The Secular Day of the Dead 2019 Event
by Margaret Downey

It is with great pride that I report on the growing trend of celebrating a Secular Day of the Dead. The Freethought Society (FS) first developed the concept in conjunction with Victoria de la Torre in 2014. In 2018, a Secular Day of the Dead toolkit was written and made available to any secular/nontheist group who requested it. This year we know of four events that took place in various parts of the country.

On Saturday, November 2, 2019 FS and the San Diego Humanist Association co-sponsored a Secular Day of the Dead in San Diego, California. The event drew 50 people to Emiliano’s Mexican Restaurant and Cantina in order to honor the life legacies of dead loved ones as well as to appreciate life in the here and the now.

The San Diego event included a Mexican buffet food service, entertainment by Juan Jose Cortés, and an Honoring Ceremony. The event opened with a welcome delivered by me, de la Torre and Consuelo Fleming. During the opening, each of us lit two Secular Saint candles. I lit candles to honor Carl Sagan and Christopher Hitchens. De la Torre honored Socrates and Sigmund Freud. Fleming honored her secular heroes Charles Darwin and Frida Kahlo.

Most of the attendees brought framed photos of their dead loved ones to place on the Honoring Table (also known as an “Ofrenda”). Very few people shared their memories and stories publicly. It’s not an easy thing to do, but for those who did talk, the ceremony seemed healing and very special. The Honoring Ceremony ended with the lighting of a John Lennon Secular Saint candle and everyone in attendance rose from their seats to sing “Imagine.” It was a beautiful conclusion to a lovely ceremony.

As soon as possible tables and chairs were moved to the side of the room to create a dance floor. Mexican music was played and many people danced. Dancing is a recognized tradition in the Hispanic community and the Secular Day of the Dead was the perfect place to enjoy music as well as the energy that is generated by people enjoying life.

Across the country, The Humanists and Freethinkers of Fairfield County (HFFC) hosted a Secular Day of the Dead on Friday, November 1st at the Rio Bravo Tacos & Tequila restaurant located in Norwalk, Connecticut. HFFC’s announcement of the event was very well done. Below is a reprint:

Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) is still an important holiday for people of Latin American descent all over the world, but its Catholic traditions no longer resonate with some. To be inclusive of those who practice other religions, or none at all, affiliates of the Freethought Society across the United States recently began to host ‘secular’ celebrations, which put religion on the back burner in recognition of the core purposes: culture, community, and family.

This year, The Humanists and Freethinkers of Fairfield County (HFFC) is bringing one to Norwalk. Come to share a story of a deceased loved one, a quote that reminds you to seize the day, or just listen while you enjoy delicious tacos and good company.

Our theme is Carpe Diem — Seize the Day! Live your best life even in the face of knowing you will die. We embrace the cultural message of the Day of the Dead, to remember and commune with those who are no longer with us physically, but remain inside of us and inspire us to live our best lives. Share a quote about carpe diem; tell a story of someone who influenced your life; bring a memento to remind you of your mortality; you can come in costume or with your face painted as is the custom for this holiday.
The Day of the Dead is a Mexican holiday celebrated throughout Mexico and the Mexican diaspora. In Mexican culture, death is viewed as a natural part of the human cycle. On the Day of the Dead, family and friends gather to remember and celebrate friends and family members who have died.

A Secular Day of the Dead is a celebration of life and family legacies. Our humanist friends in California created this celebration as a cultural event without any religious context or belief in an afterlife. Skulls and skeletons are images of memento mori (Latin for ‘remember you will die’) to remind us of our mortality and to remember carpe diem — to seize the day.

HFFC Director of Programming Anita Peters was the main organizer of the 2019 Secular Day of the Dead. HFFC invited the Norwalk Hispanic Chamber of Commerce to attend and subsequently referred their members to a wonderful Google YouTube video, Dia de los Muertos: Celebration of Life. The video is done in Spanish and has English subtitles. The video can be viewed at this link:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j44yUsIzUiks

The video provided information about the history of Dia de los Muertos. It began as an Aztec celebration that was adapted by Catholic Spaniards. The celebration spread throughout Latin America and is now appreciated by many secular Hispanics as an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of life, ancestry and living life to the fullest. HFFC encouraged participants to arrive in costumes and bring articles of memento mori to share.

During the event everyone put their business card in a jar for a chance to win two bobblehead skeletons. Peters said:

The HFFC Secular Day of the Dead was a fun social get-together. This was the first time we organized such an event, but we plan on making it an annual celebration. We, of course, will always include an invitation to the Norwalk Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. HFFC hosted 15 participants including the President and Vice-President of the Norwalk Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, but we hope to greatly increase attendance in 2020.

Another Secular Day of the Dead event took place on November 1st in Tysons Corner, Virginia, located just outside of Washington, DC. The event was hosted by Hispanic American Freethinkers (HAFree). Twenty people were in attendance at the event, which took place at a restaurant located on the top floor of a newly-opened Whole Foods. HAFree founder and president David Tamayo describes the event below:

Some of us drive electric cars and Whole Foods has free car charging for up to two hours. The restaurant at Whole Foods has a lot of tables which we put together and decorated with colorful signs.

We provided everyone with Dia de los Muertos masks. During the event we had a discussion of the future of humanity considering the many different ways humans can kill themselves as a species, not counting the ways that nature can do us in. Yes, the conversation was a bit morbid, but perhaps appropriate for the holiday.

A HAFree hero, Hector Avalos, is dying of cancer, so we also talked about his decision to not go through any additional medical treatments. I have the honor of making sure his life is memorialized and at his request I will be filming his dying message. The group made suggestions about what questions I should ask during the filming. There, at our Secular Day of the Dead, we were all rationally discussing death and life legacies. We celebrated our lives and friendships that special evening.

Inspired by the Secular Day of the Dead toolkit provided by FS, Nick and March Schweitzer held a celebration in their home on November 1, 2019 in Madison, Wisconsin. The Schweitzers provided the below description of their event:

We invited only 20 people to our celebration because that seemed to be the right number for each person in attendance to talk about their dead loved ones during the event. And they all did! Many people brought and shared foods associated with the legacy of their loved ones.

A secular ofrenda (honoring table) was prepared with marigolds, candles, sugar skulls, and food offerings of fruit and breads, especially pan de muerto. Mexican food and drink were served. Time was taken during the evening for each person to tell a story and highlight the life legacy of her/his honoree.

As an initial trial, the event was not advertised to the general public, but based on its success plans are now proceeding for a 2020 celebration in a larger venue. Next year, we will send invitations to groups such as the Humanist Union of Madison; Atheists, Humanists & Agnostics at the University of Wisconsin; the Free Congregation of Sauk City; and the Freedom from Religion Foundation, hoping that they will join us to celebrate life and the legacies of our dead loved ones.

FS is pleased that the Secular Day of the Dead concept is being used across the country. To help individuals and groups host this type of activity, a PDF version of the Secular Day of the Dead toolkit is available at the following link:


If you host a Secular Day of the Dead event, please remember to send FS a report and please include photos. FS is keeping an archive of all the Secular Day of the Dead events to enable an exchange of ideas throughout the secular community. The San Diego, California Secular Day of the Dead Honoring Table (Ofrenda) is pictured below:
Photos of the 2019 California Secular Day of the Dead

Pictured left in the top row are the three hosts of the San Diego, California Secular Day of the Dead/Dia de los Muertos Secular event. Left to right are Victoria de La Torre, Margaret Downey and Consuelo Fleming. Seated is the classical guitarist entertainer, Juan Jose Cortés.

For over eight months, Indra Zuno helped to organize the Secular Day of the Dead event. She could not attend the event due to a family emergency, but without her help the San Diego Secular Day of the Dead would not have been a success. Her photo is at right. We thank her for all her hard work leading up to the 2019 Secular Day of the Dead.

Pictured left is Jamy Ian Smith honoring the life of his friend and fellow magician, Johnny Thompson. In the above middle photo, Amy Turner is pictured honoring her grandparents. Michael McCarron is pictured in the above right photo honoring Katie Corish, who was a second mother to him. She died from cancer 3 years ago.

Pictured left is Michael Estes honoring the life of his sister, who is shown in a family photograph being held by Victoria de La Torre. In the above middle photo, Melissa Krawczyk speaks fondly of a dear friend who died tragically in a motorcycle accident a few years ago. James Nunnelley talked about the life of Stephen Hawking, a scientist he admired greatly.