



Get to know University Councillor Erin Polansky, Artsci'95



Why did you select Queen's University?

When I was applying to universities for undergrad, I was pretty sure that I would attend McGill like everyone else in my family. But I was accepted to Queen's early acceptance, and my mother suggested that we come and tour the campus. As soon as I set foot on campus I fell in love. To me, this is what a university was supposed to look and feel like. I could envision myself sitting in the stacks in the library for hours and breathing in the knowledge of generations that came before me.

What was your most memorable moment as a student?

In my second year at Queen's, I was co-president of Queen's Hillel, the Jewish students' association. That year, the High Holy Days were to fall during Frosh Week, which meant that many Jewish students would miss the festivities and the administrative processes, like receiving their student cards and such. I was asked to address all of the dons and frosh leaders during their orientation. It was the largest crowd I had ever addressed to that point. Though I was nervous, it was a great experience and helped to inform and educate, and to ensure understanding for the Jewish students.

Can you tell us a little about your career?

I was ordained as a rabbi in 2000 and have served congregations in Minneapolis, Toronto, and Vaughan. I came to Kingston to assume the position of Rabbi of Beth Israel Congregation in 2018. Here I am the only full time professional serving the congregation. I run the Hebrew/Religious school, weekly services, holiday services, pastoral care, and community organizing and outreach. It is a big job, but one that is very fulfilling.

What's the best career advice you've ever received?

Set healthy boundaries and stick to them.

What's the career highlight you're most proud of?

I am most proud of how I, together with my leadership team, was able to keep our congregation relevant and connected to our members through Covid. Despite the limitations imposed upon us by Jewish tradition, we were able to connect our members to worship services, educational opportunities and social events. Unlike many other congregations who have lost members, Beth Israel has grown in membership over these past three years.

How do you spend your free time?

I have four children, the youngest of whom is 6 years old, so I don't have a lot of free time! Any time not spent working is spent with my children—usually shuttling them to and from their extra-curricular activities, preparing them for school or playing games that a 6 year old enjoys! When I have childcare, my husband and I enjoy travelling.

What motivated you to stand for election for University Council?

Our congregation is very connected to and affected by what happens at Queen's. We are supportive of Queen's students who want to worship with us, and employ some Queen's students as teachers in our Religious School. I felt that my involvement with the University Council would help to bridge the distance between these two worlds which are so interconnected.

What are your aspirations for being a University Councillor?

Jewish students on campuses across Canada have been the victims of antisemitism—whether overt or concealed. Sometimes assumptions are made about Jewish students that have no basis in reality. What happens on campus spills over to the Kingston community. We feel threatened when students feel unsafe. I hope to be able to advocate for equality and understanding for Jewish students and any other ethnic minority that is threatened or discriminated against.

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