



The Freethought Society News

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The newsletter is published by the Freethought Society (FS) and offers information written specifically for the nontheist community.

Articles in this newsletter, however, do not necessarily represent the opinions of the FS Board of Directors.

Attention writers!

Interesting articles about freethought issues are welcomed.

Submissions will be reviewed and approved for publication by the FS Editorial Board.

Article word count maximum is 5,000.

Please submit articles with a bio and photo, a suggested title, and relevant photos/clip art to:

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The Friggatriskaidekaphobia 2011 Party

by Margaret Downey

Brian Tracy (a very clever fellow and founder of a human resource company based in Solana Beach, California) has said, "I've found that luck is quite predictable. If you want more luck, take more chances. Be more active. Show up more often."

The Freethought Society (FS) did exactly that! FS took a chance that people would be interested in challenging superstitions on Friday, May 13, 2011 and opened a Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Center at the Corinthian Yacht Club in Essington, Pennsylvania. The event required months of planning, but FS volunteers were active and showed up often to make it happen.

Carol Everhart Roper designed a fantastic poster to help advertise the event. She posted event information in every online venue she could. Members of the Philadelphia Coalition of Reason helped spread the word and volunteers placed posters in bookstores and on community bulletin boards in and around the Philadelphia area. The anti-superstition party concept caught the attention of a well-respected *Philadelphia Inquirer* journalist, **Faye Flam**. On the day of the event, the article she wrote about superstitions was printed on the newspaper's front page. The article contributed to the great number of attendees, which was estimated to be between 125-150 people. Flam's article quoted me as saying "We want people to know they are in charge of their destiny and life choices. Some superstitions, such as the African belief that albino children bring bad luck, are cruel and dangerous."

The fact is that Friday-the-Thirteenth superstitions have a negative effect on the economy. Superstitious people do not make major purchases (a new home, car or stock) and will not conduct certain activities (getting married, driving, conducting business, etc.). Their fear is based on irrational thinking and assumptions of misfortune. Even the cameraman that WPVI (Channel 6) assigned to film the event admitted that he was anxious to complete a few interviews and quickly depart the scene. He was upset about being in a place where superstitions were being broken — on purpose! I gave him some "professional advice" and encouraged him to use his critical thinking skills as often as possible. The interview aired as a special segment on the 11:00 PM news. It seems that no "bad luck" befell the cameraman and he was able to complete his assignment.

Three stars of rationality attended the party. **David Silverman** (President of [American Atheists](#)) and his family traveled by train from New Jersey in order to attend the event. FS volunteer extraordinaire **Tom Melchiorre** took on the role of "Train to Party Chauffeur." He also posted direction signs around the area. Silverman and his family said that they had a great time. **Tom Flynn** (Executive Director of [The Council for Secular Humanism](#) and Editor of *Free Inquiry* magazine) entertained everyone with his great stories and gregarious personality. He took time from a speaking tour in order to attend the party and participate as a game leader. **P. Z. Myers** flew to Pennsylvania from Minnesota to attend the party. I was proud to host Myers as my house guest for a few days and he wrote a nice review about the party on his science blog ([Pharyngula](#)). Myers led the mirror breaking ceremony and also held the fairy piñata during the "Fracture the Fairy" game.

Photos and more information about the great volunteers who showed up and were actively involved in making the 2011 Anti-Superstition party a big success are highlighted in this newsletter. ◆

2011 Friday the Thirteenth Photos



Binh Nguyen (pictured above) from "[The Pros](#)" DJ service enjoyed seeing attendees do the Ladder Limbo, break a mirror, bowl down Leprechauns, dance with open umbrellas and trash their horoscopes as he played music in the background. The play list highlighted songs related to superstitions.

Below are **Carol Everhart Roper** (standing), **Tom Flynn** and **Margaret Downey**. Roper greeted attendees as the Miss Fortune Teller and conducted the "Trash Your Horoscope" dance. Downey is dressed as a [Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Nurse](#).



Pictured above are **David Silverman** (left), **Rayanne Silverman** (center) and **Hildy Silverman** (right), as they show no fear of walking under a ladder.



P. Z. Myers (right) and **Shaun McGonigal** (left) are pictured below admiring the giant black cat head placed on the front lawn of the Corinthian Yacht Club.

Myers spoke briefly at the party and helped conduct the mirror breaking ceremony. Myers also dangled the fairy piñata from the top of a ladder as it was being swung at by an attendee.





Pictured above left is **Noah Balistra** sitting for his Friday-the-Thirteenth caricature, being drawn by “Nurse Emily.” Caricature artist **Emily Anthony** is pictured sitting under an umbrella with **John J. Byrne**.

Below left are **Carl Silverman** and his wife **Jean Silverman** as they enjoy slow dancing under an open umbrella.

Monica Jones is pictured breaking a mirror, as **P. Z. Myers** (left), **Margaret Downey** and DJ **Binh Nguyen** stand by. Jones is wearing protective goggles and signed a “hold harmless” agreement prior to the mirror breaking ceremony. She reports that only good things happened to her since her participation in the Freethought Society’s Friday-the-Thirteenth party.



FS Friday the 13th Party — Predictably Great!

by Carol Everhart Roper

It was a sunny, gorgeous day, not too hot, not too cold, but it was Friday-the-Thirteenth! What might be in store? If you're a skeptic, then the only thing Friday-the-Thirteenth means to you is a great freethought party! And The Freethought Society (FS) knows how to throw a Friggatriskaidekaphobia bash!

FS president, **Margaret Downey** 'lucked into' a fantastic venue — the Corinthian Yacht Club — located on the Delaware River in Essington, Pennsylvania. Driving along the river road, you come to a long driveway, wending its way through a lovely, spacious lawn, bringing you to the street side of a classic Philadelphia mansion. Out front, alongside the professionally landscaped foundation, was a huge

inflated black cat head swaying gently in the breeze, daring the fearful to enter. Downey borrowed the cat head from a Pocopson veterinarian who supported the concept of discouraging the superstition that a black cat is unlucky.

Once inside, the ticket table was spellbindingly manned by **Tom Schottmiller** and **Noah Balistra**. Nearby, **Andrew Barrett** sat on a comfy sofa selling the book *Imagine No Superstition*. A box full of books was donated to FS as a fund raising tool by the author, **Stephen Uhl**.

Wandering through the multi-room event, attendees encountered assorted tableaux. The "Superstition Museum" created by Downey showcased all sorts of unearthly beliefs, from the familiar to others foreign and little-known. Each table highlighted a different category of superstitions including food, clothing, household items, animals and other oddities. Cocktail tables were decorated with assorted 'entertainment' items such as a Ouija board, a wishing well and Tarot cards. Luck prevailed as no one fell victim to any magic spells!

The mood was festive. Medical personnel "Doctors of Superstition" (aka Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Nurses and Doctors) wandered the rooms ready to help exorcise any residual superstition still eerily lurking back in the primitive recesses of one's mind.

FS was fortunate to have three special guests in attendance — the estimable **Tom Flynn** from the Center for Inquiry, American Atheists president **Dave Silverman** (and his family) and scientist **P. Z. Myers** — each of whom worked the crowd like the pros they are.

I played the part of the floozy fortune teller/psychic, poised to predict a fun time that evening for all! Myers looked floored and a bit suspicious when I asked him his 'astrological sign' — that is until I explained the joke.

FS hired a fabulous DJ who played tune after



I captured this photo of **Glen Loew** (left), **Margaret Downey** (center) and **Shaun McGonigal** (right) just before they began their anti-superstition shift at the Freethought Society Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Center.

superstitious tune, heralding the tone for the visionary games that were scheduled. Among the many revealing experiences were horoscope trashing, limboing under a ladder, dancing with an open umbrella, fracturing a fairy piñata, Leprechaun bowling and much more. FS awarded a prize for the "most enthusiastic participant" for each one of these activities.

The cash bar was well-managed — and well-attended. A few snack trays were located near the bar. As large as the venue was, there was a time when the crowds were barely passable! Estimates of the crowd size ranged from 125 to over 150. I am almost certain that the final count was at least 150!

As I had foretold, everyone seemed to have a great time. Lots of cameras were capturing souls and if you wanted a break from the action, a comfortable sitting room was available. For a nice change of pace, one could simply walk out the double doors to a deck. A few people took a walk to the water's edge, or walked on water — supernatural powers permitting.

I thoroughly enjoyed the entire event. Downey's hosting magic was evident everywhere. My husband **Lee Roper** attended as did many of my friends including **Rick Wingrove** and **Ellen Birch** who drove to the event together from Virginia. They won the prize for having traveled the farthest. I met folks I knew online, but had never seen in person. It was great to finally meet **Ed Baker**, **Shaun McGonigal**, and my co-FS webmaster (a true computer magician) **Brian Fields**. I overheard parts of many wonderful conversations, but did not linger too long at any one table or group. Both **Jack Chastain** and I took tons of photos and we magically seemed to know that each of us should capture different aspects of the party. You can view my photos at the following link:

<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.149243355146198.35507.147128532024347>

Chastain's photos can be seen at this link:

<https://picasaweb.google.com/jack.chastain/Friggatriskaidekaphobia2011#>

With such a fantastic turnout FS actually had 'good luck' on Friday-the-Thirteenth. I look forward to many more such events in our highly auspicious future; but...

What *are* those faint smudges in the photos? ◆

FS Friggatriskaidekaphobia Party Cures All

by Glen Loev

The Freethought Society's (FS) 2011 Friday-the-Thirteenth Anti-Superstition party was a blast! I didn't know what to expect, but the event turned out to be much better, much livelier and much more fun than I anticipated.

Margaret Downey, FS's founder and current president was the driving force behind the event. As usual she put her all into making the party a success. She pre-planned even the smallest details.

My 13 year-old-son **Noah Loev Balistra** and I arrived about an hour before the starting time. We volunteered to help set up the space. By the time we had arrived, Downey, her husband **Tom Schottmiller** and a few others had already done the lion's share of the work. I was impressed with the interesting arrangements of museum-like displays, tables with funny centerpieces and a nicely decorated entertainment area.

The Corinthian Yacht Club venue was a challenge for our event. Basically it was a long oblong space with adjacent smaller rooms. There are connections at either end that further divided into cozy rooms. One end had a larger space where there was a bar and dance area. We set up a lectern, microphone and DJ in order to encourage dancing and game playing. The layout proved perfect to not only dance, but the smaller rooms off to the side provided nice areas for conversations.

Some volunteers were dressed as Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment personnel, clairvoyants or other sundry apparitions. After everything was in order, the volunteers were treated to a nice selection of sandwiches that Downey pre-ordered from the Club. She made sure special guests **P. Z. Myers**, **Tom Flynn** and **David Silverman** were well-fed prior to the start of the party. Downey gave each of the special guests four drink tickets and a special "thank you for attending" gift.

When guests began to arrive, I was stationed at the ticket desk with Schottmiller. My son and a few other FS volunteers rotated the ticket sales job with us. We were kept busy collecting money, stamping hands, filling out name badges — all the while keeping track of the number of attendees. We also collected contact information from as many first-time guests as possible. I was happy to welcome the steady stream of attendees of all ages — families, single adults, students, long-time supporters of FS and many new faces. Wanting to get people past the entrance table quickly, we ended up losing track of the exact number of attendees.

I spent about half my time at the sign-in table. When I wasn't working the table I walked around the party, clipboard in hand, offering to administer anti-superstition "check-ups." Downey presented those who passed "the test" with a "Clean Bill of Mental Health" certificate. Many people were recognized that night for being superstition-free. The test included asking people questions such as:

Are you upset if a black cat crosses your path?

Do you agree that checking your horoscope is irrational and a waste of time?

Can you spill salt without feeling compelled to throw some over your shoulder?

Have you "Trashed Your Horoscope?"

Did you register your name to "Fracture the Fairy" piñata?

Are you willing to break a mirror without fear of having bad luck?

This party was a lot of fun for me. I liked wearing the Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Doctor costume and I enjoyed having an assigned "task." Being in character made it much easier for me to approach people. It wasn't a surprise to me that everyone I talked to that night passed the anti-superstition test with flying colors!

Altogether, the event went very smoothly. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves, dancing, drinking, nibbling on cheese and crackers and participating in all the fun activities that took place throughout the evening. Party attendees had fun breaking a piñata, doing the Ladder Limbo, dancing inside with open umbrellas, getting their caricatures drawn, and so much more. Attendees also had the opportunity to talk with the featured special guests. Many of us were able to catch up with long-time friends and made new connections with like-minded individuals.

I am already looking forward to the next FS anti-superstition party which will take place on **Friday, September 13, 2013**. Please plan to either attend or volunteer. And, no worries, FS will still be around to party, regardless of the Mayan calendar superstition that the world is going to end on December 22, 2012! ♦



Pictured above are Tom Schottmiller (left) and Glen Loev working the ticket table.

Frigg Cures of the Past and Future

by Shaun McGonigal

Come one, come all! The Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Doctor has ordered you to be well! While clairvoyance will not help you to determine the best road to recovery, patronage of your local skeptic events just might. In my 'professional' opinion, the best remedy for your superstition ailment is to rid yourself of anxieties related to stepping on cracks, breaking mirrors, and affording funding of your fortune teller's woo-woo addiction.

Instead of collecting "lucky charms," reading horoscopes or avoiding adorable black cats, you should instead plan to visit a Freethought Society (FS) Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Center and find a cure for any hidden pesky superstitions.

The 2011 FS Treatment Center was open four hours on Friday, May 13th at the Corinthian Yacht Club and if you missed it, do not fear — another opportunity to receive anti-superstition treatment will occur in Philadelphia again in about two years. Mark your calendars and start planning to have a great time on **Friday, September 13, 2013**. Watch for event details in future issues of the *Freethought News*.

Since I have attended several FS anti-superstition parties in the past, I can attest to the fact that the party is a proximal cause of enlightenment and mirth. In 2008, I met **James "The Amazing" Randi**. His affable good humor was apparent with his opening statement and jokes throughout the evening. In 2006, I met and talked to **Michael Shermer** as he participated in helping FS dispel misconceptions of Friday-the-Thirteenth. This year it was an honor to meet and talk with **Tom Flynn, P. Z. Myers, David Silverman** and other people who I respect and admire.

It was great to see so many people attending from a wide variety of locations. I was impressed that the party crowd consisted of a mix of older and younger, outspoken and quiet people. The common thread was that everyone seemed to really like the entire anti-superstition concept. The atmosphere was conducive to having conversations with the big name attendees.

There was a shared catharsis in the room as people collectively and symbolically mocked and tossed aside symbols of

superstition. There were no signs of apprehension — only joy at partying with like-minded people. We had a sense of community as we celebrated scientific literacy, healthy skepticism, and the willingness to rid ourselves of primitive beliefs that our culture continues to hold. It was the kind of party that allows a person to see beyond where we disagree and to see many of the things about which we collectively agree.

I hear there may be more anti-superstition parties before 2013 in other areas of the country. There are plans underway to make events grander and more entertaining than ever. Watch for details provided by party planner and president of FS, **Margaret Downey**.

Future events will offer us opportunities to schmooze with all kinds of wonderful people, who have demonstrated the admirable quality of desiring to rid the public of unnecessary superstitions. Party goers are guaranteed to improve their self-confidence by challenging negative and irrational attitudes about Friday-the-Thirteenth, the number 13 and many other impulses spurred on out of fear of the unknown. Education about superstitions develops critical thinking skills and FS is on the cutting edge of how to provide an educational opportunity.

The 2011 FS Anti-Superstition party provided a mixture of education and entertainment, from free literature to party games. For instance, the party allowed people to literally and figuratively throw away zodiac signs. Those who did so also agreed to never take horoscopes seriously. They were later awarded a certificate to display. We also enjoyed witnessing the wanton destruction of a mirror.

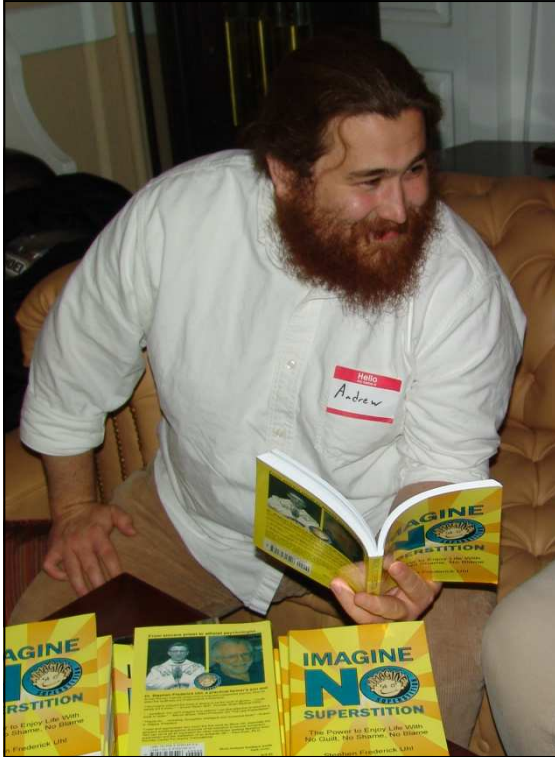
Many people thoroughly enjoyed Ladder Limbo and dancing with umbrellas open (both of which are life-goals of mine, for sure). How could you resist?

So, if you're a skeptic, want to know more about skepticism, or simply want a chance to break a mirror to the cheers of many like-minded people, then join us next time for an evening of dancing, fracturing a fairy piñata, bowling down Leprechauns, socializing with infamous and famous friends and so much more. I hear it's bad luck *not* to attend! ♦



Pictured above are **Brian Sapient** (left) **Staks Rosch** (center) and **Shaun McGonigal** (right). Sapient co-founded the Rational Response Squad. Rosch is the coordinator of the Philadelphia Coalition of Reason and is the host of the Dangerous Talk radio program which can be heard on WCHE 1520 AM. McGonigal is wearing a Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Doctor costume.

More 2011 Friday the Thirteenth Photos



Pictured above (left) is **Andrew Barrett** sharing a funny paragraph in **Stephen Uhl's** book *Imagine No Superstition*.

In the photo above (right), a party attendee registers to receive a "Trash Your Horoscope" congratulations certificate.

P. Z. Myers is pictured below talking to fans of his "Pharyngula" blog. Barely visible in the background is Executive Director of The Council for Secular Humanism and Editor of *Free Inquiry* magazine, **Tom Flynn**. Flynn helped host several anti-superstition games and delivered a very funny opening statement about superstitions. His fans kept Flynn busy all night.



Glen Schmiesing and the FS black cat mascot are pictured above. Schmiesing is pulling the leashed fake black cat along the floor demonstrating his lack of related superstitious fears.

A First-Timer's Amazing Meeting

by Celestia Ward

On July 14-18, 2011, I had the pleasure of attending my first ever TAM (The Amazing Meeting) in Las Vegas, Nevada. TAM is an annual event held by the [James Randi Educational Foundation](#) (JREF). The event can be described as part symposium, part conference and networking event, and part PARTY! This year was the ninth such meeting, nicknamed “TAM 9 from Outer Space.” Many (but not all) of the events were geared toward astronomy and space concerns, and the keynote speaker was astrophysicist **Neil deGrasse Tyson**, who seems to be the heir apparent to **Carl Sagan**.

JREF was founded by one of the most recognizable atheists in our culture today, its namesake the Amazing **James Randi**, and it is currently helmed by JREF president **D. J. Grothe**. Grothe is also an outspoken atheist — yet JREF is not an “atheist” organization per se. The majority of JREF’s members are nontheists, however, and I have never felt so at ease when discussing my non-belief in such a large group of people.

The skeptic movement has grown by leaps and bounds, its umbrella encompassing people with a wide variety of religious and spiritual beliefs, all of them bound together by their respect and understanding of the scientific method and their disdain for scams, creationism, scientific illiteracy, self-proclaimed psychics, superstition, frauds, homeopaths, faith healers, and anti-vaccination nut jobs. This crowd does not abide the likes of **Jenny McCarthy** or **Sylvia Brown**.

Scientists, doctors, writers, artists, magicians, musicians, teachers, public advocates and all manner of other hard-working folks, all identifying themselves as skeptics, came together and put on one hell of a show. Both the fellow first-timers and the luminaries I had been intimidated to even approach all welcomed me with genuine warmth and respect. That really was—well—*amazing!*

Randi himself was charming and gracious and took every moment to shake hands, sign autographs, pose for pictures, and hug as many attendees as he could. It had been one of my goals in life to meet Randi, and within an hour of arriving I had shaken his hand, taken a photo with him, and told him I’d been a fan since reading Penn & Teller’s books at age 13.

George Hrab kicked off the meeting with a song and clever video. Looking around the room, I saw a huge variety of people. Young and old, pierced, tattooed, and fluorescent-haired people dotted the audience. I also saw clean-cut and conservative, straight and gay, and all shades in-

between. There were attendees from almost every state and many different countries. The stereotype of skeptics being mostly old, white, male academics was giving way. Forty percent of participants were women, and the panelists and speakers were pretty equally spread out across gender lines. Along with **Richard Dawkins** and **P. Z. Meyers** there were also female luminaries like **Eugenie Scott**, **Desiree Schell**, Skepchick **Rebecca Watson**, and **Rachael Dunlop** (“Dr. Rachie”) from Australia’s podcast *The Skeptic Zone*.

Oh, and there were tons of Dr. Who shirts, Darwin fish, and sci-fi inspired jewelry. I overheard several conversations about bacon and narwhals. This was a thoroughly geek crowd.

Dr. Tyson was a powerhouse. He was the only “famous” skeptic whom I didn’t catch sight of outside the lecture hall; his schedule was so packed that he apparently flew into Vegas, sat on a panel, gave his keynote, and then flew out. No rest or socializing for him! He dominated the panel he was on with astronomers **Pamela Gay** and **Phil Plait**, **Bill Nye** (the science guy), and physicist **Lawrence Krauss**.

On that panel, Dr. Tyson made it clear he is furious with the lack of funding NASA is facing, and hinted that the only way to get coffers filled again might be to ignite a cold war with China (whose space program already rivals ours). It’s not a question of us not having the money, Tyson railed. Two points he made put things into a larger perspective: we are spending more money on air-conditioning in Afghanistan per year than we are spending on NASA, and the recent bank bailout exceeds all funds given to NASA over its entire 54-year history!

When asked about their “dream mission,” if they got to pick one thing that would be completely funded, each

panelist had different goals. Nye wants to seek microbial life on Mars, Tyson wants to “go ice-fishing on Europa” (the moon of Jupiter that has liquid water), and the entire panel was excited about the **James Webb** telescope, set to launch in 2018 (if lack of funding doesn’t scuttle it). The panel discussed the pros and cons of human space travel versus robots and unmanned probes. Machines are far, far cheaper, but humans add that factor that makes people excited. Krauss pointed out, “we really seem to enjoy watching to see if they die.” Dr. Tyson was clever and opinionated, impishly interrupting his colleagues and seeming to get every last word.

After a while, Dr. Gay began



Pictured above are **Celestia Ward** (left), **George Hrab** (center) and **Margaret Downey** (right) enjoying TAM 9. Hrab received high praises for his work as Master of Ceremonies of this event.

putting her finger up and, in a stern, maternal way, shushing him.

Dr. Tyson used his keynote speech to reflect on his part in Pluto's demotion. Paraphrasing Dr. Tyson: "Pluto is much happier frolicking with all his brothers in the Kuiper Belt, with guys his own size, trust me!" Dr. Tyson also read some hate mail and interesting tweets on the subject, and he talked about scientific illiteracy in our society. He put up some fairly sobering (if hilarious) examples from popular media, as well as some scary statistics about America's place in the scientific world.

A map showing how many papers are published in major journals from scientists in each country showed how intellectually dwarfed the United States is compared to China, Japan, and Western Europe. **George W. Bush's** "No Child Left Behind" did us no favors, as science was basically wiped from elementary schools so that all teaching time could be devoted to testing subjects (science is not among them), and creationists have, with surprising success, managed to wedge their mythology into what science education we do provide our students by crying for equal time and claiming science is a matter of freedom of speech.

Dr. Tyson admitted he usually tries to stay out of that sort of thing, but he displayed a letter he wrote to the *New York Times* in response to a story on a creationist teacher:

"This case is not about the need to separate church and state; it's about the need to separate ignorant, scientifically illiterate people from the ranks of teachers."

Dr. Tyson went on to talk about how a swell of scientific understanding and progress has, historically, tended to end whenever a theocracy takes over. Such a thing happened centuries ago in the Islamic world, and he worries it is happening now in the United States. Meanwhile, he also chided Dr. Dawkins for being, perhaps, a bit insensitive and condescending in his approach to advance the "public understanding of science," a clever dig, as Dr. Dawkins' official academic title is professor of just that title. Dr. Tyson then showed a Youtube clip that has become his most viewed, entitled "Tyson rebukes Dawkins." As it happened, Dr. Dawkins was sitting one seat over and in front of me — only six feet away. While Dr. Tyson was talking, I noticed Dr. Dawkins folded his arms and stiffened as Dr. Tyson showed the clip, but Dr. Dawkins also had a bemused smirk on his face and seemed to remain rather unaffected by the pokes from Tyson.

The next day Dr. Dawkins delivered his presentation, which was a sneak preview of his forthcoming book — one geared toward a younger set. Not quite *Goodnight Moon*, *There Is No God* but rather something for tweens and middle-school age children. It's called *The Magic of Reality* and has chapters devoted to answering the "big questions" of life, like where we came from, why evil exists, how Earth was created, and so on.

The book showcases the answers "fairy-tale magic" has to offer, with stories from the Bible and other mythologies, and

then it offers explanations using the "magic of reality," with everything science has come to understand and how we came to understand it. What a brilliant and simple approach! Even creationists would have to agree that he is giving "equal time" to both mythic and scientific. Yet, when these answers are set next to each other, even the most fanciful of children can see which is a more compelling approach to gaining truths and which is merely an artifact of tribal times, a collection of interesting stories created by imaginative people long ago. When these fables are laid out in a rich tapestry, showing the ways many different peoples have tried to fabricate answers to life's mysteries, the "equal time" philosophy so loved by creationists becomes religion's undoing.

The book illustrations Dr. Dawkins showed the audience were whimsical yet gorgeously rich with scientific detail. The book will likely be available October 2011, but you can pre-order yours today. The book will make a fantastic holiday present!

Dr. Dawkins told the room that his publisher asks that no one film or take photos, and, looking around, I saw no one disobeying his request. What a well-behaved group, considering most were godless, immoral heathens!

TAM panels discussing diversity in skepticism, the portrayal of skepticism in television, and the ethics of placebo medicine were all rousing, but not as much fun as the astronomy panel. There was an agreed-upon dissatisfaction of how skeptics are used as a token sound byte and so very often quoted in a miniscule way, then edited out of context, just so that producers of paranormal-friendly shows can include a person labeled "skeptic."

Joe Nickell, a well-known crypto zoology skeptic, was somewhat tickled that a character based on him appeared on the show *Bones*, only to be killed off by a "Chupacabra." Nickell happily reported that the plot unfolded to reveal the Chupacabra attack had been faked by a greedy lodge owner to increase his business (proving that at least a few *Bones* writers were *Scooby-Doo* fans as kids).

Dr. Scott, one of the brightest and most well-spoken educators in the country (and head of the National Center for Science Education) presented a talk on climate change denialism. Dr. Scott illustrated how proponents cherry-picked data, focused on anomalies, and used many of the same tricks as the creationists. She also noted that there was no specific organization as of yet devoted to fighting climate change denialism. She announced that the NCSE would take up that challenge from now on, and was greeted with a spontaneous, long round of applause.

Dr. Gay, a warm and empathetic-voiced woman in her thirties who teaches astrophysics, blogs on Star Stryder, hosts *AstronomyCast*, and writes for *Astronomy* and *Sky & Telescope*, spoke about how important science is to children — all kids love astronomy and dinosaurs, and since a meteor took out the dinosaurs, astronomy pretty much wins, she joked. Her entire childhood revolved around the space program and the shuttle flights, and she showed slides from her youth, building model rockets and attending space camp. Her speech turned more somber as she then recounted how

NASA has shrunk over the years and kids today no longer have access to the kind of inspiring scientific discoveries and understandings that helped mold her into what she is today. The shuttle has taken off for the last time, and there is no replacement, no “upgrade” to take its place.

Fewer and fewer kids are falling in love with science, fewer teens are choosing careers in science, and it’s changing our country in dramatic and frightening ways (not to mention robbing kids of what can be a truly awe-inspiring appreciation of the universe). I saw several members of the audience wipe away tears as she spoke.

Nye spoke later, and again there were tears — but these were from laughter. Nye was entertaining as ever, and his love of science practically bubbled out of every inch of his lanky, bow-tied frame. Sagan had taught the future “science guy” at Cornell, and when Sagan later watched Nye’s television show he sent some tongue-in-cheek criticism to his former student, which Nye shared with all of us. Nye personified an appreciation many skeptics and secular thinkers share, a sort of reverence for the natural universe and our place in it — far from the hopeless, godless despair in the “meaninglessness” of life that some religious groups brand us with. Nye’s philosophy, if I may paraphrase from memory, was something along the lines of:

Here I am, this little speck, on a speck, revolving around a speck, in a bunch of stuff, revolving around a bunch of other stuff, among countless other blobs of stuff, and yet, I have this amazing, thing, possibly THE most amazing thing in the universe, sitting right between my ears. How incredibly lucky I feel.

And that thing between Nye’s ears was discussed and pondered and picked at as well. Dr. **Elizabeth Loftus** covered the research done on false memories over the years, as well as the harm caused by therapists dredging up hidden “memories” of abuse. Some of those false memories led to parents being wrongly convicted and families being torn apart. In her studies, and those of others, researchers were able to implant false memories in one-quarter to one-third of volunteers, making them absolutely convinced of some event that had not really happened in their childhood. To pass ethics review panels, these false events were mundane things like getting lost in a mall then rescued by an elderly couple — or, more improbably, toppling a punch bowl onto the parents-of-the-bride at a family wedding.

Others speakers delivered presentations showing illusions and how they capitalize on deficiencies in our brain, delving into how artists use these neurological “tricks” instinctively to create two-dimensional representations that read as three-dimensional. Ghost images, pareidolia, and Jesus sightings on grilled cheese sandwiches were all touched upon.

Neurologist Dr. **Steve Novella** of *Skeptic’s Guide to the Universe* gave a talk on mental illness denial and cleverly quipped that every person, by nature, fancies themselves a “skeptic” and judges those further up the spectrum as “true believers” and those further down as “denialists.” Without

applying the scientific method, we might all succumb to this self-centered pitfall of judgment.

British skeptic **Richard Wiseman** showed off bits of his new book *Paranormality: Why We See What Isn’t There*, which covers his exploits in so-called hauntings and other alleged bits of the supernatural world. He also explained why it’s not available from an American publisher. Wiseman was told by publishers that he would need to change the book to allow for some “believable” instances of paranormal incidents in order to make it more marketable to an American audience. Sigh.

Dr. Myers gave an overview of how aliens might look and how evolution has solved problems here on earth in concurrent ways (dogs are similar to marsupials that filled similar ecological niches but evolved separately). He showed many slides of cephalopods. If you’ve read Myers’ blog *Pharyngula*, you know he likes squids.

Dr. Dawkins later touched on the subjects of Myer’s talk, with slides of his own and thoughts on potential alien body forms in light of how nature here on Earth has filled environmental niches. Flight has arisen four times, eyes have arisen many times over, and jet propulsion has arisen once (there’s Myer’s squids again).

I skipped the debauchery at **Penn Jillette’s** late-night bacon and donut party — by Saturday I was too pooped to even consider staying up that late, though I hear that the music was fantastic. It had been hyped with the promo tag “There will be donuts. There will be bacon. You will learn nothing.” I must be getting old. Sleep sounded much more appealing than just about anything else, even Krispy Kremes and skeptics getting wild and crazy.

Sunday was the last day of the meeting, and — perhaps intentionally, perhaps not — the Sabbath had more speakers who touched on atheism and secularism. As I mentioned, JREF is not an atheist group, but there are many in the ranks, and the talks did a good job of keeping an upbeat and inclusive attitude. No one raged in a condescending manner about the stupidity of any particular religion — rather it was about fostering humanist values. Many religious people can identify with humanism and the promotion of science and skepticism.

One of Sunday’s speakers was **Sara E. Mayhew**, a “manga artist” and writer. She talked about secular storytelling and provided a thought-provoking rundown of popular franchises today. Many capitalize on very non-humanist themes like being born a “chosen one” rather than achieving goals through hard work and ingenuity. Sara complained about how Luke Skywalker ignores the telemetry and targeting computer, wasting all the practice he’s done and the useful science around him, and instead channels a weird invisible force that one must be born with. One cannot simply work really hard to be a good Jedi, Mayhew pointed out, it’s predestined. *Lord of the Rings* also relies on a class system one is born into, and the one piece of “technology” that can actually elevate a character’s abilities, is (in Mayhew’s words) “fucking evil as hell.” What a bummer. As for *Twilight*, she quipped that calling the characters

cardboard would be an insult to sturdy packaging material, but it demonstrates how popular something can be if it has the right emotional cues, no matter how flat the characters are.

Star Trek was given major skeptic points for its humanist and cooperative themes (as a life-long Trekkie, I cheered at this). Mayhew then listed a great many quotations that would all make fantastic critical thinking bumper stickers, inviting the audience to figure out which franchise these quotes were from. I recognized Hermione's level-headed sensibilities right away. While **J. K. Rowling** may not have purposely intended to write a skeptical story, she managed nevertheless to inject some really great humanist themes and critical thinking into a story about wizards and witches (who always seem to run to the library and research problems before they face danger, and who value education and work hard to get where they are, eschewing the ways of the class-based "pureblood" families). Bravo, Ms. Rowling. Bravo.

Sunday afternoon we heard from lobbyist **Sean Faircloth** from the Secular Coalition for America (SCA). He really got the room riled up. He began his speech, entitled "Attack of the Theocrats — and What We Can Do about It" with the promise that he works for *us*. Faircloth works for anyone in the room who does not want to see children die because their parents believed doctors were against God's will, who do not want to see creationism brought into schools, and those of us who do not want to see rights taken away from minorities on the basis of bronze-age thinking written in a book thousands of years ago. Faircloth said that anyone who feels this way is "*his boss*." It was a very strong opening.

SCA has some very worthy goals and they are already seeing progress. Faircloth showed how effective the Christian conservatives have been at mobilizing and taking over most

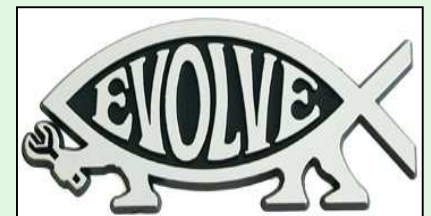
of government — even through they do not represent a majority in this country. The dangers of Christian conservative domination are very real. There are lawmakers in office right now who believe in demons, believe in a god that proscribes limiting rights for certain groups, believe in voting against women's reproductive rights based on scripture, and, memorably, one politician in particular who claims global warming is not to be taken seriously because the Judeo-Christian god promised to flood the earth only once, back in the time of Noah, so we have nothing to worry about from melting polar ice caps no matter what the scientific data shows. Well, how simple that makes it!

So, if you've made it to the end of my long report, you're probably a fan of science. You probably want to do more to help our country make scientific strides. Like what? There's a [Save-the-James-Webb-Telescope](#) page on Facebook and there are numerous ways you can contact your representative to let them know you are a constituent who values science education and NASA.

The Planetary Society (headed by Nye) has an online petition you can sign as well. Also online is the [Zooniverse](#), put together by Dr. Gay and others, where people (like you and me) can help classify galaxies, find moons, and hunt for ice planetoids in the Kuiper belt. In essence, we can help expand NASA's computing power by adding our own neurons to the mix. [Secular.org](#) is a good place to start if you want to join the fight to keep that wall of separation between church & state from eroding. Lastly, as TAM reminded everyone, sharing your views with those in your community is the best grassroots way to help spread critical thinking, skepticism, and the notion that nonbelievers are every bit as American as any other citizen, deserving the same rights and respect. ◆

*Do you know about **EVOLVEFISH** merchandise?*

Visit their great website to purchase freethought items such as emblems, buttons, shirts, jewelry, hats, patches, tote bags, license plates, door mats, greeting cards, books, DVDs, CDs, magnets, notepads, mints, mugs, window stickers, flags and banners.



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Save 10% when placing your order ONLINE at www.EvolveFish.com! This discount only applies to orders placed through the EvolveFish website. It does not apply to telephone and mail orders. Online transactions are completely secure, so personal information provided is absolutely safe.

To get the discount, add the code: **1296132938** in the Coupon Code box of the online shopping cart. This offer expires on December 3, 2011. Use your coupon as often as you like — or pass it on to friends, so that they can get a discount as well!

Freedom From Religion Foundation's Philadelphia Region Billboard Campaign

The March/April 2011 issue of The Freethought Society News announced that the [Freethought Society](#) (FS) and the [Freedom From Religion Foundation](#) (FFRF) are in need of funds to kick off an exciting "Come Out of the Closet" billboard campaign. If there are large donations earmarked for this campaign, billboards can be placed in more than one location.

The face of about six FS supporters will appear on a digital billboard which will be located on a prominent highway in the Philadelphia area. Images and words will rotate. Leasing of the digital billboard is costly, but the campaign is sure to be a success. FFRF would like to have local members to both participate and help pay for the costs. FFRF is hopeful that some FS supporters will want to do both!

A team of FS volunteers is needed to locate a good digital billboard in the Philadelphia area that will accept our campaign. Once a board location is found, FS and FFRF will

work with the billboard artist directly.

A special photo technique will be used. FS is fortunate to have [Carol Everhart Roper](#) involved in the project, as she is a professional photographer and will be able to meet the standards required. Roper has volunteered to photograph billboard participants at no charge. She is prepared to take high-resolution head & shoulders photos using a white background. Roper's volunteer photography work saves participants approximately \$70 each.

A clever, insightful, humorous or profound 3-8 word statement would appear with the image of an FS supporter. A sample billboard by **Carol Everhart Roper** is printed below.

Please think of what your statement would be and make a donation to this wonderful project. Roper will photograph you at no charge and soon your image and words will be featured on a billboard. For your convenience a donation form is printed below. ◆

FtSOCIETY.ORG

*"How can I trust someone who insists
life is directed by an invisible friend?"*

Carol Everhart Roper

artist, writer, mother, wife, grandmother, atheist.

Vice President, The Freethought Society

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION [FFRF.ORG](#)

Yes! I want to donate to the Freethought Society/Freedom From Religion Foundation's "Come Out of the Closet" billboard campaign. Enclosed is my donation of \$_____.

Name: _____

Street Address: _____

City, State and Zip: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Please keep my donation anonymous.

Clip and mail to: Freethought Society, P.O. Box 242, Pocopson, PA 19366-0242

Week long stay in St. Croix up for bid!



On November 10, 2009, Dr. **Robert J. Weiss** of Wilmington, Delaware, donated a time-share in St. Croix to the Freethought Society (FS). The time-share is always available the eleventh week of the year (second week in March). The St. Croix beach cottage is available from Saturday to Saturday. In 2012, the reservation dates are March 17 through March 24.

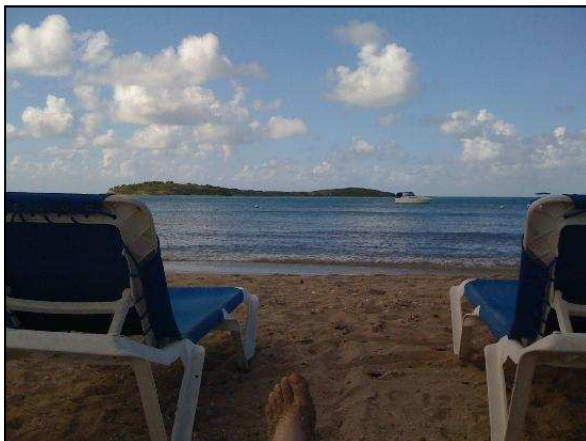
This fantastic week-long use of the cottage in St. Croix is officially up for bids (StCroix@ftsociety.org). Until the end of this year (2011), interested bidders can offer a bid beginning at \$1,000 (to cover the association fees FS must cover). The winning bid amount and the name of the bidder will be announced in the January 2012 FS newsletter.

The FS cottage has a bedroom and sofa sleeper. It is 100 feet to the beach and just as close to the pool. Guests at [Chenay Bay Beach Club](#) can snorkel, scuba, golf and enjoy many other amenities nearby.

The winner is responsible for transportation to and from the resort, and any taxes or applicable fees. The time-share constitutes access to the condo and the resort amenities which are a standard part of the time share benefits. Food and other vacation items are the responsibility of the winning bidder.

The resort itself offers many activities. All activities on the Chenay Bay Beach Club property are included. Local attractions include Buck Island National Park, Big Beard's tour, Point Udall, Divi Divi Hotel and Casino, Botanical Gardens, the Cruzan Rum Factory, a rainforest, and shopping in Christiansted, St. Thomas and St. John. Shuttle and ferry services are available.

Food items can be purchased at "The Schooner" grocery store located just eight minutes west of the resort.



Chenay Bay Beach Club Activities

local musicians and singers
snorkeling lessons
snorkeling equipment
weekly beach dance party
diving lessons
beach beds and chairs

cabanas
kayaking
poolside bar
sunfish sailboat
massage therapy
basketball court

Island Businesses

local restaurants
sunset sail cruises
power boat rentals

sports fishing charters
jet ski tours and rentals
Buck Island reef tours



General Supporter Donations

Julie Feikens	\$20
Glen Loev	\$60
Marshal Martin	\$75
Richard and Victoria Myers	\$35
Bill Paci	\$25
Al Palmer	\$50

Billboard Campaign Donations

Anonymous	\$500
Another Anonymous	\$20

Haiti Solar Box Cooker Donations

Marshall Martin	\$350
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**The Martin donation was earmarked specifically to pay the customs charges for the solar box shipment to Haiti.*

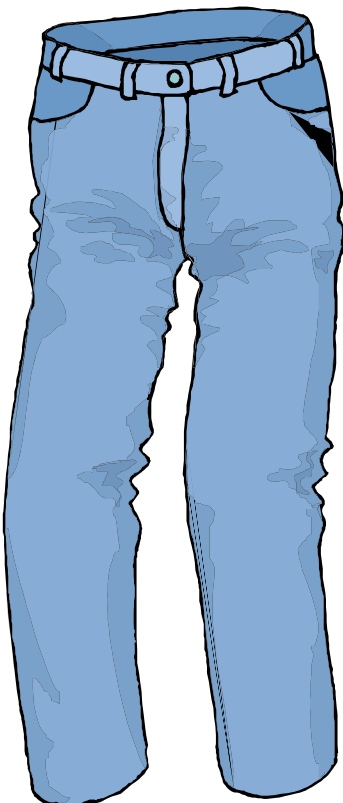
Jump into the Jean Pool

The Freethought Society (FS) is proud to announce a “Jeans Only Clothing Drive.” Donate your gently worn jeans at an FS event or monthly meeting. Jeans are too heavy to ship, so an in-person donation is necessary. All donors will receive a receipt for tax purposes.

When FS fills a large box with donated jeans, the box will be delivered to a homeless shelter in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This type of “Jean Therapy” can benefit many people who are in need of sturdy clothing. FS seeks all sizes including jeans for children, young adults and seniors. Please do not donate stained, ripped or torn jeans.

Ask your family, friends and neighbors to donate to this effort. The next opportunity for a jean donation is the September 29th FS meeting at the Philadelphia Free Library.

Local businesses can be asked to participate in this collection. Let’s find merchants who are willing to help. Please contact FS to request a poster that can be used to gather jeans from the public-at-large.



Free Thinkers of Haiti Project Needs

The goal of sending at least eight solar box cookers to the Free Thinkers of Haiti (FTH) was achieved a few months ago. Each volunteer at FTH now has their own kit and they have begun their campaign to teach villagers how to sterilize water and cook food using solar energy. Not one FTH member owns a camera. They would like to send FS updates and photos of this on-going project. A tax-deductible donation earmarked for a camera purchase can be sent to FS for processing. A digital camera donation would also be welcomed.

Book Drive for the Philippines Continues

A call for book donations to assist the Philippine Atheists and Agnostics Society (PATAS) was printed in the May/June 2011 FS newsletter. This is a reminder to readers to send book donations directly to **Marissa Langseth** at 73-34 196th Place, Fresh Meadows, New York 11366. If you have any questions about PATAS, contact Langseth at:

marissa@patas.com

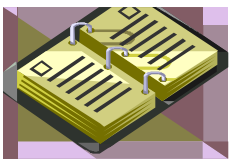
Sole Searching

FS is pleased to announce another drive to benefit the homeless community. Donate your gently worn shoes at an FS event or at a monthly meeting. All donations will be acknowledged with a “thank you” and receipt that can be used for tax deduction purposes.

Large boxes filled with shoes will be delivered to a homeless shelter in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Please note that shoes with high heels are not appropriate for donation. The more sturdy the shoe, the better! Boots, work and sport shoes are best. Please do not donate over-used and/or dirty shoes.

Thanks in advance for looking through your closet and locating shoes that you no longer enjoy wearing. Consider yourself sole-searching. There is no such thing as an out-of-style shoe in the homeless community. All flat-style shoes can be of use and will be greatly appreciated.





The Freethought Society's (FS) 2011 Four-Month Activities Calendar

September 29

On **Thursday, September 29, 2011** please attend a **7:00 PM** free and open-to-the-public presentation by **Dr. Alan Mann**.

The presentation entitled, "What does it mean to be human, and how did we evolve this unique capability?" will take place in the **Skyline Room**, which is located on the fourth floor of the **Free Library of Philadelphia (1901 Vine Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania)**.

When and in what context did modern humans become "human"? We know that we differ in substantial ways from chimpanzees, our closest living relatives, but when did these unique attributes arise and how can we account for them? The fossil and archaeological record provides some revealing insights into when our uniqueness appeared. The process through which we emerged as this special species, however, does not support traditional religious views of how we became unique. The evidence requires that religious concepts of the 'soul' or other special other-worldly qualities be seriously reconsidered. Dr. Mann will address these important issues and more during his presentation.

This is an encore appearance for FS. His 2005 speech was highly rated by the audience, and those who saw Dr. Mann's fantastic PowerPoint presentation requested him again.

October 11 and 15



FS has arranged a two-state speaking tour for **Judith Snyderman**. She is the treasurer of [Final Exit Network \(FEN\)](#).

FEN is a volunteer organization that offers counseling, support and successful suicide guidance for individuals who are suffering from intolerable illnesses. The organization contends that individuals suffering from intolerable illnesses should be able to choose a dignified death. FEN promotes the use of living wills, advance directives, durable powers of attorney for health care, and Do Not Resuscitate orders. Volunteers also advocate for individuals when Advance Directives are not being followed.

Snyderman is devoted to the right-to-die position. She provides information and support needed for those who qualify for FEN's self-deliverance services.

In her speech "Whose life is it, anyway?" Snyderman will describe situations in Oregon, Washington, and Montana — the only states that currently allow physician assistance in dying. She will also provide an update on lawsuits against FEN, one of which was an Arizona case that settled in April



2011. A case in Georgia is still pending. Snyderman will also describe her personal experiences and why she is willing to risk a potential jail sentence for defending individuals' right-to-die. Two of Snyderman's October 2011 appearances are listed below:

Tuesday, October 11, 2011
7:00 PM
Allentown Panera Bread
3100 West Tilghman Street
Allentown, PA 18104

Saturday, October 15, 2011
3:00 PM
Brandywine Library
1300 Foulk Road
Wilmington, Delaware 19803

November 7

"Preachers who are not believers" is a study published by Dr. **Daniel Dennett** and **Linda LaScola**. FS is pleased to host LaScola as our **Monday, November 7, 2011** speaker. Her talk will highlight the findings of this small pilot study of five Protestant preachers.

LaScola will discuss how the study was conceived and executed. LaScola will include a discussion of a continuing larger study which is currently in progress and information about "The Clergy Project" (a private, confidential website, supported by [The Richard Dawkins Foundation](#)). **Dan Barker** ([Freedom From Religion Foundation](#) Co-President) moderates the forum which provides an online meeting place for current and former non-believing clergy.

The presentation will take place at **7:00 PM** in the **Montgomery Auditorium**, located in basement of the **Free Library of Philadelphia (1901 Vine Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania)**.

December 3

FS continues to demand the right to display a *Tree of Knowledge* on the grounds of the Chester County Courthouse. FS fully expects that a 2011 request will be denied, therefore, FS supporters must prepare to conduct another "Human *Tree of Knowledge*" event/protest rally. Please plan to participate on Saturday, **December 3, 2011** at the Courthouse located at the corner of High and Market Streets (**2 North High Street, West Chester, Pennsylvania**). The event will start at **4:00 PM** and will include speeches, singing, photo opportunities and a press conference. Please email FS to volunteer (volunteers@FtSociety.org) for one of many jobs that need to be done several months ahead of time (new ornaments, press releases, media training, etc.).

Should the FS petition to include the *Tree of Knowledge* be approved, FS supporters will be notified by email, or a notice will be posted on the FS listserv and website.



Freethought Society Committee Reports

Helping Hands Committee (HHC)

The clean up effort needed after the death of **George Hetzel**, long-time recipient of HHC, took almost one month. HHC committee members tried hard to locate items of value, but Hetzel's personal goods were too unusual for any type of quick sale. The planned "Take what you want. Donate what you can" plan did not reap any financial benefit to the Freethought Society (FS). There is still hope, however, that some items can be placed on eBay and sold to collectors or people who like "collectibles." FS is in need of a volunteer to take on the job of selling items on eBay. If you would like to volunteer, please email:

volunteers@FtSociety.org

Anti-Discrimination Support Network (ADSN)

Apparently, unknown thugs followed **Ernest Perce** home after he organized a recent protest rally on a public sidewalk in front of the Goodwin Memorial Baptist Church in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The protest was staged to object to Mayor **Linda Thompson** calling for a three day fast and prayers aimed at trying to help solve the city's financial crisis. A few days later, Perce's tires were slashed, rocks were thrown at his home and his front door was damaged. The Perce family was forced to stay with friends for several days. Perce recalls hearing the damage being done to his front door while watching a movie. There was a loud "boom" then he heard someone screaming, "God loves you." Another possible explanation is that the damage may have been done by Perce's neighbors who may have seen him on a local newscast that highlighted the protest rally. An insurance claim was filed.



The Freethought Society (FS) is a chapter of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF). FS strives to improve society by promoting freedom of thought, freedom of expression and freedom from religious intrusion in public affairs. FS also advocates for separation of religion and government. FS activities and services depend on the financial contributions of supporters. Please donate generously. Funds may be sent using this form or via the FS website (www.ftSociety.org). All contributions to FS are tax-deductible to the fullest extent of the law.

Yes! I want to:

- become a supporter of FS (includes email PDF newsletter): **\$30** individual supporter, **\$35** family supporter, **\$20** student. Please enclose checks payable to **The Freethought Society**.
- become an **FS Star!** by setting up an automatic monthly donation to FS from my bank or through PayPal in the amount of: (circle one) **\$5** **\$10** **\$15** **\$20** \$____ (other) per month.
- join FFRF: **\$40** individual membership or **\$50** family membership. Please enclose checks payable to the **Freedom From Religion Foundation**.
- earmark a donation to (insert project, event or committee name) _____

Name _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

Email Address: _____

Phone: _____ Cell: _____

Check here if you want your sponsorship to be anonymous.

FS will email a complimentary newsletter to potential supporters. Please provide contact information for anyone who might be interested in receiving an FS newsletter.

Name _____

Email Address _____

Clip and mail to: Freethought Society, P.O. Box 242, Pocopson, PA 19366-0242 or email: newsletter@FtSociety.org