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The Freethought Society News
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2013 Tree of Knowledge Report

Each year, The Freethought Society (FS) promotes the use of a Tree of Knowledge as a winter holiday symbol for the nontheist community. The Tree of Knowledge made its public debut in 2007 when it was installed on the lawn of the Chester County Courthouse in West Chester, Pennsylvania. At that time, the area was known as a “free speech zone.”

For three wonderful years, The Tree of Knowledge was placed among winter holiday display items that included a creche, giant menorah, the Chamber of Commerce holiday tree, Santa with his sleigh of presents, wire choo-choo train, and candy canes. In 2007, The Tree of Knowledge was vandalized eight times. In 2008, it was vandalized only four times. In 2009, there were no incidents of vandalism at all. It appeared that the community was getting used to the presence of nontheist citizens and peace had come to Chester County. Alas, that harmony was shattered when Chester County Commissioners Kathy Cozzone, Terrance Farrell, and Carole Aichele, in office at the time, passed Resolution 58-10. The Resolution, in essence, took away the public use of the free speech zone (Courthouse lawn area) during the entire month of December. The Commissioners purchased winter holiday-themed items, making sure to follow permissible descriptions found in the 1984 United States Supreme Court case Lynch v. Donnelly.

FS supporters, officers and board members have objected to Resolution 58-10 every year since 2010. The goal each year: To demand equality and put an end to the status relegated to the nontheist community—that of second-class citizens!

Another inclusion effort took place in 2013, but, once again, FS was denied participation in the annual winter holiday celebration. Commissioners Farrell, Cozzone and Ryan Costello would not overturn Resolution 58-10 even though gallant efforts were made by supporters and representatives of FS. Below are texts of the speeches delivered at the Tuesday, November 19, 2013, Chester County Commissioners’ Sunshine Meeting. A video of the meeting can be seen at: http://bit.ly/SunshineMeeting

Margaret Downey:
A Secular Jew, a Hispanic Freethought representative and a Rationalist Leader from India walk into a Chester County Commissioner Sunshine Meeting…

This sounds like the opening of a joke, but it really happened last year, on October, 9, 2012.

Unfortunately, that year, it seems the statements from representatives of the Hispanic, Jewish, and Indian communities were not taken seriously; their questions were left unanswered, and their simple requests for the right of equal representation during the 2012 winter holiday season were denied. Several members of the public who were in attendance that day ridiculed their statements, disrespected their titles and even voiced objections to their standing as representatives of a growing and vibrant nontheist community. You too, Commissioners, seem to have closed your ears and minds to their positions supporting equal rights for nontheist residents of Chester County. Every year since 2007, the nontheist community has requested inclusion in the Chester County Courthouse winter season public display.

It was an honor to have our symbol, The Tree of Knowledge, recognized equally in holiday displays for three years. In 2010, it came as a shock to be denied access to, or to put it more bluntly, ousted from the free speech zone located at the Chester County Courthouse lawn.
Courthouse grounds. Each year, since then, we appear in this chamber to request that you reconsider that decision.

One year we presented the results of an online petition with over 350 signatures supporting the inclusion of our Tree of Knowledge holiday display. Since we have not been told the reason for your decision, last year I presented to you a compromise. I suggested that should your major objections to The Tree of Knowledge be the book cover ornaments, your input would be used to hand-select the ornaments we would use from our collection of ornaments that include subjects such as history, philosophy, biography, and science.

Commissioners, the Freethought Society board of directors made that 2012 proposal in good faith, yet our suggested proposal was ignored, and you dismissed the compromise without explanation.

For three years, you’ve heard testimony from business people and residents of Chester County who want The Tree of Knowledge back on the grounds of the Chester County Courthouse during the winter holiday season. Today, you’ll hear more testimony to that effect. Before supporters of The Tree of Knowledge speak, I ask you to set aside any personal biases you may have, and hear the voices of nontheist citizens.

Hear our voices as clearly and loudly—just as you would carefully and thoughtfully consider an inclusion proposal from a group requesting a Kwanzaa display, Lenape Native Americans seeking to publicly celebrate “Lowan,” Buddhists wanting to participate with the observance of Bodhi Day, and the many other minority groups that also have their very own symbols and rituals. If they asked, would these other minorities get their symbol approved for inclusion? Please, take a moment to think about that question, Commissioners…

The nontheist community is simply asking to be taken seriously. This year, we don’t want our testimony to be dismissed as if it were a joke. The nontheist winter holiday symbol is The Tree of Knowledge, and so I ask—as a citizen of Chester County, and as the president and founder of the Freethought Society—that you allow the display of our symbol this year, proving that you, do indeed, strive to do more:

Below is additional commentary presented by Downey after some banter took place between Commissioner Costello and supporters of The Tree of Knowledge:

We simply want The Tree of Knowledge placed amongst the other winter holiday symbols in 2013. Nontheists who do not reside in the area would visit West Chester to see it, bringing business to shops and restaurants. Our effort is not a battle in the so-called “War on Christmas.” This is a battle for diversity appreciation, equal rights and respect for minority opinions.

On this, the 150th anniversary of the Gettysburg Address, I ask the Chester County Commissioners to give back to the entire community the use of the free speech zone. As President Abraham Lincoln stated so eloquently many years ago, the government is of the people, for the people and by the people.

Glen Loew:

I am a member of the Board of Directors of Shir Shalom, one of six secular Jewish organizations in the Delaware Valley. If I look familiar, it is because I am the secular Jew to whom Margaret Downey was referring.

One year ago I was here before you, making this same request on behalf of our community—permission to include a Tree of Knowledge among the winter holiday displays on the grounds of the Chester County Courthouse.

During this time of year, winter holiday displays reflect diversity within the County, and include symbols and signs wishing passersby a “Merry Christmas” or “Happy Chanukah.” We see the use of menorahs, creches, and brightly-decorated Christmas trees.

We appreciate these beautiful, meaningful, and varied displays on public property. Actually, we would like to see them expanded, including more displays, from the many diverse groups in the community who celebrate winter holidays. And, as part of this inclusion, nontheists should be allowed equal access to place a symbol of our choosing in the free speech zones on public property.

As per the 1984 Supreme Court decision Lynch v. Donnelly, religious displays on public grounds are permitted as long as there is also a secular display. For 3 years, in 2007, 2008, and 2009, local secular residents were permitted to place a Tree of Knowledge on the lawn of the Chester County Courthouse designated for winter holiday displays.

The Tree of Knowledge is a beautiful symbol developed years ago by the nontheist community, and is used in towns, cities and in private homes nationwide. It is simply an evergreen tree decorated with laminated color copies of book covers representing a wide range of subjects including science, history, philosophy, critical thinking, skepticism, religion, and more.

Since 2010, however, permission to place a Tree of Knowledge among the winter holiday displays was denied. Instead, the secular inclusion requirement has been fulfilled with a plastic Santa Claus, a wire-lit choo-choo train and plastic candy canes. While this collection is apparently sufficient to satisfy minimal legal obligations of Lynch v. Donnelly, it does not at all satisfy the nontheist community.

Commissioners, we have been trying to find the answer to one simple question, without success. If you can answer it, we will be very appreciative:

Religious communities are permitted to select and install symbols of their choosing on the courthouse lawn. But after 3 years of successful, peaceful Tree of Knowledge displays, in 2010 they were disallowed, and permission revoked. Why?

In spite of our asking this question repeatedly since 2010, no answer from the Commissioners has been forthcoming. I will propose a guess. The decision was taken to placate complaints of some residents and members of the clergy.

I hope this is not the reason, because it should be self-evident that some people’s insecurity, or irrational fear of “the other,” is an unjust reason to discriminate…period, and in this case, against the nontheist minority.

(continued on next page)
We are, however, unable to come up with any other explanation for your refusal to allow us to place our winter holiday symbol alongside those representing Christianity and Judaism. The Freethought Society’s Tree of Knowledge is a symbol designed to promote knowledge, education, reading, and exposure to a wide range of ideas. Does anyone here oppose reading, learning and expanding one’s horizons?

It can’t be for a lack of space, since our display takes up much less room than the Santa, choo-choo train, and candy canes it would replace. There simply is no just reason for The Tree of Knowledge to be banned from the area and replaced with those cute but meaningless displays that are unsatisfactory, even demeaning as symbols for our community. We nontheists are a growing constituency, and our request is simple—to be allowed the same opportunity for expressing our civic pride as other groups, nothing more.

Commissioners, please consider our petition from a standpoint of equity and inclusivity, and allow The Tree of Knowledge to again join the other holiday symbols on the Chester County Courthouse grounds—that bring light and joy to the darkest days of winter and the approaching holiday season.

Commissioners, the decision is yours. Will you come down on the side of prejudice and discrimination, or on the side of inclusion and civil rights?

If, in spite of our repeated requests, the majority of the board again rules against The Tree of Knowledge display, we would at least request the courtesy of an explanation as to the reasons for that decision. I hope that you will grant permission, and this will be the last time you will need to hear our request, one that, while modest, holds very important symbolism for our community, and should be simple for you to grant.

Thank you for your consideration.

Bob Kay:

Commissioners, unfortunately, many parents and most of our schools and colleges undermine the essence of effective learning—that is, a desire to ask mind-expanding and/or provocative questions. It is vital that we expose everyone to thinking that might help us become a stronger and more competent nation. Ergo, The Tree of Knowledge, because: Fully 89 percent of our citizens of voting age are unable to name their representative in Congress. Eighty percent of high school seniors have said that they will never again voluntarily read a book—even though 50 percent eventually do, this is still a pitifully low percentage. As of 1990, the average home in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania only has 3 books. In 1996, only 40 percent of college seniors were proficient in reading. Ten years later, in 2006, this percentage had gone down to only 31 percent.

The world is clearly in big trouble. We need more curious, creative, question-asking, and deep-thinking people to help solve numerous social, environmental and economical problems while working for the common good.

The Tree of Knowledge is one way of stimulating the interest of people, while at the same time improving critical thinking skills. Even if only for this reason, I request that you give our volunteers permission to put up a Tree of Knowledge again this holiday season, and for years to follow.

Sue O’Connell:

I am a board member of the Freethought Society. I live in Philadelphia, but I have traveled to West Chester in 2007, 2008 and 2009 to participate in the unveiling of The Tree of Knowledge. The Tree of Knowledge is important to me and I would like to see it on display again.

Although I was raised by a mother who was an atheist and a father who was a religious liberal, we always celebrate the holidays. My mother used to tell us that Santa Claus is a symbol of the giver within each of us. The Freethought Society is willing and able to gift an important symbol to the citizens of West Chester—The Tree of Knowledge.

My parents, like almost every atheist I’ve ever met, are good people. My father died last year and I miss him a lot. The Tree of Knowledge is a way of showing that the values of nontheists people include knowledge and truth. These are important values and should be respected in this country along with “traditional values.”

I am a very politically active person and I know the importance of a free press. Leaving out recognition of freethought books and the freethought community is actually restricting free press. The exclusion of The Tree of Knowledge in a winter display since 2010 is an affront to this important constitutional right. Books guarantee freedom of the press and The Tree of Knowledge helps us convey this important tenet of democracy.

The Tree of Knowledge exemplifies that life can be rewarding and full without a belief in a deity. These books are important to me and so many others. Books express who I am and what my fellow citizens hold dear—knowledge!

The inclusion of a Tree of Knowledge in a winter public display makes nontheists and so many others a part of the American spectrum, and we are deserving of the right and
have the freedom to express ourselves. The nontheist community is an integral part of West Chester—we are American citizens, too.

We are good people, and we want to participate in the winter holiday season by giving other citizens a gift of knowledge—*The Tree of Knowledge*.

Our secular holiday tree will serve as a reminder of the diversity of our community. Please include *The Tree of Knowledge* in the 2013 winter holiday display.

**Jill McDevitt:**

I am a resident of West Chester. The year I moved to West Chester, I noticed *The Tree of Knowledge* sponsored by the Freethought Society when I drove by the Chester County Courthouse. The tree intrigued me, so I later walked to the Courthouse to take a closer look. I appreciated the display enough to look up the Freethought Society. Until then I had never heard of the organization. I emailed the president of the Freethought Society, Margaret Downey, to tell her I thought her display was so important, not only to the nontheist community, but because it encouraged me to believe that Chester County was a place that recognized and celebrated diversity.

I have always been frustrated every December when hearing one closed-minded small town after the next making the national news after displaying a Christmas Tree or Nativity scene in the town square, but not allowing people with different beliefs and values to have their own display. I never wanted to live in one of those closed-minded small towns, and so when I moved to West Chester and saw *The Tree of Knowledge* I was confident that my new home was a place that was open-minded to different ways of life, to learning from neighbors, to sharing ideas, and being a true community.

With the refusal to allow *The Tree of Knowledge* for the last few years, but continuing to allow emblems of other traditions to be displayed, I am dismayed that Chester County is not the diversity-celebrating community that I had hoped it was.

The way I see it is the County Commissioners have two ways of deciding what is displayed on the lawn of the Courthouse. The first is working from a “our hands are tied” perspective. Because it’s public space protected by the First Amendment’s guarantees of free expression, organizations seeking permits to hold displays should be granted those permits, and if anyone in the community complains, your answer is “sorry, our hands our tied. Everyone has the right to display. It doesn’t mean we like it, or condone it.” This attitude makes you inculpable. Under this scenario, *The Tree of Knowledge* would be displayed and you are free from legitimate criticism.

The second way is working how you are currently working, which is that only displays you deem “important” or “appropriate,” or that otherwise fit your personal values, can be put up. You, for whatever reason which I still don’t understand, don’t find *The Tree of Knowledge* important or appropriate, and you will not grant permission for it to be displayed. Under this mode of operation, I would like to hear an explanation for how the September 19, 2013 display on the lawn of the Courthouse was important or appropriate.

To refresh your memory, an organization, the Center for Bio-Ethical Reform, which by the way is not based in Chester County, and advocating extreme anti-abortion views, was granted permission to set up ten-foot-tall billboards on the lawn of the Courthouse facing High Street. One of these billboards showed victims of the Holocaust. The California-based organization displayed photos of dead, nude, and emaciated bodies stacked in piles. There were also photos of black men with nooses around their necks being hung from tree branches. Also displayed was a photo of a five-year-old boy beaten and covered in bruises. Oh, and photos of animal cruelty—a monkey being tortured with electrocution. The group likened all these things to abortion!

By the way, they also displayed ten-foot-high photos of dead and bloody fetuses.

I can’t tell you how many people I counseled in the days following. People who were stuck at the traffic light on High and Market Streets—with their children in the car being forced to look at these images for several minutes!

I also heard from people of color who were walking down the street and unexpectedly confronted with a larger-than-life photo of racially-motivated lynchings. Many people were triggered and traumatized in our community thanks to this anti-abortion organization located 3,000 miles from West Chester. You, the Chester County Commissioners, granted permission for them to put up their display on the lawn of my Courthouse, which by the way, is two blocks from where I live. Today, I find myself standing in front of you advocating for permission to showcase books on a tree!

So, again, either the lawn of the Chester County Courthouse is for everyone, including *The Tree of Knowledge*, or it’s only for displays you approve of, in which case I would like to hear a public statement on why you approved of photos of genocide and photos, not drawings, not actors, photos of actual people being murdered. What do you think citizens of Chester County would like to see—a tree decorated with book covers or photos of murdered bodies?

**Tom Schottmiller:**

I have been a resident of Chester County for the last 23 years. After retiring recently, I made the decision to give back to the community by volunteering. This is my home and I love Chester County.

I volunteer for local nonprofits and for the Chester County Orphans Court. As Orphan Court volunteers, we go into the community to visit with fellow residents of Chester County. These are individuals who are unable to take care of themselves. These folks have guardians appointed to them. What we do through the Orphans Court is make sure they have a safe environment and that they are not being abused physically, mentally or financially.

Doing that work along with other volunteer jobs has helped put in focus how diverse our community is. We may not see it in this room, but Chester County has a diverse population. We have many people living here who can’t speak for themselves, but they want to be part of the community. This is why I am here this morning—to speak up for minority citizens who just want to participate in the winter holiday season and to be able to display a meaningful symbol.
So, what is this thing we call *The Tree of Knowledge* that you are so afraid of? The reason I say you are fearful, is because actions speak louder than words. What exactly is *The Tree of Knowledge*?

*The Tree of Knowledge* is a beautiful evergreen decorated with book cover ornaments. Books written by presidents of the United States such as Thomas Jefferson. Books written by and about patriots like Thomas Paine. Books written by scientists and philosophers. The ornaments include the Bible and the Koran. Even the Constitution was on display. I don’t see any reason why a *Tree of Knowledge* would not be permitted other than the fact that you have some concern that your fellow citizens would find knowledge in these books. Commissioners, knowledge should be cherished. We should all open our minds to additional knowledge.

You say that you have followed a holiday display description found in the United States Supreme Court case *Lynch vs. Donnelly* and that decision gives you the right to display only certain items. You also say that you have the power to choose display items. Sometimes when you say you have the right to do something and that you have the power to do something, it still does not make it right. That is the case here today. I want you to consider, as you make this decision, that it’s easy to say, “Well, we have always done it this way and so thus we are going to keep doing it this way.”

But, Commissioners, this is a community that is becoming more diverse every day. It is shameful that you exclude part of the citizens from participating. We have minorities in the community that are being represented here today that want to be be involved. They don’t want to be shunned. They don’t want to be discriminated against. They want to take part—doing what—displaying *The Tree of Knowledge*, decorated with book covers so that people can be inspired to read about people like Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson.

So what am I asking? I’m asking for the Commissioners to reflect on their prior decision and stand up for what is right. As a politician I understand it is not hard to do the easy thing and to do the thing you have done before, but real courage—real courage is for someone to stand up and say, “I want to do the right thing. I want to respect all of my fellow citizens here in Chester County. I want to allow all citizens to feel that they are indeed part of the community during the 2013 winter holiday season.”

Today, I ask you to reconsider your prior exclusionary position, and this year make the right decision—vote in favor of accepting the Freethought Society’s nontheist winter holiday symbol *The Tree of Knowledge* on the front lawn of the Chester County Courthouse.

More Tree of Knowledge Supporters

Many people took the time to write directly to Commissioner Terrance Farrell in support of a *Tree of Knowledge* display. Farrell is still accepting commentary through his email address at: tfarrell@chesco.org. Since 2010, it was determined that Farrell held the swing vote on this issue. Due to lack of space, just a few of the support letters are reprinted below. The Freethought Society thanks everyone who participated. Excellent points were made by all. Reprinted are excerpts of a few messages Farrell received:

Fred Edwords
I understand that you are considering a request from the Freethought Society to include their *Tree of Knowledge* as part of your 2013 Winter Holiday display at the Chester County Courthouse. It would be most gratifying to me if that were to occur. I would then make it a point to encourage my contacts from the Greater Philadelphia area and elsewhere to visit Chester County to see this display. Indeed, during this festive season that we all share it would be my pleasure to do what I could to bring more tourist dollars to your area—a token of my appreciation for your support of religious pluralism and social diversity.

Burton Caine
The exclusion in my view as professor of law raises serious questions under the First Amendment establishment and free speech clauses. It also seems patently unfair. The views of two religions, Christians and Jews, are presented and the views of nontheists are excluded apparently because of objections to that point of view. In my opinion, that is a clear violation of the First Amendment.

George Kelley
I ask the commissioners to refrain from being religious arbiters. It is neither courageous nor wise to permit those seeking to preempt this holiday to restrict it to their own beliefs and sentiments when intelligent people of good will likewise wish to have their sentiments expressed. I ask the Commissioners to act wisely and with courage in sending the more important message, which is that holidays should symbolize knowledge, love, and tolerance.

Tom Krattenmaker
Please allow *The Tree of Knowledge* to be displayed at the county courthouse! I do not live in your area, but I care deeply about a fair, open, and pluralistic public square. What *The Tree of Knowledge* exemplifies is that spirit.

Lawrence Krauss
I do not see how a celebration of knowledge could be offensive. Objects need not celebrate God to celebrate the potential goodness in humanity, which is surely the intent of the season.

Steve Rade
I am a nonreligious person who supports the rights of religious and nonreligious groups to express their viewpoints and symbols equally in all public spaces. You will be doing the right thing by granting approval for a *Tree of Knowledge* display. Supporting this request will ultimately benefit all citizens of Chester County.