



## Alumni Profile: Nicole Goldstein Strassman, MSW '97

When she looks out the window of her book-lined office in Israel's government complex at the entrance to Jerusalem, Nicole Goldstein Strassman gains a momentary reprieve from the jangle of the telephone and the stream of visitor requests.

Her window overlooks the peaceful Courtyard of the Arches, a courtyard of quarried stone divided by a channel of water. Architects, drawing on the Book of Psalms, selected stone to represent the solidity of law, along with sky—reflected by the water—to symbolize justice.

Contemplative moments are rare in her busy professional life. As deputy director for the Supreme Court of Israel's Department of Public Affairs, each day is full, and no two days are ever the same.

Normally she coordinates and conducts tours for the public and the State of Israel's official visitors and coordinates the Court's educational programs—among them mock trials and interactive, law-related activities.

But any given day may find her managing administrative requests; organizing lectures given by Supreme Court justices; or guiding tours that encourage people of varied ages and cultural backgrounds to understand the Israeli legal system, engage philosophical questions such as human dignity and violence prevention, and think through the rich symbolism and historical context of the Supreme Court's architecture.

Strassman was no stranger to juggling priorities and communicating across cultures when she stepped into the deputy director role ten years ago. In 1994, Strassman, raised in the United Kingdom, and her husband Israel, together with their three (and later

four) children, relocated from Jerusalem to Detroit's west suburbs while Israel completed an ophthalmology fellowship.

Strassman, whose background in museum educational programming and "informal education" helped her develop a practical understanding of nonprofit administration, sensed a need to "consolidate and unify" her nonprofit management knowledge. She also appreciated the interpersonal aspects of social work. "I was quite excited about the Drachler Program in Jewish Communal Leadership, and I just called up."

Crossing cultures and juggling priorities required focus and commitment. "My first impression of Southfield [Michigan] was the six-lane highway outside our apartment building; I had never seen a highway so large!" Strassman recalls. "Studying in Ann Arbor, living in Detroit, and raising three small children required an amazing balancing act."

She recalls many "helping hands" from members of the U-M SSW community. "My children had a school holiday, but I had a psychology class," she laughs. "I didn't know what to do, so I asked my professor if I could bring them to class. Perhaps he could use them in a demonstration! He agreed, and we had a wonderful time."

Those were hectic times. Has she earned a return on her investment? Absolutely. "Dina Shtull-Leber, who supervised my field placement, taught me that one can be both detail-oriented and creative. I use this skill every day as I manage countless details but creatively adapt programs so that they speak to Bedouins, Jews, Christians, Muslims, and internationals."

Under the mentorship of now-Proessor Emeritus **Armand Lauffer**, Strassman also learned to feel "part of a family" and to bridge the gap between theory and the realities encountered in Jewish communal life. "On a day-to-day basis, I use all the interpersonal relationship and nonprofit administrative skills that I learned at SSW."

As Strassman builds on her U-M SSW experience, meets the evolving challenges of administrative leadership, and serves in a cross-cultural environment, she focuses on her foundational commitment to education.

"I work to help people understand Israel's legal system because the legal system—and more fundamentally the rule of law represented by the legal system—safeguards democracy, security, and human rights."

And when this commitment is obscured by a flurry of phone calls, she needs only look out the window to remember her desire to help visitors understand that "truth will spring up from the earth and justice will be reflected from the heavens." **M**

—*Elizabeth Leimbach Zambone is a freelance editor and writer living in Valparaiso, Indiana.*