BSA's Religious Recruitment/Anti-Nontheist Signs: Activist Report

With submissions by Margaret Downey, Sally Flynn and Thomas Schottmiller

Each year during the month of September, the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) conduct a membership drive targeting elementary school children. They use their past reputation as a non-profit service organization to get into a public school setting. However, in the year 2000, BSA declared itself a "private" organization which gave them the right to decline ANY application they found harmful to their mission. Please see the following United States Supreme Court case for details: *Boy Scouts of America v. Dale* (530 U.S. 640).

While the above mentioned case was specifically about a gay man being denied BSA affiliation, BSA was on record as having also determined that nontheists were not welcome either. My own Pennsylvania Human Relations Department discrimination complaint against BSA was dismissed due to BSA having declared itself "private." See: *Margaret Downey-Schottmiller v. Chester County Council of the Boy Scouts of America* (Docket No. P-3986).

As a private organization, one would think that BSA would be held to a different standard in their dealings with government entities such as schools, the military and Congress, but BSA has too many friends in high places for them to suffer the consequences of having become a private organization. BSA continues to this day to receive special favors and treatment not granted to other private organizations. Millions of taxpayer dollars are used to support BSA activities including their Jamboree, building needs, and fundraising efforts. BSA still retains its Congressional Charter, allowing it to receive special government privileges — all while excluding some members of society due to biased membership rules.

In 2015, BSA dropped its anti-gay membership rules. Then in January 2017, it dropped its anti-trans members rules. Just recently (October 2017), BSA announced that it would start accepting female applicants. While these are steps forward to stop certain discrimination, BSA continues to determine that nontheists are unworthy and unacceptable to be members of the world's largest youth group.

Many nontheist activists work hard to educate the public about this unfair and immoral treatment of nontheist citizens at the hands of BSA. When recruitment signs are placed on school grounds, activists must speak up and demand that the signs be removed. When a school is supporting the BSA recruitment drive they are, in essence, in agreement that nontheist children WILL BE discriminated against and that bigotry is supported by the school district. Once this is pointed out to a conscientious and concerned school superintendent, however, the signs are usually quickly removed from school property. This is what happened recently at the Pocopson Elementary School, located in Pocopson, Pennsylvania.

The day I noticed eight BSA recruitment signs on the lawn of the Pocopson Elementary School (very close to the outdoor school sign), I contacted the school superintendent.

It was not my first complaint. I've complained for many years about this entanglement. The school is easy for me to monitor, as it is located directly across from the Pocopson Post Office, where the Freethought Society (FS) has a postal box.

School Superintendent **Dr. John Sanville** has always been considerate and understanding. He treats all concerns with respect and I hold him in high regard. Only one day after my alert about the sign placements, Dr. Sanville wrote:

Dear Ms. Downey:

Thanks again for your input. I looked into the matter of the signs that gave you concern. I found that the District had acted properly. The signs were removed — without regard to their content — as they violated District policy applicable to all signs. Accordingly, it is not necessary for me to comment as to your thoughts about the Boy Scouts. However, as I shared with you previously, I can assure you that the District will continue to adhere to the standards set by the federal and state Constitutions, statutes, regulations, and court cases.

Kind Regards,
Dr. John Sanville

While the BSA recruitment signs were taken off the school grounds they were then placed on the other side of the street, which is the property of Ace Hardware. **Sally Flynn** (an FS board member and resident of Pocopson) decided to inquire as to whether or not the owner of Ace Hardware had been asked about the placement of the signs and if he approved of them and the message they conveyed. Flynn went into the store and spoke to the owner's daughter. They had a nice chat about BSA not allowing nontheists to participate and Flynn was assured that her concerns would be conveyed.

Flynn was hopeful because a few years ago she visited a nearby veterinarian's office who had allowed BSA signs to be placed on his property. When she told the veterinarian all the details about BSA bias membership rules, the signs were immediately taken down. The signs have never appeared on the veterinarians property since then. Unfortunately, BSA signs continued to be displayed on the Ace Hardware property, weeks after Flynn's visit.

Learning about the way Ace Hardware was ignoring Flynn's visit, **Thomas Schottmiller** (an FS Life Member and

resident of West Chester, Pennsylvania) decided to contact the owner via phone. After a short conversation, Schottmiller sent the following email:

*Dear Mr. **Larry Drennen**,*

Thank you for being willing to reconsider the display of Boy Scouts of America (BSA) signs on the Ace Hardware property.

I write to provide additional information concerning the discriminatory membership policies. In order to keep out people that BSA considers "undesirable," they declared themselves a "private" organization. Please see the following article:

https://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/99-699.ZD.html

Within ten years of the Dale case, however, BSA started accepting applications from gays, transgender children and girls. Their progressive approach and nondiscrimination stopped there. To this day, they will not consider membership applications from nontheists. We nontheists are more than willing to substitute the word "God" in the Boy Scout Oath with the word "Good," making it very easy for our participation. There would be no disruption and as you know, a Scout is honest and truthful. The word "Good" exemplifies the tenets of BSA without problems. Below is what is found on the BSA application:

Excerpt from the BSA Declaration of Religious Principle

> The BSA maintains that no member can grow into the best kind of citizen without recognizing an obligation to God and, therefore, recognizes the religious element in the training of the member, but is absolutely nonsectarian in its attitude toward that religious training. Its policy is that the home and the organization or group with which the member is connected shall give definite attention to religious life. Only persons willing to subscribe to this Declaration of Religious Principle and to the Bylaws of the Boy Scouts of America shall be entitled to certificates of membership.

Don't let the word "nonsectarian" throw you. That only means BSA is not pushing a particular religion. Please go to the following link to see which religions are considered "acceptable:"

https://www.scouting.org/awards/religious-awards

You will not see a nontheist emblem, nor will you see a secular category such as Secular Judaism. Here is where you will find the complete list of acceptable religions:

https://www.scouting.org/awards/religious-awards/chart

I ask that you not let BSA continue using your property to promote the exclusion of the nontheist community.

It is unfortunate that the use of your business property to promote BSA entangles Ace Hardware into a hurtful policy of bigotry and aids in the promotion of unproven prejudices against nontheists. I ask that you help us obtain equality and protect our children from being bullied and discriminated against by not giving BSA easy access to sign placement. Perhaps when the voice of acceptance is heard loud and clear, BSA will be open and fair to all applicants without prejudice.

A Pew study from 2014 showed that 23 percent of Americans described themselves as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular."

Further, a Pew survey from October 2017 showed that 56 percent of Americans are of the opinion that you don't need to believe in a god to be moral.

Sincerely,
Thomas C. Schottmiller

After several weeks passed, Schottmiller followed up and discovered that Mr. Drennen had referred his letter to the Scout Executive of the BSA Chester County Council. Mr. Drennen apparently wanted a better explanation of the BSA membership rules. The following was received a week later:

Thomas,

I have hesitated to respond as I know there is nothing I can say that you will find acceptable. As a values-based organization with the aims of developing character, personal fitness and citizenship, our programs are open to all youth (within the appropriate ages for each program) who aspire to live up to all of the values expressed, and pledged to, in the Scout Oath and Law. A number of children and/or their families decide not to participate in Scouting because one, or more, of these values conflict with their personal beliefs.

Like a great many youth organizations, we wish we had universal appeal. However, in a great country that celebrates diversity, most organizations find they appeal only to a segment of the youth population. As one of the largest youth serving organizations in the country, we celebrate diversity and are among the most inclusive in our policies.

Scouting has benefited from a great many people who share our set of values and we remain steadfastly respectful of those who do not.

Sincerely,

Charles E. Rogers, Jr.
Scout Executive, Chester County Council, BSA

Schottmiller made sure to respond, sending the following to both Rogers and Drennen:

Dear Mr. Drennen and Mr. Rogers,

Thank you for your email of Oct 23. I am sorry you felt hesitant to respond. Only through conversation can we share ideas as to how to serve the best interests of our young citizens. The tragic events of Pittsburgh reminded me that we have much work to do in our country to insure that all citizens are respected for who they are. If we are to make progress, adults like you and I must learn to work together so we can better serve all of our young people. What they learn

in their youth will be the foundation of who they will be as adults.

That is why I continue to be concerned that The Boy Scouts of American (BSA) continues to discriminate against nontheist children and families. Recent polls show that number as approximately 25% of our population. Your statement that some children and families choose not to participate is incorrect. They are excluded. What kind of signal does it send that BSA exclude such a large portion of our youth?

If we are to build a more inclusive country, we must strive to create a youth organization that accepts all. Actually, that would be easy to do. A Scout oath that states a Scout had a duty to do GOOD, would certainly create an inclusive and welcoming environment. I know you are a private organization. Thus there is no law forcing you to make a change. But, I hope you would agree that it's time for BSA to do the right thing and serve all of our youth in this great country.

Mr. Drennen owns a very successful hardware store that we are fortunate to have in our neighborhood. As you enter the parking lot you can't help but notice the warm, welcoming environment. Can you imagine if an employee met you at the door asking your religious beliefs before you could come in. Sounds absurd, right? When you posted signs on his property inviting young people to join BSA, a parent would reasonably assume their child would be welcome, regardless of their beliefs, just as they assume Mr. Drennen welcomes all customers to his store. And I might add that one always feels welcome at Ace Hardware!

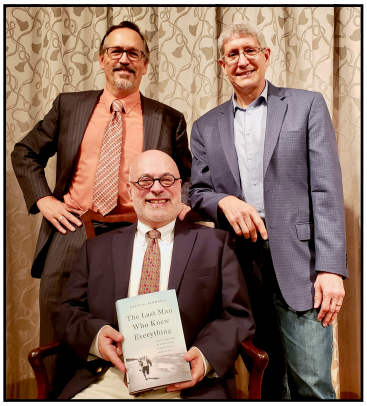
The values you state in your email of developing character, personal fitness and citizenship are universal values that are all important for the development of our young people. My hope is that our next generation will be better able to learn that we can be different in some aspects of our lives and beliefs, but still be GOOD citizens that work together to build a better tomorrow. We have an opportunity of achieving that goal if we work together in a youth organization to understand some of our differences, but build on the fact that we share so many of the same values. A Boy Scout oath allowing a youth to say a scout's duty is to do GOOD would allow all of our young citizens to be served by BSA.

I would welcome an opportunity to work with you to create that environment.

As of the publication date of this FS Ezine, there has been no further communication between the parties. Schottmiller, Flynn and I reported this entire incident in order to inspire readers to be prepared to take action next September when BSA kicks off their 2019 recruitment drive. Concerned nontheists and others who know that discrimination is immoral and dangerous must speak up when recruitment signs are displayed — whether on school grounds or on private property. Please plan to help us educate people that there is great harm in separating youths for philosophical reasons. BSA must change in order to reflect as well as promote a united, diverse and productive society. ◘

The Schwartz Event

On Wednesday, September 26, 2018, Philadelphia Ethical Society (PES) Leader **Hugh Taft-Morales** interviewed **David N. Schwartz** about his book, *The Last Man Who Knew Everything.* The event was cosponsored by The Freethought Society (FS) and PES. **Glen Loev** (FS Vice-President) represented FS that night as a welcome speaker. In the photo at right, Schwartz is seated. Taft-Morales (left) and Loev (right), are standing.



Schwartz's book is about the fascinating life and incredible work of **Enrico Fermi**, who won the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1938.

Schwartz holds a PhD in political science from MIT and is the author of two previous books. He has worked at the State Department Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs and at Goldman Sachs in a variety of roles in both London and New York. The 1988 Nobel Prize in Physics was awarded jointly to Schwartz's father **Melvin Schwartz**, **Jack Steinberger** and **Leon M. Lederman** "for the neutrino beam method and the demonstration of the doublet structure of the leptons through the discovery of the muon neutrino."

Taft-Morales and Schwartz shared growing up as children of two atomic physicists with personal connections to Fermi's work, the former being a PhD advisee of Fermi, and the latter sharing a Nobel Prize in physics built, in part, on Fermi's legacy. Schwartz and Taft-Morales both remembered their fathers having a deep reverence for physics research, perhaps exhibiting the effects of what Fermi called "physics as soma," something that produced a zombie-like state in its practitioners!

The evening focused, of course, on Fermi, a man who, while not the best of fathers, served his students and our nation unfailingly. He was a great teacher who respected, encouraged, and mentored his students. He used simple metaphors to convey complex concepts. What set Fermi apart from other physicists was his unique expertise in both theoretical and experimental physics. This is why people used to say that Fermi "knew everything."

The evening ended with discussion of how Fermi was, in the end, literally and figuratively, "down to Earth." While allowing priests, rabbis, and pastors to offer him blessings on his death bed, Fermi never did convert to religion after a starkly secular life. He was simply being kind to the clergy: "It pleased them and it did not harm me," he was quoted as saying.

Schwartz's closing statement was, "Fermi…accepted with rare equanimity the fact that he would no longer exist, an acceptance in keeping with his generally realistic, perhaps pessimistic, view of life. For Fermi, science completely replaced the function of religion and he died much as he had lived — without any obvious need for metaphysical or religious speculation on what happens after death." ◘