

Dear Application Review Committee:

This is a letter in support of Mallory Hellman's application to the summer program on Making Holocaust and Genocide Relevant Through Inquiry and Classroom Application at Penn State.

I am the principal at Agudas Achim Congregation's religious school in Iowa City, where Mallory teaches students ages 11-13. But I also know Mallory through her work as Director of the Iowa Youth Writing Project (IYWP). She and other members of the IYWP have conducted workshops at our school several times. Mallory showed a real talent for connecting with the students, drawing them out, and getting them to reflect on difficult topics in their writing and drawing.

In her Sunday School class, Mallory has achieved an easy rapport with the students. She has organized them for environmental projects such as cleaning the Iowa River. Students understand that she respects their ideas, so they open up to her. She has led very deep discussion on many sensitive topics, including the complexity of Jewish identity in Iowa.

The Jewish community in Iowa City is small and isolated from the great centers of American Jewish life. Nearly all our students come from intermarried families or from families in which one or both parents are converts. Often curriculum available to me on the Holocaust or other aspects of Jewish history assume that students have a family connection to this history and that they live in an area rich in Jewish culture. The majority of my students lack a direct link to the Holocaust; all of them experienced being the only Jew in their class at school.

My hope is that Mallory will craft a short curriculum for teaching about the Holocaust that will engage our students, whatever their backgrounds. A curriculum for a small town with a thin Jewish population may seem like it would have little broad application. But one in six American Jews is a convert. In this respect, Iowa City and other small Jewish communities are not so much the periphery of Jewish life as the frontier of the American Jewish future.

Mallory has the intellectual curiosity and the teaching experience to make the most of her time at Penn State. I hope that you offer the opportunity to learn and to grow as both a student and a teacher.

Sincerely,

Sonja E. Spear, Ph.D.
Principal, Agudas Achim Religious School