The Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 2014 Tree of Knowledge
by Margaret Downey

It’s become a tradition! 2014 marks the fourth year in a row that the Freethought Society (FS) supporters and members of the Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia (EHSP) joined together to place a Tree of Knowledge in the lobby of the Ethical Society building (1906 Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania).

The public is welcome to view the tree during EHSP business hours. Since the auditorium, the basement and the upstairs rooms are frequently rented, nearly one-thousand people are expected to see The Tree of Knowledge during this holiday season.

The Tree of Knowledge was decorated on Sunday, December 7, 2014 shortly after EHSP Leader Hugh Taft-Morales delivered his speech entitled, “Great Awakenings.”

The Taft-Morales presentation was both entertaining and educational. He highlighted waves of “righteous” social changes that periodically washed over the United States affecting society. Dressed in an old-fashion preacher’s cape, Taft-Morales delivered an 18th century sermon promoting the notion of an “angry God.” Such sermons were considered “The First Great Awakening” that roused many Americans. At the beginning of 19th century, “The Second Great Awakening” sounded the alarm of public social reform. At the start of the 20th century, progressivism woke citizens to the government’s responsibility for those in need. In the 21st century, Taft-Morales speculates the possibility that there is a righteous humanist wave of compassion and activism on the horizon and proposed that a “Third Great Awakening” is inevitable.

I opened the tree decorating ceremony by providing background information about The Tree of Knowledge. I thanked EHSP for their support and hospitality. Over the years, FS has developed a strong connection to EHSP, which is exemplified by the cooperative events that have taken place at EHSP. Many of the authors of the books displayed on The Tree of Knowledge have spoken at those cooperative events (Lawrence Krauss, Jill McDevitt, Katherine Stewart, Herb Silverman, Jay Wexler, and Ronald A. Lindsay — just to name a few).

While many people enjoyed picking out ornaments and hanging them on the tree, two volunteers worked with me for several hours. Pictured right is David McDevitt hanging some ornaments on the top branches of The Tree of Knowledge. Fortunately, McDevitt can reach over the EHSP staircase thanks to his tall stature. McDevitt is the founder and president of the Drexel Freethought Society and an engineering student at Drexel University.

FS and EHSP also thank Zenos Frudakis for helping to place book cover ornaments on the tree. Frudakis is a local celebrity. His amazing sculptures have been featured on many “Top Sculptures of the World” lists published every year.

See his famous “Freedom” sculpture at the corner of 16th and Vine Streets in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It is a sight-seeing favorite. Sport fans can see his piece “Mike Schmidt” at the Citizens Bank Park also located in Philadelphia. But the Philadelphia pieces only scratch the surface of his many worldwide award-winning sculptures.

“Knowledge is Power” is his most recent creation. Frudakis sculpted a giant open book. On one side, Albert Einstein is emerging from the pages of the book. On the other side, Charles Darwin is holding a human skull in his right hand, offering it to a passerby who might want to learn more about evolutionary science. There are many more faces and writings of 31 icons from the fields of science, history, mathematics and the arts depicted in the sculpture. It stands 8 feet high and 12 feet long. The piece weighs more than 1,500 pounds. The sculpture was installed at Rowan University College of Education on November 29, 2014.

Pictured below is Frudakis hanging The End of Faith ornament. The End of Faith by Sam Harris is one of Frudakis’ favorite books. While sculpting in his Glenside, Pennsylvania studio, Frudakis listens to books on tape. His audio collection numbers in the hundreds.

It was indeed a pleasure and an honor to have the help of Frudakis as we decorated the 2014 Philadelphia Tree of Knowledge in the EHSP lobby.