



Gratz Insider, Summer 2015 - Story Continuation

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Congratulations to Our Graduates!

“The children of Israel spent 40 years in the desert; I have spent 40 years in what has been for me a ‘promised land,’” said Professor Wachs at the beginning of his College commencement address. This “promised land” is, of course, Gratz College, with students hailing from 37 states and six countries.

Two of these students, Ann Lieberman Colgan and Michael Schatz, were graduating from the Gratz doctoral program in Jewish Education, which is directed by Dr. Wachs. Deeply moved by his students’ profound academic achievement, he said, “I cannot help but share my joy and pride in being present to see two outstanding students formally receive the hood of the doctorate in education.”

Other graduates at the College commencement earned master’s degrees in Jewish Studies, Jewish Education, Jewish Communal Service and Holocaust and Genocide Studies. There were also several Bachelor of Arts candidates and graduate certificate recipients. In addition, there was a significant contingent of students graduating with the Master of Arts in Education.

Among the College graduates was Jennifer Boyer-Switala, the Jewish studies valedictorian, who graduated with high honors from the Master of Arts in Holocaust and Genocide Studies program. During her stirring speech, she described how her “Gratz family” had helped her discover her voice when others questioned why she, a non-Jew, had chosen to study the “morbid, depressing” subject matter of the Holocaust. In her newfound proud and powerful voice, she explained:

Together, we are no longer that group that the outside world perceives as weirdoes who get some sadistic pleasure from learning about the misery of others. Far from it. We are a group of people who seek to gain some understanding of the incomprehensible, who fervently believe in equality, fairness, and social justice. . . . We understand that it is easier to remain afraid, ignorant, and uninvolved, and so we are the brave who dare to confront what others fear.

In addition to recognizing students, Gratz also conferred two honorary degrees at the College commencement. Professor Shamma Friedman, a Gratz alumnus of the class of 1958 and a distinguished scholar who won the prestigious Israel Prize in Talmud, traveled all the way from Israel to receive the title Doctor of Hebrew Letters from Gratz College. In addition, educator James Burns was named Doctor of Humane Letters in recognition of his nearly 40 years in education, including his extensive work on anti-bullying.

In his commencement address to the College students, Professor Wachs concluded by saying, “Let me assure you that you now have a ‘lifetime warranty’ to reach out to us at Gratz College whenever you wish to share your thoughts, celebrate your successes, bind up your wounds and, above all, continue the life-long joy of learning.”

Three weeks later, when delivering the invocation at the JCHS commencement on June 7, Professor Wachs offered this same “lifetime warranty” to the high school graduates. In his invocation, he also drew an interesting parallel between the high school seniors going off to college and the Jewish Community High School, which is undergoing some significant changes itself:

There are liminal moments when each of us walks through a door and cannot reverse the process. For the graduating seniors, this year brings such moments. . . . The Jewish Community High School is also entering a new stage and thus experiencing a liminal moment. There is new leadership and some new curriculum. There is a new vision that points to a bright future.

And then, it was all about the graduates - almost 60 of them, who, for myriad reasons, carved out time for JCHS in their already over-committed high school schedules. Some earned teaching certificates, and some earned college credit. A number of students were also recognized during the commencement ceremony with awards for particular achievements. There were awards for academic excellence, leadership, community service, Hebrew language skills, commitment to Israel, Holocaust studies and others.

One of the honors bestowed at the JCHS graduation was the Michael Tobiah Plam Endowed Memorial Award for *G’milut Hasadim* (Acts of Kindness). This award was endowed by Sheldon and Joan Plam in memory of their son Michael. This year, the award was conferred upon JCHS graduate Sophie Devorah Ritt, who embodies the value of *g’milut hasadim*, as Michael did. In addition to witnessing Sophie Ritt receive this award at commencement, the Plams watched their own granddaughter, Jessica Whelan, also graduate from Gratz as a member of the JCHS class of 2015.

Finally, several students - Josh Pilchik, Emily Adar, Noah Bender, Nickala Hagarty and Allison Kodroff - delivered prepared remarks at the JCHS commencement. The speakers differed in style and thematic focus. However, they all expressed a sense of appreciation for what they were taking away from their Gratz experience. As Nickala Hagarty explained in her speech, “I think I speak for us all in saying that we can now step into the real world and go to college with a more intensive Jewish knowledge, and as informed well-rounded Jewish young adults.”

The speeches were followed by a moving rendition of *Hatikvah*, performed by graduating seniors who were members of HaZamir: The International Jewish High School Choir. Then, with the recessional of the JCHS class of 2015, commencement season at Gratz College came to a close for another year.