Deborah Waxman first arrived at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Wyncote 20 years ago as a student. On Oct. 9, the college named the 46-year-old rabbi and scholar of American Judaism its next president.

Waxman, currently RRC’s vice president, will take over in January for Rabbi Dan Ehrenkrantz, who has led RRC since 2002. Ehrenkrantz, the first RRC graduate to become its leader, surprised many in the movement when he announced his intention to step down earlier this year.

Waxman — who was ordained in 1999 and later received her Ph.D in American Jewish history from Temple University — won’t be the first woman to head a rabbinical seminary or a congregational movement. But, she said, with so few women serving in the most powerful positions in American Jewish life, her selection is still significant.

Waxman noted that American Judaism is going through major upheavals and she’s well aware her new job title will come with plenty of challenges.

“The thing that I care most about is trying to help Jews find Judaism — in all of its diverse expressions — relevant in this moment in history,” said Waxman, who lives in Elkins Park with her partner, Christina Ager.

Reconstructionism, a relatively small liberal movement that has 107 affiliated congregations in toto, is itself in the middle of a major period of transformation. In 2012, the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation — the movement’s congregational arm — officially merged with the college.

That merger — in which Waxman played a major role — essentially made the RRC president the head of the entire movement. (The Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, which serves the needs of clergy, remains a separate organization.)
In a press release, RRC board chair David Roberts called Waxman “an important driver of our organizational restructuring, as well as our strategic planning and assessment efforts. Her expert knowledge of American Jewish history adds invaluable depth and dimension to her vision for the future of the movement.”

Before Waxman assumes the college presidency, she’ll be working on completing the merged organization’s first-ever strategic plan. Among the ideas being discussed in the process is possibly changing the name of the movement to something that perhaps resonates more with contemporary Jews unfamiliar with the intellectual legacy of the movement’s founder, Mordecai Kaplan.

Waxman said the organization’s goal is to further engage people involved in Reconstructionist Judaism and to provide an avenue into Jewish life — be it cultural, religious or activist — for anyone who is searching. In the wider American landscape, she views Reconstructionism as a strong voice for a progressive religion that is deeply engaged in social-justice issues.

She grew up in West Hartford, Conn. Her 1979 Bat Mitzvah was one of the first ever held on a Saturday morning in a Conservative synagogue.

She attended Columbia University and later worked as a grant writer for the Teacher’s College there before coming to Philadelphia.

Regarding the recent Pew study of American Jews, which reported high rates of intermarriage among young Jewish adults and low rates of identification with Judaism or Israel, Waxman said the news wasn’t all bad. The overwhelming majority of respondents said they felt proud of being Jewish, she said, even if they don’t identify strongly with the faith.

“So much of the interpretation of the study missed that point and went into a panic mode,” she said. “The Reconstructionist Movement is deeply committed to the idea of Jewish peoplehood. Religion is certainly critical to Jewish identity, but it is not the sole measure of Jewish identity.”

The Pew results were “an affirmation” of the core Reconstructionist philosophy and provide, she insisted, an opportunity for people to step forward and say, “What is the next step?”