The Katz Center’s board chair reflects on his family’s long involvement with Judaic studies at Penn.

A FAMILY FOCUS

The center was important to my father because it combined two of his great loves: the University of Pennsylvania and the Jewish people,” says Thomas O. Katz, W’79, parent, SAS Overseer, and Chair of the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies’ Board of Overseers. His late father, Herbert D. Katz, W’51, parent, was one of the center’s founding board members and served as chair from 1998 to 2003.

Herb Katz had long been a champion of a broad Jewish studies curriculum at the University, so in 1993 when the Anenberg Research Institute was reborn as Penn’s Center for Judaic Studies—a postdoctoral research center devoted to all facets of Jewish civilization—he wholeheartedly gave his time and support, crisscrossing the country to help raise a $20 million endowment to ensure its future. Today his family continues his legacy.

Tom Katz joined the board in 2000 at his father’s urging and became board chair himself in 2012. “I can’t go to the center without feeling indelibly bound up in the history because of the work of my father,” he says. Moreover, he’s discovered that his family’s relationship with the center precedes even Herb’s long affiliation. Tom’s grandfather, Joseph Meyerhoff, was a supporter of Dropsie University, the center’s earliest predecessor. Now Tom, his wife Elissa Elant Katz, C’79, parent; his mother Eleanor Meyerhoff Katz, parent; and his brother-in-law, new board member Howard Reiter, parent, remain committed to the world-renowned center, recognized by Judaic scholars as the premier location to attend scholarly lectures and exchange ideas.

After Herb passed away in 2007, the family made a gift to rename the center in his memory. “Some of his greatest organizational joys and happiness came from his work with Penn and with [the center’s Elia Darivoff Director] David Ruderman, so it seemed like a fitting way to honor his memory,” says Tom, whose family had already created a fellowship, an annual lecture, and a publications fund at the center, as well as the Joseph Meyerhoff Chair in Modern Jewish History that Ruderman holds.

After 20 years as director, Ruderman will step down next summer. “There is nothing about any success at the center that is not indelibly intertwined with David Ruderman,” Tom says. He’s looking forward to collaborating with Ruderman’s successor, Steve Weitzman, whom Tom calls “an accomplished scholar, a fine administrator, and a great guy.” The board is already supporting Weitzman during the transition, says Tom, who like his father has worked hard to help board members, academics, and administrators cooperate as true partners.

Exposing the board to the center’s rich scholarly life is another priority for him, as it was for Herb. One of his greatest pleasures, he says, is the annual Gruss Colloquium in Judaic Studies, at which the center’s fellows present their research. “To hear the younger scholars say what an influence it has been on their capacity to grow as academics … and to hear very seasoned people, who could go anywhere on sabbatical and choose to go to the Katz Center, talk about how the experience has brought their scholarship to new heights is really a great joy.”