

Monthly Profile: This month we feature Board Member Cat Eskin

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Where did you grow up?

When asked, I love to tell people that I was born in the same delivery room as Grace Kelly. I'm not sure if it's actually true, but we were born at the same hospital—Women's Medical College in Philadelphia. I am the youngest of three—I have an older brother, Gregg, and an older sister, JoAnne. My father (z"l) and mother were both youngest children, too—in my father's case, he was 10 years younger than his only brother. I never met my father's parents, though I heard plenty of stories about Atlantic City, NJ and the Boardwalk during the 1930s. I was blessed to have my mother's mom until I was in my 30s—in fact, I took the job in Florida hoping I would be able to see more of her, but she passed away (she was 98) less than a month before I started the job at Florida Southern. My daughter Tilly is named for her.



The Eskins: clockwise from top left: Bernie, Lynn, Cathy, JoAnne and Gregg (c.1968)



HS graduation, 1984

What is one thing people would be surprised to learn about you?

I was not actually accepted into college on my first try. I was wait-listed at the one school where I applied and after a hurried application to an alternate school, I was told I'd have to wait and begin in January. I spent most of my high school career making bad choices.

Where did you go to school-college-degree-major?

I began my undergraduate career with no idea what I wanted to do. I had originally planned to do special education, but found that it was too depressing for me (after an internship at a school for the blind in Philadelphia).

I attended Douglass College, Rutgers University, and after many minors (Criminology, Leisure/Exercise Science, History, Languages, English), I graduated with a degree in Comparative Literature. I took a "gap year" after college and moved to London. My graduate degrees (an MA and PhD in English Literature and Rhetoric) are from the University of Texas at Austin where I met my husband during my final years in the program.

How did you meet your spouse? Do you have children/grandchildren?

I had been living in Austin for four years when I suddenly found myself without housing (a story for another day, perhaps). I was dating someone else when I moved in with the man who would become my husband; he was renting out a room in his house. We have two children: a daughter, Tilly who just turned 21, and a son, Manny who will be 17 in October. Both are above average.

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What is or was your occupation?

I always knew that I wanted to be a teacher; I just was never sure what I would teach. I've been an aerobics and swimming instructor, I've taught deaf-blind students, I've taught in foreign language programs (I was an English professor in Scandinavia) and I've even been a Sunday school teacher. I am currently a professor of English, teaching composition, Shakespeare, and early English literature to undergraduates.



Teaching award at FSC (2014)

What was the most interesting job you ever had....or the most unusual?



During my "gap" year, I worked a variety of jobs (and, actually, worked some strange ones as an undergrad in central New Jersey, too!). I was living in London and needed several jobs to stay afloat: waitressing at a pub, typing in an office, teaching aerobics in a leisure center (which my father was concerned meant that I was giving massages to tourists), and for a short stint, working as a production assistant on a rock tour. I was tasked with putting together a Thanksgiving meal in central England (Birmingham, I think). Needless to say, you won't find turkey and cranberries at the local shops—at least not in 1988.

What are your interests and hobbies? What book is on your nightstand right now?

I enjoy biking, hiking and walking; each summer, I work on an organic farm, getting dirty and playing with my food. Making greeting cards out of found and discarded materials allows me to be creative, though the clutter and piles are not ideal for my small house! I just finished reading Cynthia Ozick's *Antiquities* with the Temple Book Club and I was really impressed with the book, even if it wasn't the easiest read. I am loving Sharon Olds' *Odes*, a book of wonderful poems.

*How long have you been a member of Temple Emanuel?
What committees or leadership roles have you had or perhaps would like to have at Temple Emanuel?*

I joined Temple Emanuel when I moved to Lakeland in the Fall of 1999. I was pregnant with my first child before High Holy Days and a regular at services first on Friday nights and then Saturday mornings. I first joined the Temple Board in 2004 and served for an alarming number of years before cycling off. I am back on the Board now. I founded (2007) and try (with varying degrees of success) to maintain the Temple Emanuel Archive, which has given me insight into Southern Jews, provided me with excuses to have people tell me stories, and fed my obsession with old pictures. I have served as a Sunday School teacher for the youngest (3-5) and oldest children (Confirmation class) and was even an officer in the Polk County Hadassah chapter.



The Eskin-Barickman family from Manny's bar mitzvah (2017)

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What does being Jewish mean to you?

I was raised as a Conservative Jew in suburban Philadelphia with a HUGE Jewish population in a tolerant and generally informed community. I first became aware of being a minority only after I left the relative comfort of my cosmopolitan experience. Even when I moved to Austin, Texas, which seemed to me at the time to be a backwater (I moved there from London, England), I had no trouble finding a Conservative synagogue (biking distance from my house).

My identity as a Jew is tied to Jewish practice, though I spent most of my teens and early 20s trying to pretend it wasn't. I had formative experiences growing up with Holocaust survivors and symbolically shared my bat mitzvah with a Soviet Jew.

Still, the most visceral experience I had was with the remnant of the Jewish community in Trondheim, Norway. Those men (4 of the 7 who returned after the war were still living in 1995 when I arrived) made me acutely aware of the cost of being different from your neighbors.

Now, I am grateful that I had the opportunity to learn about the experiences of the children of Temple Emanuel because it has made me a better mother to my children; my commitment to my religious and cultural identity has had a profound effect on their lives as well as my own.

Had I stayed in the cities of the North, I don't know that I would have been tied to my identity in the same way.



Sharing Sukkot with the FSC Pre-School Lab (2007)

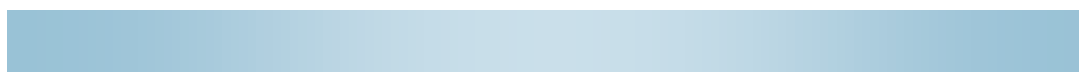
What is your proudest moment?

I think the births of my children and the first time I nursed them. Magic.

Looking back, what is the best advice you would give your younger self? What are the most important lessons you have learned in life?

Ask for help. So many people are smarter than I am and the only way I can get smarter is by asking questions!

Thank you so much Cat for sharing your story with all of us! If you would like to be our next profile, please contact irmacole26@gmail.com



Deadline for the next issue of *The Menorah* is November 30, 2021.

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