The Story of The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia’s TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

Atheists Celebrate the Winter Season

Margaret Downey
Tree of Knowledge

Compiled by Margaret Downey

Dedicated to the Constitutional principles of freedom of speech and freedom of expression.
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My interest in designing a winter symbol that could be adopted by the nontheist community dates back to 1991. On December 20, 1991, I noticed that a designated “Free Speech Zone” located at 6th and Market Streets in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania highlighted only a giant Menorah and a Crèche. I knew from my studies that the United States is populated by many citizens who are not Jewish or Christian. I wondered why these minorities were not represented at the Free Speech Zone.

In my search to find more like-minded individuals I founded a non-profit 501(c)3 educational organization — The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia (FSGP). The mission and purpose of FSGP is to educate the public. Participating in any Free Speech Zone was a natural fit for FSGP’s goals and vision. The opportunity arose in 2007, when the FSGP Board of Directors approved plans for a Tree of Knowledge display at the Chester County Courthouse.

With a Tree of Knowledge display FSGP will convey to passersby that the United States of America is not simply an exclusively Judeo-Christian country. There exists in America a strong united minority of Freethinkers, Atheists, Agnostics, Skeptics, Rationalists, Secular Humanists, Humanists, and Ethical Culturalists.

This book will take you on a journey from the first discussions about putting up a Tree of Knowledge display in 2007 and ends with 2009 Chester County Courthouse Free Speech Zone controversy. This book may inspire you to pursue the possibility of putting a Tree of Knowledge in your area. I have compiled this book to not only inspire, but to also show by example how to proceed with an application, raising funds, finding volunteers, installing a tree, alerting the press and so much more. I am always ready to be of further assistance.

My special thanks to Chester County resident, friend and fellow activist Sally Flynn, whose support and assistance made all things possible. I also thank Sally Cramer, Stacks Rosch, Walter Kasker, Shaun McGonigal, Barry Greenstein, John Shea, Carol Everhart Roper, John Reitter, Andrew Barrett, Bill and Fritzi Wisdom, Bob Kay, Sue O’Connell and the many un-named volunteers who helped to install the 2007, 2008 and 2009 Tree of Knowledge. Many thanks also to generous financial supporters among whom are Bob Brown, Michael Jacobson, Stephen Uhl, Janice Rael, Fred Barrouk, Charlotte Carney, Michael Judge, Roy Sorge, Ben and Joyce Weis, Barry McGowan, Alan Palmer, Ed Susterich, Frank Trotta, Bob Hoffman, Marshall Martin, Teller, Leonard Feinberg and W. L. Sicheri.

I also acknowledge the participation of Prometheus Books, Tom Flynn, Rob Boston, Daniel Dennett, Ann Druyan, Greg Epstein, Min Byung, Barry Lynn, Matthew Chapman, Neil deGrasse Tyson, Freedom From Religion Foundation, American Atheists, American Humanist Association and the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science. The color book covers they provided were very much appreciated and helped to defray the costs involved with making the Tree of Knowledge ornaments. Big “thanks” also to Brian Sapient and Gregory Walsh for producing videos highlighting the Tree of Knowledge.

Sapient’s film can be found at: http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=685258797#v=feed

Walsh’s film can be seen at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrcUxFqrhYk

Margaret Downey, Founder and President, Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia
www.fsgp.org
Presentation of a Possible Winter Display
The Tree of Knowledge

A. Tree of Knowledge
1. Costs involved
   a. Sign
      The sign must be professionally produced. The cost of the sign may reach $400 as it will be constructed of weather proof materials.
   b. Tree
      The best tree in looks and design is the traditional evergreen. I would suggest investing in an artificial tree (see sample photo). The size of the tree needs to compete with the giant 50’ Menorah and the life size Crèche. I would suggest, therefore that the tree be no smaller than 25’ tall. There are 30’ tall artificial trees, but they can cost up to $12,000.00. I think if we monitor EBay, we can find a tree for much less than the suggested retail cost of $6,000.00. A 25’ tree just sold on EBay for about $1,000. I think it would be safe to say that we may be able to find a tree of our liking for around $2,000. A real evergreen will cost approximately $1,000 and can be mulched after use. Some people have big evergreen trees in their yard that they want to donate. The cutting down and the transport of the tree would need to be considered.
   c. Color Copies/Lamination
      The decorations (see samples) will be gathered together with the help of FSGP members. We will ask for people to send us unfolded two color copies of the front of a book that they recommend for the Tree of Knowledge. We will take the color copies for lamination which will cost $2.00 for regular sizes and $4.00 for bigger sizes. It would be difficult to estimate how many book covers will be laminated, but it might be safe to figure a cost of $1,000 for this portion of the project. It takes approximately 100 decorations to fully cover a 22 foot high evergreen. The group may want to invest in a lamination machine and purchase the pouches. The initial investment of the laminator and the bulk pouches is about $1,000 but will lower the overall cost of maintaining the design as vandalism is expected.
   d. Ribbon/Pine Cone Clusters/Fake Apples
      Each book cover will be attached to the tree with a ribbon, pine cone cluster or apple clusters. Bolts of weather proof ribbon can be purchased but the color selection is limited. White is preferred, but only red plastic could be found to date. The top of the tree should also have a big matching bow with ribbon streamers flowing down all four sides. I would estimate spending $1,000.00 on ribbons and bows. Pine cone clusters and fake apple clusters would cost about the same or a little more. Ribbons may not be salvageable for use year after year. Pine cones are sturdy and may last longer than fake apple clusters as the plastic will eventually crack and disintegrate when exposed to incriminate winter weather.
e. Transport and Set-Up
   The artificial tree would arrive in sections, but a van might be needed to transport the items. It is likely that at least two professional people will be needed to lift the tree into position. If a real tree is used the cost digging a hole and the installation of installing support cables needs to be considered. Estimate spending $500 for the set-up and take-down of an artificial tree.

f. Book List
   The group will need to provide a list of the books displayed on the tree. The list will be posted at the website. The sign posted at The Tree of Knowledge will direct people to the site.

g. Lights
   The Free Speech Zone usually will pay for the electricity needed if they do so for the Crèche and the Menorah. We would need to purchase the six spot lights. The cost of spotlights will be $500.00.

h. Container for Tree
   A very large container might be needed to hold the base of the tree. It will need to be weighted down with rocks. I estimate the cost of such a container and the rocks to be $500.00. The tree could also be placed in the ground in a pre-dug hole. This is the best and cheapest option.

i. Wind Brace
   Steel rods and stakes are needed to hold wire that will lead from the tree to the ground. The cost to hire a professional for this job, plus the supplies needed will likely be $500.00.

j. Storage
   Storage costs need to be considered only if an artificial tree is purchased. Check with local storage facilities for monthly rental costs.

k. Permit and Insurance
   The cost of the permit varies from nothing to $50.00. One of the usual requirements for a permit is insurance. A one-million dollar policy is the usual specification. The policy may cost $200.

3. Committee
   This project will need at least 10 people on a committee. We will likely need to hire people to take care of miscellaneous duties. A group should plan on spending $500.00 on hiring helpers for the committee work.
Of Special Note:

The approximate initial cost of this project could be as high $10,000.00 (depending on the investments of such things as a laminator, artificial tree, etc.). Without the investment of an artificial tree, the project could cost $3,000. This project should not be considered part of a groups annual budget.

A special fund raising effort should be conducted. A group may want to consider a partnership with a local Ethical Society or chapter of the American Humanist Association or the Center for Inquiry.

Keep in mind that the first year of a display effort is the most expensive. The artificial tree can be reused. The wind braces, container, rocks, lights, sign, and decorations can also be reused. Some items may need to be replaced due to vandalism, but Free Speech Zones are usually well lit monitored by security/police. Thieves and those caught vandalizing will be prosecuted.

Special Consideration: You can expect financial help from the various authors whose books will be highlighted in the display. Your group can charge a fixed amount and ask authors if they would consider donating more than the developed flat fee.

Advantages:

1. The media will love this display and our standing in the community will be improved.

2. Your group will be perceived as a positive organization promoting education and knowledge. There are many sound bites that can be developed with this type of display.

3. Your group will find new members with this positive new image campaign.

4. The Free Speech Zone will no longer project the incorrect message that America is a Judeo-Christian nation.

5. Diversity appreciation can not be denied with this display.

6. A new group pride is guaranteed even though there will likely be some who object to any participation whatsoever.
November 7, 2007

Chester County Commissioner’s Office
2 North High Street, Suite 512
West Chester, PA 19380

Re: Winter Holiday Display Proposal

Dear Chester County Commissioners:

The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia (FSGP) is pleased to submit this proposal for a 2007 Winter Holiday Display, as per the newly adopted Chester County Courthouse Winter Holiday Display policy.

The FSGP holiday display described below reflects what would be considered our ideal design. FSGP is willing to compromise if there are any aspects that the Commissioners may deem inappropriate in height or width.

Mission:
The mission of FSGP’s 2007 Winter Holiday Display, the Tree of Knowledge, is to inform the community about the many freethought books available through the library system and through retail and wholesale distributors. FSGP is promoting education and, in doing so, hopes to encourage a better understanding of the freethought philosophy. FSGP is participating in the holiday display to celebrate the winter season and to ensure a year-round cooperative relationship between the theist and nontheist communities.

Duration of Display:

Tree of Knowledge Display:
The Tree of Knowledge display will include the use of a 15-foot evergreen tree. The tree will be adorned with color copies of book covers crafted into colorful decorations.
Each decoration will be a laminated color copy of a book (front and back cover), and will be attached to the tree with a color-coordinated ribbon or a pinecone cluster.

A 3-foot white and green sign will be placed in front of the tree. The proposed sign design is attached, as well as an illustration of FSGP’s *Tree of Knowledge* Display.

The *Tree of Knowledge* will be illuminated during the evening hours by strategically placed spotlights, located near the base of the tree. The spotlights will be on a timer, and will only be lit during night time hours (6:00 PM-6:00 AM).

FSGP has no preference as to the specific location of the *Tree of Knowledge* on the lawn of the Chester County Courthouse, as long as it is not secluded or blocked by any other displays.

FSGP members are contributing to the design by providing color photocopies of books. A full list of the books being used will be provided to you by November 29.

Attached are book titles of decorations that have been constructed to date. FSGP guarantees that each book cover used on the tree will be family-friendly (please see attached list).

**Indemnification and Release:**
If the *Tree of Knowledge* display is approved, I, Margaret Downey, declare that FSGP will be responsible for all costs and expenses associated with the installation, maintenance and removal of the display. FSGP indemnifies, defends and holds harmless the County and its officers and employees against any claims relating to the display (please see attached “Hold Harmless Agreement”).

FSGP carries a $1,000,000 liability insurance policy through State Farm Insurance (Policy number: 8-PN-6188-1). Please see the attached Certificate of Insurance adding Chester County Commissioners as Certificate Holders.

Please contact me with any questions, concerns or requests for modification of FSGP’s proposed 2007 Holiday Display.

Sincerely,

Margaret Downey
President, Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia
Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia
WAIVER OF LIABILITY AND HOLD HARMLESS AGREEMENT

1. In consideration for participating in a 2007 Winter Holiday Display at the Chester County Courthouse, the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia (FSGP) does hereby RELEASE, WAIVE, and DISCHARGE the Chester County Commissioners, the mayor, their officers, servants, agents, and employees (hereinafter referred to as RELEASEES) from any and all liability, claims, demands, actions and causes of action whatsoever arising out of or related to any loss, damage, or injury, including death, that may be sustained by me, or to any property belonging to members and staff, WHETHER CAUSED BY THE NEGLIGENCE OF THE RELEASEES, or otherwise, while participating in such activity, or while in, on or upon the premises where the activity is being conducted or in transportation to and from said premises.

2. To the best of our knowledge, FSGP can fully participate in this activity. FSGP is fully aware of risks and hazards connected with the activity, including but not limited to the risks as noted herein, and FSGP hereby elects to voluntarily participate in said activity, and to enter the above-named premises and engage in such activity knowing that the activity may be hazardous to me and my property. FSGP VOLUNTARILY ASSUMES FULL RESPONSIBILITY FOR ANY RISKS OF LOSS, PROPERTY DAMAGE OR PERSONAL INJURY, INCLUDING DEATH, that may be sustained by its volunteers, or any loss or damage to property owned by Chester County, as a result of being engaged in such an activity, WHETHER CAUSED BY THE NEGLIGENCE OF RELEASEES or otherwise.

3. FSGP further hereby AGREES TO INDEMNIFY AND HOLD HARMLESS THE RELEASEES from any loss, liability, damage or costs, including court costs and attorney’s fees, that may incur due to my participation in said activity, WHETHER CAUSED BY NEGLIGENCE OF RELEASEES or otherwise.

4. It is FSGP’s express intent that this Release and Hold Harmless Agreement shall bind the members or representative, if the President, Margaret Downey, is not alive, shall be deemed as a RELEASE, WAIVER, DISCHARGE AND COVENANT NOT TO SUE the above named RELEASEES. FSGP hereby further agrees that this Waiver of Liability and Hold Harmless Agreement shall be construed in accordance with the laws of the State of Pennsylvania.

5. FSGP UNDERSTANDS THAT CHESTER COUNTY WILL NOT BE RESPONSIBLE FOR ANY MEDICAL COSTS ASSOCIATED WITH AN INJURY VOLUNTEERS MAY SUSTAIN.

6. FSGP further agrees to become familiar with the rules and regulations of the 2007 Winter Holiday Display concerning conduct and not to violate said rules of any directive or instruction made by the person or persons in charge of said activity and FSGP will further assume the complete risk of any activity done in violation of any rule or directive or instruction.

7. FSGP also understands that individual adequate accident insurance should be obtained by volunteers to cover any personal injury that may be sustained during the activity or the transportation to and from said activity.

IN SIGNING THIS RELEASE, I ACKNOWLEDGE AND REPRESENT THAT I have read the foregoing Waiver of Liability and Hold Harmless Agreement, understand it and sign it voluntarily as my own free act and deed; no oral representations, statements or inducements, apart from the foregoing written agreement, have been made; I am at least eighteen (18) years of age and fully competent; and I execute this Release for full, adequate and complete consideration fully intending to be bound by same.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand on this 20th day of November, 2009.

__________________________________________________________

Margaret Downey, President of the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia
November 4, 2009

Borough of West Chester
401 East Gay Street
West Chester, PA 19380

Regarding: December Banner Placement

To whom it may concern,

Enclosed please find an application requesting approval to display a street banner in one of two desired locations. Our first location choice is listed on the application as “over Market Street between Church and High Streets.” The second location choice is “over High Street between Market and Gay Streets.”

The Freethought Society respectfully requests either location and will adjust installation plans at the last minute if the first choice becomes available. If there is a waiting list for the Market Street location, please make sure the Freethought Society’s request for that location is noted.

Thank you in advance for your consideration. Please contact me if there are any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Margaret Downey

Enclosures: Banner application, Sample banner
Below is the 2009 Street Banner Design rejected by Chester County Borough. The Borough officials indicated that there was no “event” listed on the banner, therefore, the banner was not considered appropriate. Interesting that these officials consider the holidays as a “non-event.”

Happy Holidays from The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia!

Please visit the Virtual Tree of Knowledge at: www.fsgp.org/Tree-of-Knowledge/
The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia’s Winter Display
The Tree of Knowledge

The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia (FSGP), is a nonprofit 501(c)3 educational organization. To meet its mission and purpose to educate the public, FSGP is applying for participation in the 2009 winter display/free speech zone at the Chester County Courthouse located at Market and High Streets in West Chester, Pennsylvania. FSGP proudly presents plans for a 2009 Tree of Knowledge for approval. Please see attachments, photos and description below.

With a Tree of Knowledge display, FSGP will convey to passersby that there exists in America a strong united minority of nontheists which include Freethinkers, Atheists, Secular Humanists, Agnostics, Skeptics, Rationalists, Ethical Culturalists and Humanists who celebrate family, the beauty of the natural world, the changing of the seasons, community and the power of knowledge. The 2009 FSGP winter display symbolizes beliefs such as the value of education, appreciation of history, biographical acknowledgment of the many contributions nontheists have made to society, human kindness, the appreciation of science and the promotion of rational/critical thinking.

The artificial evergreen tree will not exceed the specified height of 10’ and will take into account the use of a heavy garden pot that will prevent the tree from falling over or from being stolen. The pot will be covered with a custom made white tree skirt that will be anchored to the ground with “U” shaped metal lawn/hose grips through grommets. The tree skirt will be customized with green lettering stating, “The Tree of Knowledge” (front portion) and “See: FSGP.org for book list” will be printed on the left and right side of the skirt. Please see attached overhead view of the tree skirt.

A professionally constructed sign stating, “This Display has been placed and is owned by The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia” will be prominently placed to comply with #11 of the regulations.

The display will be lit with three spotlights (100 watts each) as specified in #9 of the Chester County Historic Courthouse regulations.

FSGP respectfully requests that a reservation be placed on the only area of the Courthouse lawn that can accommodate (without interference of foliage and other displays) the 10’ high, 8’ wide FSGP display. This reservation procedure was done in 2007 and was very much appreciated. Attached is a photo of the area that is best suited for tall displays.

In preparation for this display, FSGP members and supporters provided two unfolded color copies of the front of their favorite books. Some books are out-of-print — some books are not. All books can be found through the public library system. The book covers were laminated together and constructed into an ornament. Pictured below are samples of the ornaments constructed by FSGP. The ornaments will be tied to the tree with either a white weather-proof ribbon or pinecone clusters. A white bow (fashioned to not exceed a 10’ height) will top the tree. Some book titles are:

*The Demon Haunted World*  
(Carl Sagan)

*Social Intelligence*  
(Daniel Goleman)

*Infidel*  
(Ayaan Hirsi Ali)

*The God Delusion*  
(Richard Dawkins)

*40 Days and 40 Nights*  
(Matthew Chapman)

*Good Without God*  
(Greg Epstein)
Overhead view of the tree skirt intended to cover the weighted pot, which will keep The Tree of Knowledge anchored to the ground.
Area Suited for Tall Displays
The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia’s Winter Display
The Tree of Knowledge

The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia (FSGP), a nonprofit 501(c)3 educational organization is pleased to announce a plan to educate the public by participating in the 2007 winter display at the Free Speech Zone located at 6th and Market Streets in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. To this date only two displays are highlighted at the Free Speech Zone—a giant Menorah and a Crèche. FSGP presents our plan for a 2007 Tree of Knowledge Free Speech Zone Display (see photos, samples and description below).

With a Tree of Knowledge display, FSGP will convey to passersby that the United States of America is not simply an exclusively Judeo-Christian country. There exists in America a strong united minority of Freethinkers, Atheists, Secular Humanists, Agnostics, Skeptics, Rationalists, Ethical Culturalists and Humanists.

Below is a picture of a giant Solstice tree (25-30 feet high). Now imagine the giant tree decorated with color copies of the front of books/dust jackets that are hung from a ribbon.

FSGP invites members and supporters to provide two unfolded color copies of the front of their favorite Freethought books. Color copies should not cost more than $2 each. Please remember to take off any price tags before making copies. The book covers can be delivered in person to the FSGP monthly meeting held on the first Tuesday of every month at the Ludington Library, or they can be mailed to:

FSGP Winter Display
P.O. Box 242
Pocopson, PA 19366

Please do not assume that we already have a copy of the book cover you want to send to FSGP. If we receive duplicates, the copies will be set aside for another display or will be used if a replacement is needed due to weather damage or vandalism. FSGP will keep a list of people who participate in this project. Participants will be invited to the unveiling ceremony and will be acknowledged for their support.

A recommended book list will be maintained at the FSGP website. A sign stating “Tree of Knowledge ~ Sponsored by The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia ~ Please see book list at www.fsgp.org” will be prominently displayed.

The display will be lit with six spotlights. The Pennsylvania National Park Service will provide the electric power throughout the season. Electric power has been provided to the giant Menorah for 30 years. Electric power has been provided to the Crèche display for 10 years.

FSGP is also accepting donations earmarked for this project. The first year anticipated financial commitment to this project is $10,000. The price will go down significantly as items are reused and an artificial tree is utilized. Please consider donating using the suggested participation specification list below.

Tree of Knowledge Fund Raising

I want to contribute to the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia’s 2007 Winter Display. Please record my earmarked donation as:

☐ Book Ornament Sponsor $25 (see sample)
☐ Branch Sponsor $50
☐ Fence and Banner Sponsor: $75 (see picture)
☐ Tree of Knowledge Root Sponsor $100 (see picture)
☐ Overall Display Sponsor $125
☐ General Fund (any amount is appreciated)

Please send a receipt acknowledging my tax deductible donation to:

Name: ________________________________________________________
Street Address: _________________________________________________
City, State, Zip:   _______________________________________________

( Mail this form to: FSGP, P.O. Box 242, Pocopson, PA 19366)
Welcome New Members/Subscribers

Jonathon Mohr
Unknown

Renewals

John Shea
West Chester, PA

Dorothy Stensgaard
Lakewood, NJ

Herbert Stensgaard
Lakewood, NJ

2007 Winter Display Information

Listed below are the expenses related to the erection of the Tree of Knowledge at the Chester County Courthouse Free Speech Zone.

Outgoing Expenses:

- Ornaments: $358.15 (includes the purchase of a lamination machine)
- Tree (includes installation and removal): $1,250.00
- Lighting: $256.79
- Sign: $397.50
- Total: $2,262.44

Incoming Funds:

- April 2007: $240.00
- November 2007: $250.00
- December 2007: $675.00
- Total: $1,165.00

As indicated above, the Tree of Knowledge project did not receive the needed funding to prevent FSGP from needing to use reserved money for other important projects. It is very important that donations for the next display will adequately cover all the expenses. In 2008, FSGP will not need to purchase a laminator, but that will only save $150. It is imperative that FSGP members and supporters donate on a regular basis to support this project.

Every Sunday millions of people open their wallets to place money into the church offering dishes and millions give the Mormon Church 10% of their salary to ensure the success of that religion.

FSGP is asking for its members and supporters to back the Tree of Knowledge project with a monthly donation. It is also clear that without the needed funds FSGP must abandon the idea of declaring a rightful spot at the Philadelphia and Chester County Courthouse Free Speech Zones. It would be a shame to let this positive image of secularism die due to a lack of funding. If every FSGP member donated just $2 a week, the Philadelphia and West Chester Tree of Knowledge projects would be paid for by the middle of December 2008.

Tree of Knowledge Winter Display

Yes, I want to show my support of FSGP’s winter display project. Please use the enclosed donation to fund the project. Please send a tax-deductible receipt to:

Name: ________________________________
Street Address: _________________________
City, State, Zip: ________________________

☐ Please acknowledge my donation in the FSGP newsletter.
☐ Please keep my donation anonymous.

Mail this form to:

FSGP Winter Display
P.O. Box 5054
West Chester, PA 19380
Welcome New Members/Subscribers

Amy Band
Olga Bourlin
Patrick Inniss
Peter Roberts
Peter Wernick

Renewals

Fred Barrouk
Adam Carley
Patricia Carley
Dr. J. Bruce Carlock
Sigmund Dybalski
Bette Gossard
Harvey Gossard
Nicholas Grubb
Joseph Hackett
Ric Hopkins
Bill Paci
Evelyn Stephens
Harold Stephens
Warren Swartzbeck
Levin Tilghman
James Trick
S. Steven Wilson
Judith Zieve

Unknown
Seattle, WA
Seattle, WA
Sherman Oaks, CA
Niwot, CO

Seattle, WA
Windham, NH
Windham, NH
Due West, SC
Philadelphia, PA
Willow Street, PA
Willow Street, PA
Scotch Plains, NJ
Elmer, NJ
Doylestown, PA
Philadelphia, PA
Bayside, NY
Bayside, NY
Telford, PA
Philadelphia, PA
Williamsport, PA
Philadelphia, PA
West Conshohocken, PA

Life Member Bonus

The next person who becomes a Life Member of the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia will receive a red hotel Gideon Bible inscribed and signed by Julia Sweeney. She wrote on the Bible’s Help in Time of Need page, “Have you read this book? When I read this book, I felt I had opened the door to an insane asylum.”

A Plea to Fund the FSGP Winter Display

The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia’s (FSGP) plan to install a secular winter is moving ahead! In order to participate at the Philadelphia and Chester County Courthouse Free Speech Zones, FSGP will be spending an estimated $3,000 for each display. Below is a form to use should you want to financially assist FSGP with these important projects.

Tree of Knowledge Winter Display

Yes, I want to show my support of FSGP’s winter display project. Please use the enclosed donation to fund the project. Please send a tax-deductible receipt to:

Name: ________________________________
Street Address: _________________________
City, State, Zip: ________________________

☐ Please acknowledge my donation in the FSGP newsletter.
☐ Please keep my donation anonymous.

Mail this form to:
FSGP Winter Display
P.O. Box 242, Pocopson, PA 19366

Donations

Dr. J. Bruce Carlock $15
Robert and Kimberly Brown $50
Edward Klein $25

Winter Display Donations

Robert E. and Margaret B. Brown $600
Linda Mahan $100
Barry McGowan $25
Sue O’Connell $150
Alan and Yvonne Palmer $250
Ed Susterich $50
Frank Trotta $25
Stephen and Diane Uhl $200

You can also participate in this project by making two color copies of the front of your favorite freethought book. Don’t worry about whether or not we might already have received two copies from someone else. The Tree of Knowledge display is sure to experience vandalism. FSGP will be ready to replace all stolen or damaged ornaments if multiple copies of books have been received. Please send the copies to the following address.

FSGP Winter Display
P.O. Box 242
Pocopson, PA 19366

Thanks in advance for your help. The time has come for the secular community to counter the notion that the United States is a Judeo-Christian country. FSGP’s participation at the Chester County Courthouse Free Speech Zone will help dispel that myth while promoting reading and learning.
Dear ________________,

We gratefully acknowledge your $___ donation to The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia.

Your contribution will be used to fund the “Winter Free Speech Zone” project.

Our goal is to prove through a public display that the United States of America is not a Judeo-Christian nation.

Thanks again for your participation.

Thank You!

Website: www.fsgp.org
E-mail: fsgp@freethought.org
Fax: 610 793-2569
Phone: 610 793-2737
P.O. Box 242
P.O. Box 242
P.O. Box 242
A non-profit educational 501(c)(3) organization

Greater Philadelphia of Freethought Society

Name and address of contributor:
Fist and Last Name Here
Street Address Here
City, State and Zip Here

Contribution amount: $

Check number:

Date received: Month, Day, Year

Received by: Treasurer Name
Dear Nathan,

We gratefully acknowledge your donation of book cover color copies for use as ornaments on the Tree of Knowledge.

Your color copy book cover donation helps to convey to the public that with knowledge all things are possible.

Thanks again for your participation.
Dear ______,

We gratefully acknowledge your donation of book cover color copies for use as ornaments on the FSGP Tree of Knowledge.

Your color copy book cover donation helps to convey to the public that with knowledge all things are possible.

The book(s) will be included on the recommended book list which can be found at www.fsgp.org

Thanks again for your participation.

Received by: Margaret Downey
Date received: November 21, 2007

Thank You!

Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia (A non-profit educational 501(c)3 organization) P. O. Box 242 Pocopson, PA 19366 Phone: 610 793-2737 Fax: 610 793-2569 E-mail: fsgp@freethought.org Website: www.fsgp.org

Name and address of contributor:

Title of Book Covers Received:

City, State and Zip

Organization

Name of Publisher or

Insert Book Information

Title of Book Covers Received:
Cooperative Publishers Contact Information

Contact the publishers listed below via phone, fax, email or snail mail to request them to send two color copies of the front of books they would like to promote. Your Tree of Knowledge is good advertising for these publishers.

American Atheists
P. O. BOX 5733
Parsippany, NJ 07054-6733
Phone: (908) 276-7300
Fax: (908) 276-7402
Email: info@atheists.org
Website: www.atheists.org

American Humanist Association
1777 T Street, NW
Washington, DC 20009-7125
Phone: (202) 238-9088
Toll free: (800) 837-3792
Fax: (202) 238-9003
Email: web@americanhumanist.org
Website: www.americanhumanist.org

The Freedom From Religion Foundation
PO Box 750
Madison, WI 53701
Phone: (608) 256-8900
Fax: (608) 256-1116
Email: info@ffrf.org
Website: www.ffrf.org

The James Randi Foundation
201 S.E. 12th Street
Ft Lauderdale, FL 33316
Phone: (954) 467-1112
Fax: (954) 467-1660
Email: jref@randi.org
Website: www.randi.org

Prometheus Books
59 John Glenn Drive
Amherst, New York 14228-2197
Phone: (800) 421-0351
Phone: (716) 691-0133
Fax: (716) 691-0137
Email: marketing@prometheusbooks.com
Website: www.prometheusbooks.com
Cooperative Organizations Contact Information

Contact the organizations listed below via phone, fax, email or snail mail to request them to send two color copies of the front of books they might have in their Freethought library. Your Tree of Knowledge can promote reading through public libraries.

Center for Inquiry
3965 Rensch Road
Amherst, NY 14228
Phone: (716) 636-4869
Fax: (716) 636-1733
Email: infor@centerforinquiry.net
Website: www.centerforinquiry.net

Institute for Humanist Studies
48 Howard St.
Albany, NY 12207 USA
Phone: (518) 432-7820
Fax: (518) 432-7821
Email: matt@humaniststudies.org
Website: www.humaniststudies.org

The Humanist Institute
c/o The New York Society for Ethical Culture
2 West 64th Street
New York, NY 10023
Phone: (212) 873-0918
Fax: (212) 873-8501
Email: manager@humanistinstitute.org
Website: www.humanistinstitute.org

Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science
P.O. Box 13604
Savannah, GA 31416
Phone: (912) 352-2438
Email: contact@richarddawkinsfoundation.org
Website: richarddawkinsfoundation.org

Don’t forget to ask individual authors!

Contact all the authors you or your group may know about. Sometimes publishers and organizations will accidentally miss sending a particular book that you may want for your tree.

Start making a list and checking it twice to see which books are the most naughty and nice. Please keep your book selections “G” rated and don’t forget to place books for children on your tree.

With knowledge all things are possible.

~Margaret Downey
Please let us know if you find other publishers that are interested in assisting with this project. Remember that the *Tree of Knowledge* placed in a public square is viewed by many and will very likely be highlighted by print, radio and television media. This is a wonderful advertising opportunity for new authors and those who want to regain interest in their work.

We recommend that the titles of all book covers used as tree ornaments and those kept as a back up ornament be placed on the master book list which should occupy a special section of your organizations website. Below is a sample of the logo used in 2007.

The 2009 Tree of Knowledge design was amended when the Chester County Commissioners rejected the use of a tree skirt. An online book entitled “The Tree of Knowledge” was created and a book cover was placed on the tree. The Commissioners objected and requested that it be removed. The right to display this particular book cover is ongoing. Updates can be found at: www.fsgp.org.
How to Make a Weatherproof Book Cover Ornament

After securing two color copies (made at the same time to avoid color variances) of the front of the book, trim away all unrelated paper surrounding the cover.

Place the book cover copies back to back using a wax type glue to hold them together (a UHUstic works well).

Trim any access overlaps making sure to not trim too much on any side or the top and bottom of the glued copies.

Place the glued copies together into a lamination pouch making sure that the size of the pouch will allow at least 1 1/2 inches of laminate material above the top of the copies.

Put the laminate pouch through a lamination machine to seal the copies into a weatherproof ornament.

Use a hole punch at the center of the 1 1/2 inch lamination area. If a hole punch is placed through the copies, the pouch will not be weatherproof.

Tools Needed:

Lamination Machine or Professional Services
Use a professional through a print shop or purchase a machine that will laminate heavy duty lamination pouches.

Lamination Pouches
Purchase at least a medium grade pouch. The heavier gage the better.

Hole Puncher
Sound Bites and Talking Points

Prejudgment and negative stereotyping stands in the way of acceptance and respect for the atheist community. The *Tree of Knowledge* is an attempt to encourage others to learn more facts and truths about atheists.

Coming together for this project to educate the community is a great way for the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia to branch out and attempt to close the gap between theists and nontheists. I look forward to continuing the Winter Display project in the future.

There are over 35 million non-religious citizens in America, more than all the Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu citizens combined. It is about time that we were heard and seen as an important part of our population. And there are over one billion non-believers around the world. Among the most educated and learned professors and scientists, about 90% are believers in the wonderful natural world. They see no need to add supernatural layers of superstition for the sake of comfort and false hope.

The best read and most knowledgeable people are likely to be skeptical about miracles, ghosts, witches, gods, devils and angles. The basic state of humankind is one of ongoing ignorance. With all our knowledge and books, internet and encyclopedias, we still don't even know much about most of the living organisms on earth, such as bacteria. We don't even know what makes up most of the matter and energy in the universe. So we have a lot to learn. This is our challenge: to fill in some of the gaps with real scientific research, so that wonderful discoveries will continue to be made, that will help humanity, reduce suffering and bring peace on earth.

Prejudgment and negative stereotyping stands in the way of acceptance and respect for the atheist community. The *Tree of Knowledge* is an attempt to encourage others to learn more facts and truths about atheists.

Some of the books on the *Tree of Knowledge* are published by non-profit educational organizations because there was a time when big publishing houses would not risk producing an atheist themed book. Now that there have been best sellers about this topic, we hope to see more atheist books picked up by large publishing houses.

In the meantime, the *Tree of Knowledge* can lead people to books that are less readily available through retail locations.

The only persons who are intimidated by the presence of The *Tree of Knowledge* are those who fear learning, scientific endeavors and freedom of thought.

Surely even the Catholic Church would agree that humankind is far better served with the distribution of information in the form of books.

If atheists believed in “nothing” then we would have put “nothing” up at the Courthouse. The truth is that atheists believe in the importance of accumulating knowledge. That is why we put up a lovely tree dedicated to the avocation of reading.

The season is the reason to celebrate family, friends, and the power of learning.
Atheists love this time of year too and we have been remiss in participating with winter displays. The *Tree of Knowledge* exemplifies what atheists hold dear — knowledge, books, the distribution of information and equal participation in the community.

The winter season is not owned by the Christian community. That is why the Jewish community erected a menorah and that is why the atheists have erected a *Tree of Knowledge*.

The root of misunderstandings is a lack of knowledge.

Simply because we atheists want to be included in the free speech zone winter display area, the religious community deems us unfit to participate saying that we are engaging in a “War on Christmas.” The truth is that we have declared a “War on Intolerance!”

I always say, “Happy Holidays” because it is rude to make assumptions about the way someone might celebrate the winter season. It takes sophistication and a desire to be sensitive to the diversity of our country to deliberately say “Happy Holidays.”

When someone says, “Merry Christmas” to me, I consider it an opportunity to educate that person. I make it immediately clear that I don’t celebrate Christmas.

The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia is taking this opportunity to bring our own message of free thought, reason, and the appreciation of science to the community. The *Tree of Knowledge* is our gift to our fellow citizens of Chester County.

As a non-profit, educational organization, the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia endeavors to present minority opinions that are rarely seen, discussed, or promoted.

The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia is encouraging the reading of freethought literature in order to bring about better communication in homes, in neighborhoods, and within the community.

The mission and purpose of the *Tree of Knowledge* display is to inform the community about the many freethought books available through the library system and through retail and wholesale distributors.

The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia is participating in the holiday display free speech zone to celebrate the winter season and to ensure a year-round cooperative relationship between the theist and nontheist communities.

Atheists believe that reason and the free exchange of ideas have been the primary forces of progress in Western Civilization.

The *Tree of Knowledge* symbolizes that we have freed our minds of ancient mythologies and that we want to better ourselves through the unrestrained application of reason and human endeavor to solve the local and global problems that confront us.

The concept of God is really a version of a very angry and vindictive Santa Claus. If you are naughty Santa does not reward you with a gift at Christmas. But if you are naughty God will punish you for eternity.

Reading, writing and the accumulation of knowledge sets us apart from other animals.
The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia is participating in order to ensure that the freethought community will no longer be considered a silent minority.

The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia offers another point of view through alternative resources and organizations (here we can mention the Freedom From Religion Foundation, The American Humanist Association, the Atheist Alliance International, American Atheists and The Center for Inquiry).

The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia wants people to be curious about the books we recommend. Curiosity may have killed the cat, but a lack of curiosity kills the brain.

The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia is branching out with efforts to build a better understanding of the nontheist community.

While some religious groups advocate boycotts of movies and books, The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia advocates the unrestricted distribution of information.

Acceptance of the diversity of Chester County citizenry begins with education.

The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia welcomes all peaceful dialogue as citizens of Chester County work towards a better understanding of cultural, ethnic and religious differences.

Knowledge leads to freedom.

With knowledge all things are possible, including the acceptance of freethinkers as fellow citizens.

With this Tree of Knowledge display, The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia hopes to encourage the reading of freethought literature in order to bring about better communication.

If a peaceful and respectful winter season occurs in Chester County, there is hope that a similar attitude will prevail around the world.

Respect for The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia winter display is a gage for the future of world peace.

The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia is taking this opportunity to bring our own message of free thought, reason, and science to the community.

It's not a Christmas tree. It's a Tree of Knowledge, on which are displayed many of the great books of Western civilization. All are well worth reading.

Yes, The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia included the Bible and the Koran because we encourage people to read it carefully, and to think about what it really says. Many of us find its messages quite unacceptable — in conflict with science and the evidence of our senses and reason.

The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia display represents our contribution to this community.

Acceptance in the community is a valuable part of citizenship, hence our display.
The season is the reason to celebrate nature in all of its beauty, including the natural impulse to learn.

Fear of ignorance is the beginning of knowledge.

I pity anyone who doesn’t value learning and education.

Fear of knowledge is the beginning of religion.

The Christmas tree was used by "Pagans" long before Christianity existed. It was stolen by the Christians!

In Jeremiah 10:2-4 (KJV Bible Old Testament) refers to the "heathen" who cut down trees, fasten them, and then decorates them with silver and gold.

The Tree of Knowledge concept is so fitting to the mission and purpose of the atheist community that we will try to participate in Free Speech Zone displays all year long and we will be constructing a float for parade participation as well.

Yes, the name Tree of Knowledge was purposely used to refer to the Bible story. The reason we made that reference was to dispel the myth that the accumulation of knowledge is sinful. Quite the contrary! The accumulation of knowledge is what sets humankind apart from the rest of the animals on earth.

Not one religion owns the exclusive right to celebrate during the winter season. Winter, in fact, is the perfect time of year to gather around the fireplace and commune with others.

Humankind has survived for this long because we are social animals. Social interaction is important and atheists are no different than our fellow religious citizens. We socialize and commune for the purpose of celebrating what it is to be human.

Next year, I hope to see more displays at the Courthouse. The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia encourages all minorities in Chester County to participate in the festivities.

With over 350,000 places of worship in this country, why are the religious so compelled to place a crèche on public property?

If over 80% of the American public believe in God and Jesus, then we should see 80% of homes decorated with crèches at this time of year.

A winter display that exemplifies the nontheist community is long overdue.

I've never seen members of FSGP so energized and happy. FSGP members who live in Chester County are very proud and thrilled to not be a silent minority anymore. The presence of a Tree of Knowledge at the Chester County Courthouse gives freethinkers a reason to joyously celebrate the winter season.

The Free Speech Zone belongs to all of us. The right to freedom of expression belongs to all of us.

The religious community are being hypocritical in these matters.
The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia is participating because it is important to remain visible in the community. When you say nothing and do nothing — you risk being nothing.

Inclusion of the nontheist community during this festive time of year is an indication that Chester County appreciates its diverse citizenry.

Acceptance proves that the First Amendment of the Constitution is an honored tenet of democracy.

FSGP is participating because we do not want to be an invisible minority.

With a *Tree of Knowledge* display FSGP will convey to passersby that the United States of America is not simply an exclusively Judeo-Christian country.

**Note:**

The above suggested talking points and sound bites are intended to stimulate your brain cells. When being interviewed for television or the print media, say what comes naturally. Imagine what you would like to see printed in the newspaper before you make a comment. Think of ways in which to best represent the nontheist community and prove that you are indeed the “Friendly Neighborhood Atheist.”
1. Proposal has been APPROVED!

2. Tree-Update & options for chopping & hauling—Sally & Margaret
   a) Set-up on Saturday, December 1, 2007 (exact time is dependent upon when the tree company can deliver to the site)

3. Lighting update—Sally
   a) Options from Home Depot, listed on Yahoo Group site.

4. Fundraising Update—Margaret
   a) Author sponsorship
   b) Organization sponsorship

5. Tree Lighting Ceremony
   a) Scheduled for 5 PM on Saturday, December 1, 2007
      1. Guest speakers—Margaret
      b) Dinner/celebration afterwards at West Chester restaurant (within walking distance from courthouse)

6. Talking Points Development
   a) Only officers of FSGP can speak for the group
   b) Use attached “Issue Worksheet” to develop “sound bites”

Notes:

______________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________
The issue is: ________________________________________________

My first talking point is:

______________________________________________________________

My second talking point is:

______________________________________________________________

My third talking point is:

______________________________________________________________

My humorous sound bite is:

______________________________________________________________

My sound bite cliché is:

______________________________________________________________

My sound bite analogy is:

______________________________________________________________

My attacking sound bite is:

______________________________________________________________

My pop culture sound bite is:

______________________________________________________________

My opposition quote is:

______________________________________________________________

My rhetorical question sound bite is:

______________________________________________________________
2007 Winter Holiday Display Committee Report
Delivered Tuesday, November 6, 2007

The Chester County Commissioners recently passed a “Chester County Courthouse Winter Holiday Display Policy.” This is a direct result of the protest efforts made by Sally Flynn and Margaret Downey in 2006. According to the directives of the new holiday display policy, any community group can submit a proposal to the Chester County Commissioners for inclusion consideration.

In October 2007, the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia (FSGP) formed the 2007 Winter Holiday Display Committee. Postcards were sent announcing the first meeting to discuss FSGP’s intent to submit a proposal for a Tree of Knowledge. We are requesting that the Tree will be on display at the Chester County Courthouse from November 29, 2007-January 15, 2008.

The Committee held its first official meeting on Tuesday, October 30th at Kildare’s restaurant in West Chester. Fourteen people were in attendance. Tonight I extend a warm welcome to anyone who would like to help with the display plans.

Committee sign up sheets are located at the literature table and several sign up sheets are being circulated now. Please make sure to provide us with your email address so that we can invite you to the Yahoo discussion group set-up for committee purposes only. If you can’t attend meetings of the Committee, there are numerous ways in which you can help make the Tree of Knowledge project a success.

The Committee is asking for everyone’s help in making the decorations for the Tree of Knowledge. Please go home and look through your personal library. When you find your favorite freethought books, please obtain a color copy of the front and back cover. Please send those copies to FSGP as soon as possible. The cost of duplication will be about $2. This is a simple and easy way to participate and will assist the committee greatly in the creation of the tree ornaments.

Cash donations, are of course, greatly appreciated! A fundraising/donation form is attached to tonight’s agenda. Remember that all donations are tax-deductible.

If you are interested in this project, you are invited to join us at the next committee planning meeting on Tuesday, November 20th at Kildare’s restaurant location on Gay Street in West Chester. It is never too late to become involved with this effort and any assistance is greatly appreciated.

The Committee will begin planning an unveiling ceremony for the Tree of Knowledge as soon as we know if the FSGP proposal is accepted by the Commissioners. It will be a terrific celebration that will include a dinner and guest speakers.

If the Commissioners reject the FSGP application, the Committee will raise a ruckus. We have dotted every “i” and crossed every “t” on the proposal. There will be no valid reason for a rejection. In this scenario, the Committee will be prepared issue press release that will challenge the decision.

Please sign up for the newly-formed Winter Holiday Display Committee if you would like to be a part of this exciting and creative effort to promote education and understanding.
Planning Meeting Agenda ~ Tuesday, October 30, 2007

7:00 PM Welcome, Self-introductions and Food/Drink Ordering (Please plan to pay cash or ask for a separate bill.)

7:30 PM History, Review and Discussion of the Chester County Commissioner’s New Holiday Display Policy

8:00 PM History, Review and Discussion of the Tree of Knowledge Design

8:30 PM Fundraising Ideas

9:00 PM Discussion of Committee Members, Volunteers and Job Assignments

9:30 PM Wrap-Up and Brainstorming (as time permits)

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR:

Fundraising

1. Author/publisher sponsorship (contact information and letters needed)
2. FSGP Members and Friends (through calls, newsletter and special fundraiser letter)
3. Other Organizations (national groups, local groups, businesses—book store)

Decorations

1. Create the list of Books for Display
2. Obtain Color Copies of Book covers (front & back)
3. Laminating of Book Covers
4. Hole Punch, locating Matching Ribbon and Finishing of Individual Decorations

Opening Ceremony/Unveiling

1. Invitations
2. Ceremony Details
3. Set-Up of Ceremony
4. Lunch or Dinner Celebration

Tree

1. Purchasing (including location and transportation)
2. Lighting Design
3. Installation
4. Take Down and Disposal

Other Display Needs

1. Fence and Signage
2. Free Book List (container needed and supply guarding/reproduction)

Media

1. Talking Point Development
2. Sound bite Development
3. Press Releases (writing, proofing and distribution)
4. Press Conference at Opening/Unveiling Ceremony
5. Media Archive Development
6. Movie for YouTube
2007 Winter Display Committee Volunteers

I would like to volunteer:

Name: __________________________________________________________________________

Phone: _________________________________ Email: ________________________________

Expertise: ________________________________________________________________________

Count me in the following volunteer job, committee and/or responsibility:
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________

I would like to volunteer:

Name: __________________________________________________________________________

Phone: _________________________________ Email: ________________________________

Expertise: ________________________________________________________________________

Count me in the following volunteer job, committee and/or responsibility:
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________

I would like to volunteer:

Name: __________________________________________________________________________

Phone: _________________________________ Email: ________________________________

Expertise: ________________________________________________________________________

Count me in the following volunteer job, committee and/or responsibility:
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
It is best to place the tree topper (FSGP used a giant bow) and at least three feet of the top ornaments prior to lifting the tree into place.

This 22’ high tree was placed into a pre-dug hole and was secured with heavy gage wires attached to four eye-hook ground stakes.

Pictured right is the tree being lifted by two men. A third man is guiding the tree trunk into the pre-dug hole.

We regretted not placing more top ornaments further down from the top of tree. It was difficult to reach the top after the fact.

Pictured left are installation crew members who loaned us their 25’ ladder for volunteers to place more ornaments on the tree.

Please see the following two pages for a graph outline we used to keep track of the ornament placement.

Expecting vandalism, we decided that if we knew where each book cover was placed, we could easily determine which ornament to replace in case of theft or damage.
Photos of Ornament Selection and Placement

Pictured left are volunteers marking boxes to hold ornaments assigned to each section of the tree.

Using the master list of books, a number was written next to the title of the book. That number indicated which section the book could be found.

The sections were given further designation when we decided at the site to place all the ornaments into sections we named as categories. Section 1 was designated for history related books, section 2 became philosophy related books, section 3 was designated biographies, etc., etc.

This procedure proved helpful when we did indeed experience vandalism. Ornaments were easily replaced.

The ornaments were placed on the tree with medium gage floral wire. The wire was difficult to use and many people experienced small cuts from handling the pine and wire.

In a backyard location an experimental tree was made using outdoor ribbon instead of wire. It worked well. Ribbon will be used instead of wire for the 2008 tree.
Once the tree was in place, the location of the sign can be determined. Two deep holes were dug to support the legs of the sign.

Always remember to thank and generously tip your installation crew. We also made a photo “Thank You” book for the crew and delivered it to the owner of the tree farm after the installation of the tree and sign.

Due to religious biases held by the owner of the tree farm, we were told that doing business with him in 2008 was “out of the question.” Please be prepared for unfounded bigotry and prejudice.
Photos of The Tree of Knowledge Lighting

Pictured above are the style of the lights used to illuminate The Tree of Knowledge. In 2008, we will add four additional lights that will be raised 1-2’ off the ground so that the top area of the tree will be better seen at night.

The lights were vandalized four times. The first incident involved the moving of the light direction so that the lights were shining on surrounding display (a Crèche). The second incident involved the unplugging of the lights. The third incident involved the turning off of the automatic timer. The fourth and most devastating incident involved the cutting of five lighting cords (see photo on right) causing FSGP to purchase new lights.
A Holiday Message to
The Chester County Commissioners

The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia (FSGP) urges the Chester County Commissioners to adopt a defined and clear winter display policy at the Chester County Courthouse. FSGP members would fully support the adoption of a “No Display” policy should the Commissioners rule in favor of keeping the Chester County Courthouse free from any religious expression.

FSGP advocates complete separation of church and state. It would be most appropriate for the Chester County Commissioners to avoid the addition of religious expressions on government property. The grounds at the Chester County Courthouse are much too small to accommodate every known religion with equality. Neutrality hurts not one citizen.

Freedom of religious expression is expected at private businesses and homes. There are hundreds of churches that are supported by their members for the explicit purpose of expressing religious beliefs. It is not the duty of the Chester County Commissioners to entangle themselves into a religious issue, especially when they were voted into office with the expectation that they would be serving the entire community without bias or prejudice.

The Commissioners could instead decide that the grounds of the Chester County Courthouse will be used similarly to that of the Free Speech Zone located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Independence Mall at 5th and Market Streets). If an official Free Speech Zone is announced, then the entire community must be provided with equal access throughout the year.

Minority opinions must not be treated differently than majority opinions. FSGP would participate in a winter holiday display that would express the beliefs of its membership. Our display would be entitled Tree of Knowledge and would convey the importance of education. Knowledge leads to freedom and with knowledge all things are possible. An equal size space, protection and electrical power would be expected if the same services are provided to other displays.

Margaret Downey, President
The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia (FSGP) is pleased to announce its participation in the 2007 Winter Display on the lawn of the Chester County Courthouse located at the corner of High and Market Streets in West Chester, Pennsylvania.

FSGP’s Tree of Knowledge will be installed at 10:00 AM on Saturday, December 1, 2007. FSGP volunteers will be decorating the tree from noon — 5:00 PM.

The ornaments on the tree are hand-made by FSGP volunteers using color copies of book covers. The books in use will highlight various topics of interest to freethinkers. Book topics include religion, history, government, philosophy, sociology, ethics and science. All the book covers displayed on the tree will be listed by author at the FSGP website: Please visit:

www.fsgp.org

As a non-profit, educational organization FSGP endeavors to present minority opinion that are rarely seen, discussed or promoted. FSGP advocates a free exchange of ideas and the unrestricted dissemination of information.

“Knowledge leads to freedom. With knowledge all things are possible, including the acceptance of freethinkers as fellow citizens. With this Tree of Knowledge display, FSGP is encouraging the reading of freethought literature in order to bring about better communication in homes, neighborhoods and within the community,” says Margaret Downey, president of FSGP.

At 5:00 PM, FSGP will host a tree lighting ceremony and celebration. Please note that FSGP’s Tree of Knowledge will be on display at the Chester County Courthouse from December 1, 2007-January 13, 2008.

Event Coordinator: Sally Cramer (570) 977-2210
The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia (FSGP) is proud to announce that a Tree of Knowledge will be included in a 2009 Winter Holiday display at the Chester County Courthouse. FSGP’s application was one of only three accepted by the Chester County Commissioners. The 300 square foot space available for public displays is located on Market Street between High and Church Streets. Limiting the number of displays is a new rule enacted by the Commissioner’s office on November 19, 2009. For details about the new regulations, visit:


The Tree of Knowledge display consists of color copies of book covers constructed as ornaments. The ornaments adorn a 10’ tall natural evergreen tree (as dictated to by the Commissioners’ 2009 regulations). The book covers used on the tree highlight various points of view from the freethought perspective on topics such as religion, history, philosophy, sociology, ethics, and science. With this display, FSGP seeks to encourage the reading of freethought literature in order to bring about a better understanding of nontheist citizens.

“Inclusion of the nontheist community during this festive time of year is an indication that Chester County appreciates its diverse citizenry. Acceptance proves that the First Amendment of the Constitution is an honored tenet of democracy,” stated Margaret Downey, founder and president of FSGP.

FSGP secretary Sally Flynn further explained that, “FSGP is participating because we do not want to be an invisible minority.”

A small sign denotes FSGP’s sponsorship as required by the new rules.

The Tree of Knowledge will be installed on Monday, November 30, 2009. Volunteers will meet at 9:00 AM to decorate the tree. At 5:00 PM on that day, FSGP will sponsor a tree lighting ceremony. The Tree of Knowledge is on display at the Chester County Courthouse until January 9, 2010.

Event Coordinators:

Margaret Downey
(610) 357-9432

Sally Flynn
(610) 793-1633

# # #

The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia is a 501(c)(3) educational organization advocating separation of church and state, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom from religious intrusion and freedom of choice.
As a result of a Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia (FSGP) 2006 holiday display protest effort, Chester County Commissioners recently passed the “Chester County Courthouse Winter Holiday Display Policy” (http://dsf.chesco.org). FSGP intends to submit an application to place a *Tree of Knowledge* on the lawn of the Chester County Courthouse.

Please join us for the first 2007 Winter Display Committee planning meeting on **Tuesday, October 30th at 7:00PM**. Please plan to dine and work at:

Kildare’s Irish Pub  
18-22 W. Gay Street  
West Chester, PA 19380
Special Announcement.
A Special Winter Celebration Invitation!

Please join members of the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia (FSGP) on Saturday, December 1, 2007 at 10:00 AM to help install and decorate FSGP’s 2007 winter display:

The Tree of Knowledge

The Tree of Knowledge will be placed on the lawn of the Chester County Courthouse located at the corners of High and Market Streets, West Chester, PA 19380.

If you are unable to work on the display during the day, please plan to celebrate the spotlighting and opening ceremonies at 5:00 PM at the same location mentioned above. After the ceremony, participants are encouraged to dine together and continue celebrating this historical event. Please call if you have any questions:

Coordinators: Sally Cramer (570) 977-2210 and Margaret Downey (610) 793-2737

Note: The Tree of Knowledge will be on display at the Chester County Courthouse from December 1, 2007—January 13, 2008. Please earmark a donation to FSGP in support of this project. FSGP’s mailing address can be found on the reverse side of this card. A Tree of Knowledge donation form is located at: www.fsgp.org.

Note: This is the front side of the post card. The back side sample is on page the previous page. Copy front and back together to achieve a post card suitable for mailing. This layout allows two post cards per sheet to get printed, saving money and time. Some printers will also cut the post card for you.
**Tree of Knowledge Takes Root at Bentley College**

by Margaret Downey

I met the president of the Bentley Secular Student Alliance, Byung Min, at the Center for Inquiry’s November 2007 New York City convention. Min and I talked about various projects and I shared information with him about the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia’s (FSGP) 2007 *Tree of Knowledge*. I gave him a flyer and encouraged him to think about putting up a *Tree of Knowledge* somewhere on the Bentley College campus.

On December 8, 2007, Min informed me that the school granted him permission to install a *Tree of Knowledge* in the library at Bentley College (located in Waltham, Massachusetts). Min’s proposal was so well done that I am reprinting it below. I hope it will inspire other student groups to adopt this project in 2008.

**2007 Tree of Knowledge Proposal**
The Bentley Secular Student Alliance (BSSA) is pleased to submit this proposal for a display of a celebration of knowledge and secularism during the 2007 winter holiday season in Bentley Library.

The BSSA holiday display described below reflects what would be the ideal design. BSSA is willing to compromise if there are any aspects that the authorities in charge may deem inappropriate in height or width.

**Mission:**
The Mission of the BSSA’s holiday tree display is to inform the Bentley community of the various books at their disposal in and outside of the college library and to invoke the interest of students to the vast availability of knowledge. In promoting education, the BSSA hopes to encourage the better understanding of the secular cause and the general diversity of the world that we all live in. The *Tree of Knowledge* has great potential for many reasons. It is a positive message about education and social involvement. BSSA would be promoting the titles of books that will lead the public toward critical thinking. Because the *Tree of Knowledge* is a secular symbol it is inclusive of people from all walks of life, religious or nonreligious.

**Duration of Display:**
December 1, 2007 – December 15, 2007

**Tree of Knowledge Display:**
The *Tree of Knowledge* display will use a 7.5-foot artificial evergreen tree. The tree will be adorned with color copies of book covers crafted into colorful decorations. Each decoration will be a laminated color copy of a book (two copies of the front only—placed back to back), and will be attached to the tree with color coordinated ribbons, along with various lights and ornaments promoting education and knowledge (such as book-shaped ornaments, pens, and pencils).

The *Tree of Knowledge* will be colorfully decorated with holiday lights and will be strategically placed in the middle of the lobby of the main floor of the Bentley library to effectively send the message we intend to send.

BSSA will also be putting up a 3-foot sign next to the *Tree of Knowledge* to inform passersby, students and faculty what the mission of the display is. It will be similar if not identical to the mission statement we stated at the beginning of this proposal. If there are any changes that would be made to the sign it would be changes asking inspiring questions such as:

1. How would we go about encouraging students to think for themselves?
2. How do we develop inquisitiveness?
3. How would educators go about teaching students to think for themselves?
4. What can students do to gain more interest in knowledge? Are we too busy learning to take exams rather than learning how to think?

All of the display details mentioned above will be provided by the BSSA and no additional funding on the part of the Bentley library faculty will be requested.

**Book Covers:**
For the crucial decorative aspect of the display we plan on asking students and faculty members to list a number of favorite books by filling out a simple form.

**The Book Cover Suggestion Form:**
Below is the wording of the book cover/ornaments form.

The Bentley Secular Student Alliance (BSSA) is pleased to inform you that we will be erecting a holiday display promoting education and knowledge. A Tree of Knowledge will be displayed in the library lobby during the winter holidays. The Tree of Knowledge will serve as an inclusive secular symbol, promoting knowledge and education to people from all walks of life. The display will be adorned with book covers submitted by the students and faculty of Bentley and BSSA needs your help. Please list a few of your favorite books on the lines below. Your contribution will be greatly appreciated!

I was very proud of Min’s efforts and, as you can see by the photo above, the BSSA *Tree of Knowledge* is beautiful. Please consider putting up a *Tree of Knowledge* in your area. FSGP will offer a $10 “How To” booklet in March 2008. ◆
WEB Blog Commentary

Author: Tony Phyrillas (http://tonyphyrillas.blogspot.com)
Date: November 29, 2007

Atheists get their own holiday display

If you can't beat 'em, might as well join 'em.

A Southeastern Pennsylvania atheist group that has tried unsuccessfully for years to prevent public religious displays at Christmas, has decided to try a new tactic. The atheists, who also failed to have a Ten Commandments monument removed from the Chester County Courthouse, now want to put up their own holiday display next to a Nativity scene, a Menorah and a Christmas tree in West Chester, Pennsylvania.

News that The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia wants to put up its own holiday display was first reported by The Daily Local News in West Chester. The decision by the Chester County commissioners to permit the atheists to display their "holiday tree" could serve as a seasonal model for other communities, according to reporter Jennifer Miller.

The new policy allows any group to put up a seasonal display on county property if it meets design, insurance and safety requirements. That's a far cry from what the atheists originally wanted: An outright ban on public displays during the holidays.

"It makes us feel like whole citizens to be able to participate in this way," Margaret Downey, president of the Freethought Society, told the The Daily Local News.

The group's display is entitled "The Tree of Knowledge" and it will feature a 22-foot evergreen with color copies of book covers as "ornaments." Some of the book covers will include the Bible, the Quran, Ethics Without God, Why I Am Not a Christian, and Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism.

I've heard of the first two books. Not familiar with the atheist tomes.

Chester County's new policy allows qualified applicants to set up a display between November 30, 2007 and January 15, 2008. The deadline to apply for a display has already passed, so the atheists are the only new addition to the outdoor display this year.
"If this works here, we're going to encourage other Freethought groups to do the same," Downey told The Daily Local News. The county received four applications, and all were approved. In addition to "The Tree of Knowledge," the courthouse lawn will feature a Christmas tree, a Menorah and a crèche this year.

In case you'd like to join those fun-loving atheists for a festive tree dedication, The Freethought Society will hold a "tree ceremony" at 5:00 p.m. Saturday at the courthouse, located at 2 North High Street, in West Chester.

I've written before ("The left declares war on Christmas") about atheist Grinches trying to steal Christmas from the 85 percent of Americans who are Christians, but this appears to be a reasonable compromise.

Celebrate whatever you want, whether it be Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa or the Winter Solstice. More power to the atheists for wanting to display their "Tree of Knowledge." Just don't mess with Christmas.

Pictured right are many of the Winter Display committee members who helped install the 2007 Tree of Knowledge.

In the front row behind the sign are (left to right) Barry Greenstein, Staks Rosch, Margaret Downey, Shaun McGonigal and Sally Cramer.

In the back row, left to right are Andrew Barrett, John Shea and Bill Wisdom.

Not pictured are volunteers who needed to leave early. They are Christopher Evans, Walter Kasker, Robert Kay, Sue O’Connell, Sally Flynn, Lily Scafuro and Fritzi Wisdom.
Taking the Christ out of Christmas

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE RELIGIOUS TO ENJOY THE HOLIDAYS. JUST ASK YOUR FRIENDLY NEIGHBORHOOD ATHEISTS.

by Steven Wells

Photographs by Albert Yee

Santa is pissed. He's roaring abuse at the Christmas-stealing atheist grinches who've erected a “tree of knowledge” between the nativity scene and the Old Glory statue on the Chester County Courthouse lawn.

It's a comical sight. Pissed Santas always are. But it's more than that. It's symbolic. It's about Lyra from The Golden Compass with her gypsy and polar bear chums fighting against those God tells to bomb abortion clinics and fly planes into skyscrapers.

Unless you sympathize with those folks, of course. In which case it's about the ongoing campaign to rip America from God's bosom.

You might have noticed that America's atheists have suddenly gone from being a despised, cowed and all but silent minority to a being royal pain in the ass. How exactly did that happen? Earlier this month, when Mitt Romney dismissed atheists as un-American—“Freedom requires religion just as religion requires freedom”—seven shades of sensibilist shitfire rained down on his head from across the political spectrum.

Something has changed. In the last few years American atheism has grown from a furtive, eccentric fringe phenomenon into a civil rights movement with teeth. Perhaps unsurprisingly Philadelphia—birthplace of freedom (and the First Amendment), home of that first great American Christian-baiter Thomas Paine, and a city that prides itself on free thinking, bullshit detecting and straight talking—is at the center of the gathering atheist storm.

Philadelphia's atheist story has a cast of characters that wouldn't look out of place in a Robert Rodriguez movie scripted by a resurrected Tennessee Williams. We will meet a large-breasted exotic dancer and atheist intellectual who loves watching the Christians she debates try to maintain eye contact. And a little girl who, while the adults upstairs are holding a séance, bangs on the basement ceiling with a broom and flashes the lights on and off by removing and replacing the fuses. We'll meet right-wing libertarians and left-wing liberals, woolly agnostics and hardcore “nontheists,” students, professors of philosophy, moms and dads and YouTubing, blasphemous T-shirt-wearing punk rock troublemakers. The only things they've all got in common are: a) they don't believe in God (or Santa or the Flying Spaghetti Monster) and b) they're your neighbors.

Motorists driving by as Philadelphia's atheists erect their tree in West Chester are beeping their horns and giving the thumbs up. One woman shouts: “Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!” But pissed Santa is having none of it.

“You people are being hypocritical!” he snarls through his gray beard, the white bobble on his red hat bobbing up and down in anger.
We're at the Chester County Courthouse, scene of a recent ding-dong battle between the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia and Pennsylvania Christians over the Ten Commandments posted on the outside wall right alongside the front door. The plaque went up in 1920, back when Chester County boasted hundreds of Ku Klux Klan members, and packed revival meetings met under banners proclaiming: “Christ for West Chester: West Chester for Christ.”

Though it was covered up for 14 months after a 2002 ruling that it violated the separation of church and state, the plaque is back in full view. But now it has the tree of knowledge—festooned with gold-sprayed pinecones and laminated color copies of book covers—for company. Some of the authors and titles are predictable: Richard Dawkins, Thomas Paine, Mark Twain, Christopher Hitchens. Others not so much, like the Bible and the Koran—both essential reading for anyone who wants to see how daft religion is, says Freethought Society president Margaret Downey.

If all goes according to plan, next year’s tree will go up in the free-speech zone on Philadelphia’s Market Street, next to the nativity scene, where it would’ve been this year if not for the fact it would’ve been dwarfed by a giant menorah, says Downey. Next year she'll leave the Freethought Society to head up a national organization, the Atheist Alliance International.

Downey's the go-to atheist when Fox News, sick of seeing intellectually challenged God-botherers like Sean Hannity and Bill O'Reilly get chewed to shreds by the combative cigarette- and whiskey-breathed Brit Christopher Hitchens (author of 2007's atheist bestseller *God Is Not Great*), decide they need a well-spoken American lady to represent the forces of godless evil instead.

After the erection of the West Chester tree, Fox paired Downey with an eager young priest. Glammed up to the nines, the politely smiling Downey ran rings round the boy.

“I regularly lecture students at Penn,” she says. “One student told me, ‘When we heard you were an atheist, I thought you were going to look like a gypsy or something—and then in walks Mary Tyler Moore.’”

Don't be fooled. Downey is hardcore. The battle-scarred veteran of a thousand fights against intolerance, she flat out told her own kids that the story most central to the American Christmas experience is almost certainly bunkum. Which was cool … until her kid went to school and told other kids.

“The other parents went crazy—‘My kids are asking me if it's true that Santa isn't real. Will you shut your child up?’

“Christians don't own Christmas,” says Downey. “If they did, you'd have Jesus grottos in department stores. You'd have kids sitting in the Virgin Mary's lap.”

Back in West Chester, such subtleties are lost on Santa. “You're being hypocritical!” he shouts. “That's a Christmas tree. I'm a Christian. Jesus is the reason for the season!”

Santa storms off angrily before the startled atheists can point out that dressing as an old pagan fertility god (who was co-opted by the churches and was then co-opted again by the retail industry), and then heckling others for “stealing” Christmas, verges on the surreal.

Downey, 57, was brought up by her Puerto Rican mom in a dirt-poor quarter of Baton Rouge, La., and later Los Angeles. Her Irish dad left home when she was 3. She got angry about injustice and intolerance early on—“I could never figure out why my mother was belittled for her accent and why my half-sister Martha, a person of color, had to sit at the back of the bus.” And she stayed angry.
Downey developed a contempt for superstition at an early age. She watched her relatives endlessly pray for divine intervention while she worked her 9-year-old ass off sewing “so the kids at school wouldn't recognize the hand-me-down Goodwill clothes I wore,” and so her mom wouldn't have to again beg neighbors for handouts.

The precocious young Downey questioned everything. When given a talking doll, she immediately broke it open to find out how it worked. And yes, she's the little girl providing the upstairs séance with the banging and the flashing lights.

She adopted Uncle Floyd, a Japanese-American friend, as a father figure, and bombarded him with questions. He told her to look the answers up, and gave her a set of encyclopedias, which proved great for Downey's education but bad news for her immortal soul.

“I came across the religious stuff, and I just thought, ‘This is silly!' I told Floyd, and he said, ‘Margaret, I think you must be an atheist, just like I am.' I said, ‘Atheist, what's that? He told me to look it up.”

Uncle Floyd died when Downey was 15. Years later, as Downey herself lay nearly choking to death in a hospital recovery room, she says she saw Uncle Floyd again.

“It was the full near-death experience,” she says. “The white light, the tunnel—and there at the end of the tunnel was Uncle Floyd, smiling and holding a book.”

So did Downey take this as definitive proof of an afterlife, repent her ungodly, blasphemous and sinful ways, and accept Jesus Christ as her personal savior?

No. She went and found out all she could about near-death experiences. From books.

“Turns out it's pretty common,” she says over breakfast at the Center City Ritz-Carlton, “probably caused by a chemical released by the brain.”

Over the years Downey has thrown herself into various causes—antismoking, antiracism, feminism. And then in 1990 the Boy Scouts of Pennsylvania made a big mistake. They rejected Downey's son Matt—a scout in good standing for seven years in New Jersey—for being an atheist.

The Scouts didn't know it at the time, but they'd just pissed off the atheist equivalent of a mama grizzly bear. The ongoing battle to get the Scouts to accept nonbelievers (and gays) turned Downey into a world-renowned fighter for atheist rights.

The Boy Scouts in Philadelphia have lost their lease after failing to amend their nondiscrimination policy. They refused to pay up to $200,000 a year “fair market value” rent for the city property for which they formerly paid $1 a year.

**Back in West Chester**, the erection of the tree of knowledge has turned this patch of grass into a sort of symbolist theme park. Old Testament morality jostles patriotism, piety and the Teutonic/Victorian reinvention of the pagan Yule symbol that is the “traditional” Christmas tree.

There's one around the corner. Unlike the tree of knowledge, it's artificial, festooned in all manner of glitter and tinsel and other seasonal tat. And—again unlike the tree of knowledge—it makes no mention of Jesus.
Later in the evening—as the temperature drops savagely—there's a ceremony. A middle-class couple lead their pretty, expensively dressed and well-behaved daughter to the nativity scene and talk in loud voices about its significance, ignoring the speech-making atheists not 2 yards away.

Rudolph Bär, an immigrant from Amsterdam, turns up to show his support. Rudolph's too late for Santa, which is a pity. But he's just in time for self-described “redneck American patriot” and grandmother-of-11 Audrey Van Loan from nearby Malvern. She stands across the busy street, holding up a Bible.

The tree of knowledge is “a travesty and a sin” and “one more step down the slippery slope,” says Van Loan, who recently stopped attending the Good Samaritan Episcopal church in Malvern “because it got too liberal.”

Van Loan sees America's atheists, war protesters and liberals as symptoms of a decadent “multicultural and diverse” society that's moving away from “Judeo-Christian values.”

“You know that story of the frog that's boiled slowly so it won't hop out of the pan? Well the majority of Judeo-Christians in America are asleep. They're like that frog. Being boiled alive slowly.”

“God will take his hand off America,” she warns. “We will suffer violence and sickness and death.”

Over the road Margaret Downey looks at Van Loan's Bible and thinks about shouting: “Have you actually read that?” But she bites her tongue.

In the coming weeks the tree of knowledge will be repeatedly vandalized. One creative soul will remove all the restraining ropes on one side, presumably so the tree will topple into the nativity scene in the first high wind.

That America is undergoing an atheist … “revival” is misleading. And it's not quite an “explosion” yet. “Awakening” sounds about right. Or is that too religious?

Books like Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* and Christopher Hitchens' *God Is Not Great* are bestsellers. The religion-bashing kids' flick *The Golden Compass* is showing in mainstream theaters. Atheist meetings, lectures and book readings are packed. Atheist organizations are popping up like mushrooms after the rain.

And then there are the non-joiners, like 33-year-old Mathilda, a Philadelphian who won't give her real name. She sees no reason to leave Christmas to the Christians.

“To me Christmas means eggnog lattes and gingerbread cake at Starbucks and hanging out with my Jewish family at the movies,” she says. “I also just got an awesome winter wonderland snow globe at Target. Sure, it plays that sucky ‘Santa's coming to town' song, but it's cool.”

Mathilda says she's “a reasonable and tolerant person.”

“My problem is that sentiment isn't returned—like the boycott of *The Golden Compass*. That pisses me off. Pledging allegiance to one nation ‘under God' pisses me off. That my right to choose an abortion is constantly being questioned and threatened pisses me off. That when I travel outside of the country, everyone I meet assumes I'm a fucking moron God-fearing, self-righteous American pig pisses me off. Nancy Grace, Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh and Arlen Specter piss me off. Christian bumper stickers piss me off. I could go on.”

There have probably always been thousands of Mathildas in Philadelphia, and for generations most of them have suffered in silence. All that's really changed, thanks to the rise of the new atheism, is that now they can speak out without fear of losing their job or being shouted down. Or murdered.
All those things still happen, though. Margaret Downey has files full of discrimination stories. Sometimes it's an executive sidelined for having a nonreligious relative. And sometimes it's more serious. Like the atheist soldiers in Iraq who've received death threats and were told they were a disgrace to America by a senior officer. Like in June 2004 when Christian Eagle Scout Arthur Shelton killed his roommate Larry Hooper because he didn't believe in God.

In Margaret Downey's Chester County home two Freethought Society veterans with awesomely biblical names—Bill Wisdom and Mike Judge—help make decorations for the tree of knowledge.

The ground is shaking, says the 55-year-old Judge: “A few years ago the Atheists Alliance International conference in Tampa was attended by 250 people. This year in Washington we got 500—with 600 on the waiting list.”

Seventy-three-year-old retired Temple philosophy professor Bill Wisdom—a former born-again Christian who's been an atheist for 50 years—says he's never seen anything like it.

“We've had one author with the public's ear before. Two or three even. But four or five like now? Is it a blip? No. I think we've reached critical mass.”

In Philadelphia alone there's the Freethought Society, the Humanist Association of Greater Philadelphia, the Ethical Society, the Philadelphia Association for Critical Thinking, the 100-member First Church of Atheism and a bunch of internationally known troublemakers who call themselves the Rational Response Squad (RRS).

Just don't assume they all get along. Hang out with atheists long enough, and you'll hear agnostics referred to as “idiot atheists” and “chickenshit fence-sitters.”

Last year when Richard Dawkins spoke to an enormous spillover crowd at the Free Library, T-shirts with right-wing libertarian slogans were abundant. At other Philly area atheist events, most of the cars in the parking lots seem to sport Kerry/Edwards stickers.

It was Dawkins who wrote that organizing atheists is “like herding cats.” (“I wish people would stop saying that,” tuts Downey, atheist cat-wrangler extraordinaire.)

The atheists of the Philadelphia Atheists Meetup Group, meeting in the Cosí on 12th and Walnut in late November, might be mistaken at first glance for anarchists or some other species of modern urban troublemaker. They have a look of healthily dissatisfied, computer-savvy malevolence about them. They look like they probably don't spend too long coordinating their wardrobes.

One woman stands out. She has short red hair, elfin features, a tight low-cut top and large breasts. This is Kelly O'Connor. She works as a dancer when she's not bashing out passionate and witty articles about the pope for the hugely popular website of Philadelphia's notorious Rational Response Squad.

Last December the RRS issued its Blasphemy Challenge. Claiming that the one absolutely unforgivable sin in Christian theology is to deny the Holy Ghost, they challenged the world's atheists to do just that by posting their denials on YouTube.

Thousands did, provoking a backlash from angry and disgusted Christians—and a perfect storm of publicity.

“We got a lot of death threats,” says Brian Sapient, O'Connor's intense, energetic companion. “We called in the FBI.”

Sapient, impatient with listeners who can't keep up, hammers out statistics, statements and questions. He describes himself as “a self-educated Socratic philosopher” and “OCD/ADHD.” You'd never mistake him for the always smiling, always polite Margaret Downey.
The RRS is something new. Some of the urgent, angry youthful energy that in the '60s and '70s might have found expression in the antiwar movement, civil rights or punk seems to be finding voice in the spikier end of the new atheism, alarming grownups and moderates on both sides of the religious divide.

But Downey doesn't have a bad word to say about the RRS, nor they about her. Both are too aware just how powerful and capable of real harm their mutual enemy still is to waste time squabbling over turf or tactics.

Throughout American history atheists have been discriminated against and persecuted. It's been that way since the beginning. The hardcore of the founding fathers were deists. They believed in a creator God, but thought the Bible and other holy texts were childish nonsense.

George Washington—first president of a republic swarming with followers of every bickering, bigoted, nit-picking sect the Christian mind could come up with—wisely kept his antireligious opinions quiet, and ended up being worshipped as something of a god himself.

Philadelphia's Thomas Paine—the revolution's great propagandist—wrote Common Sense, a blistering attack on the absurdity of regarding the Bible as anything other than bad history on great drugs. For this sin of intellectual honesty he was physically and verbally assaulted, libeled, slandered and, but for the efforts of America's atheists and freethinkers, would've been written out of American history entirely. To this day, thanks to Christian opposition, there's no statue of Paine in Philadelphia.

Last March Congressman Pete Stark from California came out as an “nontheist,” stating he had no “God belief.” He's the first open atheist member of Congress. The Secular Coalition for America estimates there are at least 50 other congress people still in the closet.

That could change.

“At the moment the Republicans and the Democrats are mired in the fight for the religious vote and ignoring the secular vote,” says Barry Greenstein, a 22-year-old bioanthropology major and the interim vice president of the 35-member Temple University Secular Society.

“And there are a lot of us, a lot more than people think. A lot more. Most of us are still keeping quiet about it.”

And that could change too.

“We've got a lot to offer, and we've been banging on the door for too long,” says Margaret Downey. “All we're asking for is a place at the table.”

Steven Wells (swells@philadelphiaweekly.com) is PW's arts and entertainment editor.
Godless group displays its point
Non-theists assert their tree provides area's non-believers a voice for holidays

Wednesday, December 10, 2008

WEST CHESTER — The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia on Tuesday once again placed a Tree of Knowledge in front of the Historic Chester County Courthouse.

A monument to non-theism, the tree is situated among displays that religious groups traditionally set up on the courthouse lawn during the holiday season.

According to Freethought Society founder Margaret Downey, the tree is intended to show that people who do not believe in a deity still deserve a voice during the holidays.

"The primary goal of the tree is to help non-theists become an integral part of the community during the winter season," she said. "The tree is a symbol of our mission and purpose. It represents the non-theist community in Chester County."

According to Downey, "non-theist" is an umbrella term that encompasses atheists, agnostics, humanists, secularists, rationalists and skeptics.

Freethought Society members decorated the tree with covers of books the group considers classics of the free-thought tradition. Richard Dawkins, a British evolutionary biologist who writes about science and philosophy, is heavily represented on the tree. Also represented are philosopher Paul Kurtz, biologist Edward O. Wilson and critic Sam Harris. This is the second year the Freethought Society has put up the tree. Last year, it proved very controversial, attracting public outrage and vandalism.

The ornaments on the tree were damaged, and the spotlights that shone on it were routinely tampered with. Ultimately, the electrical wires leading to the lights were cut.

West Chester Police Chief Scott Bohn said his officers would keep an eye out to make sure no one damages the display. "We'll be as vigilant as we possibly can be — as we are with all property in and around the downtown," Bohn said.

The Freethought Society also plans to be vigilant. Downey said Freethought Society members plan to check on the tree often. And, she said, a security camera will be placed in the vicinity. She did not specify where. The tree was donated by the owner of a local plant nursery. The owner did not return calls asking to confirm he'd made the donation. Downey said she is happy that someone donated the tree this year, since things did not go well with J and J Lawn and Landscaping, the West Chester-based business from which the Freethought Society rented last year's tree.

"They were supposed to come and remove the tree at a certain date, but they took it upon themselves to come remove it early," Downey said. "That's just one example of the kind of discrimination we face."

John Petruno, owner of J and J Landscaping, said he doesn't believe his company took the tree down early. But he said he was horrified when he found out he'd done business with an atheist group.

"When I heard they were putting up a tree of knowledge, I thought they were a library company," Petruno said. "I was appalled, to say the least, when I found out who they represented."

Petruno, a devout Catholic, said he donated the money he received from the Freethought Society to the Catholic Church.

None of the county commissioners returned calls requesting comment about the tree. It is the county's policy to allow groups to keep holiday displays on the courthouse lawn between Nov. 29 and Jan. 15.

To contact staff writer Dan Kristie, send an e-mail to: dkrystie@dailylocal.com
The first mention that the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia (FSGP) would have a winter display included in a Free Speech Zone was in the July/August 2005 issue of *The Greater Philadelphia Story*. On the page devoted to announcing upcoming meeting speakers and topics a notification was printed that asked readers to present display ideas at the December 6, 2005 meeting.

At that time, it was thought that the FSGP display would go up in Philadelphia at the Free Speech Zone located at 2nd Street between Chestnut and Walnut Streets. The main reason display ideas were being solicited was that FSGP wanted to exercise its First Amendment rights to freedom of expression. More importantly, the yearly displays of a giant crèche and a gargantuan menorah at the Free Speech Zone in Philadelphia were troublesome to members of FSGP. Passersby receive a visual message that America is a Judeo-Christian nation when only two displays, both religious, dominate the area. FSGP’s intent was to find a display design that would not only convey the mission and purpose of the organization, but would also dispel the myth that minorities are to remain silent and invisible.

When the solicitation of ideas was promoted it was asked that the design express that winter is a beautiful time of year that can be acknowledged secularly with expressions of love, family gatherings and the exchanging of gifts. With that in mind, the search for the perfect winter display design began.

Five original design ideas were considered for use by the FSGP board of directors. Three ideas that had been used by other atheist groups were also discussed and considered by the board. After carefully reviewing each submission the board voted to adopt my design idea, The *Tree of Knowledge*. That decision took place at the December 5, 2006 board of directors meeting.

I was thrilled to have board support and I began to move forward with the project, intending to erect the tree in Philadelphia. Shortly after that December 5th meeting, however, FSGP members living in Chester County alerted the board of a problem brewing at the Chester County Courthouse. A crèche and a menorah appeared on the front lawn of the Courthouse. Just like the Free Speech Zone in Philadelphia, the displays conveyed the incorrect notion that America is a Judeo-Christian nation.

Further investigation revealed that the Courthouse lawn was not a designated “Free Speech Zone.” Furthermore, the Chester County Commissioners had no application or permit process in effect. FSGP’s vice president Sally Flynn and I attended several Commissioner meetings to voice our concern. We stressed that the Commissioners should immediately adopt a clear winter display policy or have no displays allowed at all. It took the Commissioners nearly a year to announce that permits and approvals would be needed in order to set up a display at the Courthouse.

As soon as the announcement was made, I submitted a detailed application highlighting FSGP’s plan for a *Tree of Knowledge*. The display application included drawings, sample decorations, a Hold Harmless form, and proof of insurance (all required as per the Commissioners directions).

It was a happy day when I learned that the display plan was unanimously approved. I immediately ordered the sign and sent an urgent message that volunteers would be needed. With the help of Sally Cramer, the FSGP Winter Display Committee was formed.

The first Winter Display Committee meeting was held at a restaurant in West Chester on November 20, 2007. One dozen volunteers brainstormed about the work that needed to be done that night. It was immediately obvious that The *Tree of Knowledge* project would require many hours of work as well as a lot of money.

Fortunately, I had a plan in place that ensured sponsors. Since we would need hundreds of color copies of books to make the decorations, I contacted individuals, authors, publishers and organizations asking them to participate.
I asked that they send FSGP two color copies of the front covers of books they wanted to see on the tree. Many wonderful people and organizations participated. The Winter Display Committee could not have completed this project without the help of the following organizations:

**American Atheists**
**American Humanist Association**
**The Freedom From Religion Foundation**
**The James Randi Foundation**
**Prometheus Books**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Charlotte Carney</th>
<th>Mike Judge</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sally Cramer</td>
<td>Bob Kay</td>
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<tr>
<td>Christopher Evans</td>
<td>Sue O’Connell</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sally Flynn</td>
<td>Niko Theris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan George</td>
<td>Bill Wisdom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FSGP also thanks the following individuals who made color copies and mailed them to me:

FSGP thanks the following authors for participating in the project by sending color copies of their book covers:

- Dan Barker
- Matthew Chapman
- Richard Dawkins
- Annie Laurie Gaylor
- Nica Lalli
- James Morrow
- Stephen Uhl

While Flynn hunted for a suitable evergreen tree to use (it needed to be at least 15 feet tall), four members of the Winter Display Committee made the ornaments. This process required trimming, gluing and laminating the book covers. Committee members also cut and attached floral wire to book covers. It took many hours of hard work to make the decorations but the results were fantastic.

Flynn found an affordable evergreen at a local garden center. The owner asked that we not disclose their name and requested that none of the photos taken during the installation of the tree be published. It was an insulting request, of course, but an understandable one. The display was sure to cause quite a controversy in Chester County, so the fear of the garden center owner was justifiable knowing the sentiments of the community.

Flynn and I purchased spot lights and other needed items using discount coupons. Even so, the cost of those items put us over budget. We knew then that if another display would go up in 2008, some major fundraising would need to take place over the next year.

The *Tree of Knowledge* was placed at the Chester County Courthouse on Saturday, December 10, 2007. It was a cold yet sunny day when committee members gathered at 10:00 AM on Market and High Streets.

The Commissioners had designated a location for the tree which would accommodate its size. The tree we purchased measured 10 feet at its widest and 22 feet high. I met with the Courthouse maintenance department and a brick was placed to mark the area where the FSGP tree would be placed.

Even though we knew that a crèche was installed on Thursday, November 29, 2007, we were surprised to find that the crèche was located very close to the spot where the tree was to be installed. We decided that there was no other option than to place the tree in the spot the Commissioners had designated. The tree is located about 5 feet away from the crèche.

The job of placing the pre-wired ornaments on the tree took much longer than expected. The committee worked for almost seven hours, stopping only for about 45 minutes to eat a late lunch. Eating at a restaurant located across the street from the Courthouse lawn allowed us to view the tree from a different angle. We were all so proud of the way it looked and we saw many people stop and stare.

While we were decorating the tree, several people drove by and hollered words of encouragement. One woman in a white sedan actually stopped traffic to honk and shouted “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

The only negative remark came from a man wearing a Santa hat. As he slowly walked by the tree he said, “You jerks. Don’t you know that Jesus is the reason! You stupid atheists. Why are you using a Christmas tree? You bunch of hypocrites!”

The man passed without incident, but we all laughed at the irony of his words. There he was wearing a Santa hat (you can’t deny that the Santa myth is more popular than the Jesus myth) calling us “hypocrites.” I would have loved to have been able to engage the man in conversation. In Jeremiah 10:2-4 (King James Version/Old Testament), the verses refer to the “heathens” who cut down trees, fasten them down to decorate them with silver and gold. The Webster’s definition of “heathen” is “an unconverted member of a people or nation that does not acknowledge the God of the Bible.” In light of the Bible verse and the definition of “heathen,” FSGP’s use of the evergreen tree makes perfect sense!

Of course, the Bible condemns those who use decorated trees because Christians sought to end any pagan rituals. Yet even now most Christians have no idea that wreaths, trees, lights and even red berries harkened back to Pagan rituals.

The *Tree of Knowledge* lighting ceremony took place at 5:00 PM that night. It was difficult to hold back my tears of joy as I saw the project come to fruition. The tree was beautiful in the daylight, but at night it was spectacular! The laminated ornaments sparkled in the spotlights and the colorful array of book covers beckoned people to take a closer look.

I tried to deliver a little speech about the significance of the tree, but sentiments choked my words. The lighting of the tree was a proud moment for everyone attending. A small crowd had gathered and some of the participants spoke with passion about how they loved the tree.

The placement of the tree brought about interest from the media. I appeared on Fox News four times (both locally and nationally). I also participated in three radio shows and was interviewed by six newspapers. Most of the interviews and newspaper articles can be found at: MargaretDowney.com.
1. Pictured above are Margaret Downey and Mike Judge. Downey points out that Judge likes to wear his philosophy on his chest.

2. Above right are Steven Wells and Margaret Downey. Wells attended the ornaments-making meeting to interview people for an article he wrote for Philadelphia Weekly. The article can be found in the December 19-25 issue.

3. Bill Wisdom and Mike Judge are pictured making ornaments for the Tree of Knowledge. Judge is trimming the color copies of book covers. Wisdom is laminating the pre-glued covers into a weather-proof pouch.

4. Pictured below is a close-up view of the laminated book covers. The decorations were strategically placed on the tree. Next to the Bible we placed Bertrand Russell’s Why I Am Not a Christian. On one side of the Koran, we placed Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s book Infidel. On the other side of the Koran we placed Ibn Warraq’s book Why I Am not a Muslim. Next to the Torah we placed Sherwin Wine’s book Judaism Without God.

The ornaments for the tree were carefully designed to allow reusing them in the coming years. The lamination machine was purchased by the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia and will be used for many more future projects. The estimated cost of getting the book covers professionally laminated equaled the investment cost of purchasing the machine.

The laminator can be borrowed for special projects and will be available at the monthly meetings for use. Bring items that you want to laminate, but please call to make sure that the meeting organizers know that the laminator is needed. To reserve use, please call (610) 430-7719 or (610) 793-2737.
The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia’s (FSGP) Tree of Knowledge represents more than the mission and purpose of the organization. Yes, FSGP promotes knowledge, reading and education, but the erection of the Tree of Knowledge in a Free Speech Zone is also intended to proclaim a “War on Intolerance.”

The Tree of Knowledge was placed at the designated “Free Speech Zone” located on the Chester County Courthouse lawn at High and Market Streets on December 10, 2007. Soon after that date, people representing the Christian point of view began writing letters to the editor and complained to the Chester County Commissioners. The main complaint was that the mere presence of an atheist group at the Free Speech Zone was an insult to THEIR holiday. I heard this repeated over and over again during television and radio interviews.

Freedom of expression and speech is a guaranteed Constitutional right guaranteed (except in an obviously dangerous situation such as yelling “fire” in a crowded theater). The Tree of Knowledge is so beautiful that a casual observer would not consider it to be inflammatory nor should it be considered capable of inciting a riot.

When I debated the issue with Father Jonathan Morris (who is a Catholic priest) on Fox News, he claimed that he would never deny FSGP its freedom of expression or freedom of speech, but the winter season is exclusively for Christians. Morris completely ignored Hanukah and Kwanza. I countered that even Christians do not own Christmas. I based my contention on the fact that most people now associate the holiday with Santa Claus—not Jesus.

Television time restraints did not allow me to expand my train of thought. It would have certainly ruffled some feathers had I been able to say that Christians will only be able to reappear on the scene (wreaths, trees, berries, Yule Log, etc.). Today, Christians must share Christmas with Santa Claus, retailers, gullible children and shoppers.

When we no longer see secular symbols being used at Christmas and when the image of Jesus replaces the image of Santa Claus in store advertisements then and only then will Christians “own” Christmas. To read more about the true history of Christmas, please read The Trouble With Christmas by Tom Flynn.

With over 350,000 places of worship in this country, why are the religious so compelled to place a crèche on public property? If over 80% of the American public believe in God and Jesus, then we should see 80% of homes decorated with crèches at this time of year.

A winter display that exemplifies the nontheist community is long overdue and FSGP members who live in Chester County were very proud and thrilled to not be a silent minority anymore. The presence of a Tree of Knowledge at the Chester County Courthouse gives freethinkers a reason to joyously celebrate the winter season. FSGP participated to ensure that the freethought community will no longer be considered a silent minority. When you say nothing, do nothing, you will be treated like nothing.

The name “Tree of Knowledge” was purposely used to refer to the mythical Bible story. The reason we made that reference was to dispel the myth that the accumulation of knowledge is sinful. Quite the contrary! The accumulation of knowledge is what sets humans apart from the rest of the animals on earth. Atheists believe in the importance of accumulating knowledge. That is why we put up a lovely tree dedicated to the avocation of reading.

Humankind has survived for this long because we are social animals. Social interaction is important and atheists are no different than our religious brothers and sisters. Atheists socialize and commune for the purpose of celebrating what it is to be “human.” The season is the reason to celebrate family, friends, and the power of learning. Atheists love this time of year, too, and we have been remiss in participating in winter displays. The Tree of Knowledge exemplifies what atheists hold dear—knowledge, books, the dissemination of information and equal participation in the community. FSGP took the opportunity to bring a message of free thought, reason, and the appreciation of science to the community. The Tree of Knowledge is our gift to our fellow citizens of Chester County.

FSGP is encouraging the reading of freethought literature in order to bring about better communication in homes, in neighborhoods, and within the community—branching out, so to speak. FSGP participated in the holiday display Free Speech Zone to celebrate the winter season and to ensure a year-round cooperative relationship between the theist and nontheist communities. Simply because atheists want to participate in the free speech zone winter displays, the religious want to deem us unfit to participate by claiming that we are participating as a “War on Christmas.” The truth is that we have declared a “War on Intolerance!”
WEST CHESTER — Now in its second year as part of the holiday display in front of the Chester County Courthouse, the Tree of Knowledge, a monument to non-theism put up by the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia, continues to be a lightning rod for controversy.

Two of the tree's most outspoken opponents — the same two people responsible for the créche and the menorah that appear as part of the holiday display — say it is a sign of arrogance and ignorance rather than free thought. Former Chester County Commissioner Colin Hanna, who now runs the conservative activist group Let Freedom Ring, is responsible for the créche. He said that, while he has no problem with people exercising their constitutional right to express doubt about or outright disbelief in the existence of God, he feels the Tree of Knowledge is in poor taste.

"Look at some of the messages on that tree," he said. "They talk about forbidden fruit, they talk about the myth of the Gospel. It is filled with things that are specifically critical, and there's no need for that."

Hanna was referring to the laminated book covers that hang on the tree. According to Freethought Society Founder Margaret Downey, the represented books are classics in the free thought tradition. Titles by Richard Dawkins, a British evolutionary biologist and firm disbeliever, are featured prominently in this year's display.

Hanna said he also thought the tree's presentation — it is mounted on a large base and towers above the other displays — is a sign of the Freethought Society's arrogance. Judy Davidson, the business owner and Republican activist who put up the menorah, agrees. "If you truly have a cause, don't impinge on anyone else's cause," Davidson said. "The menorah in no way took away from Christmas. We didn't put it behind the baby Jesus' head."

The holiday displays began in 2006, when Davidson petitioned the county commissioners to allow her to place a menorah on the courthouse lawn. Her argument, which the commissioners did not initially buy, was that the evergreen tree the county strings with lights each December was a symbol of Christmas. Denying her right to place a menorah alongside it, she said, would infringe on her constitutional right to freedom of religious expression.

A year later, Hanna, on behalf of the Pennsylvania Pastors Network, a subsidiary of Let Freedom Ring, obtained permission to place a créche on the courthouse lawn. The county's decorated evergreen tree, he said, was not a specifically religious symbol, but the menorah was. If a menorah was allowed, he said, a créche should be too.

That same year, the Freethought Society, which had fought to have the a plaque displaying the Ten Commandments removed from the courthouse wall during Hanna's tenure as county commissioner, obtained permission to put up the Tree of Knowledge. It was frequently vandalized.
Davidson acknowledged that her advocacy for religious displays had opened the door to an anti-religious display. But she said that, even if the Tree of Knowledge has the unintended consequence of making people more firm in their religious beliefs, she still doesn't like it. "Do atheists really have holidays?" Davidson said. "It's interesting they always pick this time of year to infringe on us."

She said that, if the Freethought Society really believes in free thought, perhaps it should come up with a better time to get its message out. "Think freely in March, when you're not interfering with anyone else," she said. "And why a tree? Why not a symbol that's not linked to any religion? You're supposed to espouse free thought. Can't you think of anything better?"

Hanna said that another argument against the Freethought Society's display is its supposed connection to pagan Winter Solstice traditions. "The ostensible argument for the so-called tree of knowledge is that it's related to the pagan holiday of the Winter Solstice," he said. "Now that's really quite ironic when you think about it, because pagan history is … really, frankly, about something closer to ignorance than knowledge."

Downey, who oversaw erection of the tree of knowledge this year, said there was "absolutely no connection" between her display and paganism, although she acknowledged that in Jeremiah 10:2-4, it says that people who cut down trees and decorate them are heathens. "So we don't shy away from calling ourselves such," she said.

But the real purpose of the tree, she said, is to make sure the county's non-theists — a broad term that covers atheists, agnostics, and skeptics — are not marginalized during the Christmas season. "We definitely did not want the courthouse to have an abundance of religious symbols," she said. "We are attempting to balance the displays so that they represent the community at large. Atheists are a valuable part of the community."

She added that, if Hanna is a true conservative, he should be happy to see such a robust expression of the Constitutional right to free speech. "All these negative comments from Colin Hanna suggest he should perhaps seek diversity sensitivity training to help him get over this fear he has of the non-theist community," she said.

She acknowledged that there is lingering animosity between the Freethought Society and Hanna. The Freethought Society won a case against Hanna and the other commissioners in 2002 to have the Ten Commandments plaque removed from the courthouse wall. A year later, the Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit overturned this decision and allowed the plaque to remain.

Hanna, too, acknowledged this animosity. He pointed out that the Tree of Knowledge appears just yards from the Ten Commandments. "There's an obvious irony in that," he said.

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Atheists join religions in holiday display

The group's tree at the county courthouse joins a Christian crèche, a Jewish menorah, and the Chamber of Commerce tree.

By Walter F. Naedele Inquirer Staff Writer

The head of Atheists Alliance International plans to put up a tree this weekend on the lawn at the Chester County Courthouse to stand beside three traditional holiday displays there.

The 20-foot tree will be hung with copies of covers of books, including "Why I Am Not A Christian," "Why I Am Not a Muslim" and "Judaism Beyond God."

This addition to last year's three holiday displays is sponsored by the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia which, its president Margaret Downey said, is "welcoming to agnostics, atheists, humanists, skeptics, rationalists of all kinds."

As there was last year, there is also a Chamber of Commerce tree - 32 feet high - meant to attract shoppers, as well as a Christian crèche and a Jewish menorah.

When told of the Freethought display, Colin Hanna, a former county commissioner whose organization - Pennsylvania Pastors Network - is sponsoring the crèche, said, "Their intention is to use the courthouse to make a political statement?"

"That seems to me a pretty fundamental perversion of the purpose of holiday displays . . ."

Downey said her display, which she is calling "A Tree of Knowledge," is decorated with covers of works such as the Bible. "The reason we advocate reading the Bible," she said in an interview, "is because so many people become atheists upon completing the entire reading of it."

Next to the Bible, she said, is Bertrand Russell's "Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects."

Next to a copy of the Koran on the tree, she said, "we are placing 'Why I Am Not a Muslim,' by Ibn Warraq." And then there is "Judaism Beyond God" by Sherwin T. Wine.

The Freethought Society has been to the courthouse before. In 2001, it sued to have a Ten Commandments plaque removed from a courthouse wall.

In 2003, a Federal appeals court in Philadelphia refused to allow the then 83-year-old plaque to be removed. It ruled that the county commissioners' concern, in refusing to remove the plaque, was its age and historical status, not its religious content.

Downey, who lives in West Chester, is president of Atheists Alliance International, which she said represents 55 groups totaling 5,200 members.
A spokeswoman for the Chester County Commissioners office said the two trees, the crèche and the menorah were the only displays for which applications had been submitted by a Nov. 15 deadline.

In a statement, Carol Aichele, chairman of the county commissioners, said, "The commissioners set the policy for winter holiday displays, giving all community groups an opportunity to erect a winter holiday display - as long as it doesn't cause anyone viewing the display to believe that the county endorses one particular religion.

"The request from the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia is for a 'Tree of Knowledge' - a 20-foot tree that will display book covers. This organization applied for permission in the same way that other organizations did, and met all the design, safety and insurance requirements. It will be displayed along with the Christmas Tree, the Crèche and the Menorah." Katie Walker, president of the Greater West Chester Chamber of Commerce, said in an interview, "This will be the 28th year in a row," for a tree sponsored by her agency. "We've always seen the [Chamber] tree as a commercial attraction."

Last year for the first time, the county commissioners agreed to add a menorah and a crèche. Hanna, a Republican who is president of the Pennsylvania Pastors Network, said its crèche will be the same as last year. The Network represents 1,000 congregations, which he described as "Biblically faithful.".

The menorah is sponsored by Chabad of Chester County, whose synagogue is in Devon. "We are an outreach organization, more than a congregation," Rabbi Yossi Kaplan said in an interview.

The first candle is lit on the first night of Hanukkah, which this year is Tuesday, he said, "and we light the last candle on December 11."

"I would hope that the menorah we put up is a symbol of religious freedom," Rabbi Kaplan said, "not just for the Jewish community but the community at large."

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Decorated holiday tree is vandalized four times
By Walter F. Naedele Inquirer Staff Writer

The vandals first struck on Dec. 2 or 3, after the ornamented tree had been raised on Dec. 1 at the Chester County Courthouse lawn. By December 30, there had been four attacks against the Tree of Knowledge, a 22-foot evergreen sponsored by the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia. Margaret Downey, immediate past president of the society, has defined the organization as "welcoming to agnostics, atheists, humanists, skeptics, rationalists of all kinds."

The attacks are ironic because the tree was meant to "declare a war on intolerance," said Downey, asserting that she had reported each incident to both the West Chester Police Department and the Chester County Office of the Sheriff, which provides security at the courthouse. West Chester Police Chief Scott Bohn said Thursday that there had been no arrests and no suspects.

The tree shares the lawn with a crèche sponsored by the Pennsylvania Pastors Network, a menorah sponsored by Chabad of Chester County and a tree sponsored by the West Chester Chamber of Commerce.

Downey completed her term as head of the 400-member organization on New Year's Day. She is also president of Atheists Alliance International, which she said represents 55 groups totaling 5,200 members.

The tree is decorated with copies of books such as Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects, by Bertrand Russell, Judaism Beyond God, by Sherwin T. Wine, and Why I Am Not a Muslim, by Ibn Warraq.

Becky Brain, a spokeswoman for the county commissioners, said they had received "less than five" complaints about the tree. The displays run from November 29 to Jan. 15, Brain said.

The vandalism, Downey said, ranged from tearing down ornaments to tearing out parts of the lighting system. In the first incident, she said, "one of the spotlights was broken" and "the other five lights had been turned away from our tree to focus on the crèche."

Two ornaments were torn down, she said - book covers for Charles Darwin's The Origin of Species and Richard Dawkins' The Ancestor's Tale: A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Evolution.

In the second incident, on Dec. 7 or 8, Downey said, all six spotlights had been unplugged and cables supporting the tree had been damaged.

In the third, on December 20 or 21, she said, lights were unplugged and one book cover - for Dawkins' The God Delusion - had been ripped from the tree. In the most recent incident, on December 29 or 30, she said, "someone had taken a knife or bolt cutters and actually severed the lighting cords to where all the lights had to be replaced."

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Godless Holiday Tree' makes a return to Chester

By David O'Reilly INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

From a distance, the scene on the lawn of the old Chester County Courthouse in West Chester seemed a Christmas classic. Ornaments in hand, a red-clad woman stood high on a stepladder, smiling merrily at a 12-foot evergreen. "A little forward," Margaret Downey called down to a young man holding the rungs.

Grasping the tree, she attached a yellow sheet of paper to a branch. Along with dozens of other facsimiles of book covers, A Portable Atheist by Christopher Hitchens fluttered in the December breeze.

Downey, founder of the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia, declared it "Good!" and reached for the cover of Gospel Fictions by Randel Helms. The society's "Godless Holiday Tree" - decorated entirely with book covers about atheism, religious skepticism and secular philosophy - took its provocative place yesterday alongside West Chester's Nativity crèche and the Chamber of Commerce's towering artificial Christmas tree. A Hanukkah menorah soon will join the tableau.

"This helps to balance and shows the diversity of the community," Downey said of what her group also calls the "Tree of Knowledge." Although this was only their second annual installation, Downey and her fellow atheists were a presence on the courthouse lawn as early as 2001. That year, they sued the county to remove its large, bronze Ten Commandments plaque from the face of the stately courthouse. The society won in federal court, which agreed that the plaque represented an unconstitutional endorsement by government of a religion, but lost when an appeals court ruled that the 1920s-era plaque could stay, in light of its age and "historical significance."

After the fracas, Chester County opened the courthouse lawn to seasonal displays. The crèche and a Hanukkah menorah soon followed.

"We'd love to see Kwanza candles and a Buddha statue, too," Downey said.

The "Godless Holiday Tree" will greet - or challenge - passersby with the covers of scores of titles including The Myth of Nazareth by Rene Salam, Why I Am Not a Muslim by Ibn Warraq and Misquoting Jesus by Bart Ehrman. The Bible and the Koran hang there, as well.

"We want people to read these kinds of books so they can make up their minds about religion, not just be spoon-fed by pastors and priests and rabbis," Downey explained.

Directly across High Street, at the Market Street Grill, their atheistic missionizing was greeted with dismay.

"Why do they have do that now?" wondered Laura Walsh, 30, of Glenside, who was sitting at the window table with six family members, planning Christmas dinner.

"It's very stupid," opined Carolyn Gott, of Wilmington, who was wearing a jeweled cross around her neck.

"It's terrible. And the tree is ugly," said Peggy Carroll.

"We should pray for them," said Marian Feeley of Newark, Del., and the others chuckled in agreement.

"We should tell them that!" said Frances Phaneuf of Downingtown.

But the group chose not to.

The freethinkers went about their decorating yesterday afternoon with little interaction from passersby. But they were prepared nonetheless, said Downey. "We decided just to laugh."

Staks Rosch, a society member and host of the Web site DangerousTalk.net, said Christianity's "monopoly" on western thought had spurred him into helping raise the tree. "I'd like to break up that monopoly so we have a free market of ideas - just to balance things out," he said. "This tree of knowledge is a celebration of good ideas, of science, of history."

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WEST CHESTER — The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia, an atheism advocacy group that is responsible for the Tree of Knowledge display that for the last two holiday seasons has adorned the Historic Chester County Courthouse lawn, requested permission from Borough Council this week to hang a holiday-oriented banner over borough streets.

But council, by a unanimous vote, denied this request. Council members said that the banner the group wished to hang erred on the side of advertising. The banner would have read:

Happy Holidays from the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia.
Please visit our virtual Tree of Knowledge display at: www.fsgp.org/tree-of-knowledge.

Council members said that the purpose of the banner appeared to be to advertise the Freethought Society's Web site. Borough regulations, council members said, allow nonprofit groups to advertise community events, but not to advertise Web sites. "I have no objection to the Freethought Society putting a banner up," said Councilwoman Carolyn Comitta. "My only concern is that it promote a community event, and I don't see this banner doing that."

Council President Sue Bayne said that, if the banner read "Happy Holidays from the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia," it would be probably be acceptable. The holidays, Bayne said, could reasonably be defined as a community event. Borough Manager Ernie McNeely said that, if the sign instead ended with "Please visit our Tree of Knowledge display on the courthouse lawn," it might be acceptable. The Tree of Knowledge, McNeely said, is at least physically within the borough.

Margaret Downey, the founder of the Freethought Society, said that she might try again to have a banner put up. She said that she will reconsider the wording of the banner. And, she said, she will consider holding an event that the banner could advertise. "This time, we might consider holding a particular event, such as Human Light," Downey said. She said that "Human Light" would be a "humanistic celebration of the season" and would feature guest speakers, socializing, and refreshments.

The Freethought Society in 2007 first obtained permission from the county commissioners to put a Tree of Knowledge display on the courthouse lawn. The group decorates the tree, an evergreen, with the laminated covers of books its members consider classics of the atheistic tradition. The covers of books by Richard Dawkins, a British evolutionary biologist and strong disbeliever, are consistently among the ornaments.

The tree, Downey has said, is a reminder that "nontheists" deserve to have their voices heard and their views considered during the holiday season. "Nontheist," Downey said, is an umbrella term that refers to atheists, agnostics, humanists, secularists, rationalists and skeptics.

This year, the county commissioners are putting restrictions on the size and number of holiday displays that groups may put on the courthouse lawn.
The commissioners voted Thursday to allow no more than four display spaces, one of which is reserved for the tree that is lighted during the Chester County Chamber of Commerce’s Old-Fashioned Christmas parade.

All of the display spaces can be no more than 10 feet by 10 feet square. The displays themselves can be no more than 8 feet wide, 8 feet deep and 8 feet high. And their messages must be "content neutral."

Applications to obtain display spaces are due on Monday. The spaces, the commissioners said, will be available on a first-come, first-served basis. The Freethought Society wrote in a letter to the county commissioners that it believes these new restrictions do not allow religious and non-religious groups enough opportunity to set up displays.

The society sent this letter around the time it requested permission to hang a banner over borough streets. The county's regulations were, at that point, still in draft phase. Downey said that she requested permission to hang the banner because she feared the county would deny the Freethought Society permission to put up its tree display. "We made the banner request in order to guarantee that we are a part of the winter season and that we remain a vibrant part of the community," Downey said.

The county in 2006 first allowed a religious holiday display on the courthouse lawn. Prior to then, the county marked the holidays by adorning with lights the large evergreen that grows on the courthouse lawn. That first religious display was an illuminated menorah, put up by a Jewish group. In 2007, a Christian group, arguing that the county's lighted evergreen tree was not an overtly Christian symbol, obtained permission to put a crèche near the menorah.

That same year, the Freethought Society obtained permission to put up its Tree of Knowledge display. The display attracted much controversy and was repeatedly vandalized.

The continuing controversy over the Tree of Knowledge is, in a way, a reprise of the 2002 battle over the stone carving of the Ten Commandments that is attached to the courthouse wall.

Downey, the Freethought Society founder, won a lawsuit in 2002 that forced the county to cover up the Ten Commandments. A year later, the Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit struck down this decision and allowed the county to uncover the commandments.

Colin Hanna, who heads the group that puts up the crèche display, was a county commissioner when that battle took place. He was among those named in Downey's lawsuit.

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**County revises holiday display rules**
Changes bring new round of criticism from Freethought Society

Wednesday, November 18, 2009

By MICHAEL P. RELLAHAN, Staff Writer

WEST CHESTER — A revised set of rules concerning the winter holiday season displays on the front of the Chester County Historic Courthouse has generated a dose of criticism from an old opponent of religious displays at the site.

The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia, in a letter to the county commissioners, contends that the county has given too few display opportunities for religious and nonreligious groups, and that it has inconvenienced the group's own secular display that has appeared in recent years in favor of a Christian-themed presentation.

"If the commissioners really care about equality, respect and appreciation of diversity, the problem of irrational display placements should be addressed now," said Margaret Downey, the group's president and resident of Pocopson. She spoke at the commissioners work session Tuesday.

The commissioners are set to adopt the revised rules at their business meeting Thursday. According to county solicitor Thomas Whiteman, the rules had been tweaked to address the size and dimension of displays and safety issues.

According to the draft of the new regulations, only four displays will be allowed on the courthouse property along North High Street and West Market Street. One spot is reserved for the West Chester Chamber of Commerce for a holiday tree that is lighted during the annual Old Fashioned Christmas celebration at the beginning of December.

The rules state that a maximum of three others may be in place at any one time. The displays are to be "content-neutral" in terms of their message, although they "should be in keeping with the winter holiday season," the proposed rules state.

The areas set aside for the displays will each be 10 feet by 10 feet square, and the displays themselves should be no more than 8 feet wide, 8 feet deep, and 8 feet high, according to the draft. Downey, in her remarks Tuesday, objected to those regulations. She noted that the draft proposal states that the purpose of the displays by private organizations such as hers is to "celebrate the diversity of the community."

But how can that be accomplished, she wondered, when so few spaces are available?
"Where does that allow for a future Kwanza display, Hindu symbols, a Buddhist display and a Muslim symbol," she asked the commissioners. Her organization "is concerned that too many citizens will be left out altogether. Surely the commissioners agree that three displays could not possibly represent all minorities and all religions."

She suggested that if the county could not accommodate more display sites, the commissioners should consider doing away with the practice of allowing holiday displays altogether.

The three commissioners listened to her remarks but gave no response.

Later, Chairman Terence Farrell said that the board had been advised by its legal counsel against making any comment until the adoption of the proposed guidelines on Thursday.

He said that attorney Louis Kupperman of the Philadelphia law firm of Obermayer Rebman Maxwell & Hippe would be on hand to address the matter then.

In addition, Downey complained that the spot that in the past has been given to the display of a traditional crèche should be moved to allow for those displays, like her organization's Tree of Knowledge, that are larger in height. She said that branches of the evergreen and deciduous tree on the Market Street side of the courthouse get in the way of the taller displays. "The low-to-the ground crèche could easily have been placed a few feet over so that the Tree of Knowledge could utilize the only proper area that could accommodate for its height," she wrote in her letter. "The placement of the crèche right in the middle of the open area was inconsiderate," she said.

Downey, who some years ago led the unsuccessful fight to have the Ten Commandments plaque on display at the front of the historic courthouse removed, also objected to the proposed size of the allowable displays. She said that an 8-by-8-by-8 size would restrict her group's display, and suggested that it be allowed to encompass the entire 10-feet-square plot.

The holiday displays are allowed from November 30 to January 9, and cannot be obscene or otherwise unprotected by the U.S. Constitution, according to the draft of regulations. The county pays for any and all electricity needed, but does not guarantee the safety of the display. The displays must also not be for commercial purposes, and must include a sign stating the name of the private organization that erected it.

To contact staff writer Michael P. Rellahan, send e-mail to mrellahan@dailylocal.com.
County commissioners adopt holiday display rules

Regulations limit size and number of displays

Friday, November 20, 2009

By MICHAEL P. RELLAHAN, Staff Writer

WEST CHESTER — The Chester County commissioners Thursday adopted new regulations for winter holiday seasonal displays that would limit their size and number outside the Historic Courthouse in a split vote.

Commissioners Chairman Terence Farrell and fellow Republican Commissioner Carol Aichele voted to approve the regulations, which Farrell said had been modified to take into account legal, size, and safety concerns.

Commissioner Kathi Cozzone, the board's lone Democrat, voted against the rules, saying she objected to limiting the number of displays allowed, restricting their height to 10 feet, and reserving a spot for the West Chester Chamber of Commerce's holiday tree.

"I'm a policy person," Cozzone said, noting that the regulations had been developed with safety in mind and in consultation with county legal advisers as they would not infringe on the rights of organizations that wish to erect displays between November and January. "But there are things I would do differently," she said.

Cozzone agreed with the position set forth by the president of the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia, Margaret Downey, who said the county should make room for more than the four spaces set forth for displays in the rules.

"I feel we could add one or two more (displays)," Cozzone said. "It would provide an opportunity for other people to participate in the displays."

Cozzone also said she did not feel comfortable with reserving space in the rules for the chamber's so-called "holiday tree."

"I don't think we should be grandfathering any particular display," she said.

But Farrell and Aichele said they thought the rules were proper. "I think they are both fair and reasonable," said Farrell. He said they had been drafted with input from the county's outside attorney, Louis Kupperman, and dealt mainly with issues of safety.

Aichele said she had long been impressed by the "community spirit generated by the holiday celebration in West Chester," which includes lighting the tree on the North High Street side of the courthouse on the opening night of Old-Fashioned Christmas. "It's a tradition here in this particular community and something I would like to see continue," she said.

On Tuesday, Downey had appeared at the commissioners' work session to complain
that the new regulations would unfairly limit the number of organizations that could erect displays to three. She said the rules themselves stated that the purpose of the displays was to promote the diversity of the community.

"If the commissioners really care about equality, respect and appreciation of diversity, the problem of irrational display placements should be addressed now," Downey said.

She also complained that the traditional Christian crèche display was given a spot at the center of the courthouse lawn, pushing her group's "Tree of Knowledge" to the side under trees, when that space could better accommodate the crèche.

Downey did not appear at Thursday's meeting, and the commissioners did not address her concerns about the placement of the crèche.

The regulations, taking up four pages, set forth the way displays are set up and what they can generally include.

The displays, according to the policy, are meant "to celebrate the diversity of the community, to bring the community together to celebrate the holiday season, and to foster holiday spirit in the downtown West Chester area." The displays should "be in keeping with the winter holiday season," but be "content neutral."

The policy does not mention the Christmas holiday, and specifically refers to the "secular holiday tree" that is annually erected by the West Chester Chamber.

No obscene or constitutionally unprotected displays are permitted, and no commercial tie-ins are allowed. Applications for permission — due this year on Monday — will be approved on a first-come, first-served basis for those meeting the regulations. Each display must have a sign detailing the organization responsible for it. The organizations must restore the ground to its original condition after removing its display, and can keep them up only from the last weekend in November to the second Sunday in January.

Groups must also agree to release the county from any damages caused by the displays, and must have a $1 million liability life insurance policy. Each display is to be in a 10-foot-square location, and must itself be no more than 8 feet wide, deep, and high.

County Chief Management Officer Evelyn Walker showed a sketch drawing of the courthouse lawn at High and Market streets that she said showed that the site could accommodate only four such spaces, addressing Cozzone's call for more displays.

Walker said after the meeting that no applications had yet been received — since the new regulations were in draft form until Thursday's vote — but that a number of groups had expressed interest in applying for permission to erect displays.

In past years, in addition to the crèche and the Freethought Society's tree, there have been general holiday greeting signs erected by local area service clubs.

No one in the audience spoke out against or in favor of the revised rules.

To contact staff writer Michael P. Rellahan, send e-mail to mrellahan@dailylocal.com
The tendency to stifle speech or ideas that offend us is only human, but it is unproductive and harmful. When liberals complain about NBC booking Ann Coulter, they essentially declare that people are not capable of hearing what she has to say and drawing their own conclusions. St. Joseph's University graduate student Jane Gilvary would like to ban an organization called the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia from sharing their holiday display, titled Tree of Knowledge, at the Chester County Courthouse.

While traditional holiday displays are celebrated, Gilvary refers to the Tree of Knowledge as "a grotesque and kitschy shrine to Godlessness." Writing for The Philadelphia Bulletin, she calls the tree a "monument to religious nihilism."

What is it about the Tree of Knowledge that has led to such outrage? Ornaments in the shape of laminated book covers featuring titles by prominent Atheist writers like Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins.

Gilvary contends that the tree "denigrates" the holiday and seems particularly upset that it has been placed near a nativity scene. She adds that "common sense would dictate that December holiday displays have a direct tie-in to a December holiday tradition; those that don’t shouldn’t be displayed in December."

It goes without saying that Christmas is an important holiday for millions and millions of Americans, this one included. Tradition is important to people, and holiday displays are an integral part of celebrating Christmas. I too enjoy seeing lights and decorated trees in the month of December.

However, like it or not, not everyone is devoutly religious. For some Christmas is more about family and sharing than it is about recognizing the birth of Jesus. Should we stipulate that only religious people are allowed to celebrate Christmas? Should only religious organizations be allowed to create and share holiday displays?

What is it that people like Gilvary are so afraid of? Do they think a devout Christian will see a laminated Richard Dawkins book cover and suddenly become an Atheist (as if that is a dirty word)? Do they believe that a display like the Tree of Knowledge destroys the meaning of the holiday? Who exactly is in charge of deciding what the holiday means and to whom?

Sorry conservatives, but this is not about a "secular war on Christmas." It is not about being politically correct. It is about sharing ideas in the public square. The Chester County Courthouse is not a church. It does not endorse any one specific set of beliefs over another.

If people are truly worried about Americans losing touch with the real meaning of Christmas, there are far bigger issues than a display on government property.
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<td>Thomas Paine: The Age of Reason Part Three; Examination of the Prophecies</td>
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Humblest Greetings,

We wholeheartedly appreciate your endeavor to plant the Knowledge tree in the Chester County Court Yard. Surely it is a great slam on Bible's commandment not to have knowledge and the concept that Adam and Eve became sinners condemned for acquiring knowledge by eating the forbidden knowledge fruit. So many congratulations to you for your grand success. Surely I would enjoy the event with all of you there if I would be in the US.

Cordially,

Swamiji Manavatavadi

Dear Margaret,

I'm pleased to send a few words of thanks and endorsement for the Tree of Knowledge project.

Over the past two years the Tree of Knowledge project has ably represented freethought and humanism during the Judaeo-Christian holiday season, not just in greater Philadelphia but across the country. It stresses the humanist commitment to learning and knowledge and presents its message in a dignified way, which simply makes occasional disturbances of the display by religiously-motivated vandals seem all the more small-minded.

I welcome the proposed expansion of the program into downtown Philadelphia as well as West Chester and wish the program great success in 2009.

Tom Flynn
Editor, FREE INQUIRY
Author (among other books), The Trouble with Christmas

This is very impressive, I wish it could be duplicated in other areas. Thank you!

Diana Krantz

I like the Tree in front of the Chester County Court House!

Emily Perna

"Tree of Knowledge!!? I LOVE IT!!!!"

Cindy Johnson
Sounds like a wonderful project, Margaret. Warmest regards and admiration for your work,

**Ann Druyan**  
Author and Scientist  
Widow of Carl Sagan

Dear Margaret:

Congratulations! This is a wonderful idea, and I'm so glad you pulled it off. Another secular miracle by Margaret. I'm not yet sure of my plans for next month. I'll let you know soon.

All best,

**Jim Morrow**  
Author

Hi Margaret,

I am thrilled that your project got the green light! It is a great idea - and in this period of "shop till you drop", it is nice to think about books and maybe even remember to buy some!!

Cheers!

**Nica Lalli**  
Author  
www.nicalalli.com

SUPER!

Just what I'd expect from you!

**George Erickson**  
Author

I just read about your "Free Thought Tree." Great idea! Would like to see other counties do what Chester County has allowed. Oh and congratulations on having the Fox News "bots" get in a tizzy about this. No surprise there huh?

**Valerie Vaughan**

Great idea!

**Victor J. Stenger, PhD**
I was present at the Chester County Courthouse through the entire process of the erection and decoration of the Tree of Knowledge on Saturday, December 1. The Tree was beautiful -- a large and colorful invitation for all passersby to join the members of the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia in the quest for genuine knowledge, knowledge supported by reason and evidence. My wife and I enjoyed our walk around and around the Tree, and our views of it from all angles -- from up close and from a distance, from the sidewalk below the Tree and from across the street. And we took several pictures of it.

I felt a great deal of pride as an atheist in America, as a member of the Freethought Society, and as a friend of Margaret Downey's. Life is good.

William A. Wisdom
Former Temple University Professor

I'm a lifelong atheist in Pennsburg, PA. I just saw your tree on the news & just wanted to say thank you!

Monique Melmed

I love it!

Austin Dacey
Author and Representative to the United Nations for the Center for Inquiry

"Very cool, Margaret!"

Bart Meltzer

I stopped by in West Chester to see the Tree of Knowledge. It's very cool. It is a humanistic alternative to the Christian crèche that was on the courthouse lawn, and the tree towered over the manger display. It is also a good counterpoint to the large brass Ten Commandments plaque on the courthouse building. It is a very prominent location in downtown, and the display sign clearly shows that FSGP is responsible for it.

The array of books was a great selection of humanist and atheist literature. It would be good if you could make a set of smaller laminated cards to sell for use on a home holiday tree.

While I was there, two other people were also looking at it. Hopefully, it will get a lot of attention.

Bill Creasy,
President, WASH
November 11, 2007

As one of the founding members of MISC (Metro-Boston Intercollegiate Secular Coalition) which is an umbrella group for secular groups of Harvard University, Tufts, Brandies, MIT, and Bentley College and the president of my own campus group, I would love to adopt the idea of a *Tree of Knowledge*. I plan on proposing this idea to the MISC members and I have already talked about this idea with Chaplain Greg Epstein, the Humanist Chaplain at Harvard. I think we could make a monumental impact if the secular groups of Metro-Boston created a united effort to promote secularism and the *Tree of Knowledge*. I’m extremely excited! I am honored that I can be a part of the Tree of Knowledge movement, and I know it will send a lasting message to the public.

December 8, 2007

I have approval to set up the *Tree of Knowledge*! Chaplain Greg Epstein also offered to help! I also shared your proposal with all the members of the Metro-Boston Intercollegiate Secular Coalition Members, so I think that there will be an display of *Trees of Knowledge* all over Bentley, Brandies, Tufts, and Harvard. Thank you for everything.

The tree is located in the student center at Bentley College. I think the *Tree of Knowledge* turned out great because students who visit the student center at my school have to pass it to go to the cafeteria to eat.

**Byung Min**
Prejudgment and negative stereotyping stands in the way of acceptance and respect for the atheist community. The Tree of Knowledge is an attempt to encourage others to learn more facts and truths about atheists.

~Margaret Downey

Coming together for this project to educate the community is a great way for the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia to branch out and attempt to close the gap between theists and nontheists. I look forward to continuing the Winter Display project in the future.

~Sally Cramer

On behalf of the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia, thank you for your time and support in making the 2007 Tree of Knowledge a complete success!

The project could not have been done without the commitment and enthusiasm of volunteers such as you.

Made especially for you by:
Margaret Downey

Thank you very much!