

## From seeds, a vine

**Rabbi Everett Gendler** arrived on campus in 1977 as part of a move by then-Headmaster Theodore Sizer to transform the structure of the school's chaplaincy to a Catholic-Protestant-Jewish tri-ministry. Although Gendler had been trained in the conservative movement, he had always been, according to daughter Tamar Szabo Gendler '83, "deep down, an ecumenical practitioner of religion." So he led services for Jewish students and organized a Hebrew table at lunch, but also taught classes on non-Western religions while serving as an advisor to all students, regardless of their religious affiliation—or lack thereof.

The Gendler house—which also included Naomi '85 and Gendler's wife, Mary—was open to all students, many of whom dined with the family at Friday dinners. It was a welcoming, open approach that tied in with

his Judaism, which, says Tamar, is really "a way to understand the universalities of the human experience." So although Gendler, who has been a vegetarian since his youth in 1940s Iowa, established on-campus marks of religious ritual



*In summer 2013, two campers at Camp Solomon Schechter in Washington release ladybugs into a garden to serve as natural predators of bugs (like aphids) that nibble on tomatoes.*

that were welcoming to students for whom they were tradition—a sukkah, or hut, for the harvest festival Sukkot and a mandala in the center of campus—they also appealed to students who were less familiar with them. And everyone appreciated the jack-o'-lanterns with which he decorated the synagogue at Halloween.

But perhaps what stood out most, says Claudia Kraut Rimerman '84, was an intentional awareness of the planet that Gendler shared with all students, a recognition that “God is creator of the planet; it was all about understanding God’s creation in a very accessible way.” That focus led his daughters to spearhead the establishment of The Gendler Grapevine Project, a six-year initiative that will combine funding and support for groups within the Jewish community that promote social justice and environmental action through 2018.

Gendler retired in 1995 and has since kept busy traveling with Mary to India for two or

three months every year, meeting with Tibetan exiles to educate them in nonviolent struggle. His 80th birthday fell on August 8, 2008—80 on 08-08-08; “For someone who stopped the car when his odometer hit a palindrome, that’s about as exciting as it gets,” says Tamar, laughing. But five years later, there was no such interesting pattern, and his daughters searched for an appropriate way to honor the man, a gesture that would be a celebration of his legacy. The Gendler Grapevine was born.

“The idea was to tie the values of the Torah together with concrete actions that will have meaning and are geographically spreadable,” says Rimerman. “So we’ll find clusters of people who can do something about the environment in a Jewish context but then also spread it to others outside of their communities.”

Each year, a new kind of recipient will be chosen—in year one, that was Jewish summer camps; in year two, it’s rabbinical schools—with multiple grants offered, in amounts ranging from approximately \$5,000 to \$10,000. The first year, 10 summer camps shared \$75,000 in gifts from board members and others. With the money, they built organic gardens, installed low-flow toilets, and hired fellows to teach campers about the environment. This year, the board hopes to double that amount.

“We wanted to carry forth in the next generation the seeds of what he’d planted in those who are now in their 40s,” says Tamar. The selection of recipients is not arbitrary, she says, explaining that board members look for high-leverage, low-cost projects. So the camps reached some 10,000 kids directly, but the campers then took the ideas home, for a net reach of perhaps 50,000 people.

Another component of the Gendler Grapevine is a website that’s an archive of all of its namesake’s works, both articles he wrote and articles of which he is the focus. It’s a way to preserve Gendler’s teachings for all time, and even after his 90th birthday (which will be the sixth and final year of the funding project), the website will remain accessible. It also offers “Great Ideas

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—Tamar Szabo Gendler '83

*Executive committee members of the Gendler Grapevine include (back row, from left) Rachel Loeb, David Weil '80, Naomi Gendler Camper '86, Tamar Szabo Gendler '83, Emily Loeb, Tajlei Levis '85, and Claudia Kraut Rimerman '84. Mary Gendler and Rabbi Everett Gendler are seated. This photo was taken at Rabbi Gendler's 85th birthday celebration in Western Massachusetts.*



for You to Try,” suggestions for low-cost ways to make environmentally sound changes around the home.

One of the most compelling aspects of the Gendler Grapevine is that Tamar and Naomi reached out to former PA classmates and other alums whom they knew had had some connection with their father during their years on campus, inviting them to be a part of the project. Rimerman was one who signed on; others are David Weil '80 and Tajlei Levis '85,

and they're hoping to hear from anyone who would like to be involved in some capacity. That has been an unexpected gift.

“For us, the reconnection has been extraordinary,” says Tamar of the PA alumni who are part of the project. And of her father, she says, “Each year, his birthday present is that he gets to give. It's quite a legacy.”

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