Thank you to the faculty and students of the Hornstein program for the honor and privilege of receiving the annual Bernard Reisman award. To be in your company and have the opportunity to share a few words with you, your friends and your family today is very special for me. I never thought I would actually attend a Brandeis graduation since when I applied to school here...I was not accepted. Well, it’s good to be here now. A huge congratulations to each of you on your accomplishments. And to your family, friends and faculty, we all know that without your encouragement and support, this afternoon would not be happening.

The only other University graduation I have attended was my own, which I left about halfway through out of sheer boredom. I cannot remember who gave the commencement address or one thing he or she spoke about...quite the memorable experience. I sincerely hope to do better. Not only because I want this to be an incredibly special day for you but because I know our paths will cross again. I want to share with you three events that changed the course of my life forever and some lessons I learned during the process that I hope to be helpful in your journeys.

I am sad to say that I never knew Bernard Reisman personally. But having the opportunity to speak with those who did, along with watching some great videos and reading several articles, it is clear why there is such a beautiful award in his honor. I was overwhelmed with the amount of admiration and respect he had garnered not only in the Brandeis community, but in the Jewish community as a whole. I read articles about his accomplishments as an educator and an innovator; first-hand accounts from students and peers regarding his influence over their leadership styles and professional endeavors, and anecdotes involving block parties and “Bernie-isms.” His wife, Elaine, described how their home was always filled with students that he had invited over for dinner. [“Professionally, he talked about building a community. In his personal life, he lived it,” she said.]
I grew up in Hayward, California. Always knowing I was Jewish, primarily through the lens of the Holocaust, as my father was born in a displaced persons camp in Germany, my personal identity was strong but we did not live in a large Jewish community or practice any rituals at home. I went to a Catholic High School, where I took such exciting courses as Christian Sexuality and the Catholic Experience, all taught by priests. In an attempt to keep me connected to my Jewish roots, my parents signed me up for summer teen trip to Israel. For the first time in my life, I felt what it was to have a group of Jewish friends and a real Jewish community.

Upon returning home that next year, a few of us from our High School went to volunteer at a local park to feed the homeless. In speaking with many of the men, women and children living in the park, it became clear that food was abundant on Thanksgiving and Christmas but the rest of the year was a real struggle. Not just for food but for basic things like blankets, socks, shoes and toiletries. As we were there on Thanksgiving weekend, I felt like we were doing this to feel good about ourselves, rather than actually make an impact on their lives. Over the next week I called friends from my recent Israel trip and rallied together classmates to go the following week with food and clothing supplies. What, just a week before was a bustling park filled with volunteers and warm meals, was now just a sad scene with no one there to offer any help. From this realization, we created Feed the Need, a fully student run homeless feeding organization. What started as a few friends quickly grew into a full-fledged organization. This was the first event that changed my life’s direction. Each week we fed hundreds of men, women and children, provided clothing and job training. We started getting local donations, then press coverage, public service announcements in partnership with Chevron and Clorox and then eventually being featured on the nationally syndicated Roseanne Show. All the while, we were doing more and more work with the homeless in our community. In the end, it was a failure. I went off to college and within a year, the program died. I had not built a proper team, I invested virtually no time in succession and every time there was an opportunity to share what we were doing, meet with a potential donor or speak to the press… I felt that I was the one who needed to do it. I was wrong. But, from these incredible two years, I learned exactly how not to build an organization. A leader is only strong only as
those around him, you can only be successful in this communal work if all the ships in the sea rise, not just your own.

After not getting accepted to Brandeis, I took the next best option...life on the beach at UC Santa Barbara. I continued to be involved in Jewish life while at college. I joined the Jewish fraternity and even went to Hillel occasionally my freshmen year. By sophomore year I was teaching at the local Synagogue and started to take on some leadership roles. I enjoyed it but never wanted to get too serious since my plan was to backpack Europe and study abroad my junior year. Like much of life's plans, this ideal scenario came to a crashing halt during second semester when my father was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer. This was the second event that changed my life's direction. I did not know what to do or who to talk to. Knowing that he would no longer be able to work and that my mom would be caring for him, the spicket had to be turned off. I would return from college and live at home. In order to finish my sophomore year of school, the Hillel director suggested that I apply to the Hebrew Free Loan Association for a $2,000 loan to get me through the semester. Within two weeks I received a phone call from the president of the board letting me know that he had a deal he wanted to discuss. Hebrew Free Loan Association would pay 100% of my tuition through graduation if I agreed to work in the Jewish community during those years to pay for my housing, food and books. I took the offer but not without a caveat. I wanted to know the people making this possible. It was my first real experience with philanthropy and to be perfectly honest, I couldn't understand how these people were taking their hard earned money and instead of giving it to their kids or getting a new car, they were giving it to me. I wanted to know why and how I could live up to this amazing gift.

From that day forward I built relationships with several of the board members, many of whom are my closest friends to this day. Similar to Professor Reisman, they would have me at their homes, share celebrations with me and be there for me when I needed family away from home. You may have heard in some of your development classes that relationships are the key to fundraising. Relationships are the key to everything!

While staying in Santa Barbara to graduate, I took this rare opportunity to maximize my time. Hillel was opening a new building and the momentum was great. One Friday night, during
dinner following Shabbat services, the third event that changed my life’s direction occurred. I sat at a table with an 80 year old man that I had never met before. He didn’t ask my name, who I was or anything else before saying, “If you had a million dollars a year but couldn’t spend it on yourself, what would you do with it?” To this day I cannot remember exactly how I responded but I enjoyed the question and shared some ideas. At the end of dinner he gave me his card and said to follow up with him. I did. The next week I went to his house where we spent about an hour together. At the end of the conversation, instead of a million dollars, he asked me to tutor his 24 year old wife in Hebrew, for free. Here I was, in a million dollar home, sitting with an 80 year old man asking me to tutor his 24 year old wife who not only didn’t speak Hebrew, she couldn’t read or write any language and only was fluent in Cambodian. Was he crazy or was I? I said yes and for the next several months I would go to his home and tutor his wife in Hebrew, with her eventually being able to read. Never did he offer to pay me, he would just walk by and say things like, “Not sure why you are doing this for free, look at the house she lives in!” Nevertheless, at the end of her being able to read Hebrew, he said we would celebrate. He gave me his laser disc player with bootleg laser discs from China and told me we were going to dinner. When we arrived at Costco, his dinner spot of choice, he ordered one hot dog and soda combo for $1.50. We each got one-third of the hot dog and I was last on the soda rotation. I still couldn’t figure out which one of us was crazy. But, at the end, I asked him again about the million dollars. He went into his office and gave me a check, made out to Hillel, for $10,000 and told me to start with that. I would come back every week to report how it is being spent. Once it was gone, he would consider giving more.

Over the next two years of college and beyond, I would see Morris Squire for an hour a week. By this point we were spending half a million dollars a year on a wide variety of programs in the Santa Barbara community. I made business cards for myself and figured that Executive Director would be a good title. I never showed him the cards, in case he disagreed.

A few years later, in 2006, I was in Oakland, California visiting friends and family. Four friends from my high school Israel trip had decided to rent a house together after college. Over the course of dinner, we talked about how we were personally connected to our Judaism but on a communal level, we were too old for anything on campus and too young for the institutions. I took the following idea to Morris: What if we provided these friends with funding
that enabled them to create their own, home-based Jewish community for their peers? Morris approved the idea with one stipulation; the house had to adopt his Hebrew school moniker – Moishe.

The following week these four friends in Oakland put out the word about their Shabbat dinner and 70 people showed up. Later that week, I was contacted by a complete stranger. He had attended the dinner and had an amazing time. He hadn’t felt that connected to the Jewish community since summer camp. How could he apply to start a Moishe House of his own? I was excited. I was inspired. I had no idea what to do next. All of a sudden, we were faced with the opportunity to do something important, something major, and we had no idea how to do it.

The “How” is something that is commonly overlooked. You are educated on creating and maintaining budgets, managing staff, writing grant proposals and presenting to funders, but most of those ideas are based on an existing system or organization. The fact is, the way the world works is changing. People are going to graduate school in record numbers. Young adults now change their career path an average of seven times before they are 30. We are waiting to get married and have one child until an age when most of our parents already had an entire family. Adaptability has never been more important. The “How” has never been more important, or more obscure.

This isn’t meant to be daunting. If anything, you should be excited. Be excited that you are now some of the most highly-qualified members of a brand new wave of possibility makers. Don’t box yourself in to the idea that a structure has already been set for you. Explore the “How.” Try hard, learn as you go, make friends, make connections. Have fun.

Fun is the first lesson I learned. Fun is the most underestimated and underutilized tool in the arsenal of a successful professional career. Too often we get stuck in this idea of a job being something that you go to during the day; that you clock in and out of during the course of your own, personal life. Your job should only be your professional title. Your work, however, should encompass all aspects of your life and all of the content of your character. Make your work fun; make it a place where others yearn to be and want to help make better. Surround yourself with people who are smarter, kinder, more fun. Open yourself up to recognize that and glean from them. Chances are, those people look at you the same way.
Moishe House was fun, it was an adventure. People started to take notice. Not because of the programmatic success but because fun is contagious, people want to be a part of it, all the way from participants up to the largest funders.

By 2008, Moishe House was thriving. We had 20 houses running programs for several thousand Jewish young adults. By this point, 70 Moishe House residents relied on me and our team for not only a monthly programming budget, but a sizeable rent subsidy as well. As a staff of four people with little work experience, I thought we were doing a pretty good job. Then the stock market crashed and it stopped. Everything changed.

Within a 10 day period, Moishe House went from a fully funded program of Morris' Forest Foundation at nearly a million dollars a year to having zero funding and no home. Our inexperience as a non-profit staff had led us to miss a vital part in the health of the organization; diversification. On that fateful afternoon when Morris informed us that he could no longer fund the program, it was time for me do rediscover my “how.”

Second lesson I learned: You are responsible for your own success or for your failure. I immediately thought back to my days with Feed the Need and was crushed by the notion that I had my second failure on my hands. I just couldn’t let it happen the same way. I was not going to blame the stock market for Moishe House's collapse. I called everyone I knew and held nothing back. I knew this program was working but the organization was dead. Fortunately, I built relationships along the way that were not just transactional, they were real relationships and people wanted to help. I put together enough money for one month, filed for tax exemption, asked people to join our new board and all the while, I didn’t tell anyone living in Moishe House. It was a big risk but I felt like if we had any shot of making this work, the program had to thrive, but how could it, if everyone knew it was ending within weeks?

Thinking back to spending four days in Israel with the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, I remembered having so much fun with their team. Teaching them flip cup, dancing on tables, discussing the future of the Jewish world. My problems became their problems because of our relationship. They agreed to give 6 months worth of funding with the idea that it would give us either enough time to close down gracefully so all the residents could
get out of their leases or raise matching funds for the rest of the year. I certainly hoped option 2!

Over the next 6 months I learned my third really valuable lesson: Do not spend your time in meetings or on conference calls. I looked around at other organizations and how they operated, both in the Jewish community and beyond. Top leadership were so busy with meetings and conference calls that they had no time left for what I considered actual work. Please, take this lesson with you to your jobs, otherwise you will become consumed in nothingness. I made a personal policy of no conference calls and no meetings if there were more than 3 other people in it. I had to spend all my time working and raising money.

Last year, over 62,000 people attended Moishe House programs. We now have 53 houses in 14 countries with 3 more scheduled to open on June 1st. We have almost 20 employees including my best friend Jordan Fruchtman, a graduate of the Hornstein Program and one of the original staff members of the Forest Foundation. We have fun at work and with our residents.

We apply our lessons learned to how we have built our organization, now the largest in the world serving 20-something’s. Residents must feel like they are solely responsible for the amazing feeling of creating a successful program as well as solely responsible when things do not work. There is no finger pointing or on the contrary, taking credit for what they are doing. We do not supply a marketing a budget because our belief is that if an individual or group of people are having fun together, others will want to join in. In today’s world, word of mouth spreads without even having to speak to someone. We must create fun and meaningful programs, the rest will fall into place.

Though we supply the rent subsidies and programming budgets to our Moishe House residents, we don’t tell them how to structure their programs or even what programs to have. We base our model on fostering a trust and excitement that results in people building the communities that they want to be a part of. The education and status that you have garnered here at Brandeis has put you in a position to do the same thing. Is it up to you to choose how to share what you have learned and who to share it with. It is up to you to choose your community and learn from them how you can improve it.
Not all people are cut out to be creators. By being accepted and choosing this program you have volunteered yourselves as the ones who seek to lead. Understand that you are now the decision-makers, the path-forgers, the creators of your communities. No set of guidelines exists for something that has not yet been built. The road ahead of you is filled with mistakes and pitfalls, all of which will be your responsibility to correct and overcome so that you can teach the ones who follow to avoid them. Do not blame others for them, find ways to conquer them.

So, my final piece of advice for the Hornstein class of 2013 is to work hard and have good intentions. If you do those two things, I promise, good things will happen. Continue to surround yourself by people you admire. Be so committed to success that you will not allow anything else to even be an option. I am excited for our paths to continue to cross. Congratulations.