

Childhood experiences shape new chaplain's faith

Anna Johnson
Editor-in-Chief

It took several years before Janet Fuller would eat chicken or strawberries again.

"The bombers were coming over and overnight anti-aircraft guns were set up in the empty field across the street from our house," said Fuller, Elon University's new chaplain. "So we had the shrieking of bombers coming over us and the anti-aircraft shells would fall on our roof and roll into our yard."

Fuller's family knew war was coming and would be forced to stay inside their home. Knowing food would be scarce, her mother and father stocked up on frozen chicken and strawberries.

Before being pegged as the successor to Richard McBride, Elon's former chaplain who retired in 2009, and serving 24 years as the chaplain at Hollins University, Fuller lived through four wars in the Middle East as the daughter of Baptist missionaries. During the Six-Day War in 1967, Fuller was sleeping on a mattress in the hallway of her home with her family until they were evacuated to Iran by American forces.

"I was, for a long time, really traumatized about those experiences," she said. "Hiding in hallways, in shelters and basements. In high school, jumping under my chemistry lab desk when bombers flew over."

Fuller lived in various nations across the Middle East including Lebanon, Jordan and Iran as a blonde-haired, blue-eyed minority. Her parents chose to work in an Arab nation because of their appreciation for the culture, food and people.

"I have to say that my parents were a very respectful breed of missionaries and I really credit my upbringing for the passions that I come to Elon with," Fuller said. "I wasn't born or raised with the sense that I am right and you're wrong and I need to convince you to see things my way. I wasn't raised with that culturally or religiously."

Tragic events marred Fuller's childhood and made her question her religious background and ask difficult questions of her faith.

While visiting the church her father preached at on the Saturday before Easter, Fuller witnessed the destruction that would become commonplace. She was playing with her friend, Ibtisam, in an empty field when Ibtisam stepped on a landmine and was killed by the explosion. The blast knocked Fuller back and left her deaf for weeks.

"I remember being alone and then everyone came running," she said. "Everyone thought I was hurt because I was bloody. My parents arrived with the crowd and they didn't know what to do for me. They didn't know how to help me, they were clueless about war."

The family choose to ignore what happened and didn't speak of it, she said. As a result, Fuller became the one in her family who began to ask difficult questions and challenge the status quo.



Janet Fuller, Elon's new chaplain, said she was excited to begin her time at Elon University after 24 years as the head chaplain at Hollins University. ELIZABETH EVERETT | Staff Photographer

Fuller left the Middle East to attend then-Hollins College as an undergraduate. After she graduated, she returned to Lebanon to teach and marry her childhood sweetheart, Saad Ziyadi.

Ziyadi was studying to become a Greek Orthodox priest and was a member of a Christian militia.

"I was uncomfortable with him as an active participant in the military," she said. "And, of course, the civil war had its most terrible years in 1978 and 1979. So he made an agreement with his leader that he would not actively fight but would stand guard duty."

Less than six months after they were married, he left their home to guard the station when he was struck by a drive-by bombing.

"There was nothing left to identify him," she said. "I jumped into the car and found him. I was the first to arrive and then his colleagues arrived shortly after. It was the most painful moment of my life. It shattered everything I had planned."

It was that crystalizing moment that made her ask why the world was the way it was. It's a question many face, she said, and often leaves people wondering how there can be a caring deity in a world rife with suffering.

Fuller ended her contract as a teacher and went to seminary at Yale's Divinity School. After she graduated she served as the Baptist chaplain at Yale before becoming the full-time chaplain at Hollins.

The difficult moments in her past helped her relate to students who are struggling to find out who they are and how that shapes their religious and spiritual practices, she said.

"I've met some people who have never had any questions as to why they believe the things they believe," Fuller said. "But that seems strange to me when I meet it. But that is why I love students. They are inherently asking questions and making connections."

Fuller accepted the position as Elon University's chaplain this summer and officially began last week. She made the move, she said, because Elon was able to bridge aspects of her life that are normally left unconnected.

"One of the things that excites me about this work at Elon is that I do feel I get to draw on everything that I have ever done," she said. "It pulls together all of the things I have experienced and studied and cared about and wanted to do. It feels like it integrates parts of my life that are not normally integrated."

Development of Jewish Studies program progressing

Caitlin O'Donnell
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Jewish life on campus will get a bit more academic this year with the arrival of Geoffrey Claussen, the first professor of Jewish Studies.

Part of Claussen's responsibility this year will be developing the parameters for what a Jewish Studies program would look like at Elon University.

A main component of the task is developing the courses that will provide the foundation of the program. Claussen said he plans to draw from different departments, including religious life, philosophy and history, while playing to the strengths of the professors from each.

Jewish identity for students, faculty and staff is an interwoven package of religion, culture, history, academic pursuits and even culinary pursuits, according to Nancy Luberoff, Hillel campus director.

As the academic nature of Jewish life is strengthened, these other aspects will be strengthened as well, she said.

The population of Jewish students on campus currently sits at 7 percent of the Class of 2015, though she estimates the actual number is much higher.

"We only know by who tells us," Luberoff said. "The way Elon asks about religion, you have to be one thing or another. A huge percentage has one parent who is not (Jewish)."

For decades, the Jewish population hovered between 1 and 3 percent, she said. That all changed with the hiring of a Hillel staff member.

As the infrastructure is strengthened, the national presence of the campus is likewise bolstered.

"The institution can hover at 1, 2, 3 percent forever," Luberoff said. "But once you start breaking out, students come to the university not despite of being Jewish, but because it's more welcoming."

There will be some overlap between Hillel and the Jewish Studies program but not all students who elect to participate in the academic programs will also be an active member of Jewish religious life, according to Claussen.

"Some students who take Jewish studies courses have a strong attachment to Jewish traditions or to the Jewish people," Claussen said. "Others don't have personal attachments but, for any number of reasons, have profound interest. And some are just curious."

Sophomore Mason Sklut, a Hillel member currently working to create a Jewish fraternity on campus, said he finds the study of Judaism fascinating because it transcends beyond the topic of religion and also encompasses culture, language, philosophy and history. It also includes discussions of interfaith cooperation.

"By implementing the Jewish Studies program at Elon, the university is saying that it believes in the importance of understanding and respecting the diversity of its students."

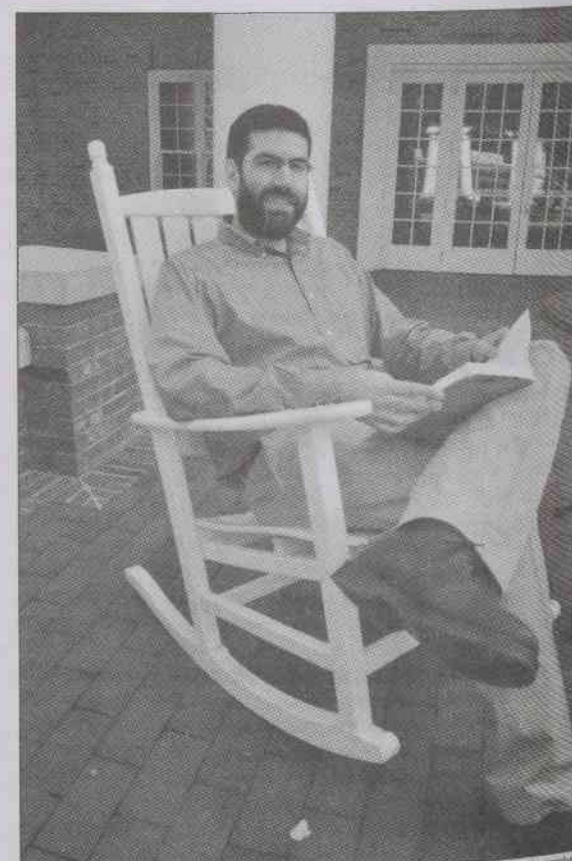
-Mason Sklut
CLASS OF 2014

The university was recently recognized in an edition of "Reform Judaism" magazine as one of six overlooked schools across the country that have "gone the extra mile" to make their campuses more attractive to Jewish students.

This will be the first year that the university hosts a full program of High Holy Day services, according to Luberoff, including Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In the past, participating students had to travel to either Greensboro or the University of North Carolina.

"Elon has developed a reputation as a campus that is very supportive of Jewish students and word has gotten out within the Jewish community, especially on the East Coast, though through the rest of the country, as well," Claussen said.

Claussen said the administration has been supportive of both the academic side of the program, but also the development of Jewish life on campus.



Geoffrey Claussen started this semester as the first Jewish Studies professor. His arrival is part of a larger move to expand Jewish life on campus. ELIZABETH EVERETT | Staff Photographer

"It goes above what other schools are doing, in many respects," he said. "Some of that stems from Elon's interest in fostering a more multicultural campus. Elon's commitment to multiculturalism has meant very good things for students interested in Jewish studies and for further developments here on campus."