

Meaningful choices: a visit with Rabbi Will Berkovitz

Like many a wandering youth before him, Rabbi Will Berkovitz, current acting director of Hillel at the University of Washington, searched for direction through

Janis Siegel
JTNews Correspondent

the many passions of his heart. However, the world-traveling, social-justice-oriented, fish-eating vegetarian's calling to Jewish spiritual leadership would be realized through a confluence of serendipitous events.

Berkovitz became a journalist, and soon found himself writing mountain-climbing stories in Guatemala, while trying to make a difference in the lives of the locals by digging toilets and building stoves for the poor. He wanted to impact people's lives in a personal way.

"I studied to be a journalist and I was traveling around the U.S. when I decided to stay in Seattle," said Berkovitz. "I freelanced, piecing together what I could. It seemed like a city you were supposed to be young in."

On a fateful day back in 1993, while writing and continuing to search for his

path, Berkovitz's imagination was captured during his first meeting with Rabbi Dan Bridge at the UW Hillel.

"I remember him coming around the corner with his tie-dyed T-shirt and Birkenstocks," Berkovitz recalled. "When we sat down in his office, he sat back, kicked his shoes off and put his feet up on his desk. I'd never seen a rabbi like this before."

Berkovitz was prepared to barrage the Hillel leader with a battery of questions about religion and Judaism, but Bridge was not as laid back as he appeared. He sent the young seeker walking that day, with a commitment to return the next week, and an armful of books that would shape the direction of his life. Unbeknownst even to himself at the time, Berkovitz was moving slowly closer to his spiritual calling.

As he continued to freelance, often getting assignments that afforded him the opportunity to travel to exotic locations, Berkovitz found himself putting bread on his table by writing for publications that were not so compatible with his personal values.

He couldn't rationalize writing for a local fishing and hunting magazine when he practiced vegetarianism. And, although he helped many people living in the

Rabbi Will Berkovitz, right, frolics in the snow with wife Lelach and son Nativ.



COURTESY WILL BERKOVITZ

Rabbi Will Berkovitz,
acting director, Hillel,
University of Washington.

Name and age:

Rabbi Will Berkovitz, 37

Favorite Jewish hangout: Jerusalem. I love witnessing all these religions and beliefs careening off each other, and I love how ancient it is.

Work: Acting Director, Hillel at the University of Washington, "Social justice, spirituality and allowing people to be transformed."

Favorite vacation spot: "I'm a wilderness and small village guy. My favorite things in the world are traveling to other cultures and sailing."

Favorite way to spend a night on the town: "My wife and I will go somewhere, maybe to a park, sit, and read a book out loud to each other. It's a great way to connect. Also having interesting conversations about social justice issues with friends who have a different way of looking at the world."

What he's reading: Salvador; My Dad and the Sea; Blink; and my wife and I are reading His Dark Materials.

Favorite Quote: "Wonder, rather than doubt, is the root of all knowledge" — Abraham Joshua Heschel

developing world, he soon realized that selling stories that focused on them was tougher than he thought. His vision of becoming a global citizen began to fade.

Pondering his next career move, Berkovitz would often hear the refrain of his mother's voice resounding in his head, saying, "You should stay in touch with the Jewish community."

He wanted to comply with her clairvoyant request, but he confesses that he didn't really think he had what it took. His childhood was a mixture of secular, Reform and Conservative Judaism eclipsed by social issues, anthropology and philosophy.

"I remember thinking, 'Gosh, I'd really like to be a rabbi if it wasn't for the God and religion parts,'" he admitted.

When Berkovitz was hired as director of the Hillel organization at the University of Oregon in Eugene at the age of 25, he was swept up in international conference planning and leadership responsibilities that put him in personal contact with Jewish heavyweights like Elie Wiesel and Deborah Lipstadt. In a phone conversation with Wiesel from his office in Eugene, Berkovitz was "blown away" by Wiesel's advice when he asked the author about becoming a rabbi.

"Don't just study", he told me, "make sure you're doing something in the world as well," said Berkovitz.

Berkovitz returned to Seattle and to Rabbi Bridge at the UW Hillel in 2004, after his rabbinic ordination from the University of Judaism. He became the assistant director of Hillel, arriving just in time to inaugurate the new Hillel building, and to see his dreams of helping people on a deep and meaningful level come true.

Berkovitz, 37, is married to Lelach Rave, 33, an American-Israeli and a pediatrician at Children's Hospital. The couple has a 2-year-old son named Nativ. They live in Seattle.