

## Student Profile

## Burma Native Realizes Dream of Attending YU



Sammy Samuels

Coming from a country of only eight Jews, Sammy Samuels was overwhelmed and astounded at his first Shabbat dinner on the Wilf Campus.

A native of Rangoon, Myanmar, formerly Burma, Sammy found himself surrounded by more than 500 Jewish young men at Friday night services as students returned to campus for the fall '02 semester.

"I've never seen anything like that in my life," he said. A soft-spoken young man with a ready smile, Sammy arrived in New York on August 14. Ira Weiss, a professor of accounting at Columbia University who met Sammy in Rangoon, gave Sammy his frequent-flyer

miles to make the arduous journey and took him under his wing until classes began.

"I visited Burma in the summer of 2000 and met Moses Samuels, Sammy's father, when I went to see the Musmeah Yeshua Synagogue in Rangoon," said Professor Weiss. "As caretaker of the country's only synagogue and Jewish cemetery, he showed me around and told me about his son, who very much wanted to attend university in the US." The government had closed down the universities in Rangoon in 1988.

Back in New York, Professor Weiss sent Sammy a directory of the 300 major universities in America, which included YU, as well as information on

preparing essays for college applications. Through email, he assisted Sammy in the process.

A *New York Times* article last July described the Samuels family as the last remnant of Burma's Jewish community and mentioned Sammy's desire to attend Yeshiva University. Professor Weiss immediately emailed it to Sammy.

Ironically, the same day, Sammy had an interview at the American Consulate. Sammy presented the *Times* article to consular officials, and believes the piece proved instrumental in securing him his visa. The value of that prize was apparent. While 10 individuals were already accepted into American colleges, only Sammy and one other person got visas.

Dubbed the 'last hope for the Jews of Myanmar' in *The Times*, Sammy is of Iraqi descent.

"Sammy is the proud heir of a beautiful legacy," said Dr. Herbert C. Dobrinsky, vice president for university affairs and consultant to YU's Sephardic Studies Program, which he co-founded with the late Dr. Solomon Gaon. "His experience at YU will enable him to go back to Myanmar and perpetuate his forbears' traditions."

Sammy spent Rosh Hashana at the home of Rabbi Yamin Levy, a faculty member of the undergraduate Jewish studies program. "Sammy had a wonderful experience in terms of seeing how a *chag* [festival] is observed according to Halakhah in America," said Rabbi Levy.

"We also got him new *tefillin* [phylacteries] and taught him how to put them on. He is doing so every day and is learning ancient texts for the first time with great enthusiasm." Rabbi Levy also pointed out that since coming here, Sammy has adopted Sephardic Jewish customs and liturgy.

Another tourist who met Sammy in Burma was Carole Basri, a New York attorney also of Iraqi descent, who has documented Iraqi Jewish communities. Ms. Basri produced a documentary on her exotic travels, in which Sammy appears, to be aired on PBS Metro Arts.

"I met Sammy and his father in November 2000 in Rangoon at the synagogue. Sammy told me he wanted to apply to university in America but had limited access to the Internet." Ms. Basri suggested he apply to YU and offered to assist him.

"My family has been affili-

ated with Yeshiva University for many years," Ms. Basri said. "My mother, Annette Basri, established a scholarship at The Marsha Stern Talmudical Academy/Yeshiva University High School for Boys and is on the board of the Sephardic Council of Overseers. My brother, Dr. William Basri, is an alumnus of the high school and was honored in 1997 at the high school dinner/concert. I contacted Dr. Dobrinsky who helped facilitate Sammy's coming to YU."

In addition, Ms. Basri taught corporate law at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law in 1994, and for the last six years was involved with the ACA Heyman Intern Program, placing students at New York-area corporations.

Sammy plans to major in computer science and is taking classes in networking, calculus, and introductory English. Having spent a year in Israel in 1999, he is conversant in Hebrew and is tackling Talmud with poise and enthusiasm. The hope is that Sammy's success will help determine the future of Burma's shrinking Jewish community, where he plans to return to carry on his family's rich heritage. □

## New Faculty Members Enrich Undergraduate Teaching

Yeshiva University welcomes these new undergraduate faculty members:



**Dr. Wenxiong Chen**, associate professor of mathematics, Yeshiva College. He received a PhD from the Institute of Math in Beijing, China, and specializes in nonlinear partial differential equations, geometric analysis, and nonlinear functional analysis. He has been awarded grants from the National Science Foundation for the past 15 years.



**Dr. Paula Geyh**, assistant professor of English, Yeshiva College. A PhD from the University of Pennsylvania, she is an expert in comparative literature and literary theory. Her interests include American literature, American postmodernism, and 20th-century American fiction.



**Rabbi Scott Goldberg**, instructor, Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration. He is currently earning a PhD in applied psychology at New York University School of Education. He is a certified learning disabilities teacher, reading specialist, and special education teacher.



**Dr. Bruce Hrnjez**, assistant professor of chemistry, Yeshiva College. A PhD in physical organic chemistry from Johns Hopkins University, he has taught at institutions including Harvard Medical School. He has received numerous grants for scientific research.



**William Stenhouse**, assistant professor of history, Yeshiva College/Stern College. He is a PhD candidate at University College London. Subjects he has taught include Greek and Roman history, Latin and Greek language, Renaissance culture, and historiography from antiquity to the Renaissance.