

Advocating for the 2014 West Chester, PA Tree of Knowledge

by Margaret Downey

Earlier this year I was pleased to learn that several influential nontheist leaders would make a special effort to join me in a public appeal on behalf of a 2014 *Tree of Knowledge* in Chester County, Pennsylvania. The Freethought Society (FS) has appealed for inclusion of *The Tree of Knowledge* at the Sunshine Meeting of the Chester County Commissioners since 2010. The tree was banned from the Chester County Winter Holiday display as a result of the passage of Resolution 58-10 that year. Resolution 58-10, in essence, gives exclusive control of the property, normally known as the Chester County Courthouse Free Speech Zone, to the Chester County Commissioners for the entire Winter Holiday season.

Unfortunately, the October Sunshine Meeting we had all arranged to attend was cancelled due to the November 2014 elections. I quickly contacted the scheduled speakers and made the necessary changes to the FS meeting schedule. **Jason Torpy** was scheduled to speak about nontheists in the military. **Hugh Taft Morales** intended to speak about Ethical Society members in Chester County. **Jennifer Taylor** was scheduled to speak about black nonbelievers. **Glen Loev** was looking forward to speaking on behalf of Secular Judaism, and I was prepared to represent FS supporters.

With the cancellation creating rescheduling difficulties, I decided that this year I would arrange to meet face-to-face with two of the three Commissioners. The third Commissioner was not contacted as he has never expressed even a mild interest in the issue. I was pleased, however, that the other two Commissioners accepted my request for a meeting.

I met with Commissioners **Terrance Farrell** and **Kathi Cozzone** on separate days and they were both very nice. They found a way to open their tight schedules in order to spend 30 minutes discussing *The Tree of Knowledge* with me and my spouse, **Tom Schottmiller**. I was impressed with their friendliness and willingness to listen to the evidence we presented, and to reconsider the reasons we were requesting the right to display *The Tree of Knowledge*.

I promised the Commissioners that I would not disclose details of the meeting — this, in order to create an atmosphere of sincerity and openness. The conversations were very enlightening and I learned how allowing the display of a *Tree of Knowledge* had been a political issue that polarized citizens and government officials. This is a real shame in that guaranteeing Constitutional rights of freedom of expression to a minority should not be a political question! Twisting the display issue into a “War on Christmas” would fuel the flames of hatred and divide the community.

I contend that FS is waging a “War on Intolerance” and I remained steadfast in my commitment to demand equality and respectful representation of the nontheist community during the Winter Holiday season. Both Commissioners were complimentary about my tenacity and determination. They each mentioned the large amount of emails they have received regarding *The Tree of Knowledge* issue and said that it was an impressive show of support.

Since I pledged not to disclose the details of our meetings, I will simply print the follow-up message that I sent to the Commissioners on November 29, 2014:

Dear Commissioners Cozzone and Farrell,

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me recently regarding the 2014 Chester County Winter Holiday displays.

I am hereby writing to make another appeal to you for permission for The Freethought Society to place a Tree of Knowledge, the widely-accepted symbol representing the rapidly-growing nontheist community, among the other Winter Holiday displays on the Chester County Courthouse grounds.

The Tree of Knowledge — a simple evergreen tree decorated with copies of the covers of a wide variety of educationally valuable books — is used in many homes, in public displays around the nation, and in many other countries around the world. Your decision to refuse the installation of The Tree of Knowledge is particularly disappointing because over the course of the three years that The Tree of Knowledge was on display we, in fact, witnessed significant social progress. The first year The Tree of Knowledge was installed on the courthouse grounds (2007), there were eight incidents of vandalism. The second year, four incidents, and the third year, no incidents of vandalism!

On an even more positive note, the Freethought Society began receiving more and more compliments from local residents and business owners about The Tree of Knowledge. There was a noticeable improvement in the social acceptance of the many nontheist residents of our community, a positive result due, in large part, to the holiday installation of The Tree of Knowledge.

Unfortunately, in 2010, the office of the Chester County Commissioners found a way to keep nontheists from participating in the Winter Holiday community event and display. When Resolution 58-10 was passed, all progress in increasing tolerance, understanding and acceptance ground to an abrupt halt. In place of inclusion and celebration of diversity within our community came tacit approval from the Commissioners to treat nontheists with rejection and discrimination.

*While Resolution 58-10 conforms to the guidelines written in the 1984 United States Supreme Court case *Lynch v. Donnelly*, following them in the most restrictive way possible, the nontheist community is represented in an exceptionally demeaning way. The childish symbols displayed to fulfill the minimal legal requirement for secular “balance” (wire choo-choo train, toy soldiers, candy canes, and Santa Claus) do not, in any way, represent the nontheist community.*

During my meeting with you, I asked what would happen if a group requested a spot for a Kwanzaa display. Both of you said that such a request would be given due consideration at such time it was presented. There should be no difference between the request for a Kwanza display and our request for the use of our Winter Holiday symbol — The Tree of Knowledge. Each display is representative of citizens in your community and should be given full and respectful consideration.

Even though for the past four years our request for a spot for The Tree of Knowledge within the Winter Holiday display

has been denied, I hope that my personal appeal might still make a difference.

After my in-person visits and the review of the materials I left, I remain optimistic that you will reconsider this modest request and allow our symbol, *The Tree of Knowledge*, to join the Christmas Tree, Crèche and Hanukah Menorah in the 2014 Winter Holiday display at the Chester County Courthouse.

Should you not do so, however, I would very much appreciate (and hereby request) a response explaining the reasons why our symbol is being rejected.

Happy holidays to all and thanks again for meeting with me.

Sincerely,

Margaret Downey
Freethought Society, Founder and President

As of the printing of this newsletter, I have not received a reply from the Commissioners. As I waited for a response, I also met with the Mayor of West Chester Borough, **Carolyn Comitta**. Schottmiller also attended the meeting that took place on Thursday, December 4, 2014.

Mayor Comitta spent 30 minutes listening to our concerns about nontheist exclusion and experiences of discrimination. As with the Commissioners, we reviewed literature about the growing secular community and the Mayor was invited to keep the information for future reference. The Secular Coalition for America literature highlights the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) and the 2012 “Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life” survey.

As the positions of Commissioner and Mayor depend upon voters, we thought it was important for Cozzone, Farrell and Comitta to know that the amount of religiously-unaffiliated citizens has risen from around 8 percent in 1990 to 21 percent in 2014. Of particular concern, the ARIS survey found that 41 percent of those who identify as religiously unaffiliated have experienced discrimination. Survey participants reported to have experienced slander, coercion, social ostracism, denial of work opportunities (goods, and services), and hate crimes.

Of the three public officials we visited, Comitta was the most interested and concerned. We were impressed with her questions, sympathy and commitment to help us find a Winter Holiday solution.

Newsletter readers will be kept informed of any progress as we continue to petition that the nontheist Winter Holiday symbol, *The Tree of Knowledge*, be included in the 2015 holiday display.

The Tree of Knowledge symbol received a major boost from the United Coalition of Reason (UnitedCoR) when **Jason Heap**, the National Coordinator, wrote to the Commissioners. He informed them about the significance of *The Tree of Knowledge* and encouraged them to reconsider denying an important nontheist Winter Holiday symbol. In the letter he stated, “For the Chester County commissioners to deny the application of the *Tree of Knowledge* relegates the nontheist community yet again to second-class status.”

Heap recommended that affiliates seek to have a *Tree of Knowledge* “planted” in a public place to symbolize the presence of a nontheist community. Heap also reported the Chester County Commissioners’ denial for a West Chester *Tree of Knowledge* to UnitedCoR affiliates through his article

entitled “Cutting Down *The Tree of Knowledge*.” The article was published in UnitedCoR’s online publication, *Hard CoR News*, as well as on the American Humanist Association’s Facebook page. In one day, the article received well over 50,000 hits and many more people wrote to the Commissioners on behalf of *The Tree of Knowledge*.

It is very important that the Chester County officials continue to hear from people who appreciate the symbolism of *The Tree of Knowledge*. To advocate on behalf of this winter nontheist symbol, please take a moment to write to the following people — no matter what time of year you are motivated to help us:

Commissioner Terrance Farrell
tfarrell@chesco.org

Commissioner Kathi Cozzone
kcozzone@chesco.org

Mayor Carolyn Comitta
ccomitta@west-chester.com

Please stress that *The Tree of Knowledge* is a symbol that represents you during the holiday season. Nontheists advocate education, reading, and the accumulation of knowledge to improve society and the human condition.

As further proof that *The Tree of Knowledge* is an accepted and respected Winter Holiday nontheist symbol, please note the many other locations that proudly display the tree. The Rhode Island Coalition of Reason’s (RICoR) *Tree of Knowledge* is pictured right. It is installed at the Rhode Island Statehouse.

The RICoR tree is accompanied by a sign featuring the **Robert G. Ingersoll** quote:

*Banish me from Eden when you will,
but first let me eat of the fruit of the
Tree of Knowledge.*

FS recommends that this Ingersoll quotation be used often and that as many people and/or groups as possible adopt this holiday symbol.

Please shop for your 2015 *Tree of Knowledge* when 2014 post-holiday sales take place. Artificial evergreen trees can be found at 50-75 percent off, so it’s a perfect time to make an investment that will last for many years.

Please send photos of your personal *Tree of Knowledge* for our collection. One supporter simply displayed a large photo of the FS *Tree of Knowledge* in his living room. What a great idea! Putting a photo up instead of an actual tree is brilliant! The photos alone created a lot of conversation and changed the hearts and minds of friends and family. *The Tree of Knowledge* proves that nontheists have something wonderful to celebrate during the winter season. We celebrate the advancements of literature, science, rationality, freedom of thought, critical thinking, and philosophy. We honor the natural world, our real-life heroes, our history, our freedom of expression, and our future. □

