The 2018 Attempt to Display The Tree of Knowledge
by Margaret Downey

Each year since 2010, the Freethought Society (FS) has requested that the nontheist symbol The Tree of Knowledge be given a space within the public Winter Holiday display in Chester County, Pennsylvania. The annual display is located on the grounds at the Chester County Old Historic Courthouse. Appearing on the lawn each year are a menorah, a crèche, a Chamber of Commerce Christmas tree, a wreath dedicated to veterans, peace banners, toy soldiers and a wire choo-choo train.

In 2010, the Chester County Commissioners passed Resolution 58-10. The resolution gave the Commissioners full control over the display. The well-known free speech zone became the “Chester County Commissioners Zone.” The Commissioners claim that the secular community is represented by toy soldiers and the choo-choo train — and those items are sufficient to balance out the overtly religious displays. The nontheist community disagrees. We resent that the Commissioners decided childish symbols are appropriate representations for the nontheist community.

Over the years, many people have attended the Chester County Commissioners Sunshine Meeting to express their desire to have The Tree of Knowledge represent the nontheist community. Past speakers included representatives from the Society for Humanistic Judaism (Glen Loev), Hispanic American Freethinkers (David Tamayo), Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers (Jason Torpy and Jason Heap), Ethical Culture (Hugh Taft-Morales), and the Indian Rationalist Association (Dr. Sam Ilangovan). Many other citizens have testified on behalf of The Tree of Knowledge display. They include Tom Schottmiller, Tracy Lockwood, Jill McDevitt, Dr. Robert Kay, Emily Bryne, Debbie Hodges, and many other people who were compelled to voice their endorsements.

In 2010, FS circulated an online petition in favor of the inclusion of The Tree of Knowledge. The petition garnered over 400 signatures. When it was delivered to the Chester County Commissioners they completely ignored it. Signatories included authors, scientists, journalists, and national group leaders.

Since 2010, FS has held two public rallies at the Chester County Courthouse in an attempt to bring attention to the fact that the nontheist community is effectively left out of the government-sponsored winter holiday display. The “Human Tree of Knowledge” rallies were well-attended. Passersby stopped to get information, participate in a sing-along and listen to speakers. Rally speakers have included (besides myself) Dr. Robert Porter, Carol Everhart Roper, Bob Lemon, Loren Corley, Tracy Lockwood, Andrew Barrett, Bill Wisdom, Stacks Rosch, Shaun McGonigal, Christopher Evans, Susan O’Connell and many other others who participated during the cold-weather gatherings.

On November 13, 2018, I spoke at a Chester County Commissioners Sunshine Meeting to promote the inclusion of The Tree of Knowledge (see video here). In my comments I requested that the Chester County Commissioners revoke or amend Resolution 58-10 “…to include not only the symbol of nontheism but to also include other minority symbols.” Several weeks later, I received a letter from the Chester County Solicitor Thomas L. Whiteman. He stated, “I have reviewed your request with the Commissioners and, following our discussion, I write to advise you that they will take no action to amend or revoke the existing Resolution.”

2018 marks the eighth year that the nontheist community has been prevented from participating in a public community event. The FS board is examining all options, which may include a discrimination complaint with the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission and/or legal action. FS welcomes feedback from supporters about The Tree of Knowledge project. Please send commentary to: TreeofKnowledge@FtSociety.org
Photos of the 2018 Philadelphia Tree of Knowledge

Pictured left is Pennsylvania resident and world-famous sculptor Zeno Frudakis. The first ornament Frudakis chose to hang on the tree was a color copy of one of his favorite books written by Christopher Hitchens.

Pictured right is Marjorie Goldman. Her first book ornament choice to hang was *Judaism in a Secular Age* by Yehuda Bauer and Sherwin Wine. Goldman is a theater artist and has helped the Freethought Society with many artistic and theatrical endeavors.

Pictured above (left to right) are Bob Steinford, Drew Snyder, Ron Coburn, Chuck O’Neil, Maureen Clarke, Lelah Marie, John Marshall, and Henry Pashkow. Together they form the “Philadelphia Ethical Society Pop-Up Chorus.” They sing regularly, at least once a month, at the Philadelphia Ethical Society Sunday platform. Since the members of the chorus never know when they will be performing, the term “Pop-Up” has an intentional reference in their chosen name. On Sunday, December 2, 2018, the group sang a cheerful song, *Give A Little Whistle* by Leigh Harline and Ned Washington. The song was selected to go along with the theme of Hugh Taft-Morales’s platform speech “Do You Listen to Your Conscience?” reprinted elsewhere in this publication.
Pictured above in the left photo is Freethought Society (FS) president Margaret Downey. She is depositing athletic shoes that were donated during the December 2, 2018 PES/FS Tree of Knowledge event into the box created specifically for display in the lobby.

In the above middle photo, PES leader Hugh Taft-Morales and Downey are holding jeans that were donated by attendees to the event. The contents of each box will be delivered to the Safe Harbor of Chester County homeless shelter in West Chester, Pennsylvania. The “Sole Searching” and “Jump Into The Jean Pool” efforts are creations of FS’s Helping Hands Committee. The donation efforts are ongoing and are announced periodically as part of an FS gathering.

In the above right photo, Downey and Taft-Morales are standing in front of the 2018 Tree of Knowledge. It is displayed in the lobby of the Ethical Society Building for a full month during the winter holiday season (December 2-January 2). The public is welcome to visit the lobby during regular business hours. See the PES website (https://phillyethics.org), or call ahead for lobby hours (215-735-3456).

Pictured left is Dan Hoffman. He is a former Freethought Society board member and a longtime supporter. Hoffman helped to install the first Tree of Knowledge on the lawn of the Chester County Courthouse in 2007. Hoffman is holding a Carl Sagan book cover as he reminisced about how Sagan inspired him to learn more about science when he watched the original Cosmos television series.

Pictured right is Cheryl Desmond. She is the Philadelphia Ethical Society (PES) Administrator. Desmond helps maintain The Tree of Knowledge during its display in the lobby of the Society. She proudly greets the public as a representative of PES.