

My name is Sophie Lerer, and I am graduating right now from UCSB with degrees in Religious Studies and Sociology.

When I started college at UCSB four years ago, I was both nervous and excited to take on the challenge of young adult life in a new place. After playing an active role in the youth community at my synagogue throughout high school, I was worried to lose the strong connection I had to my Jewish identity. I quickly sought out Santa Barbara Hillel, but I was still nervous and a bit shy. I vividly remember getting a Facebook message from student president Rita Silverman inviting me to the first Shabbat of the year, and when my new dorm friends introduced me to Tyler Barth. We were both Jewish and hoping to go to Hillel. During that first Week of Welcome, I had a hard time bringing myself to attend events because I was afraid of going alone. Tyler and I made a plan to go together to a s'mores-making event, but when I called him to bike to the Hillel building, he was already there. I was disappointed, to say the least, and can proudly say that I have never let Tyler live down the fact that he ditched me before what was supposed to be my first Hillel event.

Luckily this did not stop my journey with Hillel. Soon enough I was counting on Hillel to save me a meal swipe every Friday at Shabbat dinner, give me endless learning opportunities, and introduce me to smiling new faces every week. As someone who attended my first UCSB soccer game all alone, Hillel created community where I could always find a friend. By the end of my first year, I knew that I needed to be on

the Student Board. I saw the board as a close-knit group of student leaders, and I wanted a place in that family. By my second year, I was a member of the Tzedek team and began co-leading Shabbat services.

I was soon reminded of the significance of my Hillel family when I missed the first week of classes due to my father's sudden health issues. Almost every weekend I rode the train home to visit my dad. Though I had to put my Shabbat service leading on hold, it was such a comfort to have Hillel events throughout the week that gave me a break from the stresses of school and what was happening back home. As chatty as I may be, I am a pretty private person and didn't talk much about the fact that my dad was in the hospital. I casually mentioned it one day to our Engagement Associate, Eliana, and throughout the next week, I received messages from all the staff checking in on me. I remember that I had not had many interactions with Rabbi Evan outside of services at this point, and it meant so much to me to receive an email from him offering to talk if I needed it. Through this extremely difficult time of so much change and uncertainty, my Hillel community remained a much-needed constant.

Three months later, my dad was home from the hospital and I too was headed home for winter break. I entered the winter quarter excited for a new beginning. I was starting a new job and was so ready for a normal quarter. A couple of months later, the world was rocked by the COVID-19 Pandemic and my dreams of normalcy were shattered. I went home to take my finals, unsure of when I would see any of my friends again.

Everything moved onto Zoom and we all had to get creative to stay connected to our loved ones. Surprisingly, my Hillel friendships grew stronger during this time. I looked forward to Zoom Shabbats and the faces I knew I would see every week. Game nights gave me excuses to catch up with my friends. By my third year, as the pandemic continued, I realized I should take a step up and lead as Hillel co-president.

The confidence that staff and students had in me allowed me to develop a confidence in myself and my abilities that I previously had shied away from. Even in high school, I was always afraid to take on roles of heightened responsibility because I did not want to let myself or others down. Now I know that when I put my all into something I can achieve positive results. Although we spent the entirety of that school year on Zoom, I think we all learned a lot about ourselves. At the end of the year we held our first in-person Shabbat. The act of gathering together on Shabbat for the first time in over a year was so incredibly special.

Now as I stand here at the end of my fourth year, I look back on all we have accomplished and how much I have grown. I remember this fall's Welcome-Back Barbeque and the insane huge turnout we received. It was so heartwarming to see our community building itself back up to what it once was and beyond.

Over the course of this year I have come to appreciate that we are not bringing back whatever community we had pre-Covid. Although this

community we have now holds much of the same passion and drive, we are a new group of students and a new community. We have been through a lot together and as such we are stronger and closer than ever.

Just last week I watched as my peers peacefully and thoughtfully challenged antisemitism on campus. I also spent last week interviewing candidates for Student Board and I have never seen such a passionate and excited group of students. I'm almost jealous that I won't be here working with them next year. With my graduation ceremony only a few weeks away, I look back on my time here with so much love and gratitude for this incredible community that Hillel has given me.

As I look to the future, and I apply for jobs within the Jewish community - including at Hillels across California - I know that I can attribute my confidence in myself to my time here. I have grown so much through my experiences as a Student Leader, and now even as a part-time staff member. The nervous girl I was when I walked into this building for my first Shabbat still exists, but through Hillel, she has been equipped with the tools and experiences to help her tackle any opportunities that come next.

Thank you for making all this possible.