

the Jewish Voice

ותשמע הארץ אמרי־י
Deuteronomy 32:1
MAY THE EARTH HEAR THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH

Saturday, June 26, 2009

New York

Askenazied!

After 25 years, the outspoken yet beloved Brooklyn College Hillel director is moving on.



A native of the Bronx who grew up Orthodox in Queens, Linda Ashkenazi, with a student in her office, calls herself "a Hillel Jew." PHOTOS BY MICHAEL DATIKASH

Steve Lipman
Staff Writer

Linda Ashkenazi, happily working at the Council of Jewish Organizations of Flatbush, didn't plan to apply for an opening as executive director of Brooklyn College's Hillel chapter.

But when an insider told her "They wanted a rabbi" and it had to be a man, Ashkenazi got annoyed and applied.

Once hired at Hillel, Ashkenazi didn't plan to stay there very long. Two years, she thought.

Twenty-five years later — thousands of students and countless we-met-at-Hillel-shidduch-stories later — she's leaving.

Askenazi, 54, one of the first female Hillel executive directors in the country, a fixture who has overseen the chapter's growth from a dormant building at the edge of campus into a renovated student center that houses a wide variety of educational and cultural activities, is becoming the executive director of Berkshire Hills Emanuel Camps in upstate Copake, a "totally non-Orthodox, glatt kosher," UJA-Federation-affiliated institution that offers separate summer programs for youngsters and adults.

Hillel's board of directors will honor her at its annual meeting on Monday; two days later, she will start to clean out her office.

"Hillel's my baby," she says, reflectively

but not nostalgically. "I raised four children in the Hillel." Students at the commuter school got used to seeing Ashkenazi's kids in the Hillel building. "I think Hillel's an amazing place for children to be running around."

Why did she stay a quarter-century?

"Because I need a huge amount of diversity" on the job, she says. "I didn't feel I was doing the same thing for 25 years."

Over that time, she's tried to inject a city-wide perspective into Hillel's activities, and watched a shift in student activism from the Soviet Jewry movement to responses to other manifestations of anti-Semitism abroad, with Israel always at the center.

"It ebbs and flows," she says. "The percentage of activists" — the leaders, not the followers — "is a small percentage."

And despite the perception of campuses as hotbeds of anti-Israel sentiment, as hostile places for Jews, Brooklyn College has remained peaceful, says Ashkenazi, a founder of the Committee Against Prejudice (CAP) that brought together students from various religious and ethnic backgrounds. "Most people get along pretty well. The overall tenor of the campus is quite peaceful."

Why is she leaving Hillel?

"I'm ready for a switch," she says. "I had done almost everything I wanted to accomplish."



"I'm ready for a switch," Ashkenazi says of her decision to leave Brooklyn College. "I had done almost everything I wanted to accomplish."

