The Los Angeles, California Secular Day of the Dead

by Margaret Downey

The Secular Day of the Dead concept was developed by **Victoria de la Torre** and me in 2013. We held our very first Secular Day of the Dead in San Diego, California on November 2, 2014. Since it was a Sunday, we made the event family friendly and used an outdoor facility. It was a huge success! We held the event again in 2015 at the same location, and again, to rave reviews.

A "How to Host a Secular Day of the Dead" toolkit was developed based on the two San Diego events, but we realized that we were missing opportunities to celebrate the tradition during the week. Consequently, we approached three groups in Los Angeles to help us develop a celebration that could take place in the evening during a weekday. We were thrilled to find Sunday Assembly Los Angeles (SALA), Atheists United (AU) and the Center For Inquiry-West (CFI-West) willing to join forces with The Freethought Society to co-host a Secular Day of the Dead dinner and ceremony.

A team was developed and duties divided. After visiting several possible locations, a lovely downtown Los Angeles restaurant was chosen for the event. We contracted for a minimum of 40 diners to ensure live entertainment as well as the ability to use the stage and sound equipment for our celebration. The final number of attendees was 65.

The La Fonda Restaurant did not disappoint. They arranged for an all-female mariachi band (Mariachi Las Catrinas) to provide us with a beautiful show that included dancers and singers.

After the pre-arranged meal was served and the show was over, the co-hosts welcomed guests, lit candles, and started the ceremony. The Secular Saint Candles lit that night included **Charles Darwin**, **Carl Sagan**, **Albert Einstein**, **Frida Kahlo**, **Sigmund Freud** and **Christopher Hitchens**.

Christina Jones from AU provided some particularly interesting history in her welcome. She said, "Welcome to this wonderful celebration of life that has its origins in a 3,000-year-old, ever-evolving Aztec tradition. Our secular community has embraced this beautiful cultural tradition that allows us to celebrate the lifes of our loved ones who have died. We hope that many of you will join us later this evening to honor the memory of someone you loved. This celebration is meaningful to me, personally, because my family heritage connects me to this indigenous tradition. Traditionally, theists believe that the spirit of the dead will come back to Earth, and for one day – the Day of the Dead, they will be together with the living. I have moved on from this superstition and magical thinking that once held a strong place in my childhood."

Representing CFI-West, **Jim Underdown** said, "The Center For Inquiry welcomes you and we hope to see many of you again when we open our doors at our new location just around the corner at Temple and Rampart Streets. We non-theists know that this is our one and only life to live. More and more people are abandoning their religious upbringing, but still want to celebrate the beauty of their culture. This is why a secular version of the Day of the Dead was created."

Amy Boyle, who was representing SALA welcomed people to the event saying, "Current statistics and social surveys reveal that 46% of the population in the United States consider themselves 'non-religiously affiliated,' atheist or agnostic. Most of those 46% enjoy community and social gatherings as a way to build strong group ties. So, we think that this Secular Day of the Dead will appeal to those new non-affiliated citizens. As Jim said, our Secular Day of the Dead event is actually a celebration of life and we have incorporated Hispanic rituals and traditions that have no religious or supernatural connections. Secularism welcomes everyone — with or without faith — and tonight is a way to join together in our common humanity as we share life legacies, tell stories about our dead loved ones, and enjoy each other's company. Because we do not believe in an afterlife, it is important to stress the fact that when we die, all that will be left is our legacy. Through our legacies, we will live on. At this Secular Day of the Dead we come together as a community to celebrate life — not death."

My welcome included the words, "The Secular Day of the Dead is a perfect way to remember dead loved ones in a way that does not require prayer, church, or any other religious dogma. On this day we do not dwell on the sadness of a person's death, but instead we focus on the happiness we shared with them. The stories you share will give us the opportunity to reflect on just how precious and significant life really is."

Shelley Segal opened the honoring portion of the program by singing a song dedicated to Hitchens. She also sang a song she wrote about her grandmother. Her tributes were touching and lovely.

Julia Sweeney attended and spoke about her father and his legacy as a trial attorney. Sweeney was influenced greatly by her father and she honored his legacy in a beautiful way.

Ian Harris also spoke about his father. Through a few stories Harris described how his father had a major influence in his comedy, his political mind, his questioning nature and above all, his leading example of empathy.

Steve Hill honored a family member whose tragic death changed his personal goals in life. Hill's nephew was murdered in Detroit, Michigan earlier in the year. Hill is determined to question the acceptance of crime in the city and fight back with the use of reason and critical thinking skills.

I spoke about my father and how he and I used DNA science to confirm that we were related. I also talked about the importance of developing understanding and acceptance through the application of knowledge. Understanding can ease difficult family dynamics. While relationships can be complicated, knowledge and science can actually help us heal. When we heal, precious memories can be made, people can experience love, and families can be made whole again.

There was an open-mic opportunity and many people in attendance honored their dead loved ones. Each speaker enjoyed reflecting on their loved one's legacy.

The entire event was covered by National Public Radio's affiliate KPCC (Pasadena, California). You can read or listen to the report at:

https://www.scpr.org/news/2018/11/02/86926/angelenos-celebrate-first-secular-day-of-the-dead/

2018 Secular Day of the Dead Photos

Pictured in the above left photo are (left to right) **Margaret Downey**, **Christina Jones**, and **Amy Boyle**. They are on stage singing "Imagine," in honor of the life and work of **John Lennon**.

Jim Underdown (co-host and co-sponsor) and **Karen Briner** (volunteer) are pictured in the above right photo.

Julia Sweeney is pictured above left. She announced that she has developed two new monologues which will be produced in Los Angeles in early 2019. Sweeney provided a short description of the show topics and talked about her father's influence. Watch for more show details in future Freethought Society Ezines.

In the above center photo, **Bobbie Kirkhart** is dressed in a typical Day of the Dead outfit that includes a half-face mask. Half-face masks were offered for sale during the event as was a Saint Christopher Hitchens Secular Saint Candle created by **Margaret Downey** and **Emily Byrne**.

Pictured above is **Shelley Segal**. Her elegant performance brought tears to the eyes of attendees.