

The Gittleman Endowment for Excellence in Teaching

What names come to mind when you hear “Tufts”?

Chances are your list includes—even begins with—Sol Gittleman.

For so many of us, Professor Gittleman, retired Tufts University provost and now the Alice and Nathan Gantcher University Professor, widened our views of humanity in Introduction to Yiddish Culture or Yiddish Literature (alias “Yid Lit”). He fascinated us in “America and the National Pastime,” “History of Baseball,” or other semester-long tributes to a lifelong passion. To other lucky students, he was the avuncular advisor who (in his own words) gave “enough rope and some guidance to create a kind of opportunity you’re not going to be able to find at any other university.”

The experience of learning from Sol was emblematic of our broader Tufts experience: “aha” moments, inspired curiosity, the whetting of a lifelong appetite for learning, and always the reminder to enjoy the ride and not take ourselves too seriously. In revealing the degree to which Sol—and Tufts—helped shape who we have become, we also revel in what our achievements convey to others about our alma mater.

The relationships Sol forged with us typically started as we sat spellbound in his courses and left the room energized. We strengthened those ties every time we clustered around him after class to continue the discussion on the topic *du jour*. Or when we met up with him outside of class to ask his opinion (firmly withheld) or seek his advice (freely given).

Today, more than a few alumni can still point to their Yid Lit books on their bookshelves. Many of us stay connected to Sol via phone and e-mail. We invite him to our weddings—and to those of our kids. And we seek him out during visits back to campus, sometimes as parents (or grandparents!) introducing Sol to a brand-new Tufts student. He is an integral part of the feeling of “home” that pervades us whenever we think of Tufts; when he is on the road, he is the tie that keeps us close to that home. “I am not entirely embarrassed to say that I still follow him like a groupie whenever he is in Florida,” writes Ayanna (Kambon) Rolette, J88.

The Big Question

In 2002, as Sol prepared to step down as Tufts’ provost after 21 years, the big question became not only how to honor his service, but also how to begin to acknowledge his generations-long impact on Tufts students and alumni. How best to reflect what he has meant to all of us—and sustain that impact in perpetuity?

The answer: establish the Gittleman Endowment for Excellence in Teaching. That endowment became The Sol Gittleman Professorship as the university celebrated Sol's 75th birthday and 45th year at Tufts in June 2009.

This endowed chair honors the three pillars of academic excellence that he represents: teaching, lifelong active scholarship, and mentorship. And it salutes those Gittlemanesque qualities that are permanently burned into our collective consciousness.

“He vibrates this unabashed joy”

So many of us have named Sol the “best teacher they ever had” that it ceases to be a surprise. He is for countless alumni the single most important influence in opening our eyes and minds to the broad issues that affect humanity, whether they are rooted in culture, religion, literature, history, current events, or baseball. Students in any given semester don't even consider how many times he has taught the same material before, since every semester it seems as though he is teaching it for the very first time. “He takes his teaching very seriously,” says Tufts Provost Jamshed Bharucha. “He really focuses on prepping for every class—he gets keyed up every time.”

Energy, joy, enthusiasm, passion: these are the words that students and alumni most often use to describe what possesses Professor Gittleman in front of an audience. Robert Hollister, dean of the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service, says it best: “He vibrates this unabashed joy about teaching.”

That electricity is contagious. “By the end of my first Yid Lit class, my pulse was up, my heart was racing, and I felt like I'd just done an intense cardio workout,” writes Steven Koltai, A76. “I had totally lost track of the time. I went back to my room and took out all my books I'd bought for the class and started looking through them simultaneously.”

But Professor Gittleman's uniqueness goes well beyond his energy. It is also about the breathtaking density of information he packs into a lecture or conversation. Anyone who has listened to even one Gittleman lecture immediately grasps his strong sense of story and sequence. He takes you back in time to build context, then brings you along to the present, intuitively anchoring his narrative in events and people you know something about. Next thing you know, you're engaged, feeling part of the storytelling. Sol leaps from story to story, fact to fact, observation to observation, and conclusion to conclusion, almost without drawing breath. He often stops before the end of a thought, or pauses and asks, “...what?” He invites you to connect the dots, draw a conclusion, fill in a blank, and feel smart. He punctuates with his intonation and his gestures. He evokes memorable images: “After beating the Turks, the Arabs went to Versailles looking for payback. What did they get? *Chopped liver*. They got *nothing*.” Or: “Job was the quintessential *schlimazel*, a guy with the bad luck to get caught between God and Lucifer on a bet that Lucifer could get him to hate God.”

It doesn't take long for his audiences—numbering anywhere from one to 350 or more—to recognize that they are in the presence of a massive intellect, well served by an extraordinary memory and an infectious sense of humor. He offers what he knows with no whisper of pretension. His gift is to value you so highly that he wants to share it all with you. He is sure you will—you must—want to know, too. Ask Sol anything about the history of Tufts, Germany, baseball, Abrahamic traditions, geopolitics, and so on, and he will expound upon the topic in a context you can relate to. But there is one thing he will not share: his own opinion on an issue. “Students always try to get me to tell them what I think, but I won't do it,” he asserts. “I don't proselytize. There's a line I will not cross. Instead I'll challenge them—provoke them—into forming their own opinion.”

High expectations have always characterized Sol's teaching. Anyone, for example, who ever thought those open-book take-home exams would be a snap soon realized otherwise. And take football player Joseph Groff III, A71. He was sinking fast in German 7 when Professor Gittleman rescued him through one-on-one tutorials. The two would walk around campus, discussing assigned readings on Germany's history. At semester's end, Sol signed his student off on the language requirement. But Groff, hooked, begged Sol to continue the walking discussions. “Rescue” notwithstanding, Sol's standards must have pretty high: Groff went on to earn a law degree from Georgetown University.

“Keep a dictionary in your bathroom!”

Scholarship, teaching, and lifelong learning have always been inseparable for Sol Gittleman, each one enriching and adding dimension to the other. Through his own active scholarship, he sets the example for all of us to engage in lifelong learning. Not that he hasn't also repeatedly exhorted us to do so. Charlotte (Kerrigan) Janigian, J88, recalls, “He would say, ‘You should never stop learning—read as much as you can, and keep a dictionary in your bathroom!’ Any time I start to think I'm too old to learn something new, his voice pops into my head.” Nadine (Ullmann) Brozan, J58, heard Sol lecture on the Abrahamic religions in an Alumni College session, sparking an interest that led to her assignment as a religion reporter for *The New York Times*. To this day, she engages in studies of the Torah and Talmud.

“Sol imbued in his students a thirst for knowledge and always did so with a smile,” writes Stephen Bayer, A89. “I walked away with wisdom that has made me a more learned and thoughtful person, a better parent, and a better citizen.” Indeed. How many of us still remember his “ten books” list—a list that, by the way, changes with the times? Chances are many of us still have the ten books he said we should read, no matter what. Chances are we have read them. And chances are our inner landscapes were changed by them.

For the university, the interplay between teaching and scholarship is a mission that Sol has furthered in all of his roles as provost, vice-president, and senior faculty member. “I

think of him as embodying Tufts' vision to be a community of teacher-scholars," states Rob Hollister. "He has been a strong force of encouragement for that ideal in both his personal work and his mentoring of younger generations of faculty." Sol was instrumental in laying the institutional groundwork for Tufts' blending of its teaching and research missions. It is part of Sol's legacy, Hollister believes, that "in our upwards trajectory in the ranks of research universities, we'll never lose that distinctive strength in undergraduate education." The proof is in the number of new faculty who excel as both teachers and scholars. They came to Tufts because they saw an institutional culture that would allow them to thrive as scholars and build on their teaching strengths. Sol helped create that culture—making it one of his lasting imprints on the university.

The quintessential *haimisheh mensch*

Sol has also endeared himself to many in the Tufts community through his mentorship. His secret? "He's the kind of person who's there for you at the right time, with the right thing to say," states Lonnie Norris, dean of the Tufts School of Dental Medicine. Aside from those who have had formal mentoring or advising relationships with Sol, many others—students, faculty, and deans—have enjoyed his informal approachability. Sol is, in fact, the quintessential *haimisheh mensch*, or "regular guy."

During orientation week, one surprised freshman, Mike DeBartolo, A06, found a new friend as he engaged with Professor Gittleman in an in-depth discussion about the Red Sox. One year later, Sarah Licht, A07, discovered in her professor someone to help fill the void from the loss of her beloved grandfather: "I came to Tufts and found, to my delight, another bald, Jewish, baseball-loving man telling me not to forget a jacket in the fall."

Sol has always had a way of passing on his gift of mentorship by example. During a particularly tough period of student unrest, student activist Stephen Wermiel, A72, "got the message that it was important for a professor to help [students] see how to find values and make judgments and become productive individuals." In the process, Wermiel—now an American University law professor—learned how to be a mentor himself.

Norris, too, is in the position of supporting and encouraging others in the same way that Sol did for him. Both were working together on the search committee to find a new dean for the dental school when Sol, as provost, asked him to be dean *ad interim* pending the outcome of the search. After several months, Sol had seen enough to appoint him to the permanent position. "For him to see that potential in me and give me that opportunity is so gratifying," says Norris. "I don't know if I would have even aspired to be in this position. He is someone who gives you an awareness of your own potential by helping you see yourself through his eyes."

It is this talent, plus the personality and human skills of “a terrific baseball coach,” says Hollister, that Sol brought to the university during his long tenure as provost. “Like a good coach working with a range of people, he had a gift for helping myriad individual members of the Tufts community do our best in a sustained way,” he recalls. “He knew instinctively how to bring out the best in all of us.” Behind the scenes, Sol used those skills to help reinvigorate discouraged faculty members. If not for him, some of today’s most productive faculty—scholars who in turn have taught, encouraged, and motivated so many—might have left Tufts.

“He is the unbroken thread”

Sol doesn’t see much difference between today’s students and all the other students he has taught over the past 30 years. And this despite the very different world that today’s students live in, using rapidly evolving tools to process and share information about that world. This astonishing observation says as much about Sol as it does about his students. What this tells us is that he looks beyond exterior trappings—language, dress, behavior, technology fads—to see the essence of a person’s potential, no matter what the era. Generation after generation, *that* is the person he homes in on, the one he connects with, provokes, prods, and challenges.

And he does it so well, touching us so deeply, that decades later we are still bringing our families to meet Sol or telling our newly matriculated offspring: “*This* is the man I was telling you about. *This* is the professor whose course I took, and whose course you have to take. If you do nothing else while you’re here, *this* is the connection to make here at Tufts, the one I guarantee that you will carry with you for the rest of your life.”

Every time we see Sol again—even when he’s touring the country for Tufts alumni—feels like coming home to family. We check in, catch up, and assure him that, yes, we are still learning. Aside from the simple pleasure of talking to him or listening to one of his lectures, he is always a reminder to us of the larger family that is our alma mater. With the passage of time, it sometimes seems as if there is no distinction between the two. “Tufts has always had a smile on its face, and that smile has been Sol’s,” writes Alan Solomont, A70, A08P (his daughter also learned from Sol). “Few others have contributed as much as Sol to making Tufts the warm, friendly, and nurturing place that it is.”

“There’s a continuity that he represents,” notes University Provost Jamshed Bharucha. “He is the unbroken thread that goes through generations of alumni and current students. And because they keep in touch with him, he is also a hub of communication.” Sol is the nucleus around which the Tufts extended family keeps growing, staying connected with him and finding each other. Two strangers can meet by chance and discover they are both Jumbos, decades apart. One of them mentions Sol Gittleman. The other cries out, “Yid Lit!” And suddenly they’re family.

What Tufts is all about

The Gittleman Endowment for Excellence in Teaching affirms this simple truth: As a teacher, a scholar, and a mentor, Sol Gittleman exemplifies everything that makes Tufts unique. In an environment where students feel their minds opening up, “they literally are *challenged*—pushed and provoked—to think about the dilemmas and the conundrums of society,” states Bharucha. “Sol represents that.”

The result of these challenges is an extraordinarily public service-oriented alumni base. One of the key ingredients in the development of the Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service, for example, has been the support of several alumni “who stepped up and have done a lot of heavy lifting, organizationally and financially,” notes Hollister, adding, “It’s not accidental that they all revere Sol and Robyn.”

Sol Gittleman has not only come to represent what Tufts University is all about, he has helped shape that identity. As provost he worked to knit together the separate schools by brokering inter-school connections among faculty. This laid the foundation for the university’s interdisciplinary culture. “He got us all believing that Tufts is a place where boundaries between schools and among disciplines are thinner, and the fences that separate us are lower,” says Hollister. “And he helped build everybody’s consciousness of being part of Tufts.”

Why an endowed professorship?

Endowed chairs are important to Tufts because they allow us to establish an unbroken foundation for the future. And they enable us to compete with other top-ranked universities for faculty members who are leaders in their disciplines.

An endowed chair with Professor Gittleman’s name on it cements the lasting imprint that this extraordinary man has made on Tufts University. It also demonstrates the university’s ongoing commitment to valuing and rewarding excellence in teaching and research. This endowment sends a clear signal to our own distinguished faculty members as well as potential faculty: these are giant shoes to fill. The high standard this chair represents will, in perpetuity, challenge many to aspire to it. And the faculty who earn this prestigious chair will, in succession, embody many of the same academic values and personal qualities that have been Sol Gittleman’s gift to Tufts.

The Sol Gittleman Professorship reflects the deep conviction that inspired teaching and innovative interdisciplinary research are the heart and soul of what Tufts is all about. The endowment reaffirms the university’s long-standing commitment to student-centered education. It is a living monument to all the students and alumni who have experienced—and continue to experience—Sol’s transformative teaching. Successive generations of brilliant educators will continue his tradition of engaging, provoking, prodding, and challenging their students, forever changing them for the better.

Endowed chairs are permanent funds established within the university endowment that provide vital support by underwriting faculty salaries and the substantial costs associated with scholarship. In so doing, they free up funds in the university budget for student financial aid and other critical needs. Funds are carefully managed to provide annual income or to finance stable funds for research. The Board of Trustees requires \$2.25 million to fund an endowed professorship; fundraisers have currently amassed around \$800,000. Fundraising began in 2002 and got an extra push five years later when the New York-based Leon Lowenstein Foundation became involved. The foundation issued a challenge, creating four annual fundraising benchmarks. For each benchmark reached, the foundation promised to donate \$50,000.

The first phase of the Lowenstein Foundation-backed fundraising, beginning in late 2007 and ending in 2008, raised a total of \$100,000. To encourage widespread, small-scale contributions, the foundation stipulated for the first phase only that the endowment not accept gifts of over \$5,000. This enabled a larger number of people inspired by Sol to participate in fulfilling this professorship. Writes Michael Lainoff, A84, “Honoring Sol by helping to endow a professorship is an appropriate legacy, since Sol has given decades of outstanding service to the school and inspired me to love learning for learning’s sake.”

The third and fourth phases of fundraising are expected to raise \$250,000 each. Additional funding beyond the four phases will be needed to reach the \$2.25 million necessary to set the professorship in motion.

Our chance, our challenge

In reflecting on the extraordinary alumni support for the Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service, Dean Robert Hollister observes, “Having talented alumni who are intensely loyal and who get great fulfillment by being active members of the broader Tufts community—that is a huge asset to the university. More than that of any other single individual, that’s Sol’s doing.”

To endow a professorship in Sol Gittleman’s name is to demonstrate and honor the ideals that he and Tufts University impart, ideals that involve searching both within and beyond ourselves to engage in and support lifelong learning. Through our own achievements, we are a living testament to this university’s humanistic culture of courage, respect, teaching, and learning. This is our chance to recognize in a major way what we’ve gained—often from Sol himself, and certainly from the culture that continues to pervade Tufts. This is the best opportunity anyone could possibly have to honor the man who has devoted a lifetime to promoting that humanistic culture. This is our challenge to seize that opportunity.

Gittleman Moments

I have a vivid memory of Sol's compassion as an educator. We must not forget, he said [during an intense period of campus unrest between 1968 and 1972] that "these are our children." It was a profound moment to me that taught me something about how a parent must always love a child, no matter how much a parent may think the child has gone down the wrong path.

Steve Wermiel A72

There are certain phrases that once you hear them, they stay with you. Thank you, Sol, for opening my eyes to the worthy goal to "suck the marrow out of life!"

Jeffrey Stewart, A90

Perhaps Sol's greatest attribute is his ability to eat the entire menu in a Chinese restaurant in Newton at one sitting—with a little extra mustard.

Ed Merrin, A50

Dining with Sol is a gustatory experience: I think his enthusiasm for food comes close to that [which] he has for baseball, the history of the papacy and other esoteric subjects.

Nadine (Ullmann) Brozan, J58

I was a senior in 1983 when my mom [cafeteria worker Dorothy McManus, taking her one allowed free course per semester] and I took Yiddish Literature at the same time! The whole lecture hall even sang her Happy Birthday one October afternoon. Sol bent the rules....She was thrilled. No one could know what that meant to a Somerville blue collar "girl." It brings tears to my eyes now thinking about it.... Sadly, Dorothy died of lung cancer in 1985.

MaryAnn McManus Bartlett, J84

The one memory which stands out was the voice of Professor Gittleman's mingling with Bertolt Brecht's recording of "Mack the Knife." Every time I hear that song, I think of him—pacing, explaining, interpreting, and once again, making the material come alive.

Deborah Jurkowitz, J78

Professor Gittleman...turned toward the 350+ person class and yelled in his classic hearty-toned, "matzo ball soup" voice: "Is there a Shelley Cohen in this class?" I sheepishly raised my hand....[He] paused for what seemed like an eternity, in a way only he could manage. I held my breath. And then he bellowed out at the top of his lungs in a tone more frightening than my own Jewish mother: "Call Your Mother!" Pause. "Call Your Mother. Oy, what's wrong with you? Call your mother, she is worried about you!"

— “Is that it?” I said, meekly, not knowing what to say. Professor Gittleman...with a disappointed shake of the head said, “Isn’t that enough?”

Shelley Cohen, J90

I called Sol after a dental school meeting, kind of depressed, because there was some undercurrent indicating I was only getting about 70 or 80 percent approval of some things I thought needed to get done. Sol said, “Did the majority agree with you?” I said yes. “Did it get passed?” Yes. “Then what are you worried about?” he said. “You think the whole world’s going to agree with you? You got to keep those people included, but you’re never going to have 100 percent. You think I get 100 percent all the time here?” It put things into perspective: you have to do what’s right, and every time you make changes, you’re going to have some pushback.

Lonnie Norris, dean, Tufts School of Dental Medicine

Blame no one. Get it done. Expect nothing in return.

Sol Gittleman