, she said to Weinstein, “I’ve been waiting for your call.”

Elias is delighted to become part of an institution that has had an enduring impact on her life, and one that continues to be relevant to the future of Jewish education in general. She explains, “With the Jewish model moving away from a movement-based focus, there is an important place for a non-denominational Jewish institution like Gratz that enriches lives, just like it enriched mine.”