

Presidential Matters

by Steve Aronowitz



So, you're not feeling well. How about a bowl of chicken soup delivered right to your door? If you are a student at Elon University in North Carolina, I'm told it's a phone call away.

Come with me on a recent business trip visiting colleges, seeking best-fit places for high school juniors and seniors. Last week, I toured Wake Forest University, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill and Elon University. Because many of my clients are Jewish, one of the concerns I investigated was how these soon-to-be college freshmen would fare in today's climate on college campuses.

We would all agree that from a parent's perspective, the first priority is a safe place. Nothing is guaranteed but these adolescents are approaching what should be an exciting time with trepidation beyond what you and I may have had to confront.

More than one Jewish parent has eliminated prestigious schools like Columbia, Harvard, Cornell and U Penn. I know, most of these students aren't going to get accepted anyway; however, over the years, I've had a few selected to these schools. That's not the point. I've never had a parent state, "Take that school off the list!"

The stories abound. When Senator Dan Sullivan of Alaska recently visited the Harvard campus he had attended as an undergraduate, he went over to the Widener Library Reading Room. He was rattled, intimidated, and harassed by the anti-Israel banner screaming "Stop the genocide in Gaza." He was confronted by students handing out fliers and hanging large banners denouncing Israel. The senator was certainly used to Harvard's active political climate with students expressing their views, but this was different. These protestors were spewing hate and revenge and threatening language. This wasn't the hallowed halls he knew.

But that's one incident at one of the so called elite academic giants we are familiar with. My trip was to visit colleges, speak with admission officers, students, and professors. I travel so when I meet a student and his/her family, I can provide some insights about each campus and its culture. I try to look through the perspective of who I represent. After all, students are interested in going away and there are hundreds of schools throughout the country that offer wonderful opportunities. This trip had the added piece I described above.

Here's what I discovered on my travels to North Carolina. At Wake Forest in Winston-Salem, NC, I met with an admissions officer who recounted recent actions involving Professor and Chair of the Humanities, Laura Mullen. On October 19, the professor posted, "So, it's kind of a Duh but if you turn me out of my house to

plow my olive grove and confine what's left of my family to the small impoverished state you run as an open air prison, I could be tempted to shoot up your dance party. Yeah, even knowing you will scorch the earth."

Many WF students and alumni criticized Mullen's post as justifying attacks perpetrated by Hamas. The Jewish population at Wake Forest is around 7-8% with an increase in the upcoming class. Many engage with Chabad, Hillel or the local temple. As the admissions representative told me, "Wake Forest isn't immune to ongoing world events."

Students I met with spoke of the general vibe of awareness and support by campus partners. One sophomore explained, "I think the administration is very intentional about programming and support resources. That might be why I don't know of any outbreaks of violence." The university's president stated, "while the professor had a right to free speech, we do not support the views she expressed."

The professor resigned.

The feeling at Chapel Hill was far different. First, the comparisons don't really work. Two small schools vs. a giant university with over 30,000 students. I first met with an admissions counselor who pretty much dismissed any protests by stating, "students are free to express their views. Protests are common."

The Chabad rabbi had a different take: "First, it's a state university. I can tell you we understand the new chancellor likes Israel so that's a good sign. Pro-Hamas students took over an administration building for a few hours. We heard nothing beyond that. We have a sizeable Jewish enrollment (approx. 800 - 1000) and they are very active with Hillel and Chabad.

At Elon, the rabbi at Chabad, echoed the sentiments of several students I had lunch with: "It's good to be a Jew at Elon." The word at Elon is "take a course with Boaz, Hebrew professor and Jewish Life Engagement Liaison."

An admissions representative who I know well and is not Jewish explained, "I've worked at a few schools and Elon is unique. We had students supporting the Palestinian Red Cross that is what the college experience should be, students free to express their views and exchange their thoughts with classmates who may not agree. There was no visible or militant activity, which was predictable based on the environment we have."

Certainly, size matters. Management of an Elon or Wake Forest or so many other schools is manageable. Perhaps it's also because as the Elon representative said, "Maybe that's because the administration sets the tone here. There is discourse. There are people to talk to."

Now, I'm going to finish my soup!