

WAYNE'S WORLD

HILLEL'S PRESIDENT FIRESTONE ON JEWS, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND MEANINGFUL JEWISH EXPERIENCES

MELANIE KANTOR



Earlier this fall, Wayne L. Firestone took office as the president of Hillel. A lawyer, businessman, and activist by training, he prefers to be called Wayne by students and staff alike, and his jovial manner makes him far more approachable than one might expect of a leader of his caliber.

Before taking the reins at Hillel, Firestone served as executive vice president of U.S. Hillel, and before that, as the founding executive director of the Israel on Campus Coalition. He began his association with Hillel as an undergraduate at the University of Miami where he was involved with advocating for one of the burning Jewish issues of the day: Soviet Jewry. His student activism was recognized with an appointment to Hillel's national student secretariat.

Firestone's appointment as president comes at a time of massive change. For the first time in Hillel's history, a five-year strategic plan was developed to make Hillel more welcoming to Jewish students on campus. The plan strives to double the number of students having so-called "meaningful Jewish experiences" within the next five years.

Like any president, Firestone seeks to provide vision and direction for the organization, and he serves as its chief spokesperson. And so, behind the frosted-glass office of the largest Jewish campus organization in the world, I began my interview with Wayne Firestone.

Melanie Kantor: How did you get involved with the Jewish professional world?

Wayne Firestone: As part of my senior thesis at the University of Miami, I interviewed a former staff member of the House of Representatives who had helped draft legislation on behalf of Soviet Jewry, the Jackson-Vanick Amendment. The interview ended with an internship with the organization he headed and then a fellowship working to enhance Jewish life in Eastern Europe and other locations. When, years later, I looked back on my various jobs, I realized that it was that experience that was the most happy and fulfilling time in my career.

MK: Was that your first experience in politics?

WF: My political activism really started my junior year when I studied at Tel Aviv University. While there I learned about a person in the Soviet Union who was imprisoned for teaching Hebrew and I wrote and produced a play called *Trial and Error* about his life. For me this was an experience of *tikkun olam*, or repairing the world, on a small scale. It really taught me that human rights issues and social justice could be taken down to the level of a single person.

MK: Do you think all Jewish students need to

be involved in social justice work?

WF: I think Jews in America, and Jewish college students in particular, who go to great schools and have the benefit of very expensive and valuable learning experiences in college, have a social debt to repay. If students can learn that in college, and learn to make those personal connections, they'll be advocates for social justice and human rights for the rest of their lives. We at Hillel see learning outside of the classroom, the type of learning that develops values and character, as an invaluable complement to what students learn inside the classroom. But we have to be careful not to just spoon-feed social justice opportunities to students.

MK: Is this sort of social responsibility why Hillel changed its goal from "maximizing the number of Jews doing Jewish with other Jews" to fostering "meaningful Jewish experiences" and "enriching the lives of Jewish students so they may enrich the Jewish community and the world?"

WF: What's important isn't the act of "doing" something Jewish, but having an experience that a person will look back on and see that it made a difference in the way they understand or express their own Jewish identity. In the same vein, it's not enough for Hillel to merely serve the Jewish students while they're on campus, but we must also think of our work as an investment in the Jewish future and the future of the world. Unlike a lot of the notes students take during lectures that they're going to forget the day they put their degrees on the wall, the "enduring commitment to Jewish life" mentioned in the strategic plan is about a Jewish memory which doesn't just end. Like the Torah, it has a cycle of learning. Our thousands-of-years-long tradition of returning each year to learn about the world we live in and to ask deep questions is one of the greatest gifts the Jewish community can give to the world.

MK: How is Hillel doing in its efforts to serve the entirety of that Jewish community?

WF: Well, I think there is a conventional path to Hillel, driven partially by parental nudges, and partially by a general recognition of currently affiliated Jewish students. I think the far larger group of Jewish students that we're trying to engage is students who will never come to Hillel. We know that these students aren't necessarily looking for a place to hang out or even for a social experience. Many students are quite happy to be Jewish in an independent way, and we have to be able to meet these students where they are.

MK: How do you reach the student who does not identify with a denomination, or a student from an interfaith family?

WF: First of all, these students have to feel like full citizens. They need to feel completely welcome. Second of all, we have to make a very deliberate choice not to just offer something

superficial or dumbed-down. It is a mistake to think that unaffiliated Jews want something less substantial. Unaffiliated Jewish students who are not involved in Hillel are not afraid of or intimidated by content, it's just that the type of content we have been offering feels neither attractive, interesting, nor relevant to them. There is interest in this generation from affiliated Jewish students, unaffiliated Jewish students and non-Jewish students alike in what it means to be a Jew.

MK: Being a Jew on campus often means having a strong opinion on Israel. As an organization that wants to be available to all Jews, how does Hillel deal with this divisive issue?

WF: It is very unfortunate when the absolute extremes define any debate. We want to promote responsible, deep, and critical discussion of important issues, whether the issue is Israel, abortion or anything else that society needs to discuss. Often when the extreme voices on campus, both on the left and the right, are promoting an agenda, it undermines constructive, informed discussion. It turns people off, which is the exact opposite of what we want to happen on campus. We don't want less debate and discussion about Israel, or opinions from fewer perspectives. We want more.

MK: How has your experience as director of the Israel on Campus Coalition affected your thoughts on this issue?

WF: We are a big, loud, accented, opinionated, *schvitzzy*, community. We have lots of opinions, lots of organizations, and lots of views of the world. Now and then, we have to find a way to make Shabbos together; to set aside our differences and celebrate. That's what I learned working with 35 different organizations on the issue of Israel. There's a lot we disagree on, but there's far more consensus. My work at ICC also allowed me to spend time on over 60 campuses around the country. I really started to learn, from the bottom up, what "works" for students, and what the nuances of campus culture are that had previously not been fully appreciated by the community.

MK: It must take a concerted effort to bridge the disconnect between Jewish professionals and Jewish college students. Why have a national organization headed by professionals rather than smaller student-run campus initiatives?

WF: We are, at the same time, local, global and scalable. We have an institutional presence that has access to resources that may not exist on a particular campus or from year to year in a student group. We can connect a student at Georgetown with a student at Stanford, and we can do it in real time. Our goal is not to compete with student organizations, but rather to embrace and be a champion of student innovators, student leaders, and student voices.