

A U S T I N

Atheist

April 2011 • Newsletter of the Atheist Community of Austin **ACA**

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Election Meeting May 1st

—by Donald Baker

Every year in the ACA we fill the roles of officers and members of the board of directors. Officers serve in official capacities and act as official liaisons of the group.

Two officers, the president and vice president are directly elected by the membership. The other two officers, secretary and treasurer, are elected by a vote of the board and later approved by a vote of the membership. All officers are considered part of the board. There are five at-large board seats, but the membership will vote for seven board members during the election, because two of those will go on to fill the offices of secretary and treasurer. Our 2011 election will be held in the Austin History Center on Sunday, May 1, at 12:15 p.m., and the meeting will be in lieu of a lecture that month.

Regardless of title, all board members are proactive leaders and are expected to work hard in the best interests of the ACA. Having a large board means that the ACA should never want for good ideas or people to lead members in turning those ideas into reality. Ideally, the most sensible and proactive people in the ACA should find themselves serving on the board. Once constituted, the board has leeway to match board members

to various initiatives, so that the ACA is able to both preserve continuity and have sufficient resources to carry out important initiatives as they arise. Above and beyond being board members, officers have additional responsibilities. The president, among other responsibilities, acts as the official spokesperson for the group, runs board meetings, and keeps the group running smoothly. The vice president fills in for the president when necessary, and he/she has traditionally helped manage much of the day-to-day running of the ACA. The treasurer manages the finances, of course, but this management also includes things like investments, property, and taxes. The secretary records and publishes meeting minutes and runs special meetings including the election meeting. The current ACA board roster is available on the ACA Web site <www.atheist-community.org/activism/board.php>, along with a picture of the board members. Officers and directors are also listed on page two of this newsletter.

The election is imminent and members should think about whether they'd like to run for the board. If you are interested in running, you can contact one or more current board members and find

out more. Members are also welcome to attend board meetings. If you'd like to run, let our president or secretary know of your intent and you will be put on the slate. It's preferable to nominate yourself, so there is no confusion about intent. Be aware that you will need to have been a member in good standing for six months by

the day of the election in order to be eligible. Regardless of whether you run, please participate in the election, and the ACA as a whole, to help make it a stronger and more vibrant organization. ■

**MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS
DUE MARCH 1ST. RENEW
ONLINE OR USE THE
FORM ON PAGE 5.**

Grief: Dealing with sickness and death without God

—by David Tyler

We are often asked how atheists can deal with death and dying without the divine support. I recently had to experience such sadness with the unexpected sickness, then death, of my little pal, Foo. Foo was a cat. She may have been only a pet, but anyone who has developed a close relationship with one of our fellow creatures will understand the feelings can be profound. The issues that have to be dealt with are similar to dealing with the loss of a human loved one.

The end began with a cold. It started with sniffles which is not that unusual, but when she got worse I took Foo to the vet. She had a significant upper respiratory infection, which was treated and we were sent home with a medication to be given over the next ten days. Foo's

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Foo's grave.

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Report from TAMoz

—by David Tyler

While skepticism and atheism are not necessarily synonymous they do a common ground in their commitment to an evidence-based worldview. There has been some concern that the JREF (James Randi Educational Foundation) was making special accommodation for religious beliefs. In his opening address, Mr. Randi clearly identified himself as an atheist and that religious belief is fair game for skepticism. While there is still a diversity of opinion about the best way to deal with religious belief in the JREF, Mr. Randi made it clear that all claims are open to evaluation.

As an event, TAMoz (**November 26 - 28, 2010**) was a great success. About 630 people attended and the event was sold out within the first month. It could easily been bigger but the Masonic center was packed and at times there was standing room only. The Australian Skeptics outsourced the registration process and that aspect of the meeting was handled professionally and went more smoothly than some Vegas meetings. The lineup of speakers was well balanced. While some of the names were unfamiliar to guests from the US, they came as pleasant surprises. The

most notable of these was Dr. Karl Kruszelnicki who is well known in Australia as a promoter of science to the public. His monologue “Great Moments in Skepticism” would have been suggestive of Bill Nye but on speed.

Almost on a par with Dr. Karl was the Dr. Paul Willis with his dissection of a roast duck. Dr. Willis was the moderator for the meeting and was called on to do his duck presentation to fill a gap in the schedule. For the presentation he took a roast duck and by hand separated various bones to hold up and point out 20 of the more than 200 characteristics shared uniquely by birds and dinosaurs. It is the sort of presentation that sticks in the mind the way that a basic lecture cannot.

In addition to Dr. Karl and Dr. Willis there were several well known personalities from the skeptical community – Eugenie Scott, Brian Dunning, George Hrab, and the whole crew of the Skeptics Guide to the Universe from the US. There were two astronomers, Fred Watson from Australia and Pamela Gay (AstronomyCast) from the US. Dick Smith, a founder of

the Australian Skeptics and long time friend of Mr. Randi, appeared with the “Amazing one” to recall together the early testing of Australian Dowsers and the tale of Carlos the Channeler. The Australian Skeptics were well represented with Richard Saunders, Dr. Krissy Wilson, Loretta Marron and Dr. Rachie (Rachael Dunlap). Science journalist, Simon Singh was there from the UK to review the history of the libel case brought against him by the British Chiropractors. The meeting finished on Sunday afternoon with an illuminating talk by John Smyrk about how much of the advice given to business by motivational speakers and other experts is based on Woo and some of the practices espoused by big names have been decidedly harmful. The final speaker, Rob Morrison, gave a lively demonstration of how easily the senses can be fooled. In general TAMoz was up to the standards of the meetings at Las Vegas.

I would like to relate a few aspects of TAMoz that made the meeting special. Foremost of these was the award of the \$1000 Thornett Award for the promotion to Ken McLeod and Wendy Wilkinson. What made this award so memorable was that it recognized the accomplishments two “ordinary” people who working separately

were able to have a significant impact on the way the Australian media views information from the Australian Vaccination Network, a source of misinformation about vaccines. Because of the hard work of these dedicated people the AVN went from the “go to” source for vaccination “balance” to a virtual media pariah. Their efforts managed to halt the AVN’s attempts to place their lying message in movie theaters over the holiday season. It is particularly inspiring to see that a small number of dedicated individuals can make a real difference.

The story of Ken and Wendy echoes the story of Loretta Marron who while recovering from successful cancer therapy was deluged by offers from quacks to take her money for worthless treatments. She was so outraged that she determined to fight this exploitation. Due to her tireless research and persistence she has managed to have a number of fraudulent treatments and devices banned in Australia. Quackery has not gone away and is a problem in this country. It is inspiring to see that ordinary people with commitment can make a difference. With a world of stupidity out there, these people give the rest of us a reason to keep trying to make a difference. The TAM events help to keep the enthusiasm alive. ■

Grief

—continued from page 1

breathing improved quickly but she was not herself. “Never miss a meal” Foo was off her food. We returned to the vet for a more complete workup. On a Monday I dropped her off and returned at the end of the day. That is when I learned that Foo was dying. Her disease had no cure and would likely progress rapidly. I was advised that euthanasia would soon be the most humane option. Foo had just spent the day in a strange place, and I was not ready to kill her. She was given steroids to allow her to feel better, but I was advised that the effect would only be temporary. Thursday morning we returned for a final goodbye.

The decisions I had to make and the way I had to deal with Foo’s death and the sense of loss after she was gone touched the core of my atheist worldview. Not only are we able to feel empathy for one another this identification extends to how some of us feel about other creatures. We know what it is to suffer and wish to minimize the suffering of others we love. Atheists also have no illusions about living on in some other form once our physical bodies cease to function. This leads to some hard choices as to the best course of action to minimize the suffering while not being too quick to end a life. We believe that for any living creature, the life they have now is the only chance they will ever have to be alive. In the vastness of the known

universe this is very rare. To take life away is a huge responsibility. Some animals can tell us when the right time has come. When Foo started trying to go off by herself, I knew she was preparing for death.

I started grieving for Foo when I found out that she was dying and would never again be the happy playful animal I had known. When I first met her, she was a cat from hell. I took her in from the shelter, knowing that it was unlikely anybody else would. It took a long time to win her trust but once she decided that I was her human she was fully committed to me. That struggle made it all the harder to let her go. I had one friend tell me that she was now chasing rats in never-never land. I guess she does not understand that atheists find

no comfort in such platitudes. It was a kind thought nonetheless. Sharing mutual experiences with other pet owners also made the loss less painful. The only true comfort is that which we give one another. I found that writing about her seemed (Missing Foo) to help. It is as if putting my feelings into writing drew the hurt out of me so I could let it go.

When I brought Foo home for the last time I buried her myself. This last service to her helped me say goodbye. A few days later I planted a rose bush over her grave. Maybe a small bit of her will live on in the blooms. As to the thorns – that would be Foo. ■

ACA CALENDAR

SATURDAY, APRIL 2

• **2-3:30 p.m.:** *Non-Prophets Internet Radio Show* (See Web site for details)

SUNDAY, APRIL 3

• **12:15-1:45 p.m.:** *ACA Lecture Series "Aron-Ra on "What we can and cannot honestly say we 'know'"; Free" (Austin History Center)*
• **4:30-5:30 p.m.:** *The Atheist Experience* (Channel 10-16)
• **6 p.m.-?:** *Meet-up after The Atheist Experience* (El Arroyo)

THURSDAY, APRIL 7

• **7 p.m.-?:** *Happy Hour* (Dog & Duck Pub)

SATURDAY, APRIL 9

• **2-3:30 p.m.:** *Non-Prophets Internet Radio Show* (See Web site for details)

SUNDAY, APRIL 10

• **11:30 a.m.-1 p.m.:** *Regular Sunday Meeting* (Romeo's)
• **12:30-1:30 p.m.:** *Board Meeting* (Romeo's [outside])
• **4:30-5:30 p.m.:** *The Atheist Experience* (Channel 10-16)
• **6 p.m.-?:** *Meet-up after The Atheist Experience* (El Arroyo)

THURSDAY, APRIL 14

• **7 p.m.-?:** *Happy Hour* (Dog & Duck Pub)

SATURDAY, APRIL 16

• **11 a.m.-?:** *KAB Cleanup* (South Lamar Location)
• **2-3:30 p.m.:** *Non-Prophets Internet Radio Show* (See Web site for details)

SUNDAY, APRIL 17

• **11:30 a.m.-1 p.m.:** *Regular Sunday Meeting* (Romeo's)

• **4:30-5:30 p.m.:** *The Atheist Experience* (Channel 10-16)
• **6 p.m.-?:** *Meet-up after The Atheist Experience* (El Arroyo)

THURSDAY, APRIL 21

• **7 p.m.-?:** *Happy Hour* (Dog & Duck Pub)

SATURDAY, APRIL 23

• **2-3:30 p.m.:** *Non-Prophets Internet Radio Show* (See Web site for details)

SUNDAY, APRIL 24

• **11:30 a.m.-1 p.m.:** *Regular Sunday Meeting* (Romeo's)
• **4:30-5:30 p.m.:** *The Atheist Experience* (Channel 10-16)
• **6 p.m.-?:** *Meet-up after The Atheist Experience* (El Arroyo)

THURSDAY, APRIL 28

• **7 p.m.-?:** *Happy Hour* (Dog & Duck Pub)

SATURDAY, APRIL 30

• **2-3:30 p.m.:** *Non-Prophets Internet Radio Show* (See Web site for details)

REGULAR LOCATIONS:

- **Austin History Center**, 9th and Guadalupe. Building opens at noon. Lectures are free and open to the public.
- **Dog & Duck Pub**, North of the Capitol, 406 W. 17th at Guadalupe, 512.479.0598. Informal gathering; food available.
- **El Arroyo**, 1624 W. 5th St.
- **Hickory Street**, 8th and Congress
- **Romeo's**, 1500 Barton Springs Rd. South of Town Lake.
- **South KAB location**, Parking lot West of Half Price Books, 2929 S. Lamar Blvd.
- **Threadgill's**, 301 West Riverside Drive (at Barton Springs Rd.)

Unless otherwise indicated, events are open to all atheist and atheist friendly people, regardless of ACA membership status. Check the calendar on the Web site <www.atheist-community.org/calendar> for last minute changes.

Renew your ACA Membership

Membership fees are \$30/year for individuals, \$15/year for students and retirees, and \$45/year for a family. Lifetime membership is \$1000. Our membership year begins on March 1st.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION for the ATHEIST COMMUNITY of AUSTIN, INC.

Please fill out the information below if your information has changed or make corrections to your mailing label, as necessary, on the opposite side of this form.

Last Name

First Name

Companion's Name (for family membership):

Last Name

First Name

Street

City/State/Zip

Phone

E-mail

Please make your check out to ACA in the amount above depending on your membership type. Any amount over the membership fee will be considered a tax deductible contribution to the ACA.

New members must complete the following membership affirmation:

This is to certify that I am a non-theist, that I have read the Purpose Statement of the Atheist Community of Austin, Inc. (appearing on Page 2), and that I am in agreement with the principles stated therein. I understand that membership is only open to non-theists.

Signature

Date

Signature (Companion)

Date

Please return this form and payment to: Atheist Community of Austin, Inc., P. O. Box 3798, Austin, TX 78764 or bring it to any ACA event and give it to an ACA board member.



Atheist Community of Austin
 P. O. Box 3798
 Austin, TX 78764
 www.atheist-community.org

ATHEIST EVE

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<p>THEN... After Sarah was well past her childbearing years (Gen 18:11), she gave birth to a son. (Gen 20:2)</p>	<p>THEN... After Jesus died, the streets of the city were filled with zombies that everyone saw. (Matt 27:52-53)</p>	<p>THEN... God splits the ocean in half and holds it that way all night as the Hebrews walk through on dry land. (Ex 14:21-22)</p>
<p>NOW... After \$20,000 of fertility treatments fail, a couple adopts and calls their new baby "a miracle."</p>	<p>NOW... After a man is saved by an emergency worker from burning car wreckage, it's called "a miracle."</p>	<p>NOW... A pilot with a long lifetime of flight experience makes an emergency landing in the Hudson river, and it's "a miracle."</p>

Atheist wear available at www.cafepress.com/atheist_eve