

New Tulane Hillel director prepares to welcome the Class of 2028

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Gary Brandt is the new executive director of Tulane Hillel. (Photo courtesy of Brandt)

As a first-year student at the University of Arizona in 2001, Gary Brandt knew exactly how he wanted to get involved in student life. He went straight to Hillel, a Jewish organization at more than 850 colleges and universities around the world.

It was a natural landing spot for Brandt, a Baton Rouge native who served as a leader in his synagogue youth group, spent most of his summers at a Jewish sleepaway camp and earned Eagle Scout status in the Boy Scouts.

What he treasured most about his student experience in Hillel was the opportunity to lead — to create engaging programs that would help students acclimate to college life and learn how to become leaders themselves.

“Being a student leader in Hillel was a developmental milestone for me,” said Brandt, who holds a bachelor’s degree in Near Eastern Studies.

When an opportunity arose to work for [Tulane Hillel](#), Brandt couldn’t pass it up. He was hired as assistant director in 2022. Two years later, he was appointed executive director following a national search by the Hillel Board that yielded several excellent candidates. Brandt also had the full endorsement of Hillel’s then-Executive Director Ron Gubitz, who was preparing to move to St. Louis.

“Gary's passion for our community, deep experience, innovative ideas and unwavering commitment to Jewish life on campus make him the perfect leader to guide our Hillel into the future,” Gubitz wrote in a letter to the Tulane Hillel community.

Since first stepping into his assistant director role two years ago, Brandt has enjoyed serving on the Hillel leadership team, from welcoming new students and their families to mentoring students as they plan programs infused with Jewish values and traditions.

Recent programs have included coastal restoration volunteering, challah baking, a financial literacy workshop, film screenings and Jewish holiday celebrations.

In April, students heard from World War II veteran Bill Kongable, who helped liberate a Nazi concentration camp. In 2022, two student leaders brought Holocaust survivor Sami Steigmann to campus to share his and his family’s story with an audience of over 300.

Friday nights are reserved for Shabbat dinners and services, and on any given day (except Saturdays), Hillel is open to students — of any religious background — for studying, grabbing a cup of coffee or dining at Rimon, a kosher eatery that is part of Tulane’s meal plan.

Brandt has spent most of his professional life working for Jewish organizations. His roles have included senior assistant director at the URJ (Union for Reform Judaism) Henry S. Jacobs Camp in Mississippi, founder of the Boulder Jewish Teen Initiative in

Colorado, and director of family and youth engagement at the New Orleans Jewish Community Center. Prior to those positions, he had stints as an EMT, an English teacher in Japan, a ropes course facilitator and a carpenter/welder. In his spare time, he enjoys group bike rides, building Mardi Gras floats and volunteering with groups dedicated to combatting food insecurity.

With the start of the 2024-25 academic year just a few weeks away, Brandt is preparing to welcome the Class of 2028 with Hillel's annual First-Year Family Welcome Event and the annual Welcome Back BBQ and Block Party. Brandt remembers the angst and apprehension of being of a first-year student, and he hopes he can help these newcomers make an easy transition into college life.

"This is the first time they are emerging from the nest and trying themselves out in the world," he said. "I really want to be that positive influence and help them become the best people they can be."

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