

# Homecoming, religious holiday conflict leaves Jewish teen in tough spot

By [James Ayello](#)

October 6, 2011 | 7:38 p.m. CDT



Hickman High School senior Laura Davis watches with other cheerleaders Tuesday as her schoolmates hang a sign in the school's commons area that reads "Senior 2012 Swag." Davis' decision to attend the Homecoming game Friday as a cheerleader and member of the Homecoming court instead of attending Yom Kippur services was a struggle. ; [Pinar Istek](#)

COLUMBIA — Laura Davis is a conflicted teenager. That's not uncommon.

But her conflict is.

On Friday evening, Hickman High School will have its Homecoming football game. As a cheerleader and a candidate for Homecoming queen, Davis is expected to be there.

But Friday evening is also the observance of the beginning of Yom Kippur, Judaism's holiest and most important holiday. As a Jewish person, she is expected to be at Kol Nidre services.

“It’s been stressful,” Davis said. “It’s disappointing I have to choose between a school event and my beliefs.”

Davis, 17, is a senior and a member of Hickman's student government, dance steering committee and newspaper. She had planned to miss the Homecoming game against Gateway Tech — until she was elected to the court.

“Being on the Homecoming court is a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence,” Davis said. “It’s also a really cool opportunity.”

As queen nominee, she was allowed to raise money for a charity by selling lunch to students Tuesday. For her charity, Davis chose the Central Missouri Humane Society, to which she has long donated money from birthdays and holidays.

Faith plays a big role in Davis' life. At Congregation Beth Shalom, she's an assistant Sunday school teacher, takes a class on modern Jewish culture and is a member of a youth services group that plans events for Jewish teens.

“I have been going to (Yom Kippur) services since childhood,” she said. “I have never missed them. They’re very important to me.”

Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of atonement, begins at sunset Friday and ends at sunset Saturday this year. Observant Jews usually mark the day by fasting, praying for forgiveness and spending much of the day in synagogue services.

Davis said that before she was nominated, the decision would have been an easy one.

“I would have recognized my religious obligations and known that I’d be missing just another football game,” she said. “I initially told my mom that I really wanted to go to the services, but that was before I was named a queen candidate.”

Davis took her dilemma to those closest to her: her mother and members of the synagogue.

“It was definitely a difficult decision, one that we really struggled with,” Leah Cohn, Davis’ mother, said. “I know that being on the Homecoming court is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, so Laura and I spoke with members of the congregation, and I talked to the rabbi and his wife about it.”

The response they received helped them make the decision to go to the game.

"Almost everyone told us that being on the Homecoming court would be a great experience for Laura and that God would understand if she decided to attend the game," Cohn said. "Yom Kippur is all about forgiveness."

But although Davis has decided to attend the Homecoming game, she doesn't feel any less stressed about it.

"I'm a little disappointed in myself. It's a really big deal not to be there (at the services)," Davis said. "But everyone reassured me it would be OK. They told me, 'Kol Nidre comes every year.'"

Kol Nidre is the declaration said at the start of the evening service on Yom Kippur, and the name sometimes is used in referring to the entire service.

Cohn reassured her daughter that she believes Davis made the right choice and decided to show her support by attending the game with Davis.

"It will be the first time I've missed Kol Nidre services in 49 years," Cohn said. "I don't like that I will miss them, but they are not as important as this unique point in my daughter's life."

Davis will have the opportunity to attend Yom Kippur services at 9 a.m. Saturday, but not before she fulfills another obligation to Hickman — to prepare the school for the Homecoming dance Saturday night. As dance chairwoman, Davis will go to the school at 7:30 a.m. to help set up, then go to the synagogue for services until sundown. Afterward, she will head back to Hickman for the dance.

The situation was a result of accidental scheduling by the Hickman athletics department and Columbia Public Schools.

"We always try to accommodate students' needs," said Bruce Whitesides, director of athletics for the district. "But football games are scheduled two to three years in advance, and, unfortunately, our hands are kind of tied."

Peter Stiepleman, assistant superintendent of elementary education, explained that Friday night's conflict was not an issue they anticipated.

"Holidays conflicting at this point in the schedule was not something we traditionally thought about, but it will certainly be something we look at in the future," Stiepleman said.

He stressed the importance of being aware of all religious holidays in a districtwide email he sent out months ago after members of the Jewish community expressed concern about the year's athletics schedule.

"I sent out an email saying that everyone in the district needs to be more conscious and considerate of all religions and their holidays," Stiepleman, who also is Jewish, said. "There is a lot of value in diversity and inclusion. As a community, we all need to be more aware of days important to people's faiths."

Rock Bridge High School also has its Homecoming game, against Francis Howell, on Friday and its dance on Saturday.

Last February, Hickman moved its prom from Good Friday to another Friday in April after receiving complaints.

Although Cohn is confident in her decision to go to the game with her daughter, she recognizes this won't be the last time she or her children will have to make a choice like this.

"Jews are the minority," she said. "We will face these kinds of things our whole lives."