Report on the First Online International Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular

More and more Hispanics are abandoning their religious upbringing but still want to celebrate the beauty of their culture. This is why a Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular was created. Many nontheist Hispanics desire to continue traditions and cultural rituals but in a secular way. In 2014, Freethought Society (FS) board member Victoria de la Torre and FS founder and president Margaret Downey created a secular version of the traditional Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos. Since that time, the event has taken place three times in San Diego, California; once in Los Angeles, California; Norwalk, Connecticut; Tysons Corner, Virginia; and Madison, Wisconsin.

Contrary to the name, the Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular event is actually a celebration of life. The nontheist Hispanic community views the Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular as a perfect way to remember the legacy of deceased loved ones — in a way that does not require prayer, church, or any religious dogma.

The 2020 Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular event honored many Hispanic traditions and rituals that celebrated our one and only life and the joy of being human. Due to the current COVID-19 health crisis, de la Torre and Downey decided to modify the event in order to present it online. They developed a bilingual program that highlighted ways to keep all the secular aspects and have interaction with those who log on. When the program was developed, Downey pitched the concept to leaders of national nontheist groups and offered co-sponsorship opportunities. American Atheists (AA); Center for Inquiry (CFI); Hispanic American Freethinkers (HAFree); and the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) immediately agreed to share costs and preparation responsibilities.

Thanks to the efforts of an energetic organizational team that included co-sponsor representatives Kristina Daliden (FFRF), Samantha McQuire (AA), Melissa Myers (CFI), David Tamayo (HAFree), Downey (FS) and de la Torre (FS), the event took on a decidedly international dimension. The very first online International Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular event took place on Sunday, November 1, 2020. Registrants included people from all over the United States, Columbia, Canada, Denmark, El Salvador, England, Hawaii, India, Luxembourg, Mexico, and Spain. A total of 401 Zoom registrations were received.

Helping to advertise the event were the many people who shared the Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular Facebook event page. Many groups set up Meetup pages for their members as well. Podcaster Ryan Bell featured Downey and de la Torre on October 28, 2020 on his podcast “Life After God” (number: 094 Secular Day of the Dead). FFRF featured Downey and de la Torre as guests on their weekly live Facebook broadcast Ask an Atheist. The show can be seen at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLJQbGuLl8k

Día de los Muertos or Day of the Dead honors the life of dead loved ones. Traditions connected with the holiday include building private altars called “ofrendas.” Ofrendas are tables that honor the deceased using sugar skulls and flowers as well as the favorite foods and beverages of a dead loved one. Some families and friends make a point on this day to visit graves with these items as gifts. Secularists, however, are encouraged to meet with other like-minded individuals to enjoy Hispanic food, beverages, music, presentations, and socializing – even though the event had to be done online this year.
The event began with a 15-minute concert that included recorded performances from Juan Carlos, who played an original guitar song entitled This is Life; Gary Stockdale, who sang Imagine in Spanish; and Christina Magallanes-Jones, who sang La Llorona (The Weeping Woman) and played the piano. All three performances were subtitled.

The formal event opened with a fantastic subtitled welcome from actor Jon Huertas who spoke about the importance of the separation of religion and government and his philosophy in life as a proud nontheist. Huertas also said:

“I don’t need a reason why we exist. We just need a reason to live. Reasons like, I don’t know, free will, equality, love, solidarity, and respect of human dignity. Those are all amazing reasons for living, but they are also the essential values of secularism, nontheism and humanism. So be kind and be good not for some kind of afterlife, just because it feels pretty damn good to treat people like that in this life...”

After de la Torre and Downey welcomed everyone in both Spanish and English, de la Torre honored the life and work of Frida Kahlo and Downey honored the life and work of Thomas Paine. The leaders of co-sponsoring groups also participated in the welcome. Each provided a description of the group they were representing and honored a secular hero.

Tamayo (HAFree) honored Gabriel Jose de la Concordia Marquez, a Colombian author, scriptwriter, editor, and journalist, who received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1982; Annie Laurie Gaylor (FFRF) honored her mother Anne Nicol Gaylor, who co-founded FFRF in 1978; Nick Fish (AA) honored the legacy of Madalyn Murray O’Hair, who founded American Atheists in 1963; and Robyn Blummer (CFI) honored the many accomplishments of CFI founder Paul Kurtz. All presentations were subtitled.

Zoom participants were then offered a choice of moving into either a Spanish speaking room or an English speaking room. To give time for this breakout choice, interlude music was provided by Stockdale, who sang Guajira Guantanamera and Abraham Steve Mackey, who sang Rancho Grande.

Dan Barker (co-president of FFRF) filmed his keynote speech in both Spanish and English to insure a mirrored program in both Zoom rooms. Barker’s talk was about his journey from being an evangelical preacher in Mexico to becoming a proud and productive atheist leader.

An Honoring Ceremony began after Barker’s presentation. Previous to the event, special guests sent the organizational team films of themselves honoring a dead loved one. All films were subtitled in either Spanish or English in order to make the event truly bilingual.

Authors Fernando Alcántar honored his grandmother. Hollywood actor and Broadway star John Davidson honored his dear brother Lee. Sculptor Zenos Frudakis honored his brother and mentor EvAngelos Frudakis. Huertas honored his grandparents and his mother. Author Sasha Sagan honored her father Carl Sagan and his legacy. Downey honored the life and work of skeptic, debunker, and magician James “The Amazing” Randi. She also read sentiments about Randi submitted by Penn Jillette and Teller.

The session was then turned over to folks who had made a reservation to honor the legacies of the people they loved followed by an open mic session. People in attendance were invited to share stories about their dead loved ones. Following

is a list of the speakers and the names of the people they honored:

**In the Spanish-Speaker’s Room:**
- Memo Benumea: Father, Dr. Guillermo Benumea Jimenez
- Consuelo Cortes de Fleming: Uncle, Enrique Cortes
- Tanya Galaviz: Father, Pedro Galaviz Padron
- Gerardo Romero: Father, Joaquin Romero
- Bertha Vazquez: Grandfather, Daniel McDonald

**In the English-Speaker’s Room:**
- Debbie Allen: United States Supreme Court Justice
- Ruth Bader Ginsburg
- Darrell Barker: Wife, Suzan Palmer-Barker
- Jennifer Beahan: Friend and atheist blogger, Ed Brayton
- Michael Steven Martin: Author Christopher Hitchens
- Lynne Schultz: Son, Scout Schultz
- Shelley Segal: Grandmother, Rebeca “Beppie” Isaacs
- Katie Reyes: Brother, Eric Weave
- Jenny Robbins: Son, Kade Riefenberg
- Hugh Taft-Morales: Father-in-law, Dr. George Morales

Six prizes were awarded to the best Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular Zoom setting, face painting (half and entire), overall costume, hair adornment, and face mask. Congratulations to Ana Zamudio, Jennifer Vines, Allen, Benumea, Schultz, and Cortez de Fleming.

The Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular team thanks all the musicians, speakers and technicians who made the 2020 online international event possible. Aside from all those mentioned in this article, thanks also go to Buck Bowen for inserting video subtitles and FFRF’s Multimedia Manager Bruce A. Johnson for rendering the submitted videos.

To close the event, an 8-minute mini-concert was performed by Davidson in Spanish. Mackey sang the closing song Imagine in English.

If you missed participating in the 2020 event you can still view both the English and Spanish Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular sessions at the following links:

**English Speaker’s Room:** https://youtu.be/N46al_yEDdU
**Spanish Speaker’s Room:** https://youtu.be/ILM1Ozp4-8Q

After the event, many complimentary emails were received. Louise Danielson wrote, “Thank you for organizing a great event yesterday. It was interesting to experience such a beautiful tradition. I enjoyed the remembrance so much that I would like to book a slot at next year's event to honor my parents. They passed away in 2013 and 2012. My father was a devout atheist and my mother a devout Baptist. I would love to tell a short story about them.”

Phillips Stevens, Jr., Ph.D. wrote, “Very interesting, very well organized. I read the comments as many people introduced themselves and brought greetings from their corners of the world. A truly international gathering! Nice music, heartfelt comments and tributes. I was impressed.”

The success of the event has inspired the organizational team to consider a future event with the possibility of adding more co-sponsors, speakers, entertainers, activities, and even more international connections. Ideas are welcomed and appreciated. Please send suggestions and comments to Downey and de la Torre at the following email address:

SecularDayoftheDead@FtSociety.org
2020 International Secular Day of the Dead Event Photos

Pictured left is Secular Day of the Dead co-creator Margaret Downey. She is standing next to the Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular Honoring Table she prepared for her Zoom setting.

Pictured right is Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular co-creator Victoria de la Torre. She is pictured in front of her secular Honoring Table.

Pictured left is Consuelo Cortes de Fleming. She won sugar skull earrings for having the best Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos headdress.

Pictured right is Memo Benumea. He won a sugar skull squeaky dog toy and a gold-and-black sugar skull thermal drink container for having the best overall Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular costume and Zoom set design.

Pictured below left is Jennifer Vines. She won a Day of the Dead spice jar for the best Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular face painting.

Pictured above right are Secular Saint candle labels for sale through the Freethought Society. The labels can be affixed to 7” round, 8” high candles found at most Dollar Stores. The available labels honor Ann Nicol Gaylor, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Christopher Hitchens, Robert Green Ingersoll, Paul Kurtz, and Thomas Paine. The price for a single label is $6 or $5 per label for orders of two labels or more (postage included). Send your orders to: SecularDayoftheDead@FtSociety.org or mail orders to The Freethought Society, P. O. Box 242, Pocopson, PA 19366.