

Chapter 20: The Sound(s) of Sustainable Stewardship: Composing Audio Essays with the JHFE

Jewish Kentucky Oral History Repository and Undergraduate Researchers

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featuring Madison Cissell, Hannah Thompson, Hannah Newberry, and Laura Will

1. Untitled by Team Hillel: Lizzie, Mary, Bilal, Cameron, Madison, and Laura

In this audio essay, Lizzie, Mary, Bilal, Cameron, Madison, and Laura explore the organization Hillel International.

Transcript

[Music: Cheerful, major-key rock music starts quietly, as a voice on the recording says, "Internal magnetic forces." Then the music gets louder, adding bass and drums before quieting down for the speakers.]

Lizzie: Hello. Welcome to your friendly student involvement newsroom. My name is Lizzie, and I am here today with my co-host, Mary.

Mary: Hello, everyone! I'm Mary. We are here to meet all of your informational needs. We cannot wait to inform University of Kentucky students regarding another organization on campus.

Lizzie: Yes, today we would like to talk more about Hillel.

Mary: Interesting! Could you define Hillel for some of our campus-wide listeners?

Lizzie: Hillel is an international Jewish student organization. According to Hillel International, the official Hillel website, Hillel is a "network of dedicated student leaders, professionals and volunteers who have encouraged generations of young adults to celebrate Jewish learning and living, pursue social justice and connect to their peers and the global Jewish people." It was created in 1923 in Illinois, and it has grown to more than 550 universities and campuses worldwide. Although Hillel's focus has shifted and changed over time, which will be discussed later by our historical information team, it has always served as a "home away from home" for Jewish students. Hillel's mission is "enriching the lives of Jewish students so that they may enrich the Jewish people and the world." According to their mission, Hillel seeks to serve as a safe community for Jewish students internationally. Additionally, Hillel organizations strive to educate both Jewish and non-Jewish students on Jewish religion and culture, while also helping to shape the leaders of tomorrow.

Mary: That's fascinating. We actually have two of our Hillel historical experts on site in the studio next door. Bilal and Cameron are here to describe how and why Hillel was founded and how it has changed throughout its existence. Bilal?

[loud phone rings three times]

Bilal: According to hillelinternational.org, Hillel was founded in 1923 by Rabbi Benjamin Frankel with the goal of providing a home for Jewish students and teaching them about their culture and heritage. Since then, Hillel has become the largest Jewish student organization in the United States.

[indistinct sounds, including a group cheering and along with small explosions, perhaps fireworks]

It grew out of Midwest college campuses throughout the 1920s. During World War II, the organization began to focus their efforts by providing scholarships for Eastern European refugees, supporting Jewish students who went and fought in Europe and the Pacific, and advocating for a Jewish homeland. By the 1950s, Hillel was on over 200 campuses in three different countries including the U.S., Canada, and Cuba! They continued to be an active student group on campuses and fought alongside other leaders during the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Cameron: Great information there, Bilal! Hillel history from post-1970s era to today is quite different from prior years. According to Hillel's International website, during the 1990s there was a split in Hillel Split from B'nai B'rith, with one emerging group renaming itself Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life. By the late 1990s, Hillel was present on over 400 university and college campuses and 120 foundations, demonstrating the massive growth that has occurred since its founding. Hillel has grown throughout the years to become an organization that provides opportunities for students to enrich their Jewish faith and educate both Jewish and non-Jewish students. Additionally, Hillel supports students' interest in and support for Israel. One large, well-known program in connection with Hillel was created in 1999, called Taglit-Birthright Israel. Birthright Israel is a program that sends their first group of students on a free 10-day trip to strengthen their Jewish identity, a common goal for Hillel. Many of the trips are staffed by Hillel campus professionals, though Hillel did not create Taglit-Birthright. More information regarding this program can be found on Hillel's website, called Hillel International. Currently, Hillel operates in 17 different countries and has over 850 campus professionals worldwide. Hillel has experienced amazing growth over the past years, with even more room to grow and enrich more students into the Jewish faith. We have Robin Michler here, a 2008 University of Kentucky graduate, to talk about some of the growth he has personally seen from Hillel at U.K. Robin discusses hosting dinners for students to come and talks about the growth they have seen with that.

Robin Michler: Well, it's definitely increased since the beginning. We, I mean we started with, by the end of the first semester that I was doing it, we maybe had like four regular students coming. With, so, like a table of like six? And then, we currently have—it's not like massive numbers of students are going to these—it's currently 12 to 15 students come on So they're more frequently now; now they're every other week instead of once a month. And about, so 12 to 15 students go.

Mary: Thanks, Bilal and Cameron. Lizzie and I were delighted to host you two, and I know our listeners were quite intrigued with what you had to say!

Lizzie: Since we are located here at the University of Kentucky, I would like to examine Hillel at UK a little more closely. What is the history of Hillel at UK? What services has it provided and does it provide for Jewish students here in Kentucky?

Mary: I happen to be just the person to talk about Hillel in Kentucky!

Lizzie: How perfect, Mary! Where should we begin?

Mary: Well, Lizzie, Hillel serves a number of college campuses in Kentucky. According to Hillel International, Hillels are present on the University of Kentucky campus and Northern Kentucky University's campus. The UK location also serves Eastern Kentucky University, Transylvania University, Centre College, and Bluegrass Community and Technical College. We have actually heard from the current president of Hillel at the University of Kentucky, Amy Groswald, as well as the Vice President, Lela Lyon. Both of these young women shared with us a little bit about their experiences as members and

as the now-executive office holders in Hillel. They also helped us learn more about the growth of UK Hillel. Let's hear some information from Amy, the current President of Hillel, about its current status on UK's campus.

Amy Groswald: And I think that's one thing that has grown a lot more is, the ratio of undergrads to graduates has gotten a lot bigger. Like, there's a lot more undergrads than there used to be involved in Hillel. So that's kind of exciting 'cause it just kinda shows that maybe in the future we'll grow even more.

Lizzie: Wow, that is so interesting to hear about the positive differences the Hillel leadership and President Amy Groswald have been able to make since they first became involved. Amy has been involved since her freshman year, 2014, and it seems like she's thriving with the role she has taken on! Current Vice President, Lela Lyon, also discusses the impact Hillel has had on her, the Jewish community at UK, and the university as a whole in her interview as well.

Lela Lyon: Well, so, Kentucky's not a big Jewish area to start [*laughs*], so like, I mean, honestly, as far as like my opinion, I just want the freshmen to feel welcome. And like you guys in general, you know, you come to college in a new place, and you just want to fit in somewhere, with something, so that's like honestly just like what I want Hillel to be for incoming people, to just have a place to go, and like, have people that they can talk to.

Mary: Lela and Amy are very involved on UK's campus, and I loved hearing from their unique perspectives on Hillel at UK. Hearing from Lela presented us with an important aspect of Hillel at UK today. Isn't it striking to hear about how close-knit the members living at the Hillel house are? Crazy to think that something created in 1923 could play such a large role in people's lives. In a minute, we'll get to hear from Joel Gordon, a former University of Kentucky student and basketball player. He was also a member of Zeta Beta Tau, the Jewish fraternity on campus at the time. He is going to be able to tell us a bit more about Hillel from a while back.

Lizzie: I really am starting to see how different Hillel is from when it was first founded. Amy and Lela spoke so highly of the organization, and it's clearly such a large part of their lives at the University of Kentucky. Both of them seem so eager to educate others on the organization. Hillel has really grown since its founding, even here at UK. Now let's hear from Joel Gordon!

Joel Gordon: We'd go to Hillel; we'd go out there to have a Sunday night dinner. It went so well, I think, well, we've seen what's there. And there wasn't any Jewish girls there you could meet, it was, I would . . .

Unnamed Interviewer: So it was mostly the guys from ZBT who went? Or, who else was there?

Joel Gordon: No, this was mostly the ZBT people. There'd be two or four, three or four other guys. . . .

Mary: How nice to hear from another individual. Joel Gordon was able to talk about Hillel from when there were only about 5,500 students on UK's campus!

Lizzie: After listening to Joel Gordon speak, I realize the extent to which the organization has evolved on UK's campus! Hillel at UK was not very big when he attended. What an interesting contrast to Amy and Lela's high levels of involvement in the organization.

Mary: Lizzie, just as you mentioned earlier, Hillel has spread to 550 campuses in the U.S., but obviously isn't every campus. One of Hillel's missions is to educate both Jewish and non-Jewish students on Jewish faith and culture. So I think we can gather

that, even though Hillel has changed a lot, it still has many campuses to reach in order to extend to more students and educate more people! Hillel at the University of Kentucky has really served as a way for Jewish students to have a tight-knit community, regardless of the amount of Jewish students. It's great that we get to see Hillel's mission play out on UK's campus. Amy and Lela are clearly doing a great job leading Hillel at UK.

Lizzie: Wow, that's so amazing how much Hillel has changed over the years at UK. We actually have two news correspondents, Laura and Madison, to tell us more about current membership, outreach events, and community support of Hillel at UK. They are live on site at a Hillel student mixer. Laura, Madison?

Madison: Thanks, Lizzie! Madison here. Yes, we are at UK's Hillel house, located at 333 Grosvenor Avenue here in Lexington, and we have just been talking with some current Hillel members. UK's Hillel currently has around 15 to 20 members who regularly attend planned meetings and activities. There are approximately 50 members on the Hillel Facebook page, and you can also find them on Instagram! Here's a clip of Lela Lyon sharing her experience of the growth of Hillel in the past few years

Lela Lyon: It was really small—there were probably like eight people that came consistently my freshman year. And like, four of us were freshmen. So *[laughs]*.

Unnamed Interviewer: It's grown a lot.

Lela Lyon: Yeah, yeah, it's definitely grown a lot.

Madison: UK's Hillel has a board of officers, President, VP, and Finance. This board organizes at least two events per month, with activities ranging from apple picking to shabbat dinners to bowling nights!

[sound of small, cheering crowd]

In the words of Amy Groswald, President of Hillel, Shabbat is the Jewish day of rest that takes place every Friday-Saturday. On Shabbat, candles are lit . . .

[sound of a match: three attempts to light it and a sudden flare when it lights]

. . . and participants will eat challah, which is a special type of bread made especially for the Jewish sabbath, and drink wine or grape juice. It's a time when Jewish people are supposed to rest and spend time with each other! The dinners are always hosted at the Hillel house where you can be guaranteed a good meal; just a couple of weeks ago they had a kugel cook-off competition!

Laura: What's kugel?

Madison: Kugel is a baked pudding or casserole and is most commonly made from egg noodles or potato. Kugel is a traditional Jewish dish that is often served on Shabbat! The Hillel house has been a great resource for the club, graciously donated to Hillel by Robin Michler; they are able to host Jewish students there and use it for fun activities like Shabbat and Hanukkah parties! Lela actually lives in the Hillel house right now and having a place where all members can meet to make and have meals makes Hillel feel more like home for its members. When Laura and I talked to Amy Groswald, she expressed the difficulty that Hillel faces in spreading the news about Hillel in order to grow its members. But one of Amy's primary goals as President is to grow the membership of Hillel and raise more awareness of the club on campus. Amy recounted that she has noticed that more undergraduates are joining Hillel, and she wants to continue this trend. She hopes that together the board, and future officers, can make Hillel a well-rounded and present organization on campus.

Laura: Absolutely, Madison. I've also been talking with some students about outreach opportunities and members of the community that have played a key role in their growth as an organization on campus. It seems as though Hillel really wants to be inclusive and active in the UK community. For example, the Hillel officers I have talked with have elaborated on attending Campus Ruckus, a super-event to encourage freshmen to join campus organizations, during K Week each year. They've also been telling me how important it is to have a table/representative at campus involvement fairs to spread awareness of their presence at UK. Starting in Spring 2017, Hillel members have registered a team to fundraise and participate in DanceBlue, a 24-hour dance marathon that raises money for the DanceBlue Kentucky Children's Hospital Hematology and Oncology Clinic. In addition to reaching out to campus organizations, several community members have greatly influenced Hillel's growth, according to Dr. Kuperstein. Dr. Kuperstein is the current faculty advisor for Hillel. She discusses one of the initiatives taken to provide guidance for the organization: . . .

Student: [reading Dr. Kuperstein's words] "In June, 2015, with the help of UK Leadership, we invited Hillel International for a campus visit in an effort to help guide our efforts to grow Hillel."

Laura: She also elaborated on specific advisors, such as Robin Michler and his contribution to the Hillel house:

Student: [reading Dr. Kuperstein's words] "Robin Michler has been our barely paid staff for several years although at this point, I think he takes nothing. He and Penina, his wife, own the house in which several Hillel students live, and they are given a rent reduction to plan and execute Hillel events."

Laura: Wow, that is so great! After talking with the students and advisors of Hillel here for just a few minutes, I am so impressed with their efforts to grow not only within, but also in the community.

Mary: UK Hillel students seem to be very active, not only in Hillel itself but also in the campus as a whole.

Lizzie: I agree. Hillel continues to play an important role in students' lives across the nation, and the world. Hillel at the University of Kentucky provides a place where Jewish and non-Jewish students can learn more about the faith and culture, as well as providing a home and a community for Jewish students in a place with a smaller Jewish community. The team and I here at the student informational panel hope that you've learned about the roles Hillel plays in building a community for Jewish students, and an educator of the Jewish faith and culture, and a place shaping the leaders of tomorrow.

[Same music plays that introduced the file: cheerful rock music, with a speaker saying, "Internal magnetic forces."]

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