Celebrating the Freethought Society’s 25th Year
by Margaret Downey

When the Freethought Society (FS) was founded in 1993, I never imagined that the FS Ezine/newsletter would be delivered to over 7,000 recipients, that FS’s Meetup page would have almost 1,300 members, that the FS Facebook page would have thousands of followers, and that FS events would take place all over the country and some abroad. We started FS with only about 35 interested people and we now have hundreds of volunteers eagerly participating.

FS will be celebrating this milestone all year long. FS announced plans for the first celebration of this special year in the January/February 2018 Ezine and many wonderful messages of congratulations began pouring in. The messages are archived on the FS website, but we are printing some of the messages below as newsletter layout space allows:

Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-Presidents of the Freedom From Religion Foundation

The phrase “After all is said and done, usually more is said than done” DEFINITELY does not apply to the Freethought Society. For a quarter of a century, the brave and charming Margaret Downey with equally dedicated and intelligent cohorts have been on the front line of freedom, not only elevating the status of freethought, but making it FUN! Congratulations for persevering to 25 years, and beyond.

Gary Berton
Coordinator, Institute for Thomas Paine Studies at Iona College and Secretary, Thomas Paine National Historical Association

Congratulations on your first 25 years! May the next 25 be as productive. Thanks for being a great partner with the Thomas Paine National Historical Association over all these years, and I look forward to bigger things coming soon. All my best!

Sean Carroll
Theoretical Physicist
California Institute of Technology

Congratulations to the Freethought Society and Margaret Downey on twenty-five years of fighting the good fight for freethought in the public sphere. This quarter-century has been a time of momentous change in the public perception of secularism, and organizations like the Freethought Society have contributed enormously to the progress we have made in getting atheism a seat at society’s table. Of course the journey is far from over, with atheists still one of the least-trusted groups in America, and continual overreach from governmental officials who don’t respect freedom of conscience. So here’s hoping that the next 25 years are as active and successful as the last!
Arthur L. Caplan  
Professor of Bioethics at New York University’s Langone Medical Center

I am proud to support this vital organization in the fight against ignorance and fear.

Ted Daeschler  
Associate Curator of Vertebrate Zoology at the Academy of Natural Sciences and Associate Professor at Drexel University’s Department of Biodiversity, Earth and Environmental Science.

Congratulations on 25 years of promoting reasoned discourse, and having fun doing it!

Richard Dawkins  
Scientist and author

Many congratulations to Margaret Downey and the Freethought Society on your Silver Jubilee. We need more people, and more organizations, like you: doing good for both Freethought and freedom of thought — especially in America where both are so sadly needed.

Ann Druyan  
American writer and producer specializing in the communication of science. She co-wrote the 1980 PBS documentary series Cosmos, hosted by Carl Sagan, whom she married in 1981.

What a joy it is to celebrate a twenty-five year commitment to questioning authority and standing up for freedom of thought. Through the darkest periods of those years, and this is one of them, Margaret Downey and the Freethought Society have been sources of light and hope. Thank you for working to protect the values that are at the heart of both science and democracy.

Fred Edwards  
Director of Planned Giving Humanist Foundation for the American Humanist Association

For a quarter century the Freethought Society, led by the unsinkable Margaret Downey, has not only been a staple of freethought in the greater Philadelphia area but a player in the nation as a whole. As such, the Freethought Society continues to be a focus for activism, education, and camaraderie. And it has been my personal honor to address its members as a featured speaker.

Moreover, across these past twenty-five years we have watched the larger secular movement experience dramatic growth. The Freethought Society, under Margaret Downey’s inspired guidance, has been a significant part of that, often leading the way with innovative programming, robust social action, and imaginative initiatives toward greater cooperation among atheist, freethought, and humanist organizations.

Many people in our movement owe the Freethought Society a personal debt. For some, it is because it helped them find their way to emotional and intellectual liberation through a life of reason. For others, it is because it stood up for their civil liberties when nobody else would. But beyond such intensive accomplishments, the Freethought Society has continued to amuse, delight, and entertain us, making serious ideas fun and human community both a comfort and a joy.

Therefore, I heartily congratulate the Freethought Society on reaching this silver milestone in its continuing history. Should I be more progressive and call it a silver kilometer stone? Well then, I should drop the “silver” part too. The notion of a silver anniversary finds its origin in the Holy Roman Empire with its silver wreaths. And who uses stones anymore to mark off distances?

But we can refashion old traditions to new uses, can’t we? After all, those old traditions were invented by human beings to serve practical purposes. So I say, “Happy silver anniversary Freethought Society!” Please plan on me being there in person for your golden one. I’ll only be ninety-four years old but have a whole lot more to say!

Elizabeth Loftus  
Distinguished Professor Psychology and Social Behavior, Criminology, Law and Society at the University of California, Irvine

On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Freethought Society, Margaret Downey should receive a Gold Medal for all she and the organization have done to promote freedom of expression, freedom of thought, and other crucial ideals and values.

Hugh Taft-Morales  
Philadelphia Ethical Society Leader

Congratulations to the Freethought Society (FS) for 25 years of activism, education, and inspiration! Thanks to Margaret Downey, the FS Board Members, and the legions of volunteers, FS has stood up energetically and effectively for the rights of non-believers, the importance of evidence-based public policy, and the separation of religion and government. The Philadelphia Ethical Society has been proud to be a home
for The Tree of Knowledge and to host great speakers and performers brought to us by FS. Over the years we have enjoyed co-hosting Lawrence Krauss, Jay Wexler, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Herb Silverman, Ron Lindsay, Roy Zimmerman, and many more.

No congratulations for this occasion would be complete without acknowledging Margaret Downey specifically for her sage advice, counsel, and encouragement to me as Leader of the Philadelphia Ethical Society. Her high standards and amazing energy help remind us all that while we remain firmly grounded on the earth, we can still reach for the stars!

Michael Newdow
Attorney and Emergency Medicine Physician, best known for his efforts to have recitations of the current version of the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools in the United States declared unconstitutional because of its inclusion of the phrase “under God.”

Congratulations to the Freethought Society on reaching 25 years of work in its support of the magnificent principles of religious equality and non-establishment. The framers of our Constitution would have been appalled to see the pervasive and persistent violations of the first ten words of the Bill of Rights that are the hallmark of today’s federal government. Margaret Downey has been tireless in her efforts to return the nation to its constitutional underpinnings, and the fact that the Freethought Society is still going strong after two-and-a-half decades is a testament to both her tenacity and to the many who truly understand religious freedom.

Steven Pinker
Cognitive Psychologist, Linguist, and Author

Happy Silver Jubilee, Freethought Society! Here’s to continuing success in keeping thoughts free.

Roy Speckhardt
Executive Director, American Humanist Association

Congratulations to those gathered to celebrate the 25th year of the Freethought Society! Today, America is shamefully lead by a president whose priorities are antithetical to humanism and freethought. Trump’s aggressive posture to other nations, his willingness to merge church and state, his opposition to social justice, and his disregard of the poor are on the far extreme of what we would hope for from our nation’s leader. That’s just one reason we at the American Humanist Association are pleased to work side-by-side with the Freethought Society to show the nation and the world that Mr. Trump doesn’t represent us all.

Unfortunately, our numbers of nonreligious and nontheistic are continuing their rapid rise. This leads to greater respect and prominence for humanist and freethought perspectives in government and public life. The Freethought Society helps raise the profile for our perspective and focus our energies toward real progress.

Our best wishes to everyone gathered as we support the promotion of critical thinking. We don’t need gods or other supernatural forces to make this world better. We understand that science and reason are better guides than ancient holy texts and divine revelation. Together, let’s make this world a better place for all.

Teller the Magician

When you started your amazing work, atheism had barely penetrated into the popular consciousness. Prominent people were atheists, but tended to remain discreet, and many of the outspoken declarations of atheism, such as The God Delusion, The End of Faith, God is Not Great, and God No, had yet to be published, much less become bestsellers.

It took guts and enormous amounts of planning, outreach, and work for you to lead that movement into the age of TV and Internet. You did this against great odds and with great success and are a tremendous model of the impact that smart and determined heroes can have on the culture.

Toni Van Pelt
President of the Institute for Science and Human Values and the National Organization for Women

It is with great pleasure I congratulate and honor the Freethought Society, its Founder and President Margaret Downey, Vice President Glen Loew, and the Freethought Society Board of Directors on the 25th anniversary of their founding. The importance of their work and their reach can not be over emphasized. The members of the Freethought Society by their actions are helping to create a more humane society. Thank you to each and every one of you for all that you do. Here’s to another twenty-five years of promoting rational thinking, scientific advocacy and happiness! Press forward.

Jay Wexler
Author, Professor, Legal Scholar, and SCOTUS Humor Documentarian

Congratulations to Margaret Downey, the Atheist with the Mostest, and her terrific organization, the Freethought Society for twenty-five years of truly outstanding work! For over two decades, FS has been an essential voice in fighting for the rights of freethinkers of all stripes.

Thank you so much for everything you do, and I wish you all the best for another century or two of future success (although hopefully the need to fight for the rights of freethinkers won’t still exist in 2218!).
Roy Zimmerman
American Satirical Singer-Songwriter and Guitarist

I’m tempted to be glib and say “God Bless the Freethought Society!” But glibness belies the important work the Freethought Society has been doing for 25 years now. Freedom of belief or nonbelief is the foundation of our free way of life. It is one of the things that Makes America Great Again and again. So let us all bless the Freethought Society, and send it into another 25 years of important, successful work.

Several congratulatory messages arrived in the form of a video! Please follow the links printed next to the photos of the following friends of FS:

Rob Boston
Director of Communications at Americans United for Separation of Church and State, author of Why the Religious Right is Wrong, The Most Dangerous Man in America?, Close Encounters with the Religious Right, and Taking Liberties, and Board Member of the American Humanist Association. Video at:

Rob Boston Congratulations Video

Zenos Frudakis
Award Winning Sculptor (created a statue of Clarence Darrow in 2017 and the Freedom sculpture located at 16th and Vine in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), and Life Member of the Freethought Society. Video at:

Zenos Frudakis congratulates Freethought Society

Penn Jillette
Juggler, Comedian, Actor, Musician, Inventor, Filmmaker, Author, and television personality. Best known for his Magician/Illusionist work with fellow magician Teller as half of the team Penn & Teller. Video at:


Julia Sweeney
Comedian, Monologist, Actor and Author of God Said, Ha!, If It’s Not One Thing, It’s Your Mother. Video at:


FS also received one audio message. The MP3 was sent to FS from Herb Silverman. He is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America and author of Candidate Without a Prayer and An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt. Silverman’s audio message can be heard at this link:

https://www.ftsoociety.org/wp-content/uploads/Congrats.m4a

FS hosted a 25-year anniversary celebration on Friday, February 23, 2018 in the grand auditorium of The Philadelphia Ethical Society. The evening started with a Happy Hour and Meme Show. Freethought music selections played in the background as guests chatted and enjoyed finger food and an open wine bar.

As Christine Jones played the lovely Steinway piano located on the stage of the auditorium, Binta Edwards served a seven-course buffet dinner. While attendees ate dessert, the following people delivered congratulations and conveyed experiences they have had with FS over the years:

Lori Lipman Brown
Brian Fields
Dan Hoffman
Edwina Rogers
Tom Schottmiller
David Silverman
David Tamayo

Comedian Leighann Lord kicked off the scheduled comedy show at 8:00 PM. The crowd delighted in her unique style of delivering punch lines and she wrapped people around her finger, relaying humorous stories that ranged from family situations to current events.

Up next on stage was comedian Steve Hill. He had people practically crying from laughing so hard as he delivered one punch line after another.

The evening ended with a performance featuring Jones and me dancing to Good Luck, Good Night, Good Bye.
Photos of the 25-Year Anniversary Philadelphia Event

Pictured left is Bob Bueding delivering a welcome to the Freethought Society’s 25-year anniversary happy hour. Bueding is the president of the Philadelphia Ethical Society.

Pictured right is Janice Rael. She organized pre-ticket and on-site sales for the event.

The delicious anniversary cake from the Wegmans bakery is pictured below.

Pictured below are Sara Levin (left) and Lori Lipman Brown (right). Levin is the Director of Grassroots and Community Programs for the Secular Coalition for America (SCA). Brown was SCA’s first director and lobbyist occupying the position 2005-2009.

Pictured below is a standup banner showing a photo of The Tree of Knowledge. The secular winter holiday symbol has occupied the exact corner space next to the stairwell in the lobby of the Philadelphia Ethical Society for seven years running. Standing next to the banner are Margaret Downey (left) and Christine Jones (right).
More Photos of the 25-Year Anniversary Philadelphia Event

Freethought Society’s supportive and longtime friends Brian Fields and Barbara Hengst are pictured left.

Below left are Barbara Mancini and her husband Joe Mancini.

Pictured below center are Hypatia Alexandria and David Tamayo. Tamayo and Alexandria founded Hispanic American Freethinkers in 2010.

Marla Dubin, pictured below right, traveled from Columbia, Maryland to celebrate the Freethought Society’s 25-year anniversary.

At left Freethought Society board member Alan Gold (center) is pictured with comedians Leighann Lord and Steve Hill at the happy hour.

Pictured above are David Silverman and Margaret Downey. Silverman is the president of the American Atheist Association. He traveled from Cranford, New Jersey to deliver an in-person heartfelt congratulatory message at the anniversary event.
More Photos of the 25-Year Anniversary Philadelphia Event

Pictured above left is Leighann Lord performing her comedy standup routine at the Freethought Society’s 25-year anniversary gala. Her classy style of comedy had the audience laughing during her entire performance. She sold out of her books Dict Jokes and Real Women Do It Standing Up that night. These books are available in paperback and Kindle at your favorite bookstore or online. Please shop at smile.amazon.com as using that link automatically increases the Freethought Society’s AmazonSmile donations.

The event volunteer team is pictured below. Left to right are Emily Byrne (set-up and tear-down), Bob Bueding (venue coordinator), Christine Jones (set-up, pianist and tear-down), Janice Rael (Eventbrite and ticket sales coordinator), Dan Hoffman (lighting and sound specialist), Tom Schottmiller (transportation and clean-up crew), and Margaret Downey (event coordinator).

Pictured above is comedian Steve Hill. His excellent standup comedy routine hilariously highlighted the current political atmosphere, what it’s like to be black in the United States, and much more. Hill caused audience members to both laugh and think at the same time!
Celebrating Black History Month at Cheyney University

When the Secular Coalition for America (SCA) requested their 18 affiliate members help conduct a national voter registration campaign during the first quarter of 2018, the Freethought Society (FS) immediately made plans for tabling at Cheyney University. The goal to register as many people as possible before the November 2018 election date is a high priority for FS. The goal of increasing voter registration numbers overall meets the purpose of FS, which is a non-partisan educational organization. It does not matter under which party people register; the intent of tabling at Cheyney University was to increase the number of registered voters.

The unethical political landscape of today finds the younger generation discouraged about being able to make a difference through the voting process. Religious blocs are highly organized and they are gaining control in many levels of government. This is why FS plans to concentrate on registering students by tabling on college campuses. The plan includes educating students along the way.

The FS voter registration outreach at Cheyney University took place on Thursday, February 22, 2018 from noon to 5:00 PM. The table was located in the Student Union Building. It was staffed by Steve Hill, who portrayed Frederick Douglass, Margaret Downey and Christine Jones. Downey and Jones portrayed Douglass’ Victorian abolitionist friends. The 19th-century theme was selected to educate students about the difficulties endured by Douglass and many others as they struggled toward obtaining the right to vote. To honor the legacy of abolitionists and other voting rights heroes, free literature and one-on-one conversations conveyed the importance of registering to vote.

“I was pleased to talk to students in the Frederick Douglass character to dramatically emphasize how important it is to remember and honor the difficulties related to the passage of the 15th Amendment to the United States Constitution,” Hill said.

The students at Cheyney accepted voter registration information, took advantage of photo opportunities, the free FS literature, and complimentary snacks. Downey, Hill and Jones enjoyed the many conversations that took place that day.

It is fitting that the tabling project was held during Black History Month, and the effort also coincided with Cheyney University’s Founder’s Day celebration. Cheyney University was established on February 25, 1837 through the bequest of Quaker Philanthropist Richard Humphreys, making it the first institution of higher learning for African Americans. Humphreys bequeathed $10,000, one-tenth of his estate, to design and establish a school to educate African descendants.

Douglass was 19 years old when Cheyney University was founded. On September 3, 1838, Douglass successfully escaped slavery by boarding a train that lead to safe northern cities. At that time in 1838, the rail line was not yet complete. Douglass had to travel by steamboat along the Delaware River to reach the “Quaker City” of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, an anti-slavery stronghold. The path north became known as the “Underground Railroad.”

Douglass continued his journey to the safe house of noted abolitionist David Ruggles in New York City. It’s not difficult to imagine that Douglass and Humphreys were likely aware of each other as their mutual passions for education and freedom were legendary.

Hill has been a longtime advocate of history education. He is a part-time actor from Los Angeles and standup comic who has a keen sense of social justice. Hill incorporates secularism in his humorous overview of current issues in politics, science, and activism. His website is:

http://www.stevehillcomic.com

Cheyney University can proudly boast about many accomplished graduates. Among them are Ed Bradley, Robert W. Bogle, and Marcus Foster. The students who stopped by the FS table were as impressive as the now-famous graduates mentioned above. Many professors, employees, and school officials stopped by the FS table. Several school counsellors asked for a pile of one particular handout we were distributing. It was a slip of paper that conveyed the following message:

Please visit the following website to register to vote:
https://www.pavoterservices.pa.gov/Pages/VoterRegistrationApplication.aspx
“The ballot is the only safety.”
~ Frederick Douglass, Life and Times of Frederick Douglass

The counselors wanted to keep these slips of information in their offices to be ready to encourage students to register to vote.

On an adjacent table, FS offered free literature from the Secular Student Alliance and SCA. Many students picked up brochures about starting an SSA group and FS hopes to see a group start there soon and will be happy to offer mentoring and grant opportunities.

It was a pleasant surprise to see the cafeteria workers wearing the complimentary “I’m Secular and I vote” buttons FS placed on the free literature table. The women, pictured below, made the preparations for the day and the time spent at Cheyney well worth the efforts. They wore the “I’m Secular and I vote” pins all day long.
Pictured above left are Margaret Downey and Steve Hill. The sign stated that the table would be open until 3:00 PM, but many of the professors and students requested that the Freethought Society stay until 5:00 PM. Classes during the day prevented many from staying very long at the table, so by popular demand the table stayed up until after 5:30 PM.

Pictured right are Hill and Christine Jones. Both Hill and Jones traveled to Pennsylvania from California to participate in this effort. The Freethought Society happily funded their participation as each provided much needed assistance not available locally. To help offset expenses related to tabling at Cheyney University, please earmark a donation at the following link:

https://www.ftssociety.org/donate/
A Science-Themed Trip of a Lifetime
by Mike Judge

The date is December 28, 2017. Kathy and I are on the train from Ollantaytambo traveling to Aguas Calientes, which is at the foot of the famous Inca ruins of Machu Picchu in central Peru. We are sitting in the first-class car mesmerized by the stunning view parading through large clear windows while savoring many tasty Peruvian appetizers and refreshing drinks. At the end of the car, doors led to a cocktail lounge with small standing tables, a bar and an opening with a railing protruding out the side of the train. We wander in, order a drink at the bar and notice a musical duet is setting up and preparing to play. We go back to the dining car to inform our fellow travelers that “Hey, there’s a bar up there and the drinks are free!”

At that point, our group pours in and surrounds the bar, tables, the musicians and the open outside railing. As majestic Andean mountains and crumbled Inca ruins roll by, we joke, laugh and dance to the music. Among the jolly group members is world-renowned theoretical physicist and cosmologist Dr. Lawrence Krauss. He is the author of ten popular books and hundreds of scientific publications. He heartily joins in with the toasts. The party is on! The fun, excitement and energy cause us to miss our first-class lunch being served at our seats in the other car, but no one cares. Only later in the day will we mourn this lost infusion of calories.

Later that evening Kathy and I sit down for dinner at a four-seat table in a quaint but elegant restaurant located in the tiny but bustling Peruvian town. Unexpectedly, someone approaches and asks if they could join us. It is the famous Inca ruins of Machu Picchu in central Peru. We are sitting in the first-class car mesmerized by the stunning view parading through large clear windows while savoring many tasty Peruvian appetizers and refreshing drinks. At the end of the car, doors led to a cocktail lounge with small standing tables, a bar and an opening with a railing protruding out the side of the train. We wander in, order a drink at the bar and notice a musical duet is setting up and preparing to play. We go back to the dining car to inform our fellow travelers that “Hey, there’s a bar up there and the drinks are free!”

At that point, our group pours in and surrounds the bar, tables, the musicians and the open outside railing. As majestic Andean mountains and crumbled Inca ruins roll by, we joke, laugh and dance to the music. Among the jolly group members is world-renowned theoretical physicist and cosmologist Dr. Lawrence Krauss. He is the author of ten popular books and hundreds of scientific publications. He heartily joins in with the toasts. The party is on! The fun, excitement and energy cause us to miss our first-class lunch being served at our seats in the other car, but no one cares. Only later in the day will we mourn this lost infusion of calories.

Later that evening Kathy and I sit down for dinner at a four-seat table in a quaint but elegant restaurant located in the tiny but bustling Peruvian town. Unexpectedly, someone approaches and asks if they could join us. It is Dr. Richard Dawkins, ethologist, evolutionary biologist and author of multiple publications and books including The Selfish Gene and The God Delusion. Three days prior we had never met nor talked to either of these two famous scientists and authors but were now on a first name basis. We proceed to enjoy a leisurely two-and-a-half hour dinner.

Our journey to this “trip of a lifetime” could be said to have begun twenty years ago when I joined the Freethought Society. At the time, the Religious Right seemed to be taking over politics and some of my family and friends were being drawn in. I decided to get actively involved with FS and try to counter the destructive irrationality of this movement. I joined other activist secular groups and was inspired by many intelligent and rational people who were trying to make this a better and more compassionate world.

Six years ago I retired, moved to Phoenix, and left the comfort of Philadelphia and many family and friends. Once settled, we joined several local secular organizations including The Humanist Society of Greater Phoenix and an Atheist hiking group. We also began attending public lectures at Arizona State University. This is where we became aware of The Origins Project.

The mission of The Origins Project is to promote and support scientific research and science education. It also seeks to increase the public understanding of science. Project programs raise public awareness along with scientific knowledge with the intent of addressing pressing global issues that confront us. Towards this goal the project puts on lectures, debates, and a variety of workshops.

Impressively, The Origins Project also maintains archives that provide important information for academic and public use. Hopefully, educated citizens will promote and encourage sound public policy.

Another project endeavor is to organize public trips once every year or two to certain destinations where guests can engage in a global experience while interacting and sharing views with world-class scholars. The first destination I was able to consider was a trip to Antarctica. We decided to pass on it, but always felt some regret for that decision.

The next trip we heard about was on a privately chartered boat that was to cruise through the Amazon River. We immediately decided we wanted to go, but reasoned the smart thing to do was to sleep on it and call in the morning. Too late, it had sold out in one day. The next trip was to Peru’s Sacred Valley and Machu Picchu. This time we would not be rational. We called as soon as we could and booked the trip and thus this article.

We had never been to South America and knew virtually nothing about the history — especially pre-Columbian — or culture of Peru. We spent several months studying for the trip. We read books and articles. We also watched lectures on DVD that told the history of all the various cultures leading up to the Incas.

We learned that at the height of the Inca civilization there were 12 million people and essentially no food shortages. They had developed efficient food production and distribution. The Incas were masters of terraced farming and there is evidence that they had established permanent sites dedicated to agricultural research.

They was also a community-based culture, which meant that everyone shared the work. This allowed the Incas to maintain production while up to a third of its adult males were away providing labor. As towns were absorbed into the growing Inca Empire, they were forced to furnish food and labor in support of the empire. In return the community received stability and security. This system provided a large permanent labor force and is why such huge and numerous
projects could be built throughout the empire. Finally, we learned about the fall of the Inca Empire and the lingering effects on the current Peruvian and Amazonian societies.

Our December 2017 trip began with a red-eye flight to Lima. We decided to go a couple of days early to acclimate and explore the city. On the first day we toured the central districts of Lima. Shopping is vibrant in this part of the city, which is close to several impressive cathedrals and various government buildings. Lucky timing rewarded us with the spectacle of the highly-choreographed soldier and equestrian changing of the guard at the Presidential Palace. The next day we went to the Larco Herrera Museum. This museum has the largest private collection of pre-Columbian artifacts and art in the world. Of particular interest is the huge collection of ceramics from the Moche dynasty, some of which are quite erotic.

That evening we began to meet our group. It consisted of 37 people. We knew no one before the trip. There was no formal gathering place, but we knew the hotel bar would probably be a meeting place. The first guest we met was a young, late 20s, single male. Intelligent, inquisitive and fun-loving, he portended that this was going to be a good group of people. Soon we met others, including Krauss who greeted us warmly and provided us with materials and information that we would need for our trip. We noticed Dawkins as he checked in the hotel, but did not get to meet him until the next day. It quickly became clear that our group was united in a shared respect for reason and knowledge. Everyone seemed thrilled with the anticipation of spending time and interacting with Dawkins and Krauss — two giants in their fields of science. Still, the group was very eclectic. We had come from different parts of the country and the world. We all had different interests, occupations, educations, and living situations. Plus there was a wide range of ages. Everyone was interesting and interested.

The first full group day started with a flight from Lima to Cusco. Cusco was the capital of the vast Inca Empire and there are many remnants of the ancient Incas in Cusco. However, for now, we were only passing through. What most people do when visiting the area is to get a room in Cusco and use it as a base. They then take day trips to the Sacred Valley and eventually a full day trip to Machu Picchu, where they take the train in the morning, spend several hours in the middle of the day exploring the ruins and then take a late afternoon train back to their hotel in Cusco. This is not the best way to see the sites for several reasons. Cusco is over 11,000 feet above sea level and altitude sickness is a common issue with visitors. The Sacred valley is up to 3,000 feet lower, which can help in acclimatizing to the thin air. Also, four or five hours at Machu Picchu is not enough time to devote to the site. It is fairly congested in the middle of the day — mostly as a result of the above-mentioned day trips. Our itinerary had us spending two half days at the Machu Picchu ruins.

Our particular plan was to arrive at the Machu Picchu ruins in mid-afternoon as the crowds were thinning out. The next half-day, our plans were to arrive to the ruins early in the morning before most people would arrive. Machu Picchu is sometimes called a “city” but “ruins” is more accurate.

After our arrival in Cusco, we divided into three groups with three different tour guides on three buses and headed to the Sacred Valley. We would spend every day with this same assigned group and guide. Dawkins was with our group. The next two days were spent visiting various Inca ruins and small Peruvian towns.

The Peruvian people were wonderful. Yes, there were some local people who vigorously tried to sell us things, but they were polite and respectful regardless of whether we bought anything or not. Some would use their very young children in colorful traditional Peruvian dress to steal our hearts in an attempt to make some money, but it was only our hearts that they tried to steal — and at this they were usually beautifully successful.

We stayed the next two nights at the Tambo del Inka Resort, a beautiful complex that copied and reflected the Inca philosophy of construction, in that instead of blighting the environment with their buildings they sought to blend and function within. In the evening before dinner, either Dawkins or Krauss would deliver a lecture. They would expound on topics in their individual areas of expertise and, when possible, relate it to the subject of our trip. We were excited to be able to have our questions addressed up-close and personal.

Dawkins and Krauss were by no means tour guides as this was also their first time to these sites. On the tours, the tour guides did all the talking and answered all the questions. When we climbed the mountains around Machu Picchu on long hikes, the guides were with us. The guides were excellent. They talked for hours about the area’s history and culture. We also learned about the flora and fauna of Peru. They helped us appreciate not only the ancient Incas but also the warmth and sincerity of the Peruvian people. The guides seemed unaware of how famous our two science hosts were. To them we were all the same and they readily mispronounced the name “Richard Dawkins” as much as they did the rest of us.

On one of the tour days, at the end of the day, Dawkins informed us that the guide had been wrong about how certain fauna came to be in South America. He did not say this in front of the guide, but he made sure we knew the correct information. None of us caught it and in no way faulted the guide.
While preparing for this trip we contemplated three areas of concern. The first was that we wanted to learn and experience as much as we could about the history, culture, and the sites as we could. Would the tour guides be helpful?

Second, as we have never personally known anyone as accomplished and famous as Krauss and Dawkins, we wondered about interacting. How would they interact with us? Would they be approachable? Should and could we approach them and how personal should we be with them?

Third, we wondered what type of people would be going on such a trip? Would they be stiff and snobbish super-intellectuals or snootily rich? Would they be cliquish and unfriendly to anyone not in their group?

We were well-prepared for the first concern and the guides and trip structure made the trip very educational. As to the second concern, Krauss and Dawkins were completely open. They were always friendly and personable. From the very first day we felt as comfortable talking with them as we did with anyone else in the group. They were obviously learning and enjoying the trip as much as we were and we were all part of their experience.

As to the final concern, we could not have hoped for a better group of people. Not one single person in the whole group was evasive, unfriendly or disappointing. Everybody got along. Everyone wanted to get to know each other and have a great time doing so. We will sincerely miss each and every member of our group.

We spent our last night together in Cusco. By that time we were acclimated to the high elevation and no one suffered altitude sickness. We arrived after dark and were tired from a very long day of exploring, site seeing, hiking, and traveling. Still, a large group went down to the main town square for dinner and fun.

It was obvious that our group had bonded and we were sad that we would soon break up and go our separate ways. It is remarkable that such a short trip — interrupted by extended periods of sightseeing — could foster such warm feelings toward people that had never known each other. Such is the power of interacting with people who are like-minded, not simply or necessarily holding the same views, values or opinions, but in respecting each others’ views as long as they are based on rational premises and are open-minded in the search of, and respect for, the truth.

On the final day, we flew back to Lima where we would eventually go our separate ways. The final scheduled event was a wine and cheese reception that included a question and answer session at an airport hotel. This was held in a meeting room where the wine and conversation flowed freely. Dawkins and Krauss held an open forum where we could, and did, fire questions at them on any subject. It was a great discussion and we all learned a lot.

Some in our group, including Kathy and I, had to catch flights shortly after the event and had to say our sad goodbyes. Others headed out, in a rented bus provided by one of the guests, to downtown Lima for a final group dinner.

As to whether this was the “trip of a lifetime,” it’s hard to argue otherwise. It exceeded our expectations. We learned a great deal and met a lot of interesting people. Visiting Peru, and all the ancient Inca ruins, would be a wonderful experience for anyone.

We will probably never talk personally with Krauss or Dawkins again, but that’s okay. For a few short days we could honestly consider ourselves, and act like we were, their friends. The best part of the trip, however, was the many new friends we made. We will keep in contact with them. For us, good friends are the best things in a lifetime.
Make Your Voice Heard in Washington

Each year, the Secular Coalition for America hosts our Lobby Day in Washington, DC, a one-of-a-kind event that brings the voices of nontheistic Americans to the Halls of Congress. This year, we need to get as many of our supporters as we can to Washington to meet with their lawmakers, make their voices heard, and put a face to the growing number of Americans without religion.

If you are looking for an opportunity to get off of the political sidelines and onto the frontlines, this is the event for you. Attendees will get to hear speeches from sitting Members of Congress, learn about the legislation affecting our secular government, receive hands-on lobby training from the Secular Coalition staff, and attend in-person meetings with Members of Congress and/or their staff on Capitol Hill.

As a supporter of the Freethought Society, you will receive a special discounted registration rate. To register, go to LobbyDay.US and use your exclusive promo code Freethought to receive this offer.
Margaret Downey is pleased to be an invited presenter at the Silver Anniversary Celebration of the Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum’s reopening to the public. Downey is a member of the Museum’s Advisory Board, but also has a keen interest in the legendary love story of Eva Amelia Parker and Ingersoll. It is said that their union in 1862 had a great influence on the intellectual and philosophical development of Ingersoll. On Saturday, August 18, 2018, Downey will portray Eva (pictured right) to convey what is known about the couple’s story.

On Sunday, August 19, 2018, Downey will be one of three tour bus hosts. She is looking forward to organizing entertaining activities that will include music, games, and prizes as the bus travels along The Freethought Trail. Below are details about the event, courtesy of Free Inquiry Magazine (a publication of the Center for Inquiry and the Council for Secular Humanism).
March 22
On Thursday, March 22, 2018 at 7:00 PM at the Ludington Library located at 5 South Bryn Mawr Avenue, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, the Freethought Society will host acclaimed science writer and physicist Dr. Paul Halpern. He is Professor of Physics at the University of the Sciences and is the author of fifteen popular science books.

Halpern’s latest book, The Quantum Labyrinth, investigates how physicists Richard Feynman and John Wheeler, despite strong personality differences, established a lifelong bond that stimulated each of them to explore the fundamental ingredients of nature and revolutionize the nature of time and reality. His March 22nd speech is based on this book.

Halpern is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Fulbright Scholarship, and an Athenaeum Literary Award. He is a regular contributor to NOVA’s The Nature of Reality physics blog. Halpern has appeared on numerous radio and television shows, including Future Quest and The Simpsons 20th Anniversary Special.

More information about Halpern, his books, and other writings can be found at: http://phalpern.com

April 24 and 25
Please participate in the 2018 Lobby Day and Secular Values Summit sponsored by the Secular Coalition for America (SCA). The two-day event will kick off with SCA’s annual Secular Awards Dinner on the evening of Tuesday, April 24, 2018. Dinner speakers/awardees to be announced.

This Lobby Day event is your opportunity to become a DC insider and meet the individuals leading the fight to preserve our secular government. Lobby training and personalized representative appointments take place on Wednesday, April 25, 2018. Over the years, this SCA event has brought secular Americans from across the country to the Halls of Congress. If you are ready to make a hands-on political impact in Washington, then this is the event you can’t afford to miss!

Both the dinner and the lobby training will take place at the Capital Skyline Hotel (10 I St SW, Washington, DC 20024). Hotel reservations can be made online (or by phone (855-516-1090). Mention SCA for a discounted rate.

Reserve your Lobby Day space at the following link as soon as possible so that an appointment with your state representative and senator can be made for you. A special 25% off rate has been granted to the Freethought Society if you mention “Freethought” when you register:

http://www.lobbyday.us/register-now/

Washington, DC is lovely in April. Plan to see the city, museums and monuments while you are there for SCA’s 2018 Lobby Day.

May 23
The Freethought Society will host Dr. Ted Daeschler at 7:00 PM as the May 23, 2018 speaker. The event will take place at the Ludington Library. The library is located at 5 South Bryn Mawr Avenue, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania.

Daeschler is the Curator of Vertebrate Zoology at the Drexel University’s Academy of Natural Sciences. He is also a professor in the Department of Biodiversity, Earth and Environmental Science at Drexel University.

Daeschler’s presentation “Cold, Hard Science: The 2016-2017 Antarctic Paleontological Expedition” will highlight how the Devonian Period (420-360 million years ago) witnessed profound diversification of the form and function of aquatic vertebrates, including the origin of limbed forms. Previous discoveries from fossil sites in the northern hemisphere motivated questions about biotic evolution within the southern landmasses from the same timeframe. Daeschler worked in the Transantarctic Mountains of Southern Victoria Land, Antarctica. These areas have had little paleontological exploration and this fieldwork revealed productive Middle Devonian sites with a wide variety of fossil vertebrates from ancient freshwater ecosystems. Attend to learn what was found and the science involved.

June 29 - July 1
Every year the Secular Student Alliance (SSA) holds an annual conference. Hundreds of secular students and community leaders gather to share ideas and learn from each other. SSA’s conference goal is to train student leaders and activists from across the United States in grassroots organizing and leadership skills. The SSA conference is unique in the nontheist community.

This year the SSA national conference is being held at Ohio State University (OSU). Affordable housing is available on campus in OSU residence halls, either in a single or a shared room. Conference housing nights are Thursday, Friday, and Saturday (check out Sunday morning). You can reserve your housing as a part of the registration process. A shared room is only $30 a night. A single room is $65 a night. Register at:

https://secularstudents.org/annual-conference/

The reasonable conference registration price includes all five meals that occur during the event.

Student: $59
Five-Student Group Rate: $240
Group Advisor: $74
Group Alumni: $74
SSA Member: $179
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 tristate area of Pennsylvania, Delaware, 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 want 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.

Mail this form to: Freethought Society, P.O. Box 242, Pocopson, PA 19366
This form can be scanned and emailed to: Ezine@FtSociety.org

Volunteer Opportunities Through the Freethought Society
Supporters of the Freethought Society (FS) often want to do more than just donate. Listed below are various committees organized by FS. The committees are designed to fulfill the mission, goals and vision of FS. We seek to be of assistance to 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
(locates 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 and 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 interesting and unique nontheist events)

Sole Searching
(collection of athletic shoes for donating 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)