

A girl came up to Josh VerStandig and asked, "What did you do over Thanksgiving break? Jewish people don't celebrate Thanksgiving."

This happened to Josh VerStandig during his first few weeks freshman year at James Madison University. At first, Josh was confused then, he found out that he was the first Jewish person the girl had met. After, Josh informed the girl of basic aspects of the Jewish religion.

Josh said people very easily consider Judaism a nationality, like someone being Polish or Swedish. What people forget is that Judaism is a religion. "A common stereotype of Jewish people is that we are not American."

At JMU the Jewish population is small. This gives many members of the community the ability to get involved and become close with one another. "From there you start to branch out," said Josh.

Josh is a significant figure on campus. He is, and has been involved in Jewish organizations such as Alpha Epsilon Phi, Hillel for the past five years, as well as went on a Birthright trip in the Spring of 2010.

Josh is always involved, especially in leadership roles in organizations, stated fellow fraternity brother, Steve Robertson. Josh feels that being involved breaks certain stereotypes of the religion. It gives people the opportunity to know someone of the Jewish faith as well as the opportunity to learn about the religion.

Upon coming to college, Josh wanted to get involved and gravitated toward the Jewish community.

Josh was approached by the Jewish Fraternity, Alpha Epsilon Phi (AEPi), and offered a spot within the organization. Once Josh started to explore the values, especially mutual helpfulness, honesty, integrity, of the fraternity and to see how much the organization meant to its brothers, he knew it was the right fit for him to continue to practice his Jewish traditions.

"AEPi at JMU is the literal definition of brotherhood" said Josh.

Freshman year a brother by the name of Brian Schaplain adopted Josh as his little in the fraternity. Brian encouraged Josh to be involved in fraternity, to get involved athletically in intramural sports, and to reach as many people on campus to make a greater impact.

Josh was raised in a Jewish family. He attended synagogue only on Jewish holidays. His parents were adamant about him getting Bar Mitzvahed, after that they left it up to him to continue practicing the religion.

The Jewish population at Josh's high school was very large. The students got out of school for Jewish holidays.

High school is different from college because it is based more on your parent's beliefs and what they have taught and instilled in you. College is more about wanting to do it for yourself. In college, you get to explore the religion on your own terms and as deep as you would like. High school is more about knowing people where college is more about getting involved said Josh.

Since coming to college Josh has become proud of his heritage. He wants to do everything in his power to enlighten JMU's campus about the Jewish religion.

Stephanie Novak, a friend of Josh's finds him to be devoted and passionate about his religion. "We wanted him to come out with us last Friday but it was Yom Kippur so he ended up staying in," said Stephanie.

The Harrisonburg Jewish community is smaller in comparison to that of JMU's, said Josh. The community has one reform (loosely practicing the religion) synagogue. Josh also knows many Jewish community members through internships and other community based projects he has helped put together through Hillel and AEPi.

Some of the Jewish projects that Josh has put together are two philanthropy weeks for AEPi. Josh put in many hours for about three weeks to put the philanthropy events together.

The best part of the philanthropy event was when Josh was the last person opening the money box. The organization had raised about \$3,000. This was their first time doing fundraiser and raised more than they expected. The brothers of AEPi had no outside help from the community or other nonprofit organizations. AEPi was able to help more people than expected to and was proud of their accomplishments.

"A fraternity, especially AEPi is about what you can do for other people and the amount of change you can have in someone's life." said Josh.

Because of being involved in AEPi Josh won a JMU Dolly award for his leadership in the fraternity. This was the first time Josh's father had ever said he was proud of his son. This made Josh want to continue and broaden his efforts on JMU's campus.

"AEPi has helped me become the leader I am today and literally made me the person I am today." said Josh.

Josh is a fifth year senior and plans to graduate in May and return to JMU to work. Before Josh leaves he is putting together one last project, a Holocaust Remembrance Memorial. Josh is currently applying for a grant to help fund this project. The memorial would take place in April in Warren Hall and mimic the Holocaust Museum style.

If people were to look back on Josh in 10 years, he would want to be remembered as raising awareness for the Jewish community on JMU's campus, especially through the hopeful Holocaust project.