

news from the center

CAROLINA CENTER *for* JEWISH STUDIES

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL • SPRING 2011 • CCJS.UNC.EDU

carolina students to benefit from *Howard R. Levine Student Excellence Fund*

JAMES HEILPERN, an Archaeology and Religious Studies double major, is this year's recipient of the Elsie Kaplan "Mother" Shapiro ZBT Undergraduate Research and Travel Grant in Jewish Studies. He will use the \$1,000 award to help fund his senior thesis project on the dating of ancient synagogues.

With the support of this grant, Heilpern plans to travel to Israel this summer to participate in the archaeological excavation of the synagogue at Huqoq, under the direction of Professor Jodi Magness.

Huqoq (modern Arabic name: Yaqoq) is a small ancient village located 1.5 miles to the northwest of the Sea of Galilee in Israel. While in Israel, Heilpern will also study other sites of historical significance that are relevant to his research. For more information on Professor Magness's new project, visit: www.unc.edu/ccjs/study_abroad.html.

Elsie Kaplan Shapiro was house-mother at Zeta Beta Tau for 22 years. This undergraduate research fund was established by her family and a group of fraternity brothers who wanted to ensure that her generous spirit and dedication benefited future generations of Carolina students.

Howard R. Levine, '81, business major, Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer of Family Dollar Stores, Inc., has created an endowment to support Carolina's undergraduate and graduate students pursuing academic studies and scholarly research in the field of Jewish Studies.

"Through this gift, I hope students will have a more enriching college experience and perhaps have the means to take advantage of learning opportunities that otherwise might not be within their financial reach," said Levine.

The Howard R. Levine Student Excellence Fund in Jewish Studies was created through a \$500,000 pledge. When fully funded, the endowment will provide the Carolina Center for Jewish Studies with a permanent source of funding to further the teaching mission of the Center. The endowment will support student research inside and outside of the classroom, including student travel and study abroad during the academic year and the summer months; it will support academic field trips to extend the classroom experience into the community; it will enable the Center to bring in visitors to campus to meet with students and deliver unique programs; and finally, it will ensure that the Center is in a position to expand its course offerings to meet rising student demand.

"We are so thankful to Howard and his family for this generous and inspiring gift to the Center and to Carolina's students," said Jonathan Hess, director. "The level of study

and the quality of the research conducted by UNC students is truly impressive. Now, thanks to the Levine family, our students can participate in more projects and programs than ever before."



"I've been following the Carolina Center for Jewish Studies for a few years now and I've heard nothing but positive things about the program and its growth. Furthermore, I like that the Carolina Center for Jewish Studies program attracts students with different backgrounds and a range of interests," added Levine. "As a Carolina alumnus with interest in supporting Jewish organizations and causes, I thought this was the perfect opportunity for me to support my alma mater in a way that was personal to me. I was born and raised in Charlotte, I'm a Tar Heel fan, and I'm delighted that I can give back to Carolina's students."

For more information on supporting the Carolina Center for Jewish Studies and students who study Jewish Studies, please contact Margaret Costley at the Arts and Sciences Foundation: 919-843-0345 or margaret.costley@unc.edu.



Dr. Jonathan M. Hess

Director, Carolina Center for Jewish Studies

Moses M. and Hannah L. Malkin
Distinguished Term Professor of Jewish
History and Culture

Professor, Department of Germanic
Languages and Literatures

jmhess@email.unc.edu
(919) 962-4866

from the director's desk

supporting the next generation of scholars

In past issues of our newsletter, we've profiled new faculty, original research, and innovative teaching. The focus of this issue is on the remarkable students we have at Carolina and on wonderful new ways we're finding to support students from all backgrounds who find themselves interested in Jewish Studies here on campus. Thanks to the generous gift from Howard Levine, we'll soon be in a position to give Carolina undergraduates opportunities in the field of Jewish Studies inside and outside the classroom that rival that of peer programs in the nation. And we'll also be finding ways to support graduate students in departments in the College of Arts and Sciences who make Jewish Studies central to their program of study.

In this way, we'll not just be ensuring that our own students take advantage of incredible opportunities. We'll also be making Carolina one of the premier universities in the nation training the next generation of professors and leaders in the field of Jewish Studies. As you read the article about my

colleague Ruth von Bernuth in this issue, I guarantee that you'll be impressed by this up-and-coming star whom we recruited to teach at Carolina. But try to imagine a world in which Carolina does not only hire professors of this caliber but produces them—a world in which colleges and universities across the nation hire recently minted Carolina Ph.D.'s to teach Jewish Studies at their institutions.

In recent months, we've made great progress in our plans to create a major in Jewish Studies, and if all goes as planned, we shall soon be the only institution in the state of North Carolina to offer a degree program in this field. The momentum we've developed over the last eight years is in large part a product of the incredible support we've received from alumni and friends. Please know how much we appreciate your investment in the future of Jewish Studies at Carolina. With your help, the Center's next eight years will be just as spectacular as our first eight!

news briefs

The newly endowed **Samuel J. Wisnia Endowment Fund for Jewish Studies** will provide a crucial and permanent source of funding for the Center's director to use for high-priority initiatives, including instructional support, student support, and course development funding. Samuel Wisnia, a partner with Goldman Sachs in London, contributed the \$100,000 gift through Goldman Sachs Gives (UK), a donor advised fund established by Goldman Sachs.

FACEBOOK: The Center is on Facebook. To become a fan, visit our Web site and click on the Facebook icon, or simply search "Carolina Jewish Studies" on Facebook. If you are already a fan, please suggest our Facebook page to family and friends.



recent events



Despite the thunder and lightning on February 28, the Friday Center auditorium was filled to capacity for an enlightening lecture delivered by **ETHAN BRONNER**, Jerusalem bureau chief for *The New York Times*.



On March 21, Hyde Hall was at standing room only for the lecture given by **DAN DINER** from the University of Leipzig, Germany.

Van Ryn finishes her doctoral studies this May, after a long journey toward her academic career. “I first learned about sociology when I took a class in college to fulfill a curricular requirement as an undergraduate. Immediately, I knew that this is how I wanted to approach religion, not from a sense of what is true and what isn’t, but what people do with religion. So I declared a second major (the first was religion),” said Van Ryn. “After my master’s in religion, from Vanderbilt, I decided to switch gears a bit because I thought that a sociology background would give me the theoretical and methodological tools to do the kind of research I wanted to do. It has done that and more—I am thrilled with the way that sociology has opened up subfields to me that I wouldn’t have had access to previously.”

This fall, Van Ryn will join the Sociology Department at Yeshiva University in New York City as assistant professor. But this project has also made her realize that she wants to keep doing more hands-on work, so she’s also looking into consulting for groups who want to do interfaith programming. One of the benefits of an academic job is the ability to balance teaching, which is her primary passion, with research and these kinds of community projects.

Private support for graduate student fellowships help nurture young scholars, create relevant scholarly works, train the next generation of leading teachers and researchers, and further Carolina’s commitment to student-focused research. For more information, contact Margaret Costley at the Arts and Sciences Foundation at (919) 843-0345 or at margaret.costley@unc.edu.

faculty profile

Ruth von Bernuth



Junior faculty members play a critical role at Carolina, and for the Center, by helping to expand course offerings, extend the curriculum, and further new and important research. During the past few years, several new assistant professors have joined Carolina, including Professors Marienberg, Lambert, and Shemer, who are all helping the Center meet increasing student demand for Jewish Studies courses.

Another assistant professor to join Carolina in recent years is Ruth von Bernuth, who is based in the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures. Her focus on Germany’s early modern period (15th to 18th Century) has filled a special academic niche in the German Department, and her new research focus on Yiddish literature is likewise filling an important curricular need for Jewish Studies.

“When I was seeking a faculty position, I knew Carolina was a perfect fit for me because of its strength in several areas, specifically its Early Modern program, German department and the Center for Jewish Studies,” said von Bernuth. In fact, Carolina was the only institution to receive an application from von Bernuth. “There really is no other institution that could provide the same level of opportunity for me and my particular research interests.”

Since joining Carolina in 2008, von Bernuth has taught a range of courses, furthered her own research initiatives, and helped guide undergraduate research. Last year, one of her students was honored with one of the Center’s first undergraduate research awards. The student, Trey Meeks, used the funding to travel to Germany to complete the duo’s translation of a Yiddish prayer book.

“What truly sets von Bernuth apart from her peers is the energy and enthusiasm she expends turning her research interests into innovative new courses for our students. Indeed, I know of no other colleague who’s done more to promote undergraduate research

on campus. We’re thus very excited that she’s proposed a new undergraduate course on early modern Jewish literature. And when we get our major in Jewish Studies on the books—in the very near future—she’ll be a natural choice to teach the capstone seminar for Jewish Studies majors as well,” said Jonathan Hess, director of the Center.

Chapel Hill is a long way from the East German town where von Bernuth grew up. Her experiences growing up in East Germany and then witnessing the fall of the wall and the remarkable transformation in her home country give von Bernuth a unique perspective for Carolina undergraduates. She has also introduced some students to her parents, who have come to Carolina to share their personal experiences of life in Leipzig.

Her current research project is focused on Yiddish literature written in central and eastern Europe between 1450 and 1700 and explores representative works of the major genres of writing in Yiddish—biblical texts, heroic epics, early novels and songs. Von Bernuth is currently writing a book based on her research, tentatively titled, “Shared Worlds, Shared Texts: Early Modern Contacts Between Old Yiddish and German Literature.”

She will spend much of next academic year in Israel, thanks to a visiting fellowship from Yad Hanadiv. While in Israel, she will work with Chara Turniansky, a highly-renowned expert on old Yiddish literature. She also has received a fellowship award from YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York City, giving her access to many of the works she is planning to study for her book.

“I feel so privileged to have so much time to focus on one project,” added von Bernuth. “There are so few people working on old Yiddish, but this project is introducing me to wonderful colleagues around the world and exposing me to remarkable writers and publishers from centuries ago.”

spring 2011

graduate student profile:

Ria van Ryn

What seemed an otherwise unremarkable November day turned into a deeply meaningful, perhaps life-changing day for a group of middle school students, thanks to the efforts of one of Carolina's graduate students. The teens, from B'Nai Shalom Jewish Day School in Greensboro and Al-Imam School in Raleigh, were meeting each other for the first time, after months of learning about each other's cultures and beliefs from Maria (Ria) Van Ryn, Ph.D. candidate in UNC's Sociology Department.



Van Ryn, front row, center, with students and school personnel at the November workshop.

As the focus of her dissertation, Van Ryn met with the eighth graders at each school over the course of the fall semester, about once a week for 12 weeks. The first few classes were a basic overview of each tradition—teaching the Jewish kids about Islam and the Muslim kids about Judaism. Then they had several class periods on the shared values Van Ryn was focusing on: love/family, education, peace, and service. In all of these classes, Van Ryn would use a variety of teaching techniques—reading from texts

(including the Torah and Qur'an), watching movie clips, doing interactive PowerPoint activities, skits, crafts, etc. Eventually, the students wrote letters to each other, sharing personal insights into their lives and cultures.

"I started studying Jewish and Islamic schools because my primary research interest is in minority identity, and I wanted to see how and why Jewish and Muslim families were using religious schools to perhaps counteract the heavy influence of Christianity in the American South," said Van Ryn. "Along the road, I realized I couldn't leave my dissertation kids without them meeting one another and knowing what I knew—that they had so many shared values and experiences. I felt that the earlier they were able to build relationships with one another, the easier interfaith understanding would be later in their lives."

So she began efforts to arrange for the workshop and finally have the students meet each other. "The day of the workshop was one of the most fulfilling of my life, much less career," said Van Ryn. "The kids were all so excited, and it was just amazing to see how quickly they connected. What's also been neat is to see the kids maintaining their connections—I've been to the schools for various reasons since then, and they're always eager to tell me that they've been chatting on Google and writing on one another's Facebook walls. I've had nothing but positive reactions from the school communities as well as others around the country who have learned about the program and want to know more."

continued inside. See "van ryn"