How are you going to meet a nice Jewish boy at a Catholic School?
By Lisette Dolgin
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“How are you going to meet a nice Jewish boy at a Catholic School?” my mom worried after I announced my decision to attend Loyola University Chicago for my undergraduate education.

I would be leaving the comfort of my Jewish Highland Park community, where even our school colors were blue and white, to a place where every classroom had a crucifix above the chalk board.

I had not even started classes before she was planning on how I would transfer to a university with a larger Jewish population to ensure her future Jewish grandchildren. I was more concerned with getting the classes I wanted and what I’d do with my newfound freedom.

I remember my first day waking up in my dorm room: no homework, no friends, not much to do… I was paralyzed by my own autonomy. So I walked into Hillel, hungry for some free food and something to do.

It was quite bizarre, as I had little to no interest in Jewish organizations throughout junior high and high school. In fact, I made a point to avoid Jewish institutions altogether, unless it was the High Holidays. I made it three steps into the Hillel room before I was greeted by open arms and a welcoming smile.

“Lisette, I’m so glad you are here!” cheered Patti Ray, Loyola Hillel Director, as she introduced me to everyone in the room. Her enthusiasm and warmth were enchanting. Little did I know that I would spend more time in that Hillel than I had spent in a Jewish place my entire life. By the end of my first year at school, I had dozens of pictures in Patti’s photo albums documenting my Succah decorating skills, using Hillel as a study hall, all of the friends I had made and the events I had attended.

By the end of four years I was transformed. I was no longer Jewish by default, but Jewish by choice. My life was enriched with Jews from all parts of the religious spectrum, cultural backgrounds and ethnicities. To me, Hillel at Loyola was a microcosm of the perfect Jewish community: different types of Jews sharing one space and the common goal of helping Jewish life thrive. I even forwent graduating early to be Loyola Hillel President in my senior year.

Hillel was where I found my Jewish voice, but more significant was the fact that Hillel was a flourishing part of university life at this private Jesuit institution. Hillel was a central force on campus promoting human rights, hosting interfaith dialogues and addressing the issues of environmental responsibility. Non-Jewish students would frequently come to learn about our faith tradition, join us in our celebrations, and support us in our times of difficulty.

Hillel did more than ignite my passion for Judaism; it taught me the importance of being confident in my Jewish identity in a primarily non-Jewish world, something I missed growing up on the North Shore. This past August, I attended the Hillel at Loyola reunion, filled with 23 years of Hillel at Loyola alums. It was great to connect with peers, many of whom have gone on to graduate school or started careers. It was amazing to connect with those Hillel alumni who were pioneers of Jewish life at Loyola.
Before leaving the event I skimmed through the thick photo albums that recorded my four years at Hillel. I would have loved to introduce the Jewish girl I was then to the Jewish woman I am now: an employee of The Hillels of Illinois, getting my graduate degree in Jewish Professional Studies, and living in Highland Park with my wonderful, Jewish husband who I met—at a Catholic university—through Hillel at Loyola.