



The Freethought Society News

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Articles on topics of interest to freethinkers are welcomed and will be considered for publication.

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COVID-19 Virus Destroying the Jeffersonian Wall of Separation

by Margaret Downey

Since early Spring of 2020, violations of religion and government separation took place as a result of the coronavirus pandemic and resulting economic crisis. Below are two examples:

1. Religious Freedom

Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, federal, state and local governments instituted social distancing mandates. The closing of nonessential businesses, schools, and other venues that normally attract large gatherings found houses of worship wrestling with the question of whether they close or claim “religious freedom” in order to stay open. Most religious congregations suspended services and many moved to digital communication. Some began offering services in parking lots. There were, however, churches that continued meeting as if there was not a pandemic, ignoring almost every Center for Disease Control (CDC) suggestion and government mandate. Those places of worship claimed that they operate solely under the First Amendment’s Free Exercise Clause. National nontheist organizations called for churches to be held to appropriate standards of safety for the public good. On March 20th, the CDC confirmed that guidelines for reopening the country were loosened to accommodate places of worship. The CDC had originally included recommendations that large crowds should be avoided, no choirs should be conducted, books/hymnal sharing should be limited, no passing of collection plates and close contact during rituals should be restricted. This CDC change was obviously politically motivated to appeal to the religious community of voters.

2. Money Going to Religious Entities via The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act

When the Small Business Administration (SBA) announced that faith-based organizations were eligible to receive financial assistance under the CARES Act, including the Paycheck Protection Program and Economic Injury Disaster Loans, many in the nontheist community were shocked and dismayed. Hundreds of thousands of places of worship as well as many other faith-based organizations are now receiving federal funding! Previous to the COVID-19 crisis, religious organizations were restricted from receiving SBA business loans. Separation of religion and government suffered another blow due to the new SBA provision that allows loans to religious institutions. SBA justifies the decision by stating that the second clause of the First Amendment prohibits discrimination based on religious belief. Even the salaries of ministers and other staff engaged in the “religious mission” of the institutions can be covered under the grant, as well as rent, mortgage and debt payments. When federal funds are given to houses of worship they should automatically consent to a certain degree of government regulation. However, houses of worship are not required to file yearly paperwork with the IRS and the accountability of funding is sorely lacking.

The above separation violations are just a few samples of what needs to be protested. The Freethought Society (FS) is working with other nontheist groups to counter violations of the separation of religion and government by promoting and using established computerized action alerts. Groups larger than FS have developed and maintain databases that enable instant connections to local, state and federal legislators. FS does not have a large enough budget to provide an action alert program. Consequently, FS urges all readers to sign up to receive action alerts and become online activists through the following groups: [American Atheists](#), [American Humanist Association](#), [Center For Inquiry](#), and [Freedom From Religion Foundation](#). Someday FS will have an action alert system in place, but until then, please make your voices heard by signing up via the hotlinks we have provided. □

COVID-19 Crisis: Stories of Nontheists Doing Good Without God

From Margaret Downey:



During the COVID-19 crisis, I have noticed many postings on a West Chester, Pennsylvania Nextdoor website asking for people to drive by a particular address at a certain time to wish a youngster a "Happy Birthday."

Since I created an Elmo costume many years ago to surprise my granddaughter on her 2nd birthday, I decided to offer to have Elmo lean out of a

vehicle sunroof to wish a child a very happy Elmo birthday — weather permitting, because Elmo doesn't like to get wet.

The sign pictured above is attached to the outside of the passenger side windows. The sign was created by my friend and Freethought Society (FS) supporter **John Hannum** at Goshen Signs (West Chester, Pennsylvania). As you can see by the photo, the lettering is perfect for the character.

Word spread and I started getting requests from people who just wanted Elmo to drive by to wave and blow kisses to children stuck at home. Fortunately, I have an SUV with a sunroof that is big enough for Elmo to be seen from the waist up.

On April 25th, a Facebook friend arranged for Elmo to travel through an area at exactly 11:00 AM. Thanks to the pre-arranged time and date, Elmo was able to bring joy to about 30-40 children just that day. Every weekend since, with my 20-year-old grandson driving, Elmo has arrived upon request at a set time in many areas of Chester County, Pennsylvania. Parents who arrange my appearance at a certain time and date alert the entire neighborhood to be on the lookout for Elmo. They usually also provide a map for us to follow. I've found cute things to throw to children who line the streets. Children have received balls, beaded necklaces, and individually wrapped snacks.

Even though many people offered to send money for this little service, I declined, saying that my small contribution of cheering up children is being done on behalf of the FS Helping Hands Committee. A few people have donated to FS and some have joined as a result.

From Amelia-Elizabeth Hart:



In the first weeks of March, I found myself watching CNN daily for updates on the COVID-19 crisis. I felt helpless as I watched the tally of new cases and death toll numbers scroll up on the side of the screen like a morbid clock.

My state, California, was one of the first to issue a stay-at-home mandate which even a few days in added to feelings of isolation and overwhelming dread. Each hour I stared helplessly at my

television and computer screen until I asked myself the question, "What can I do to help everyone constrained at home?"

Two answers came to mind. The first; stay up-to-date on the latest and most accurate information available and share it with my circle of influence on social media. I witnessed so much bad information circulating online about COVID-19 transmission, symptoms, and mitigation that keeping current was a priority. Correcting misinformation and conveying the truth with my friends online could stem the tide, even a little bit. The second thought was that people need masks and I can sew.

I started making masks for just me and my immediately family. I watched dozens of YouTube videos, all with competing suggestions as to the best shape and materials to use. After a week of trying different styles and making modifications to work around supply limitations, I started making them for friends and neighbors, sized both for adults and children. I even made a lovely flower-patterned mask for my friend whose baby was due the first week of April. Her mask gift included a matching headband and bow for the baby. I wanted to make the baby's first photos with her mother just a little more special.

A week into turning my craft room into a mask making studio I decided to share what I was doing on Facebook, in hopes of encouraging others to think outside the box as to what they might be able to do from home. To my surprise, I received several requests for masks from people I didn't even know.

A friend of a friend (who is a nurse at a children's hospital) requested 20 masks for her team who were already having to wearing the same mask all day. A woman in my town, whose niece is a naval aviator stationed in the Mediterranean Sea, also requested a supply of masks. Her team of 50 are required to wear masks whenever they are not on their planes, yet all they have are bandanas. Her aunt recruited three mask makers in our town including me. Together we completed 50 masks in one day and they were shipped the day after the request was received.

My local hospital still did not have enough masks as of late March. I found a group of do-it-yourselfers in my county who committed to making 6,000 masks for first responders in the area. I was no longer an island! I was now a part of a movement in my town. Mask-making has become a passion. An obsession, really! When I am not making masks I am thinking about how to better streamline my operation. Initially I was only making five or so masks a day. Now, with better tools and a dozen adaptations I am able to complete over 25 masks a day.

I know I am not making a huge difference in this global pandemic. Perhaps I am like a drop of water in an ocean of need. However, with each washable cloth mask I get into someone's hands I know that it is making a huge difference for them.

I am making masks available for any medical staff, active military, and first responders free-of-charge. I tell recipients, however, that I'm very happy to receive donations of new, 100% cotton fabric, all purpose thread, narrow elastic, and pipe cleaners folks might have lying in their craft supplies. I

specifically ask that no one go out to acquire supplies. I want them to abide by stay-at-home mandates. In order to sustain this endeavor for which I anticipate a need for several months to come, I am making a limited amount of masks available at \$10 each.

I am a nonreligious humanist. I do my best to be the change I wish to see in the world. This crisis has really lit a match under me. I'm sharing my story in hopes that it inspires even one person to think outside the box about what he or she might be able to do from home as well. My dear friend and mentor, **Richard Wade**, always says, "It's good for atheists to be caught doing good."

It's easy to feel helpless in the midst of all this upheaval, but I encourage you to get creative. You don't need an organization or perhaps even to leave your home to help. Someone you know needs something that you can do. Think outside the box. We are all in this together and every action counts.

From Mike Jones:



I've been playing the piano for for nearly 55 years, professionally since 1976. The year 2020 is the first time in my life that there has been no opportunity to perform in public. Having played 250 shows a year for the past 18 years with Penn & Teller, it's been quite a shock to have nothing to do and nowhere to go!

I had a week or so of sitting around and tending to Monty, my dog, and my four cats, Tatum, Dave, Ella and Benny, but that was not enough! I decided to sit down at my Kawai concert grand piano and make a few videos. I enlisted the help of my friend, **Jennifer Szabo**, to do the cinematography with my iPhone. I thought I would do a few, post one every other day, and we'd be back to the show in a month or so. Well, we're not back yet. I'm up to video number 28 in my so-called "[Quarantine Series](#)," via Facebook. I'll keep going until we are back on stage! Streaming my music is just one way to give some folks a little diversion, and it is keeping me sane while we wait for science to solve this problem.

I'm so happy to see that people are enjoying my playing, and even more are enjoying my dog Monty's cameos! Most times I can't get through a take when Monty's barking ruins it. But that's life with a camera hungry dog! He wants his solo!

I surround myself with friends who are very pro-science, and nontheistic, so I can't understand anyone not realizing that simply by wearing a mask they are helping! I hope more people can see their way to keep up the social distancing until it's really safe.

Keep up the great work everyone, and we'll all be together live and in-person soon! In the meantime, follow me on Instagram @jonesjazzmusic and [YouTube](#). If you like my music, please visit my website at www.jonesjazz.com.

From Leighann Lord:



On March 12, 2020, I was scheduled to perform at the Comic Strip in New York City. I started my career at The Comic Strip and was looking forward to getting on stage there again. I was also nervous about what was happening around the world. A lot of venues were closing due to social distancing mandates and CDC recommendations.

Many comedy shows were being cancelled around the country. Hearing how contagious the COVID-19 virus was in public spaces, I secretly hoped that The Comic Strip would not do that March 12th show. Alas,

the booking agent called that afternoon and confirmed that the show was going on as planned. Dammit! Well, the show must go on, right? I figured if they were brave enough to open the least I could do was show up and perform.

I showered, dressed, styled my hair, and put on my makeup. Just before I left home in Queens to drive to Manhattan, the phone rang. Show canceled!

All dressed up with nowhere to go, I was both relieved and peeved. Determined not to let my fresh new COVID-19 jokes go to waste — because that's what comedians do, we joke about scary things — I decided to log onto the Internet and air the very first episode of what would become my [Working From Home Comedy Club](#) on YouTube.

I mused about all of us getting invited — against our will — to the COVID-19 cotillion; whether my Working From Home Comedy Club setup would be tax-deductible; how Zoom meetings would have to be scheduled around my cat's nap time; and, with schools closing, how parents would soon be having very difficult conversations with their kids: "Baby, you fittin' to get left back."

I taped up a piece of cloth I'd bought from Michael's craft store as my backdrop and I recorded a "set" on my phone in my home office. It was fun, different, empowering, and, I later learned, needed.

One of the things this pandemic and the various stay-at-home orders have revealed is that in difficult times, people distract from their own self-loathing with entertainment: art, music, movies, and, thankfully, standup comedy.

As clubs, theaters, and events began rescheduling and canceling shows — mostly canceling — my calendar of live performances, events, and conferences started looking empty and scary. If I'm not performing, I'm not earning. The entertainment industry in general and standup comedy in particular has always been a hustle, but now the financial sustainability outlook seems particularly dim.

Yet, I still feel a powerful need to create, perform and share and, as of the date of this article, I'm still producing my Working From Home Comedy Club. New York City is still not yet open for business. My show, however, has evolved to include the performances I do on the growing number of

comedy shows being done on various online platforms — most notably, Zoom.

One of the big differences for me has been the direct asking for financial help. With no cover charge or drink minimum, I now openly need to tell my online audiences that my virtual tip jars are open. I've had to ask for tips using PayPal, Venmo, and CashApp. Technically, my gigs haven't changed — just the method of delivery has. I'm still learning to navigate all these changes.

I have been pleasantly surprised by how so many people have contributed after seeing my online shows. Even if they couldn't, many folks took the time to thank me for making them laugh when they needed it and for providing some light during a dark time. This brings me great joy because I love placing comedy into the lives of others, imagining their laughter and giving them the ability to cope with the COVID-19 situation.

So, while my comedy colleagues and I are struggling and scrambling, and trying to figure out what comes next, we admit that technically we are not essential workers, but we are learning that what we do is essential. And I'm grateful for that. Well, I'm grateful for that and bourbon.

From Abraham Steve Mackey:



I started playing guitar when I was twenty years old. At age seventy, (2018), I was hired to be a live musician in a small, but elegant, dinner restaurant in Stockton, California. I have played solo at The Kitchen @ Stonebrier three or four nights (sometimes more) every week for three years now.

When things shut down due to the COVID-19 health crisis, I looked for ways to keep playing and singing. I also wanted to reach folks sequestered in their homes so that I could bring them a little entertainment and my messages of love.

Using my iPhone 7, the Facebook Live stream service is the perfect fit for me. I perform a short online concert six days a week. I prefer the outside setting of my backyard. The set up takes only about 15 minutes.

For the last few months I am averaging roughly 85 views per gig. It makes me happy to get accolades when people tune in and make comments. Offering this type of entertainment online during the COVID-19 crisis is my contribution to help make this social situation a little better for people. I always tell people that they should do things that give them the greatest reward for the time and the effort invested. My online concert time investment gives me an emotional, artistic satisfaction of expression and I think I'm representing the nontheist community well.

Both my wife and I began a period of questioning religion and searching for philosophical answers between the years of 2005 to 2009. In 2009 I made my decision regarding God and faith. I proudly announced to friends and family that I will live as if there is no God! I began to feel more free to live, think, question, learn, and enjoy my great and guiltless life. I am very comfortable using the word "atheist" to describe my philosophical leanings and I enjoy doing good without God.

After a few weeks of live streaming on Facebook, I realized I was missing an opportunity to help local charities. I finally became aware of the DONATION BUTTON on Facebook Live! I contacted an old friend who is the Executive Director of our local Chamber of Commerce and asked him which vital charities needed the most immediate financial help. He suggested two important works: the Stockton Shelter for the Homeless and the Emergency Food Bank. Starting with the homeless shelter, I was able to raise \$450 the first week. On the second week, I raised \$410 for the food bank. It is an eye-opener to see how we can help others by doing what we love.

From Sally M. Mendon:



When the COVID-19 pandemic began in March, I started making masks for my fellow volunteers at Micah Ministry. I made the masks to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Micah Ministry works to feed hundreds of poor and homeless people in Kansas City, Kansas. Every week they make more than 1,000 meals that are served, table-style, by dozens of volunteers.

Kansas City Atheist Coalition (KCAC) has volunteered at Micah Ministry every Monday for many years. Ministry members are well aware that we are an atheist group and they

welcome us with open arms.

When Micah Ministry shut down as a non-essential service, I started donating masks to local police departments in Kansas City and Blue Springs, Kansas. As word spread that I was making masks, I started getting requests from many individuals.

I am a lifelong quilter, and fortunately the quilting community is uniquely equipped for this task. We tend to hoard fabric, which happens to be the most ideal for making mask.

I don't charge for masks. When pressed I ask folks to donate to Kansas City Oasis or KCAC. I prefer that they donate to KCAC. I am the KCAC Philanthropy Director.

I spend 8 hours a day working on masks. I can't seem to keep up with the demand. I've received requests from many other locations, including California and the city of Topeka. To date I have made and given away over 200 masks.

From Ben Radford:



This is the first, and hopefully the last, global pandemic in my lifetime, and I'm reminded of a comment I read recently on Facebook:

"If you're wondering what you would do during a national emergency, you're doing it now."

In early March, as a writer at the Center for Inquiry (CFI), I began to

write articles about the coronavirus. I was soon asked to contribute to CFI's Coronavirus Resource Center — a clearing house for valid information about the virus. I was happy to fight misinformation as the media literacy part of my job, though conspiracy theories and myths seem to mutate and evolve even more quickly than the virus. For a long time now it's felt like Misinformation Whack-A-Mole as two new bogus claims seem to pop up for every one we debunk!

As state stay-at-home orders multiplied and self-isolation became routine I saw another threat emerging, this one more psychological than epidemiological. I wrote an article encouraging unity and tolerance, emphasizing that instead of mocking others for under or overreacting, we should recognize that everyone is different with unique circumstances and risk tolerances.

I saw people using their skills to support others, from musicians to mask makers. Since my (non-God-given) talent is writing, I wanted to reach out on a personal level. I posted on Facebook an offer to anyone who was feeling lonely to reach out to me and I would send them a note or card. Not an email or DM (I spend too much time in front of a computer as it is), but instead a real, tangible, old-school letter. A letter delivered by the United States Post Office, founded by **Benjamin Franklin**, who, by the way, I was named after.

A few dozen people took me up on it. I knew a few of them personally; the rest were social media acquaintances. I made custom envelopes out of oversized paper, cutting and gluing pages with maps or artwork on them. I hand wrote the letters and notes, sometimes adding cartoons I found funny, or stickers I had on hand. They weren't long — since I didn't know most of them personally I couldn't offer much advice or commentary on their lives and circumstances, but everyone received a few paragraphs just saying hello, musing both about the pandemic and specifically something other than it. I also offered them encouragement that they are not alone. All of the letters went out within a week to friends across the country and around the world. I've recently received a few appreciative notes in response.

As joblessness and food insecurity became more urgent, I sought out ways to help locally. I remember watching the nightly news and seeing medics, police, and essential workers on the front lines — people far more useful than me — out there helping. I contacted my local food bank, the Roadrunner Food Bank (named after our state bird, made famous in Warner Brothers cartoons and which does not in fact beep) and asked how I could help.

Within a week I was part of a volunteer mobile pantry team, boxing and delivering food to needy families in a downtown parking lot. Vehicles line up, in some cases for over two hours, waiting to get one box each of dry goods (canned goods, pasta, etc.), cold goods (eggs, cheese, etc.), and produce (radishes, softball-sized onions, etc.). Volunteers wore masks since we were in contact with the public, at least some of whom, statistically, probably carried the deadly virus. We weren't allowed to touch the vehicles out of fear of cross-contamination, so boxes were dropped into opened trunks and slid into passenger seats through opened doors.

The caravan of desperation reflected a cross-section of the most vulnerable, and many of the cars were barely roadworthy. Fellow volunteers recognized a few from the week before. Some drivers were handicapped; many were veterans; and some had young children in the back seat who

offered bright smiles and grateful waves to us masked strangers.

I did a second shift a few hours later at the food bank warehouse, putting allergy warning labels on mislabeled packaged food that would otherwise have to be thrown out. It was tedious though rewarding work, and I'm scheduled to return to the mobile food pantry next week. If I don't do it, who will? Like many people I have elderly parents at higher risk, though no spouse or children in my home, and I'm in good health overall. If I do get sick I'm more likely to survive, and less likely to spread it to others.

I don't make mention of my secular views when I volunteer. I am there to help, not specifically to represent the humanist community. I'm fine with those who do represent their particular philosophy, however. I know many atheists who volunteer in religious charities. I just didn't see God at the warehouse packing boxes, and He didn't seem to be there at 7:00 AM in the parking lot with the rest of us loading packages into cars with hungry families. God's absence was notable to those who looked, but it didn't matter. I saw something more powerful than any god: people helping each other without regard to religion, race, or profit but instead based on our shared humanity.

From Ken Ross:



For the last few months, I've been working with my 3D printers, a Creality Ender 3 Pro and the Creality Ender 5 Plus, creating masks and clear face shields for any local frontline healthcare workers who want them. The shields are what everyone wants. I'm happy to do this free-of-charge.

Healthcare workers quite literally put their lives at risk to help others during this COVID-19 crisis. They often put their own lives on hold and self-quarantine from their own family members. Offering them a little extra protection that might help lift a small amount of stress is the very least I can do. I've supplied several local medical offices so far and I'm reaching out to the community to find more people who need them.

As a nontheist — a humanist really — I feel we have an obligation to help each other whenever we can, and not just in times of crisis. I serve my fellow humans without regard to religious affiliation. I am honored to be able to help any and all people. Nontheists are truly the “universal donor” for charitable actions in support of our fellow humans in need.

A note from the Freethought Society Editorial Team:

We thank all the people highlighted in this article for the efforts they have made and continue to make in order to help fellow citizens get through this difficult COVID-19 pandemic. As we wait for science to catch up with the coronavirus threat, we welcome more stories about the efforts of others who are bringing help and happiness to their online or local community. Tell a friend about our ongoing “Doing Good Without God” articles or submit something about yourself. Submissions can be sent to editor@FtSociety.org. □



Text of the Commencement Address Filmed for the 2020 Secular Student Alliance Virtual Graduation

by John de Lancie



Greetings — wherever you may be. I'm John de Lancie. Some of you may recognize me from my roles on *Star Trek* or *Breaking Bad* or any number of other shows. But today, I'm speaking to you not as an actor, but rather as a Secular Humanist — as a person who has far more love and respect for the real world than for the imaginary one.

Congratulations to those of you who have just finished high school. And congratulations to those of you who have just finished college. Bravo to all of you who worked hard and got the grades. And to those of you who barely read the assignments, slept through your classes, pushed the boundaries of goofing off to new levels — like I once did — bravo to you too. Whether you are graduating summa cum laude or by the skin of your teeth, you've made it!

Make no bones about it — graduation is a milestone. It's a day reserved just for seniors. You might have thought, as freshmen, this day would never come, but it did. It's a special day. A special week. Getting your diploma in front of family and friends is important. The parties and proms are all part of the celebration. Whether you're graduating from high school or from college, you are on the launch pad. Fueled and ready to go. Next stop — The Future. Except, hold on...there's a glitch? A problem? A what?

A worldwide pandemic! Just like in the movies. And all of a sudden the best part of your senior year is cut short and the springtime ramp up to graduation has been replaced with anxiety, hurried goodbyes, quarantine and Zoom?!

It sucks. No question about it.

And yet, in the midst of all this disappointment and tragedy, you need to remain optimistic — as difficult as that may sound. Your future depends on it. Because as dark and scary as things may be today, there are opportunities opening up that only come around once in a generation. A new world is going to get shaped out of this mess, and as a secularist, you are particularly well-suited to do the shaping.

This is not the first crisis to befall humankind nor will it be the last. Each generation has had a particular challenge.

I think about my parents and how they must have felt, at eighteen years old, when their lives were suddenly turned upside down. Saturday night, December 6, 1941. They were at the movies, looking forward to Christmas and New Year's. Their future was all worked out — or so they thought. The next morning, in the blink of an eye, the party was over as a whole new reality came screaming into their lives.

How frightened and scared they must have been those first months as the world exploded around them, and yet it didn't take long before they understood the challenge they faced, rose to the occasion and, ultimately, created a whole new world out of the old one. Just like you will do.

My parents' generation achieved extraordinary things. They built a world in which democracy triumphed over



fascism and dictatorship. A world where cooperation and international institutions replaced "might makes right." Out of the ashes of WWII came an unprecedented period of prosperity both for the victors and the vanquished, where billions of people worldwide were lifted out of poverty. Where parents no longer had to fear losing their children to measles or polio. If that weren't enough, in a supreme feat of optimism and creativity, they landed on the moon. Pretty impressive.

But along with all those successes was a dark side. There was a world of inequality. A world where people were limited by race, gender, and sexual orientation. A world of consumption and extraction without regard for sustainability. A world where one political misjudgment and the push of a button could annihilate the human race.

That's the world my generation inherited when we graduated. A war in Vietnam, race riots at home and political assassinations. So what did we do?

Well, like most every generation we started out with the best of intentions. We helped to end the Vietnam War. We fought for the civil rights of minorities, women, gays, and people of color. We started the sexual revolution. We innovated and turned the richness of American music, art, comedy, film and television into the world's most attractive brand. We invented the personal computer, the Internet, and an entire digital economy in which a majority of you will probably make your careers. We traveled the world like it was our backyard.

But, as my own children remind me, that's not all we did. We happily reaped the benefit from the investment our parents made in education, infrastructure and institutions, then pulled the ladder up behind us. We allowed, and even celebrated, the obscene accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few with no regard for what it does to the many. We borrowed and borrowed — never wanting to pay the Piper. We choked the earth with pollution and then convinced ourselves that your generation should take care of it. We incarcerated more of our fellow citizens than any other country on Earth. We shrugged and turned away when our own children were gunned down in their classrooms. We corrupted the political system with vast sums of hidden money. We turned news into entertainment and lying into a political norm. Because we didn't go to the moon ourselves, out of envy we concocted conspiracy theories about how it never happened at all. And as the years wore on some of us became small and petty. There's a reason we're called "The Me Generation."

Crises have a way of exposing both the best and worst. And this pandemic is no different. As secularists, these last few months have shown with brutal clarity that the future does not and cannot belong to the liars, the magical thinkers, the bloviators, the science deniers — to those who are too

lazy to actually “know” anything except for what their “gut” tells them — as ample as that may be.

The future belongs to you. And the forging of that future will require what you possess in abundance: reason, truthfulness, critical thinking, and courage. And also “belief.”

Now I know that’s a strange thing to say about people like us. We are used to being defined by what we don’t believe. “Oh, you don’t believe in God?” “You don’t believe in the Bible?” “You don’t believe in the Blood of the Lamb?” You got it! I don’t!

I believe that truth is more powerful than fiction. That ideology, dogma, and groupthink is dangerous and should always be challenged. I believe in fairness, tolerance and equality. I’m happy to say that these last few months, as tragic as they have been, have provided us with shining examples of what matters most: Facts, truth, and caring — as health professionals and scientists all around the world battle to save us all.

People love to say “there are no atheists in foxholes,” but my experience is that when the shit hits the fan there are no anti-vaxxers or magical thinkers in a pandemic. Well, unfortunately there are, but we all know Darwinism will eventually take care of that.

What’s important for you to know is that my generation’s influence is coming to an end. And that this crisis, positioned a few months before an election, provides you with the unique opportunity not to just clean up but to clean out.

Today, your graduation day, is an invitation to imagine your future and to achieve it. You don’t like \$72,000 a year colleges? I don’t blame you. You want to breathe clean air and drink pure water? You should. You want to be paid a living wage? I agree. You want healthcare? Absolutely! Social justice? It’s all within your reach.

As this crisis wanes, there is already a push to get things back to “the way they were.” Here’s your first challenge. If the way they were is not good enough, then you need to do something about it. How you tackle these next six months will impact your lives for years to come.

Remember, good intentions are not enough. “Being” secular is not a lapel pin — it’s a mission. Today, more than ever, we need leaders. We need visionaries. We need a whole new conversation. That’s why you must remain optimistic and active. Your time is now. In the coming months the forces of bigotry, ignorance and fear are counting on you to remain on the sidelines. Surprise them. Be smart. Be strategic. Be secular. The world needs you.

See you out there! □

Note:

To see the filmed delivery of the 2020 John de Lancie commencement speech, please visit the Freethought Society’s YouTube Channel at the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zD1DCIS9A9M>

Freethought Society President Sends Virtual Congratulations to the Class of 2020 Graduates

On May 30, 2020, the Freethought Society (FS) joined with many other secular national groups in congratulating seniors who, due to the COVID-19 crisis and stay-at-home-mandates, could not have a traditional live graduation ceremony and celebration. The [Secular Student Alliance](#) conducted an online virtual graduation ceremony that included speeches by students, a commencement address by **John de Lancie**, prerecorded congratulatory messages, and a live post-ceremony party.

Below is the message that was delivered by FS founder and president **Margaret Downey** (pictured right):

On behalf of the Freethought community, I’m sending you hearty congratulations on your graduation and academic achievements.

The Freethought Society Board of Directors has asked me to offer all of you a complimentary membership to the Freethought Society. We do so hoping that you will stay involved with secular social issues such as separation of religion and government and freedom of expression.

Just send your email address to Ezine@FtSociety.org.

Again, congratulations on all your accomplishments and I hope to meet you in person someday soon. □



Due to COVID-19 health crisis, the Secular Student Alliance will conduct their annual conference virtually this year. The online conference will take place July 22-25, 2020 starting at 9:00 AM (PDT) until 5:00 PM (PDT). The event is free and open-to-the public. Speakers include **Cara Santa Maria**, Representative **Jared Huffman**, **Rachel Laser**, **Anthony Pinn**, **Katherine Stewart**, **Elle Harris**, **Sikivu Hutchinson** and many more. Register at:

<https://secularstudents.org/conference/2020conference/>

Healthcare and End-of-Life Choices

by Herb Silverman

“If God had decreed from all eternity that a certain person should die of smallpox, it would be a frightful sin to avoid and annul that decree by the trick of vaccination.” So said **Timothy Dwight**, president of Yale University from 1795 to 1817. He was speaking passionately against **Edward Jenner’s** new medical invention called vaccination.

It was not then a particularly extremist view. Vaccination and inoculation, though highly successful, were denounced by many religious leaders. Today, during the pandemic, religious fundamentalists will not say that God changed His mind and no longer condemns medical interventions that can save lives. Most, but not all, will simply find interpretations of their holy book that oppose those of previous generations. It isn’t hard to do. You just focus on one particular passage and ignore a contradictory passage.

There are religious reasons to decline a vaccine, there are valid reasons to decline a vaccine, but there are no valid religious reasons to decline a vaccine. I think an adult should have maximum decision-making freedom on issues that involve him or her alone. However, since most viruses are contagious, ethical considerations demand taking into account how declining a vaccine may affect others. This includes COVID-19, should a legitimate vaccine be found.

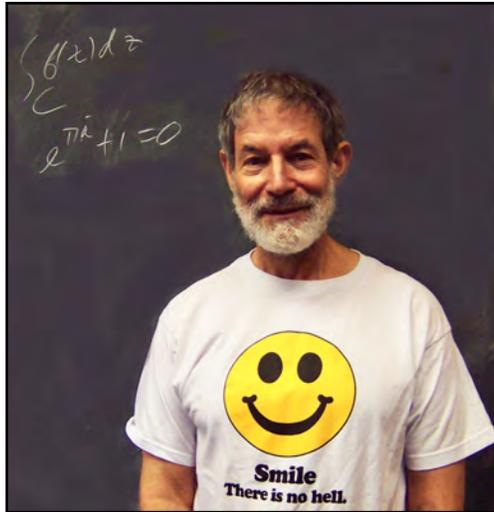
During this COVID-19 pandemic, it makes sense to discuss how to decide who gets what kind of healthcare. We generally accept that people with more money can afford more things. I don’t have a problem with this, except when we treat a necessity like quality healthcare as if it were just a consumer product. I wish all Americans would recognize the need to make healthcare both a moral and financial priority.

I stand with progressive people of faith who want to expand healthcare coverage, though I don’t need biblical justification. If I did, I could quote from the Genesis 4 myth. After Cain murders Abel (interestingly, the first murder in *The Holy Bible* follows the first religious act), God asks Cain where Abel is. Cain resorts to the familiar tactic of answering a question with a question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

God did not respond to Cain, but had I been God I would have said, “Damn right you are your brother’s keeper. That’s an integral part of my post-garden healthcare plan.”

I feel the same about separation of church and healthcare as I do about separation of church and state. People have the right to follow the god of their choice, and denominations have the right to make rules for their flocks. A religion need not accept government funds, but any money a religion receives from our secular government should only be used for secular purposes.

Under current law, people may have some “spiritual care” covered by Medicare and Medicaid, including Christian



Herb Silverman is a retired math professor and the author of two books, *Candidate Without a Prayer* and *Stranger in a Strange Religious Land*.

If interested in making a purchase, please order through the [Amazon Smiles](#) program to benefit the Freethought Society.

Silverman is also the founder of the Secular Coalition for America.

Scientists who are prayed for when they are sick. Numerous children have died while receiving this “spiritual care” when modern science could easily have saved their lives. Placing the government stamp of approval on non-scientific practices such as “spiritual care” risks lives.

Society has a special duty to protect children from abuse and physical harm, without regard to religious motivation. If a child dies from a burst appendix because parents neglected to seek effective medical care, it makes no difference to me whether the parents preferred instead to pray or watch television. I don’t doubt the sincerity and concerns of most religious parents. However, abuse by any other name is still abuse, and that includes incurring illness that could have been avoided by a vaccine.

For financial reasons, some secular hospitals have merged with church-affiliated hospitals. If they don’t publicize what they offer (or, more likely, what they don’t offer), patients probably won’t know. I’d like to see truth in advertising where all hospitals are required to

prominently display what religious restrictions they place on healthcare. Perhaps we would see signs like: “We are more likely to pray over you than give you a blood transfusion.” or “Exorcism is among our psychiatric services” or “Our sexual advice to couples comes from celibate priests.”

Given the limited amount of money our government is willing to spend on healthcare, I think we need to stop devoting so much of our resources to the last few months of life. Regardless of age, if a very ill person has a chance to recover and live a life with quality, then by all means go for it. Yet many people never have the opportunity to become old because they lacked the financial means to obtain adequate healthcare. If a re-allocation of resources can transform a few expensive brain dead weeks into a combined hundred years for others, I would call it “rational rationing.” If it is clear there is no hope for recovery, we should put no more public money into it.

A few years ago, there was a license plate war in my home state of South Carolina. The legislature wanted to authorize our Department of Motor Vehicles to distribute, at no additional cost, license plates with the anti-abortion motto “Choose Life.” When Planned Parenthood objected, a state representative from my county suggested that Planned Parenthood sponsor a “Choose Death” plate. Though not what the legislator intended, choosing death can sometimes be a good idea when it comes to end-of-life decisions.

Some religious fundamentalists use biblical justification to condemn those who don’t use all possible scientific technology to extend the lives of sick people who never will, regain any quality of life. Such views didn’t exist 1,000 years

ago, when most believed that the terminally ill were in “God’s hands.” With scientific breakthroughs the terminally ill are often in technology’s hands. It’s up to humans to decide the extent to which that technology should be used. For me, regardless of age, the bottom line is about quality of life, not just length of life.

Patients and their families who seek information about end-of-life care should certainly be provided with available options so they can make informed decisions. But I would also like doctors to make this information routinely available, whether requested or not. Some patients are ignorant or afraid to bring up these kinds of unpleasant matters. Contrary to the cliché, ignorance is not bliss in this case.

The time to start planning for end-of-life care is now. Advance planning involves making thoughtful choices, putting them into a written advance directive and discussing those choices with others. Such choices are not just for the elderly, because we don’t know when our time might be up. Actions taken now can preserve autonomy and dignity later.

Medical aid in dying empowers terminally-ill patients with the choice to die on their own terms, at the time and place of their choosing, and in accordance with their conscience and beliefs. Seven states (California, Colorado, Hawaii, Montana,

Oregon, Vermont, and Washington) and the District of Columbia have authorized medical aid in dying: the ability for a terminally ill, medically competent adult to request and receive prescription medication to bring about a peaceful death. An excellent resource for information and documents to help in end-of-life planning is available at the organization [Compassion & Choices](http://www.compassionandchoices.org). Below is a link to the website:

www.compassionandchoices.org/end-of-life-planning

I certainly wish more states had such provisions, but I have a problem with one feature. I think I would like to stay alive as long as I am able to communicate effectively, but if I develop some form of dementia like Alzheimer’s then I may be unable to request a peaceful death. I told my wife Sharon that if she won’t then kill me, she should hire a hit-man or a hit-woman who would. One sign to pull the plug on me would be if I said “I believe in God!”

I know that COVID-19 is particularly hard on older people. I’m seventy-eight and Sharon is eight-two. Fortunately, we are both in good health. I also take comfort from this **Mark Twain** quote: “Do not complain about growing old. It is a privilege denied to many.” □

The Advantages of Being a Freethought Society Meetup Member

The Freethought Society (FS) has maintained a [Meetup](https://www.meetup.com/Freethought-Society-Meetup/) page for almost five years. The current FS Meetup membership is a over 1,500 people. The Meetup page has been used to promote events that are both announced in the FS ezine/newsletter and those organized with no chance of appearing in print due to time constraints. Only members of the FS Meetup group receive the meeting notices. We urge readers of *The Freethought Society News* to become members of Meetup in order to stay informed on all the interesting online upcoming events. Join the Meetup group at:

www.meetup.com/Freethought-Society-Meetup/

Listed below are the Zoom online Meetup events that FS conducted during the last few months.

May 16

Thanks to the Zoom expertise and co-hosting skills of FS Southern California supporter **Michael Steven Martin**, FS hosted a virtual Trivia Game Night. Martin designed five trivia games that were played during the two-hour session. The games included visuals and sound effects!

Trivia game winners were awarded their choice of books from the FS library. The winners and their book choices were **Brian Anderson** (*Out of God’s Closet* by **Stephen Uhl**), **Patti Butcheck** (*Overkill: When Modern Medicine Goes Too Far* by **Dr. Paul Offit**), **Marjory Goldman** (*River Out of Eden* by **Richard Dawkins**), **Christy Jacobs** (*The Lord Was Not On Trial: The Inside Story of the Supreme Court’s Precedent-Setting* by **Dannel McCullum**), and **Greg White** (*My Name is Stardust* by **Bailey Harris**).



May 23

FS hosted **Dr. Paul Offit** via a Zoom broadcast. Dr. Offit talked about his new book *Overkill: When Modern Medicine Goes Too Far*, provided COVID-19 updates, and entertained questions. The session lasted 90 minutes and included a beautifully-presented slide show that traced the history of medicine, the development of medicines, and so much more. FS thanks Dr. Offit for volunteering his time to be our very first Zoom guest.



June 13

FS hosted authors **Bailey Harris** and **Elle Harris** via Zoom. The almost two-hour session included the young ladies talking about what motivated them to write their books. The presentation included an entertaining and lovely PowerPoint presentation. Their father, **Doug Harris** read the forward to *My Name is Stardust* written by **Dr. Richard Dawkins** and their mother **MacKinzie Harris** read the forward to *Elle the Humanist* written by **Daniel Dennett**. The ladies read their books aloud, then answered questions from Zoom audience members.



There will likely be more Meetup events that fall between publication dates of the FS ezine/newsletter. Please sign up to become a [Meetup](https://www.meetup.com/Freethought-Society-Meetup/) member so as to not miss any educational and social opportunities FS provides. □

Saving Mubarak Bala: A Nigerian Humanist

Since 2014, the Freethought Society (FS) has followed the struggles of **Mubarak Bala**. He is the President of the Nigerian Humanist Association who also identifies as an atheist. Bala was born in Kano State, located in Northern Nigeria.

In 2014, Bala was committed to a psychiatric institution against his will. For eighteen days he was forcibly drugged. One doctor suggested there was nothing wrong with Bala but a second doctor suggested a personality disorder and, according to Bala, told him:

“My dear, you need a God. Even in Japan, they have a God. No one should live without God. Those that do, are all psychologically ill. Denying the biblical account of Adam and Eve is delusion, denial of history.”

As an affiliate of the Secular Coalition for America (SCA), FS has many opportunities to join with other national groups in activist efforts. FS became a signatory on the below printed letter of concern written by **Rachel Deitch**, Policy and Social Justice Manager for the American Humanist Association on May 12, 2020:

*The Honorable Michael Pompeo, Secretary of State
United States Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520*

Dear Secretary Pompeo,

We, the undersigned twelve humanist and other nontheist organizations, write to bring to your attention the case of Mubarak Bala, President of the Nigerian Humanist Association, who was arrested at his home in Kaduna by police officers from Kano State Police Command on April 28, 2020. As of yesterday, it remains unclear whether Mr. Bala has been formally charged and his lawyers are unable to confirm his current location.

Mr. Bala’s arrest followed a petition filed with the Police Commissioner of Kano Command on April 27, by a local law firm who allege that Bala insulted the Prophet Muhammad in his Facebook posts in violation of Section 26(1)(c) of the Cybercrimes Act, which criminalizes insult of any persons due to their religion, among other characteristics, and is punishable by a fine and/or up to five years’ imprisonment.

The petitioners also allege that Mr. Bala’s posts will incite the Muslim community and lead to public disturbance, a violation of Section 210 of the Penal Code of Kano State.

Since leaving Islam in 2014, Mr. Bala has been the victim of death threats and harassment. In June the same year, he was held against his will in a psychiatric facility in Kano state. As such, freedom of religion organizations are deeply concerned for his welfare.

We fear that Mr. Bala is being targeted solely for his exercise of his rights of freedom of belief and freedom of expression, as enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution and international and regional instruments to which Nigeria is a signatory.

We ask that the State Department take immediate action to urge the Nigerian authorities to:

- *Guarantee Mr. Bala’s well-being and safety while he remains in detention, particularly in light of the many death threats he has received and the increased risks posed to him as a prisoner during the COVID-19 outbreak;*
- *Grant Mr. Bala free and unimpeded access to his legal counsel;*
- *Clarify Mr. Bala’s legal status and his whereabouts, and release him immediately and unconditionally if he was not charged within the 24-hour time frame stipulated in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria;*
- *Transfer Mr. Bala to a neutral territory, such as Lagos, where it is more likely that he will receive a fair trial, if any trial against him were to take place.*

Freedom of religion, as we all know, must mean freedom from religion. The rights of humanists and atheists, among other minorities, are often barometers of religious freedom. We urge the State Department to take on Mr. Bala’s case and work to protect his safety, health, and rights. Please contact Rachel Deitch (rdeitch@americanhumanist.org) at the American Humanist Association with any questions.

We look forward to hearing from you.

American Atheists
American Humanist Association
Black Nonbelievers
Center for Inquiry
Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations
Ex-Muslims of North America
Freedom from Religion Foundation
The Freethought Society
Hispanic American Freethinkers, Inc.
Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers
Secular Coalition for America
Society for Humanistic Judaism



Freethought Society Three-Month Zoom Calendar

To participate in the below listed Zoom event, you must be a member of the [Freethought Society Meetup](#) group.

Join the Freethought Society Meetup group at: www.meetup.com/Freethought-Society-Meetup/

Each event will have a Zoom URL link listed in the description of the event. Connections will be secure, educational and fun!

July 11

The Freethought Society (FS) is pleased to host **Mandisa Thomas** on **Saturday, July 11, 2020 at 3:00 PM (EDT)/Noon (PDT)** for an online Zoom presentation entitled “Women of Color Beyond Belief: Where Do We Go From Here?”

Please note the information under the headline of this calendar page to learn how you can obtain the Zoom link by registering as a member of the FS [Meetup](#).

In 2019, [Black Nonbelievers](#), Black Skeptics, and the Women’s Leadership Project hosted the first-ever conference that featured nontheist women of color. With the constant call to action in addressing diversity and inclusion, how can the secular community better work with and support the organizations who serve this need?

Thomas will discuss the conference goals and the work that women of color offer in the secular movement. She will also advise on improving communication with people of color and subject matters pertaining to race, reproductive justice, and other issues that affect marginalized demographics.

Thomas currently serves on the boards of the American Humanist Association and American Atheists. She was the Unitarian Universalist Humanist Association’s 2018 “Person of the Year,” the Freedom From Religion Foundation’s “Freethought Heroine” for 2019, and the Secular Student Alliance’s 2019 Backbone Award winner.

As President of Black Nonbelievers, Thomas works to encourage more people of color to come out and stand strong with their nonbelief in the face of such strong religious overtones.

August 1

FS is pleased to host Professor **Christopher Cameron** on **Saturday, August 1, 2020 at 3:00 PM (EDT)/Noon (PDT)** for an online Zoom presentation entitled “Black Free-thought from Slavery to Civil Rights.” His talk is based on his book, [Black Freethinkers: A History of African American Secularism](#).

Please note the information under the headline of this calendar page to learn how you can obtain the Zoom link by registering as a member of the FS [Meetup](#).

Cameron’s talk will explore the origins of black freethought among 19th century slaves, many of whom could not reconcile notions of a loving God with their condition on Earth. The talk will then examine freethought in the 20th century as well as cultural and political movements such as the Harlem Renaissance, radical leftist politics, and the Black



Power movement. Cameron argues that religious skepticism was prevalent among some of the most prominent voices in African American history, including **Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, Huey Newton, and Alice Walker**.

Cameron is a history professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte with research and teaching interests in African American and early American history, including slavery, the antislavery movement, religious and intellectual history. His first book, *To Plead Our Own Cause: African Americans in Massachusetts and the Making of the Antislavery Movement*, explored the relationship between Puritan theology and the rise of black abolitionism, arguing throughout the work that African Americans were central to the development of the antislavery movement in America.

August 16

On **Sunday, August 16, 2020 at 3:00 PM (EDT)/Noon (PDT)**, please help celebrate the 70th birthday of FS founder **Margaret Downey** by joining an online Zoom afternoon virtual party that will include special guests and live music.

Attendees will have an opportunity to convey sentiments, tell funny stories, and wish her a happy birthday. Downey will also share interesting stories about her guests. She would enjoy answering questions about her life and activism.

The birthday party Meetup announcement will have more details as plans continue to unfold.

Please note the information under the headline of this calendar page to learn how you can obtain the Zoom link by registering as a member of the FS [Meetup](#).

September 19

FS is pleased to host award-winning author and *USA Today* columnist **Tom Krattenmaker** on **Saturday, September 19, 2020 at 3:00 PM (EDT)/Noon (PDT)** for an online Zoom presentation entitled “A New Vision for Secular Transcendence.”

Krattenmaker’s talk will address how religion has faded from importance in contemporary life along with a sense of transcendence, which is traditionally understood as the experience of “rising above” the mundane, ordinary aspects of our lives. Krattenmaker will present his alternative vision for a secular, or horizontal, transcendence that does not depend on belief in a deity or supernatural ideas but, rather, on people’s connections to one another and to life on our imperiled planet.

As a columnist, Krattenmaker specializes in beliefs and values in public life. He is also the author of three award-winning books: *Onward Christian Athletes*, *The Evangelicals You Don’t Know*, and, most recently, *Confessions of a Secular Jesus Follower*, which was named one of the top two religion books of 2016 by the Religion News Association.



The Freethought Society (FS) promotes freedom of thought, expression, and choice. FS also advocates separation of religion and government. FS publishes *The Freethought Society News* every other month. The publication is delivered as an ezine via email and is complimentary to supporters, donors, like-minded individuals and those who are interested in learning more about freedom of thought.

Monthly events take place in locations across the United States, with emphasis in the tri-state area of Pennsylvania, Delaware, and New Jersey as well as Southern California. FS activities and services depend on financial contributions from supporters. Funds may be sent using this form or via the FS website (www.FtSociety.org/donate/). All contributions to FS are tax-deductible to the fullest extent of the law (Tax ID Number: 23-2738574). Please [donate](#) generously.

Yes! I would like to:

() become a supporter / renew support of FS (Please enclose checks payable to the Freethought Society):

\$30 Individual Supporter **\$40** Family Supporter **\$20** Student **\$1,000** Supporter for a Lifetime

() become a "Freethought Star" by setting up an automatic monthly donation to FS from my bank or through

PayPal in the amount of (circle one): **\$5** **\$10** **\$15** **\$20** **\$25** **\$30** **\$35** **\$40** **\$45** **\$50** **\$55** \$_____ other (per month)

() earmark a donation to (insert project, event or committee name): _____

Name: _____

Street Address: _____

City, State and Zip: _____

Email Address: _____

Phone: _____ Cell: _____

() Check here if you prefer your sponsorship to remain anonymous.

FS will send a complimentary ezine (or hard copy upon request) to potential supporters. Please provide contact information for anyone who might be interested in receiving an FS publication.

Name: _____ Email: _____

Mail this form to: Freethought Society, P.O. Box 242, Pocopson, PA 19366

Scan and email this form to: Ezine@FtSociety.org

Volunteer Opportunities Through the Freethought Society

Supporters of the Freethought Society (FS) often want to do more than just donating money. Listed below are various committees organized by FS. The committees are designed to fulfill the mission, goals and vision of FS. We assist nontheists, educate the public about nontheism, and provide social opportunities where like-minded individuals can meet, socialize and share ideas. Please see the FS website or contact FS to volunteer at: volunteers@FtSociety.org.

Anti-Discrimination Educational Committee

(nontheism explained in classroom settings)

Anti-Discrimination Support Network

(assist Secular Coalition for America gathering reports)

Community Outreach

(locate tabling opportunities)

Diversity Outreach Committee

(brainstorming about and developing programs to appeal to minorities)

Free Speech Zone Committee

(research and implement displays in public venues)

Helping Hands

(provides helpers to seniors in emergency situations)

Jump into the Jean Pool

(collection of jeans for the homeless)

Meetup Committee

(social events and improving online communications)

Monthly Meeting Coordinators

(schedule and manage speakers and venues)

Secular Celebrations

(develop, organize, and implement new nontheist celebrations)

Speakers Bureau

(provide FS a resume, photo and speech subjects/titles)

Special Events

(coordinate unique events of interest to nontheists)

Sole Searching

(collection of athletic shoes for donation to the homeless)

Thomas Paine Memorial Committee

(assist with assemblies, city proclamations, and work on themed events)

Tree of Knowledge/Winter Display Committee

(make ornaments, find venues, write articles, and support the Winter symbol concept nationwide)