Earlier this month Molly Rissien became the first student to graduate with a Bachelor of Arts degree with a special major in Jewish studies from the University of Kansas. The 24-year-old daughter of Kehilath Israel Synagogue members Aaron and Shelley Rissien double majored, also earning a degree in applied behavioral science. She is a 2009 graduate of Hyman Brand Hebrew Academy.

KU currently offers an undergraduate minor and courses in Jewish studies, Hebrew and Yiddish. John Younger, the academic director of Jewish studies, said the program is currently seeking approval to offer a Jewish studies major. Rissien’s special major, he said, “is obviously an historic moment.”

Younger said he expects to receive final approval of the Jewish studies major in October of this year. He explained it’s already been approved by the college and now needs to be approved by the Board of Regents. Once that happens he said KU will “begin signing students up immediately.”

“In which case then we can start offering the major and start graduating our regular BA’s next spring,” Younger said.

The first student to petition the college to special major in Jewish studies was Jerusha Pitney, who is expected to graduate in 2016. Rissien said she didn’t even know such a thing was a possibility until she overheard a conversation about it between another student and Younger. She became interested immediately.

“It was really exciting because I had always wanted to be a Jewish studies major but it was never an option. Once I heard about them applying for the special major, we sat down and looked over my classes. I already had enough classes for the major because I had already taken so many Jewish studies courses and Hebrew courses,” she said.

Younger said the program has been informing Jewish studies minors who had a GPA over 3.0 about the possibility of petitioning for a special major in Jewish studies.

“The process is actually pretty simple since we have already outlined what the major will look like in Jewish studies. So basically they are duplicating that and having it approved by a committee of three Jewish studies faculty members. I then write a cover letter and we submit it to the college Undergraduate Studies Advisory Board,” Younger said.

Rissien said the process wasn’t as easy as it may sound. The approval process was longer than she anticipated as well.

“It was a stressful few months but it was really exciting when it finally got approved,” she said. “We waited a whole semester before we heard. During that time I was taking courses to fulfill the requirements.”

One of the Hebrew teachers in the Jewish studies department is Rissien’s mother, Shelley.

“I only had her in one course, the third level of Hebrew, and there were only five students in the class,” Molly Rissien explained. “It was a conversation-based class so most of the grades were based on participation.”

Rissien said it was nice having her mother in the department.

“I would help her with her other classes, which helped me,” she said.

Being the first graduate with a special major in Jewish studies is amazing, Rissien said.

“When I went to graduation, I had a few people come up to me and say, ‘You’re the girl who got the first Jewish studies major.’ I had no idea people even knew. It was such a great feeling.”

“Now there are people going to John Younger and asking if they can now be Jewish studies majors. It’s exciting to see that it’s growing and they are trying to make it an actual major, not just a special major.”

This summer Rissien will be working for BBYO at CLTC, a leadership training camp in Wisconsin. She plans to move to Chicago in August and pursue her career.

“My dream job is to work in Jewish education with Jewish children who have special needs,” she said.

She decided to pursue this career path after working as a summer camp counselor at The J. She said she was impressed by how The J, with the help of Sasone (the community program which provides services to children with special needs), integrates children with special needs into its summer camps.

“I love Judaism and I love working with kids with special needs. Camp was what made me realize that this is what I want to do with my life because I gained the most when I was a counselor working with these kids,” she said.

She chose to move to the Chicago area for two reasons.

“I want to experience what it’s like to live in a large Jewish community where there are more people my age. My brother Matt also lives there.”