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Searching for Tolerance: A Closer Look at IWU Hillel

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Searching for Tolerance:

A Closer Look at IWU Hillel

Katelyn Scott, Rebecca Gearhart*

IWU Hillel

IWU Hillel has been established for more than six years and provides students who identify themselves as culturally or religiously Jewish with a way to connect with others who share similar backgrounds and beliefs. IWU's chapter is one of hundreds of chapters in the national organization, Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, which is the largest Jewish campus organization in the world. While forty to fifty students at IWU identify themselves as Jewish, about ten students actively participate in Hillel. To expand the community, the IWU and ISU Hillel chapters meet together twice a month with a rabbi to discuss different *mitzvahs* of the *Torah* and socialize.



Members of IWU and ISU Hillel meet with the rabbi at their semi-monthly gathering.

Ethnographic Methods

I used participant observation, interviews, and collaborative visual ethnographic methods to conduct my research. Lizzy Rubel, the vice president and Donna Chudnovskaya, the president of Hillel, helped me identify the three most important issues to Hillel: their lack of a sacred space of their own on campus, the various ways Jewish identity can be experienced and expressed, and how non-Jewish students relate to their Jewish identity and towards Judaism in general. We then developed ideas for photographs that best represent these issues.



Implementing visual ethnographic methods. Lizzy (right) and I (left) choose the photos that best represent the issues of IWU Hillel.

Finding Their Place on Campus

IWU Hillel used to meet in the chapel, but many students did not feel comfortable there since it is not their place of worship. Now they meet in the Multicultural Center, but Hillel does not feel they can put symbols of their organization on its walls out of respect for the other groups who meet there. Both Lizzy and Donna feel that if Hillel had its own space, more Jewish students would join and the group would have a better sense of community.



The Multicultural Center is on the edge of campus, contributing to how marginal IWU Hillel members feel on campus.

Educating Others

The attitude of other students at IWU toward Jewish students affects the members of IWU Hillel. Lizzy and Donna have heard students make stereotypical comments such as "How Jewish are you?" in reference to being cheap. Members of Hillel wish other students at IWU would be more sensitive about what they say. To help remedy this situation, Hillel tries to educate students about Judaism. One way they do this is their annual Chanukah dinner. At this dinner Hillel discusses the traditions and practices behind Chanukah.



At the Chanukah dinner members of IWU Hillel explain the meaning of the *chanukiah*, a special type of *menorah* and the *dreidel*, which rests at the base of this *menorah*.

Expression of Jewish Roots

Although every member of Hillel identifies themselves as Jewish, they each choose to experience and express this identity differently. Some members want others to know they are Jewish. Donna says, "I don't hide the fact that I'm Jewish, a ton of people know that I am Jewish, I usually talk about it all the time." Lizzy does not openly discuss being Jewish. She feels that telling people she is Jewish invites them to think of her differently before they get to know her. While Lizzy does not represent her Jewish roots openly, she expresses them in more subtle ways.



Donna (right) shows me how she expresses her Jewish faith by lighting candles for Sabbath. Lizzy (left) quietly displays her Jewish faith by wearing a necklace with the Hebrew word "chai", meaning, life. She chose this symbol because it is not instantly recognizable as Jewish except to those who know.



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