In history-making move, rabbinical college gets out female prez

Rabbi Deborah Waxman has a lengthy affiliation with the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College — as a student, vice president and professor. And now, she adds the title of president to that list.

Waxman will be inaugurated as the president of RRC Oct. 26. She is believed to be the first woman president of a religious seminary, and the first woman rabbi to head a major Jewish movement. And, as she's an out lesbian, the presidency is even more historic.

Waxman is a 1999 RRC graduate. She grew up in New England but had family ties in the Philadelphia area and, after earning a bachelor’s degree from Columbia College, she went on to attain a master of arts in Hebrew Letters and a rabbinical ordination from RRC.

“I was choosing between a Ph.D. and the rabbinate, and I chose the rabbinate. I really wanted to be in my heart even more than my head,” Waxman said. “I had done administrative work, raising money, grant-writing, but I was really looking for something that would give me the framework, the training in which to talk to people about the ultimate things, the things that really matter.”
Waxman was born and raised Jewish, in the Conservative movement. It was her history with that movement, coupled with her burgeoning sexuality, that led her to RRC.

“I came of age in that movement right as there were many, many changes for women, but not necessarily for queer people. And that really affected my decision of where to study to become a rabbi,” she said. “I wasn’t entirely out at the time; at first, I had the conception that I was bi while I was applying to rabbinical school. But I wanted to be studying somewhere where I would be celebrated in all my strengths and capacities, in my fullness.”

She came to embrace her identity as a lesbian during her first year at RRC. After graduation, Waxman went on to join the faculty of RRC and from 2003-13 served as the school’s vice president for governance. She earned her Ph.D. in American Jewish History from Temple University in 2010.

Among her work as RRC vice president of governance, she was instrumental in RRC’s 2012 restructuring, led its academic-accreditation work and also played a key role in its first comprehensive-assessment plan.

“I’ve been at this institution so long because I really think the questions Reconstructionists ask about how to be Jewish, how to be religious, how to be cultural and human are really interesting questions. The commitment we have to hearing each other across our differences and celebrating our commonalities are interesting, vital questions,” Waxman said. “I think Reconstructionists have a tremendous amount to contribute to conversations about how to be Jewish in the 21st century. There’s a sense of optimism, forthrightness, a veneration of the past and excitement about our future so, when the presidency came open, I wanted to be a part of this conversation.”

Waxman added that the history-making nature of her appointment — as both a woman and an LGBT community member — puts her in a unique position to take that conversation outward.

“Judaism as a religion is very old and there’s a lot of expressions of patriarchy where certain expressions of Judaism cannot or do not accommodate women in leadership; sometimes it’s a social choice and sometimes it’s inherent in the legal system of Jewish law. So I have found myself in interesting situations and seen growthful opportunities for people I’m in conversation with,” she said. “But it’s a tremendous honor. I’m so aware of the people who’ve paved the way for me to hold this position — the pioneers, the women who entered into leadership, the queer people. I’m deeply, deeply moved and aware that I am part of a lineage and that I have benefitted so much from their courage and extraordinary leadership.”

Waxman’s inauguration ceremony will take place at 2:30 p.m. Oct. 26 at the National Museum of American Jewish History, Fifth and Market streets. For more information, visit www.rrc.edu.