

Scholar's game plan took surprising turns



Jason Gosnell holds aloft the Becker Trophy, awarded to the Tel Aviv Pioneers football team after they won the Israel Bowl in the 2008-09 season.

Photo courtesy Jason Gosnell

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Jason Gosnell has been a lawyer at a major firm in New Jersey, a law clerk for the chief justice of Israel's Supreme Court, a fish harvester on a kibbutz, and a professional football player in Israel.

Now he has something else to add to his already eclectic resume: He is the first student to receive a master's degree in Jewish studies from Rutgers University.

Gosnell, who graduated in October, expects to earn a doctorate in math and history with a specialization in American-Jewish history of the 20th century with an eye toward launching still another career, this time in academia.

On Saturday, Jan. 25, the Toms River native will speak at Highland Park Conservative Temple-Congregation Anshe Emeth following the showing of the Israeli documentary *The Law in These Parts*, which examines the legal structure created to administer the West Bank and Gaza Strip after the 1967 Six-Day War.

Rutgers inaugurated the state's first master's degree program in Jewish studies in 2012, through the Department of Jewish Studies.

Gosnell's career history was largely determined by a combination of fate, a strong sense of Jewish identity, talent, and luck.

After earning a bachelor's degree in history and political science with a minor in Hebraic studies from Rutgers in 1999, Gosnell, now 36, earned a degree at Rutgers School of Law in Newark. He went on to clerk for James Havey, then presiding judge of the New Jersey Appellate Division.

After two years with a large New Brunswick firm, he decided to go to Israel, which, he said, he had fallen in love with on a Birthright trip.

"I went straight through high school, college, and law school, and I wanted to go out and see the world," said Gosnell. "I didn't have a mortgage or children, and I thought it was a great opportunity to live abroad and see what's out there. I hadn't gone with the intention of making aliya."

That trip stretched into about six years as Gosnell learned Hebrew at an ulpan on Kibbutz Ma'agan Michael, near the Mediterranean between Haifa and Tel Aviv.

Gosnell's athletic background and 6'4" frame got him assigned to fish harvesting, one of the kibbutz's business specialties.

Gosnell's job was to feed, vaccinate, and ship koi, a fish used in decorative fountains and small pools. While on the kibbutz, Gosnell also trained with the Israel Defense Forces and landed an interview resulting in the clerkship for Chief Justice Aharon Barak.

“The interesting thing about the Israeli Supreme Court is that they have law clerks from other countries to look at rulings, to come up with the best possible case law,” said Gosnell.

Because Israel has no formal constitution, it relies on legal precedent and clerks to ensure that rulings are in line with other democratic nations.

Gosnell’s legal memos were always in English, which both justices and clerks spoke fluently. “It was a great group of people from whom I learned a lot,” he said. His tenure ended when Barak retired.

Gosnell decided to stay in Israel and joined a Tel Aviv law firm. After spotting an ad in the *Jerusalem Post* for the fledgling Israel Football League, the former high school athlete and pole-vaulter for the Rutgers track team became a star player for the Tel Aviv Pioneers. Twice named all-league defensive end, Gosnell also helped take the team to the league championship of a sport that is rapidly gaining popularity in Israel.

“The great thing about playing football in Israel is that it’s such a blend of cultures,” said Gosnell. “During the huddle you can hear three or four different languages being spoken.”

The league is sponsored by Robert Kraft, owner of the New England Patriots, and its games are now televised in Israel.

“When the league started there were only three teams and now there are 10,” said Gosnell, who is still in contact with the IFL. “There is now an Israeli national team, and the competition is getting better. They’re seeing some Americans during their gap year between high school and college playing in Israel. A few guys who played in the IFL are now playing college ball in the United States.”

Gosnell returned to the United States in 2010 with his Bulgarian-born wife, Victoria, after his father was diagnosed with esophageal cancer (he has since recovered).

Although taken back by his old law firm, he left after two years to learn more about his Jewish heritage after Rutgers established the master’s program in Jewish studies.

Gosnell said he is unsure whether he will return to Israel after earning his doctorate.

“It’s a tough decision because my family is all here and my wife’s is all in Israel,” he said. “I guess it will depend on where I can get a job.”

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