

et al.: Concrete shredder

# Bright

*The professors, students  
and alumni who shine in  
Madison's constellation*

Skateboard aficionado and history professor Howard Gelfand is researching the culture and history of board sports. He has also published *Sea Change At Annapolis: The United States Naval Academy 1949-2000*. The book explores the social development of the U.S. Naval Academy and how it reflects the social development of American culture.

# Highlights

[Howard "H" Gelfand]

## Concrete shredder

*History professor surfs the sidewalk to save the environment* BY TYLER McAVOY ('12)

**R**oad rash" is not a term generally used by anyone beyond the concrete shredders who regularly coast around on skateboards. Most students and professors choose to get around campus on a bike or by just plain old walking; but for those few brave skaters, skateboarding is a die-hard passion that even the worst of asphalt injuries can't diminish.

JMU history professor Howard "H" Gelfand is a concrete shredder from way back.

A skater since his days as a doctoral student at the University of Arizona, Gelfand has chosen a skateboard as his vehicle of choice. Carving the hills of JMU's campus to get to and from his history classes, Gelfand's style is unique. He is perfectly relaxed on his board, slowly gliding down JMU's sidewalks and roadways.

He knows all too well the difficulties of dedicated skaters. "I've been beeped at, given the middle finger, sworn at, and told once I should 'grow up and get a car,'" Gelfand says. But he has seen improvement. "As the number of skaters has increased on campus, I've seen more welcoming behavior."

Skateboarding has piqued some interest from JMU police as well. Officers have stopped Gelfand several times while skating around campus. "JMU and Harrisonburg have been tough places to be a skateboarder," Gelfand says. "JMU police, Harrisonburg police and even a state trooper have stopped me for riding my board."

The professor applauds the officers for looking out for everyone's safety but still touts skateboarding as the best mode of campus transportation. When he travels to other parts of the country, Gelfand takes his board with him. "I see things that everyone else misses," he says. Gelfand has logged miles on his board in places like Honolulu, Portland and San Francisco.

As any good thrasher will admit, you can't skate without earning a few scars. Unlike hit-

ting water on a surfboard, the tarmac likes to remind you just how powerful gravity can be. "I have great respect for asphalt, which almost always leaves a mark and, in my case, a variety of broken bones," admits Gelfand.

His worst accident resulted in a broken chin, jaw and wrist. "I had to write a lecture at the University of Arizona after that accident. That was not fun," he says. "But the surgeon who repaired my jaw said, 'Hey, you've been riding your board for years without an accident, why stop now? Have fun.' So I've followed his advice."

The practicality of skateboarding can't be denied. Cheaper and more portable than a bike, skateboarding is beginning to gain a strong following at JMU and in Harrisonburg.

It's also better for the environment, says Gelfand, who has fitted his boards with soy and bamboo wheels, making them more environmentally friendly than the traditional plastic-based wheels. He also owns boards made from materials like bamboo and koa wood, which are grown on tree farms and not cut from hillsides.

"I remind my students that each of us can make a small difference in reducing our carbon footprint," Gelfand says. "We can take small steps to improve our personal health and the health of our environment."

The crux of Gelfand's academic research in JMU's history and interdisciplinary studies programs is examining the culture around board sports. He is interested in how skating and surfing culture intersects with other disciplines like business, engineering and oceanography. His research has included visits to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and the University of California to pursue the history of boarding culture.

The largest part of Gelfand's study is his ongoing research with the Surfrider Foundation in Southern California. The foundation includes large groups of academics, lawyers and physicians who work to protect the coastal environment from business and governmental abuses. Surfrider representatives have partnered with music groups like Incubus and professional athletes like champion surfer Kelly Slater.

From academic research to health benefits, skateboarding is a part of Gelfand's daily life. "Instead of stressing out about traffic, worrying about the price of gas or finding a parking spot, I get some fresh air, a little exercise and a chance to enjoy myself." **MI**

\* Learn more about Howard Gelfand at <http://webjmu.edu/history/faculty/gelfand.html>.



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— HOWARD GELFAND,  
skateboarder and history professor