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LOCAL | ST. LOUIS HILLEL

Hillel hires new campus rabbi

ST. LOUIS HILLEL

BY DAVID BAUGHER, SPECIAL TO THE JEWISH LIGHT



St. Louis Hillel at Washington University's newly named campus rabbi says that feeding the community's hunger for Judaic knowledge will be his top priority.

Rabbi Andy Kastner, 30, is expected to join the organization in July after he finishes his rabbinic training at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinic School. He is a 2002 graduate of Indiana University, who now heads the Jewish Youth Encounter Program for the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, an Orthodox shul in New York. He is also the founder of Smadar, an agricultural cooperative, and has previously served as director of PanimWorks, an experiential program for Jewish teens who perform community service and interact with Native Americans in southern Colorado.

Among other postings, Kastner has worked as assistant program director for Beth Israel Conservative Synagogue and been named a scholar-in-residence at the Yale and Princeton University Hillels. Last year, he was honored with the Riverdale Jewish Community Council Leadership Award.

Jacqueline Ulin Levey, Hillel's executive director, said that Kastner was selected from a field of approximately 50 prospects worldwide. She described the organization as "ecstatic" about the rabbi's arrival.

"He is incredibly talented and bright, relatable to students, and his warm personality and depth of experience is certain to facilitate and enhance a pluralistic Jewish environment on campus and pluralistic approach to Jewish expression," she said in a statement announcing the new hire.

Interviewed later, Levey said that the qualities Hillel was seeking for the job were decided by a series of town hall-style meetings with students, administrators and the board of directors. She said that Kastner made visits to St. Louis in February and again in March, with the latter trip highlighted by a meeting with JCC staff and a Shabbat service at Congregation Bais Abraham.

"It was really a communitywide effort to help attract and recruit him here," she said.

Kastner's job is named in honor of the Silk Foundation which, along with the Staenberg Family Foundation, help support it. Kastner will be the first full-time rabbi with Hillel in two years. Last year, the organization relied on two part-time rabbis to fill the position's duties.

"It was a challenging time to be a Hillel without a rabbi," Levey said. "This is going to be a tremendous step for our Hillel and the future of our organization and programming going forward."

It's a pretty big step forward for Kastner as well, as it will be the first full-time rabbinic position of his career. Still, it's tinged with a hint of familiarity.

"It will be a big change but I think at the end of the day, it will feel like returning home," said Kastner, a native of Cleveland. "Both my wife and I are from the Midwest."

Kastner praised Washington University as an institution with a long-standing reputation for high-caliber learning and engagement and said he was excited about joining the campus community. He's equally enthusiastic about becoming a part of the St. Louis community.

"What I noticed amongst the student body and the community members I engaged with is that students and the broader community are ready to learn," he said. "They are sold on the value of Jewish education and education in general. They are anxious and hungry for substantive Torah and universal relevance."

The most formidable task, he said, is finding the best way to deliver Torah into the busy lives of students.

"One of the biggest challenges I foresee is that there are a lot of demands on students' time and energy and it's a challenge to set aside time for conscious spiritual growth and religious engagement," he said. "My hope is to model a life of personal significance that is distinctly Jewish."

Largely, that means encouraging inquisitive minds to find their own Jewish path as they emerge into adulthood, he said.

"In my experience working with the college age group, what's been most successful is helping students find the right questions to grapple with instead of providing the answers," he said. "Answers are certainly a positive and they give us a sense of conclusion but I think there is so much potential for growth and insight when we grapple with questions."

Kastner said he hopes his experiences with the Jewish Youth Encounter initiative will help him understand the best methods to keep Judaism fresh and relevant to his young adult demographic. He said he will also draw on his time at PanimWorks for inspiration.

"That's relevant to a university because of the cross-cultural exchange as way to get to know those outside of our community and a way for us to deepen our sense of self," he said.

In any event, he knows teaching Torah will be a difficult but important job.

"It's a tall order but I'm thrilled to engage in the challenge," he said.

Kastner has a wife, Leslie, 31, and a 10-month-old son, Asher.