

The Berman Family—Celebrating an Enduring Commitment to Jewish Life

By Joyce Romine

When Jodi and Doug Berman were exploring college options with their oldest son, Zach, their must-have list included a Hillel.

Jodi and Doug both have strong Jewish ties. Jodi is on the board of Jewish Family Services, and Doug is a board member and leader of the Jewish Federation of Broward County near the Berman's home in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. He also recently joined the Hillel International board of directors. In his professional role, Doug heads H.I.G. Capital's U.S. private equity business.

The Berman's three sons, Zach, Ethan and Charlie, have all been involved in Jewish education and activities from preschool through high school.

"Our family's Jewish background is a core part of our identity," Doug says. "For Zach, we wanted a college with a Jewish presence and a strong, cohesive Hillel."

They found that at Washington University in St. Louis, where it is estimated that a quarter of all undergraduate students are Jewish. In addition, the Hillel's close proximity to campus appealed to the Bermans.



The Berman Family (L-R): Ethan, Zachary (AB '21), Jodi, Doug, Charlie, and Jodi's mom, Roni Garron

A Launch Pad for Leadership and Service

Once Zach became a student at Washington University he made instant friends at Hillel and even recruited other students to participate.

"Everyone was so welcoming to him," Jodi says. "Hillel eased his transition to college. It provided a social network along with guidance in a way we couldn't provide from 1,200 miles away. It also offered Zach an opportunity to gain leadership skills that will serve him well in his career."

Zach immersed himself in Hillel and soon became the Social Programming Vice President for Hillel Leadership Council. He planned programs to engage his peers in Jewish traditions and coordinated social outings on campus and around St. Louis.

He also served on the board and as Co-President of WashU's Challah for Hunger chapter. Challah for Hunger and various student volunteers regularly get together to bake challah at

Hillel, while raising awareness about food insecurity. The student group sells the challah loaves in the Danforth University Center and donates proceeds to a national hunger relief organization and the Harvey Kornblum Jewish Food Pantry in St. Louis.

At the height of the pandemic, students were unable to use the Hillel kitchen and bake together. Ever resourceful, Zach led his peers in adapting their program to ensure the chapter's continued success. They sold pre-measured ingredients and ready-made dough so students could bake challah during joint Zooms.

Jodi appreciates how Hillel gave Zach a sense of purpose. "He is goal-oriented and likes to keep busy doing meaningful things to feel fulfilled."



*Zachary with Jodi and Doug
Commencement, May 2021*

Doug agrees. "I'm proud that Zach became a leader committed to the success of an organization that helps other students. Hillel has such a charitable aspect to it."

Because of Zach's many accomplishments and dedication toward strengthening the campus Jewish community at Washington University, Hillel honored him with the prestigious 2021 Fred J. Rosenbaum Award for Excellence.

After his 2021 graduation, Zach began working as an AmeriCorps VISTA member for the St. Louis Promise Zone where he continues to serve others.

Investing in Jewish Connections for the Future

In 2017, the Bermans began investing in Hillel through gifts to Washington University for the benefit of Hillel. They have been leading donors of Hillel's Annual Fund ever since. In addition, they served on the Executive Committee of Washington University's Parents Council.

Through the Annual Fund, the Bermans provide unrestricted support so Hillel can use the funds wherever they are needed most.

"We're supporting the overall mission of what Hillel is trying to accomplish through the breadth of programs and the number of students they are engaging," Doug says.

He sees Hillel as the bridge between home and adulthood. "When your kids go to college, they don't have the same Jewish infrastructure they had growing up. Hillel fills that gap. We support Hillel so students can still have that connection to Judaism, Israel and other Jewish students. I think that's critically important."

The Bermans appreciate the many benefits Hillel gave Zach. "Hillel allowed Zach to have a platform to develop leadership skills, to make lifelong relationships, and to solidify his interest in a career that involves service to others for the greater good," Jodi says.

This positive experience was the catalyst for their deep commitment to Hillel.

"In addition to their phenomenal support through our Annual Fund, Jodi and Doug are helping us match a significant challenge grant to build out our development infrastructure," explains Jackie Levey, President & CEO of WashU Hillel. "We're immensely grateful for the Berman's transformational philanthropy that has allowed us to launch new programs, strengthen existing offerings and hire new staff to help communicate Hillel's positive impact and increase our fundraising."

The Bermans are passionate about ensuring there is a strong Hillel on campus.

"We wanted to help Hillel fully develop their fundraising capacity so the organization can continue in perpetuity," Doug says. "I wish more parents knew about Hillel and the benefits and support it provides our sons and daughters. Hillel is exclusively funded by donations so I hope that Hillel becomes a bigger component of our peer group's charitable giving."

This strong leadership voice and dedication to Hillel's mission is making a lifetime impact for Jewish students and families.

"The Berman's vision, partnership and extraordinary investment will have a ripple effect on our operations and growth for years to come," Levey says. "We are forever thankful to them for helping us inspire thousands of students in making an enduring commitment to Jewish life."

**For more information on supporting WashU Hillel or designating gifts to Washington University for Hillel's benefit, contact Jackie Levey at (314) 935-9042 or jackie@washuhillel.org.*

Joyce Romine is a St. Louis-based writer who specializes in health care and philanthropy communications.