Having never visited Las Vegas, Nevada during the winter, I knew nothing about an attraction known as “The Magical Forest.” The winter-themed attraction sits on the grounds of Opportunity Village. At the site (Oakley Campus, 6300 West Oakey Boulevard, Las Vegas, Nevada 89146), between November 21, 2014-January 4, 2015, visitors can ride the Forest Express train and the Cheyenne’s Enchanted Carousel. There is also a miniature golf course to enjoy. Youngsters can slide down Snowflake Mountain and families are invited to view a 3D film (Boris the Elf) and so much more.

I learned about the location when I accepted an invitation to honor the contributions Penn Jillette and Emily Zolten Jillette have made to help Opportunity Village. They provide a wide array of services to citizens with disabilities including job training, music programs, art lessons, and more.

When Penn appeared on NBC’s “All-Star Celebrity Apprentice,” he donated all his winnings to Opportunity Village. He also donated a portion of the sales for his Apprentice ice cream creation to Opportunity Village. “Magic Swurtle” ice cream is comprised of turtle candies and chocolate swirl in a vanilla ice cream base. This one-of-a-kind flavor is only available at Walgreens Pharmacy locations. The Jillette family also donates their time and energy to Opportunity Village, often hosting classes and special events.

Just before the event, I told Penn that, “It’s about time an atheist is being recognized for good works.”

As Penn accepted his award, he mentioned my comment on stage. I was so proud. The above photo of Penn and me was taken shortly after his acceptance speech.

The award event included a tour of the Magical Forest, after which I knew that a Tree of Knowledge would be a perfect addition to the all-inclusive and hospitable venue. I immediately began searching for donors to make that vision a reality. Soon, the United Coalition of Reason (UnitedCoR) contacted me to say that a grant was available thanks to generous donors and the American Humanist Association (AHA).

Thanks to AHA Executive Assistant Meghan Hamilton supplying two (flat) color copies of recommended books, I was able to create 40 new and much-needed ornaments. I also thank John Hannum at Goshen Signs in West Chester for immediately creating a Tree of Knowledge topper and custom tree skirt. I shipped the needed items to my dear friend Celestia Ward, who volunteered to decorate the tree at Opportunity Village.

Ward is a Las Vegas artist and a regular cartoon contributor to The Freethought Society News. She is a world-renowned caricature artist and sculpts in her spare time. Ward received tree decorating help from another Las Vegas caricature artist, Celeste Cordova.

Since we were a little late getting the funding we needed, we were only able to secure a tree that nobody else wanted. It looks like a very tall and extremely scrawny Charlie Brown-style tree. We love it!

The branches of the tree are perfect for the ornaments. The book covers hang from the bare branches and twirl in the wind. The tree looks like a book cover whirligig mobile.

Cordova and Ward did a wonderful job working with the bareness of the tree, and within a few hours the Las Vegas Tree of Knowledge was ready to be unveiled.

Upon learning of the tree, Teller wrote, “This boffo tree has the balls to have books.”

Penn wrote, “I’m all for the study of history, science, skepticism, real-life heroes, culture, and philosophy but, don’t get so wrapped up in all that that you forget hot chocolate, cookies, family and friends — in that order.”

The placement of The Tree of Knowledge in the Magical Forest brought together many nontheists in Las Vegas — so much so that a donor offered to sponsor a billboard announcing the presence of the Las Vegas Coalition of Reason (LVCoR). The billboard was placed on Interstate 15, about 1,500 feet south of Flamingo Road. The north-facing billboard was unveiled on Sunday, December 21, 2014. Watch for an article about the LVCoR and billboard in a future Freethought Society newsletter.

Pictured above are Celeste Cordova (left) and Celestia Ward (right).

Cordova and Ward are sitting under the 2014 Las Vegas Tree of Knowledge at Opportunity Village’s Magical Forest after spending hours decorating it on behalf of the Las Vegas Coalition of Reason.