

2018 Secular Coalition for America Lobby Days

by Margaret Downey



Once again, the Secular Coalition for America (SCA) organized and conducted a fantastic lobbying experience for the nontheist community. While it is not easy to meet with Members of Congress on Capitol Hill, the pre-appointment training offered by SCA eased almost all the anxiety of the members of the Pennsylvania group. We were provided talking points along with some helpful lobbying protocol information. The two issues we addressed with our legislators were:

Do No Harm Act (H.R. 3222):

We asked for legislators to co-sponsor this act or support a Senate version. This Act was written because the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) is being used to justify discrimination and deprive people of their civil rights based on religious belief. The Do No Harm Act seeks to amend RFRA so that religion is not allowed to cause harm to others.

First Amendment Defense Act (S. 2525):

We requested that legislators oppose this act because the First Amendment Defense Act would legalize discrimination against non-traditional families, including same-sex couples, single parents and unmarried couples. Entities intend to use this legislation to discriminate using the Act as a sword to hurt nontraditional families rather than as a shield to protect religious freedom from government overreach.

Our group chose me to open the conversation when we visited the offices of Senators **Robert P. Casey, Jr.** and **Patrick J. Toomey**. I began with my name and I immediately provided my philosophical label. In my case, I prefer to be called a “Freethinking Atheist.” I specified that we were participating in the Secular Coalition for America lobby days and stated the reason we were there (to talk about the two issues mentioned above). That led to me asking the other people in our group to introduce themselves. Each person took a turn stating their name and how they like to identify themselves as members of the nontheist community. I thought this was an important step in that we had an opportunity to show the diversity of non-belief and to educate about the many shades of nontheism. Some in the group identified as a Humanist, agnostic and secularist. I was so proud to be a part of this articulate group of people, all of whom easily explained their philosophies quickly and very effectively.

The process led back to me and I presented our position about one issue. I told a short story about why I was personally interested in the issue and why I was there. Each person took their turn using the same method — a personal story and the reasons we are “for” or “against” the two Acts.

We all had a chance to speak, but the legislators we hoped to meet with were out of the office. We could only hope that **Virginia Lenahan**, Casey’s Legislative Aide and **Dan Sullivan**, Toomey’s General Counsel would convey our

sentiments as well as we did that day.

During the visit to Toomey's office I happened to sit across from a credenza located just behind the conference table. Sitting on the credenza was a large antique brass sculpture of a Boy Scout. I immediately recognized it because it is a mini-duplicate of the statue that was once located in front of the Philadelphia Boy Scouts of America (BSA) headquarters. It took over twenty years to oust BSA from that building for their blatant violation of Philadelphia's anti-discrimination statutes. I was so happy when the building was returned to the city and the statue was taken down.

As people in our group took their turn to speak, I could not take my eyes off of that Boy Scout statue. When the last person in our group spoke, Sullivan asked, "Is there anything else?" I was compelled to say the following:

"As my fellow secularists were speaking, I could not help but notice the Boy Scout statue sitting on the credenza. Every person sitting with you here today would not be welcome as a member, employee, or volunteer in the Boy Scouts of America

— neither would our children and our grandchildren.

"The Boy Scouts of America now has a policy to allow lesbian, gay, bisexual scouts and leaders. They also allow transgender scouts and leaders. In addition, the Boy Scouts of America recently decided to allow females. Unfortunately, they continue to reject nontheists. We are treated like second- class citizens and it hurts us greatly.

"My son was not allowed to continue his affiliation with the Boy Scouts due to his believing in 'Good' not 'God' and I was told that we could 'never be the best kind of citizen, without a

belief in God.' My son was unable to earn his Eagle Badge like the one Mr. Toomey is proud to have accomplished. When my son entered the Air Force, we learned that the United States government pays Eagle Scouts almost 2% more in comparison to non-Eagle Scouts. To us, this practice is the government rewarding the religious community. This is a small example of the harm being done at the hands of the Boy Scouts of America.

"Telling members of the Boy Scouts of America that they must separate themselves from nontheists is promoting hatred and misunderstandings. The Boy Scouts of America claims to be developing future leaders — all the while conveying that nontheists must be separated from, 'not the best kind of citizens' and excluded.

"Please let Mr. Toomey know that you met people today who also asked that he use his influence to persuade the Boy Scouts of America to allow nontheists to participate equally and without prejudice."

I had been looking directly at Sullivan the entire time I spoke. When I looked back at my fellow nontheists, several people had tears in their eyes. I had become rather emotional as I spoke and had not noticed that

others were feeling the same. Sullivan noticed as well.

The harm that BSA has done to the nontheist community is without question. We are the last taboo for BSA, even though our children are more than willing to add one more “o” to the BSA oath. It is not intrusive or disruptive for an honest nontheist Scout to simply say:

“On my honor, I will do my best to do my duty to Good and my country, to obey the Scout Law, to help other people at all times, to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight.”

Asking for acceptance from BSA must become a priority for the nontheist community, national nontheist groups, lobbyists and activists. We simply can’t allow this type of bigotry to flourish without strong objections.

If BSA continues banning nontheists without good cause, the organization must not be allowed to solicit for new members in our public schools, receive government gratuities and be rewarded with benefits that favor religious citizens over nontheist citizens.

Perhaps this issue will be part of our next lobbying effort. I certainly hope so. Equality, acceptance and respect are long overdue.