

THE ATHEIST

Newsletter of the Atheist Community of Austin, a Nonprophet Organization
P.O. Box 3798, Austin, Texas 78764 • 512.371.2911 • www.atheist-community.org

July 28, 2002 - Volume 6.7



Catching up with ACA

Welcome to the new edition of The Atheist. We have been without a regular monthly newsletter since January, 2001, and we are excited to be providing this publication again. For those of you who are unable to attend regular ACA meetings, here is a recap of the activities ACA has sponsored in recent months:

- Conducted a Wall of Separation Rally on the steps of the Texas Capitol commemorating the anniversary of Thomas Jefferson's letter to the Danbury Baptists.
- Introduced "The Non-Prophets" a weekly Internet radio broadcast produced by Russell Glasser and hosted by Jeff Dee, Vic Farrow, and Mary McManamee.
- Protested the National Day of Prayer at the Austin Day of Prayer breakfast.
- Continued production of "The Atheist Experience" TV show produced by Russell Glasser and Steven Elliott and hosted by Martin Wagner, Ashley Perrien, and rotating co-hosts.
- Co-chair Michelle Gadush attended the Atheist Alliance annual meeting and networked with members of other regional atheist groups. ACA members also got to know the members of the Freethinkers Association of Central Texas at their annual barbeque and pool party.
- Took part in the Democracy Rising rally and the Austin Gay Pride celebration.
- Conducted a secular memorial service following the September 11th attacks.
- Reorganized and streamlined the committee structure of the ACA constitution.
- Provided support to a new UT atheist and agnostic organization.
- Began a feasibility search for a permanent ACA building.
- Expanded social events for ACA members including Atheist Happy Hour and day trips to Texas wineries, museums and parks. Recent events organized by 'Manda have included "Celebrate Reptilian Diversity Day (and BBQ), a winery trip, and geocaching.
- Organized several successful blood donation drives.

Regularly Scheduled ACA Events:

Bagel Shop Meetings: Every Sunday except the first Sunday of the month at 11:00 AM at the Hot Jumbo Bagelry, (307 W. Fifth Street)

Monthly Lecture Meetings: 1st Sunday of each month at 11:00 AM, in the Furr's Cafeteria in Northcross Mall.

"The Atheist Experience" Live Call-in TV Show: Sundays 4:30 - 6:00 PM, on Austin Access Channel 10

Godless Gamers: Monday evenings at 7:00 at the home of Russell and Ginny Glasser. Contact [Russell](#) for details.

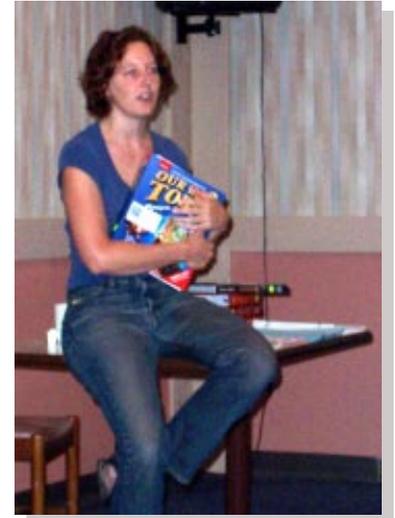
Happy Hour: Thursday evenings at 7:30 at Antonio's Tex-Mex restaurant near the intersection of I-35 & 183.

"The Non-Prophets" Internet Radio Show: Saturday afternoons from 2:00-3:30 on www.atheistnetwork.com.

E-Mail Lists: <http://www.atheist-community.org/email.htm>

For more details on any of these events, see www.atheist-community.org

Lecture Series News



Heather Alden, outreach director with the Texas Freedom Network, speaks at ACA's monthly lecture meeting on July 7, 2002. Ms. Alden spoke about the upcoming State Board of Education textbook adoption hearings and the strong influence exerted by the religious right in selecting textbooks for Texas' public schools. She urged ACA members to review textbooks, testify at public hearings, and write letters to the State Board of Education, textbook publishers, and legislators, opposing textbook censorship. To find out more about how to combat the religious right's hold on our public schools, see Texas Freedom Network's web site at www.tfn.org.

Our speaker for August 4, 2002 will be Jeisyn Credeur, owner of the Southwest Institute of NLP (Neurolinguistic Programming). As usual, this lecture will take place at 11:00 AM at Furr's Cafeteria in Northcross Mall.

Summary of ACA Board Minutes for July 14, 2002

- 1. Financial Report:** Available upon request from Treasurer Laura Sargent.
- 2. Financial Safeguards:** The board is considering changes to the signature requirements for checks. Laura withdrew a motion to propose that any transaction (except simple deposits) will require a second signature and a note. The Board has tabled this issue for next month until we get more specifics about how to draft the letter. Laura also reminds us that Don Lawrence had suggested having a "cash flow" report so that we know how much money transfers are being made on a monthly basis. Don Rhoades suggests that we could have several folks who have online access to view the account and periodically check the financial status without actually making any transactions.
- 3. First Sunday Lecture Location:** The Building Committee folks need to go look at the Austin History Center (9th and Guadalupe) to see if it would be a good alternative to Furrs.
- 4. TV Shows on CD:** Ashley's converter (VHS to CD) cost \$250. He is working on a "best of" show for July.
- 5. Handling of Donations:** The ACA Board will need to decide how to handle monetary donations from individuals so that the federal government does not change our tax-status from a nonprofit to a foundation. Greenlight is an organization that can help us research these issues.
- 6. New Building:** Someone needs to check into banks and what they'll offer our group to secure a loan.
- 7. Fundraisers:** All Board members are asked to think about well-known guest speakers who might be willing to speak to our group for free (or low cost) so we can raise big-time money for the group and our new digs. Let's get George Carlin!
- 8. Bylaws:** Michelle asked that people start thinking about some guidelines pertaining to their duties within the group. She said that she would try to find some examples of bylaws for us to use as a guide.

ACA Board Election Results

ACA's annual Board of Directors elections took place on May 5. The results were as follows:

Co-Chairs of the Board:
Michelle Gadush & Vic Farrow

Treasurer:
Laura Sargent

Secretary:
Mary McManamee

Archivist:
Ashley Perrien

Board of Directors:
Susan Brown
Tim Burnett
Jeff Dee
Russell Glasser
Jeff Jones
'Manda
Don Lawrence
Don Rhoades

The ACA Files: Member Profile of the Month

Name: Charles Tabony

ACA Member Since: November 2001

ACA Activities: Does sound effects for The Atheist Experience and is taking classes to become a producer at ACAC. Charles is a regular at Godless Gamers and happy hour and took part in the National Day of Prayer protest.

Where From Originally: Austin

Occupation: Student. Charles is an undergraduate electrical engineering major at the University of Texas. He recently cofounded the U.T. student organization **University Atheists and Agnostics**.

Hobbies: Computer gaming, learning to play the guitar

Little-Known Facts: Charles has every episode of "Get Smart" on tape. He also rides a unicycle (no, he does **not** juggle at the same time) He also owns all of "Weird Al" Yankovic's albums and most of his music videos!



Au Revoir (but not Adieu), Philippe



Our friend and ACA member Philippe Pouliot has moved out of Austin to pursue academic research and adventure abroad. Philippe will spend three months in his native Montreal, Canada, visiting family and conducting research for the University of Texas. He will then move to London, England, where he expects to spend the next two years continuing

his physics research at Queen Mary University.

This will be Philippe's first time in London and he is looking forward to living in the heart of the city in a residence near the British Museum. Philippe has promised to drop us a line once in a while and invites his ACA friends to write to him at pouliot@zippy.ph.utexas.edu. We'll miss you, Philippe!

Philippe presented a fascinating lecture on superstring theory at our June lecture meeting. If you missed it, you can download his presentation at: <http://zippy.ph.utexas.edu/~pouliot/ACA-Lecture.zip>

Update on Larry Mayfield

Larry Mayfield is currently living at Capitol City Nursing Home in North Austin. Larry was hospitalized in December, 2001 following an infection that affected his brain. He has since undergone brain surgery and has improved steadily, but still requires full-time nursing care.

Larry welcomes visitors and appreciates getting new reading material - especially science fiction and nonfiction books. He also enjoys Bill Miller BBQ. Larry is in Room 304 of Capitol City Nursing Home. It is located at 9052 Galewood Drive, which is behind the PetsMart at 183 and Payton Gin.

Condolences

ACA member Larry Roisman passed away after an illness in March 2002. We offer our sincere condolences to his wife, Ronnie Roisman.

Bouncing baby boy

Benjamin Jack Glasser was born on May 26, 2002 to Russell and Virginia (Ginny) Glasser. He weighed 7 pounds 13 ounces, and was 20 1/4 inches long. Benjamin has two older sisters, Caitlin and Samantha. Congratulations to the Glasser family.



Congratulations, Newlyweds!

Two ACA member couples have tied the knot in the past month. **Vic Farrow** and **Cassandra Moore** happily eloped on July 12 in Austin. On July 10, **Scott Ingram** and **Susan Brown** were married in a surprise physics lecture/wedding, presided over by ACA member **Paul Wilson**. With Susan's permission, we're re-printing Paul's description of their unconventional wedding.

"We followed Philippe's string theory talk at my house with a surprise wedding, which I had the great honor of officiating. Here's a transcript, to the best of my memory, of the entire wedding ceremony. (They asked for short and to-the-point.)

Dearly beloved... and well-liked others... we are gathered here tonight to celebrate strings and ties, in particular the marriage of Susan and Scott.

Scott, do you take Susan to be your lawfully wedded wife?

(Scott: "I do.")

Susan, do you take Scott to be your lawfully wedded husband?

(Susan: "I do.")

Good!

By the power vested in me by the State of Texas, the Universal Life Church of Modesto, California, the Atheist Community of Austin, and a complete vacuum of divine authority that SOMEBODY has to step up and fill... but most importantly, by YOUR mutual and informed consent, I now pronounce you married.

Everyone got an actual souvenir piece of string, suitable for tying two actual things together. [...] So everybody congratulate the young newlyweds, who have only been together a scant 10 years so far. Despite their precipitous and rash behavior in getting hitched, I think they'll make it."

Paul

ACA Members: Don't let us overlook your announcements!

If you have something you'd like to announce in the newsletter, e-mail the editor at jillf@austin.rr.com

Math porno not likely for virgin agnostic

By Mary McManamee

“Before they put me under, I’m going to get involved in everything there is to get involved in. That’s what I want from life. I don’t intend to stand by and be a spectator.” – Madalyn Murray O’Hair, *Playboy* Magazine interview, October 1965

This is not an interesting column unless you want to hear about “math porno.” Whew, there are two words you’ll never see together again (not even in this column, damn) but consider them your teaser. OK?

Since you’re still with me—my God, you’re such a pervert! See, it’s great to be an atheist because you can freely say the G-word in a sexual context without frowning like you just ate some Heinz tartar sauce that tastes like sour mayonnaise. Your fellow ACA member and my boyfriend, Tim Burnett, will hopefully appreciate this nasty food example which he shared with me today—I love you, Honey!

Some folks think that atheists are heathens who are destined to rot in eternal damnation. I think that hell is really the answer to an algebra equation but after giving very little thought to either concept, I’d like to share this tale with you.

My second boyfriend was a Palestinian named Mohammed. Our relationship is ancient history now—much like the Egyptian pyramids where he once invited me to go on a summer holiday. He was 32. I was 18. We met in the tutoring lab at the ACC Northridge Campus and when it came to helping us solving math problems, he was no less than our prophet. In addition to tutoring, he was working on his Ph.D. in Petroleum Engineering at UT. I was one year outside high school, still living with my folks and studying algebra to get enough credits to transfer to UT and do the ever-popular “something else.”

On the first day we met, he helped me balance an equation (no pun intended). Really, I’m talking about math here, folks—Jesus H. Christ, I adore how your mind works! One day, we were all alone working in the lab and I blurted out, “You look like Billy Crystal!”

“Who?”

Have you seen the movie, “*When Harry Met Sally?*”

“What? No.”

“You knowwwwwwwww,” I persisted. Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan. You look just like Billy Crystal. You look like him, and you sound like him, too. I can hear you saying, “You look maaaaaaahvelous.” Although he was taller than Billy and had much curlier hair, they really did sound and look alike.

I giggled and he stared blankly at me for a split second. His eyes met my gaze and with a distinctly flat reply his oh-so-suave accent made

me melt, “I’ve never heard of him.”

Ouch! What a blow to my fantasy! I wanted to cry out: “But, Moha! You’re so funny, just like Billy! Can’t you see that? You make me laugh all the time!”

Alas, he could not be my personal stand-up comedian. I would have even settled for Billy during his *Soap* years but it’s too painful to be the only one who gets the joke.

And then there was Islam. Mohammed would pray five times a day and would never eat pork. He also told me a little about his family and how when he was a teenager, they were kicked out of their home by Israeli soldiers. Mohammed said that for a long time he was angry enough to stay and fight for Palestine and their home but decided that there was no point at all except death.

I would ask him how any woman could ever wear a veil without losing her dignity. He said that only some Koran interpretations make it disrespectful and many times women actually enjoy wearing the Hijab. “You should talk to my ex-wife,” he would say. “She actually enjoys it.”

I never did get the chance to ask her but the idea made me think about religion. At the time we met, I was a devout agnostic. I say this because the fence felt very comfortable and being an atheist meant nothing less than hating believers—at least this was my fear. All I had to do was think about Madalyn Murray-O’Hair and her rants against religion. I wasn’t so sure that I didn’t agree with her but I couldn’t decide. It was all so scary and endless like Medusa had her snakes snaring my thoughts and I would surely succumb to stone.

When I told my parents that he had invited me to Egypt and had even agreed to buy the ticket, they refused to let me go. They said it was too dangerous and my gut told me they were probably right. We argued but it didn’t take long for me to acquiesce. For one thing, I didn’t have a passport and had been no further away from Austin than New York City. I’d also only known him three months even though we had spent hours kissing at his apartment and in his car. I was still a virgin and was looking for the man I love. Perhaps I was also looking for Mr. Ideology, too. There was no choice but to break up. As with many coordinate graphs, sometimes points are parallel. Besides, I could never wear a headscarf unless I was Tippi Hedren driving a convertible in Alfred Hitchcock’s, *The Birds*.

I knew that my parents loved me even though they may have been overreacting to all the sinister possibilities our minds can conjure when we think about the Middle East as CNN news footage.

I told Mohammed that our beliefs were just too different and he said that he understood and would bring me some earrings from Egypt. The semester had ended and he called me about two weeks later and said that he wanted to give me the gift. I told him that I was very sorry but I could not accept and to please not call me anymore. I never saw him again.

The dawning of the age of hysteria

By Jeff Jones

*I'm just an American boy raised on MTV
And I've seen all those kids in the soda pop ads
But none of 'em looked like me
So I started lookin' around for a light out of the dim
And the first thing I heard that made sense was the word
Of Mohammed, peace be upon him*
- John Walker's Blues by Steve Earle

The above lyrics are from a song off a yet-to-be released album called “*Jerusalem*” by alternative country artist Steve Earle. The song is told from the perspective of John Walker, also known as the “American Taliban” who recently pled guilty to various charges stemming from his conduct as a member of the Afghanistan military. Earle chose to try to get inside Walker’s skin in order to better understand what would lead an American child, raised in affluence, to reject not only the religion of his family but the very country that embraces that faith so overwhelmingly. What led John Walker to Afghanistan and why? It is a time-honored literary technique to write from the perspective of a character in an attempt to comprehend the process that leads to such infamy.

What does any of this have to do with atheism? Very little directly, but the reaction to this song in the country music community has much to do with the emotional state of a wounded country. A Nashville radio talk show host named Steve Gill latched onto this song as soon as advance releases of the album became available. Gill claimed that the song glorified and sympathized with a traitor and likened Earle to “Jane Fonda and John Walker and all those people who hate America”. His remarks were picked up across the country by such media outlets as CNN.com and MSNBC. Although the life of the story in the national media was short the discussion in the country music community was much more robust and disturbing.

On rec.music.country.western, an Internet newsgroup, I have participated in numerous discussions about a variety of subjects including, but certainly not limited to, music and its effect on and relationship to our community. Anyone who has ever participated in an online discussion group knows that, with time, it becomes simple to recognize the folks whose opinions are rarely worth reading let alone discussing, those that sometimes have something valuable to add, and the few people whose opinions you greatly respect. The discussion of Earle’s song degenerated almost immediately to calls for a boycott of his music, talk of lining up to kick his commie ass, and the bizarre opinion by more than one person that since Earle lived in a country that guarantees free speech he should use more discretion when using this right. Even some of those who I greatly respected attacked Earle in what can only be called a rage. This all happened before any of us had not heard the song in question nor had we heard from Steve Earle himself. In fact, we

didn’t even have access to the lyrics of the whole song, just a few lines that Steve Gill chose to use in his tirade.

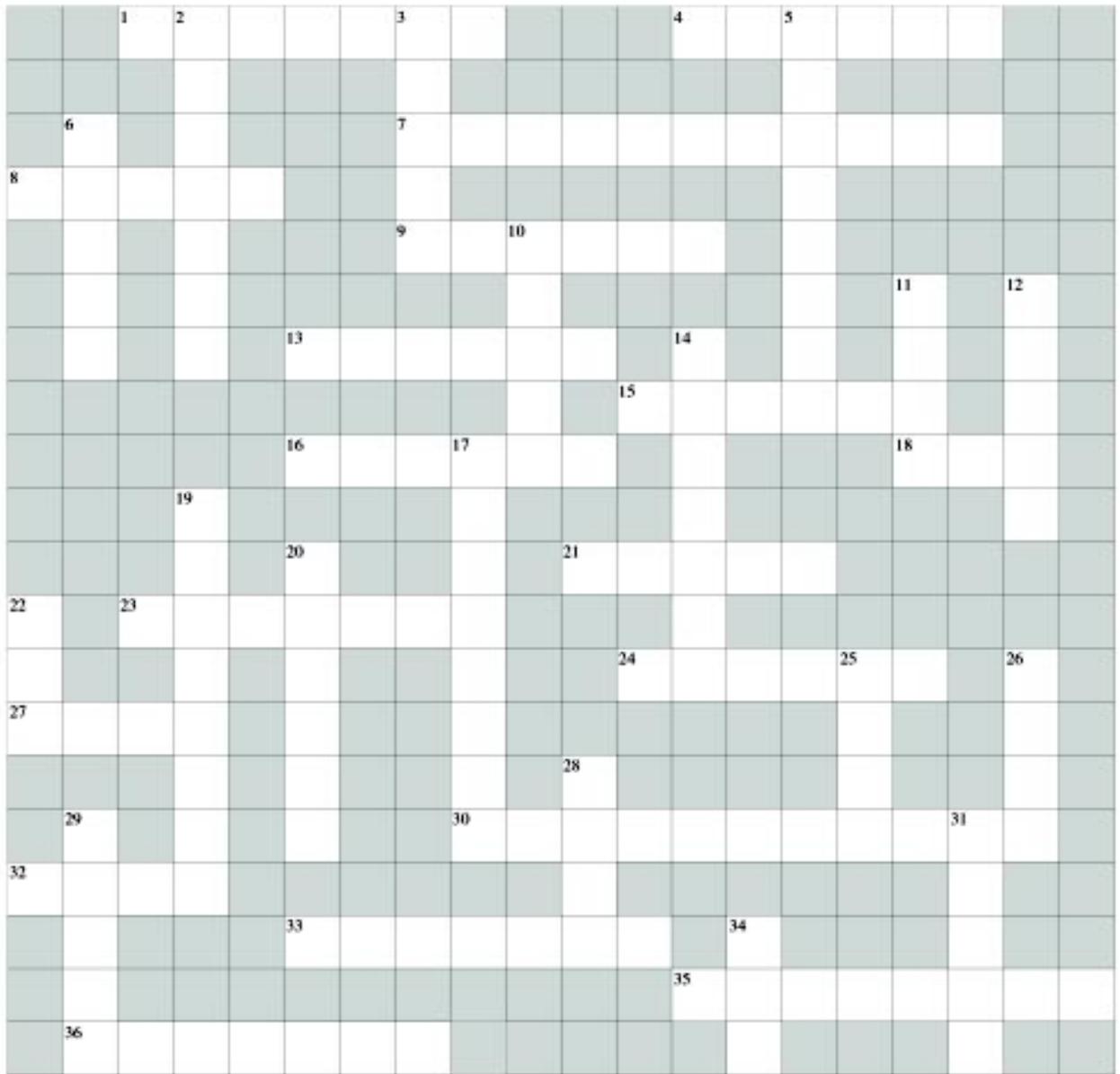
The Earle discussion was mild in tone compared to the discussion in the same newsgroup on the subject of the court decision on the Pledge of Allegiance. Being the group nonbeliever, at least the only one that is aggressive about it, I received much verbal abuse including being called a communist, troll, homosexual and, most often, anti-American. Most of us have grown used to having our patriotism questioned since 9/11 due to our lack of belief by a variety of politicians, talk show hosts and the general public. However, when this abuse comes from people whose opinions you have grown to admire, if not agree with, it hits a bit harder. The irony of the situation is that the majority of this abuse came from people who had not only failed to read the ruling, but did not even understand the legal aspect of the law. These folks acted from a new and pervasive force that has invaded political discussion in the United States since 9/11. They were acting from hysteria.

The reaction to the events of 9/11 ranged from justifiable rage to shocked silence and steeled determination. We came together as a country in support of our President and our nation no matter our political views and religious or philosophical beliefs. As atheists we felt the sting of being denied the chance to grieve with our fellow countrymen when virtually every national observance of 9/11 was seeped in religion. This was especially difficult for us to bear when many of us felt, and rightly so, that religion was one of the primary causes of the events of that day. But we remained respectful of the beliefs of the majority even as patriotism was linked with god-belief. We looked to others of our ilk for comfort and a sympathetic ear hoping the intolerance of our countrymen would pass when their grief subsided. Then the pledge ruling came and it became clear that irrationality and intolerance were not a passing anomaly but, unfortunately, the state of attitude toward dissent in our country.

We did not deserve to be vilified as we were after the pledge ruling. We are good and loyal Americans who love our country and the freedoms it provides us. We have fought and died in its wars. We have stood up for women, minorities and even the religious in order to protect and keep the rights of all Americans. The pledge ruling provided us with a glimpse of the dangers we face when hysteria passes for political discourse in a nation. Hysteria brought us Japanese internment camps and McCarthyism and similar atrocities could very well happen again if we are not vigilant in our opposition to it. We can no longer afford to assume that the current climate will change if we wait long enough. We must take on hysteria wherever we find it. We must stand against it whether it is directed at atheists or middle-easterners or anyone who is being targeted by intolerance. Or even when the target is country singers whom you have never heard of.

Crossword Puzzle

by Tim Burnett



Across

1. Texas _____ Network
4. Fundies schooltime desire
7. Not a science, despite fundy wishes
8. Can we stomach this lecture meeting place?
9. TV show Co-Host: _____ Wagner
13. super_____ theory, topic of ACA lecture on physics
15. French mathematician and gambler?
16. Author: "Origin of Species"
18. Audio show Co-Host: Jeff _____
21. Jack _____; wacky publisher of Christian pamphlets
23. To Muhammed, an unbeliever
24. TV show Co-Host and Archivist

27. Unconventional religious group
 30. Hubbard's Dianetics "religion"
 32. Korean religious leader
 33. Webmaster and Audio show producer: _____ Glasser
 35. "There are no atheists in _____"
 36. Publisher of Skeptic Magazine
- ### Down
2. UT prof, lectured on Milton
 3. _____'s Razor
 5. Does not believe a god's existence can be proven or disproven
 6. Xian hoax, Shroud of _____
 10. The Amazing _____; offers \$1M reward to any proven psychic

11. How John Edward reads ("Crossing Over" host)
12. Round treat for ACA
14. Author: "The Blind Watchmaker"
17. Late atheist baseball icon
19. "God does not play dice with the universe"
20. ACA member; UT professor; puppet-master and jam-session host; Paul _____
22. ACA Co-Chair: _____ Farrow
25. The Problem of _____
26. Audio Show Co-Host: _____ McManamee
28. ACA Newsletter Editor (first name)
29. Mark Loewe wants schoolkids to keep
31. Late paleontologist and evolutionary theorist
34. What we don't believe in

-Answer key on page 8-

The Atheist Community of Austin is a member of Atheist Alliance, Inc., an organization of independent religion-free groups and individuals in the United States and around the world. AAI helps democratic, atheistic societies become established and grow and to work in coalition with like-minded groups to advance rational thinking through educational processes. AAI provides us with periodic articles for publication to our membership. To find out more about Atheist Alliance, Inc., visit www.atheistalliance.org.

Shifting gears at AAI

By Mynga Futrell

Marie Castle, who has been sharing the Atheist Alliance International's co-presidency with Bobbie Kirkhart, is leaving her leadership post (effective September) and thereby bringing to a close the recent state of affairs. (In March, the AAI board had elected both persons to share the presidency.)

There is much to show for Marie's tenure in leadership. She leaves in her wake a coalition that has been growing and developing rapidly. The Volume 1, No. 1 issue of *Secular Nation* magazine records ten member societies in the Alliance. That year was 1994 (when Marie shared the presidency with Christos Tzanetakos). Eight years later, the number has quadrupled. Membership now includes groups in several other countries.

Bobbie, who will be taking up the reins as AAI's president, is looking ahead. Of the changeover, she says: "Building on a strong foundation, the AAI will continue to grow. I can never replace Marie Castle's hard work and determination, but I have seen so much talent and dedication in this organization that I'm certain I'll have a lot of help getting us through this transition and into an even brighter future."

With AAI's gear-shifting taking place, the transition is a very opportune time for reexamining both the organization and its "strong foundation".

I found that a good place to look for a capsule summary of the Atheist Alliance International is inside the front cover of any recent issue of *Secular Nation* (AAI's quarterly publication). The wording of the depiction in the spring 2002 issue reveals the gist of what AAI is about and indicates how AAI is unique among atheist organizations:

"(It) is an organization of independent religion-free groups and individuals. Our primary goals are to establish strong, democratic, atheistic societies in every state and to advance rational thinking through educational processes. All income goes to public outreach projects and helping mem-

ber groups grow in strength and numbers. We have NO paid staff. Our members run the Alliance. Together, we make all the decisions and do all the work... The Alliance sponsors annual conventions, publishes *Secular Nation* magazine and *The Freethought Directory*, maintains a web site that hosts member societies' web sites free of charge, and has a national distribution network for atheist videotapes on public access TV."

It's easy to see that the organization has come a long way without losing its fundamental character. There is a sound (and unique) base on which to build further. Indeed, AAI's organizational structure, erected on autonomous member societies, is a somewhat distinctive design for an atheist organization.

The Alliance arrangement allots to local member societies the voice and impetus of the organization. Each *member society* chooses its representative(s) who serve on the AAI Board of Directors. These Directors decide what the Alliance does. In this way, the member societies govern the Alliance. This inherently democratic design reflects a fundamental dynamic of the Alliance—it exists *because* individual atheists have joined *local* organizations. The volunteer nature and democratic character of the Atheist Alliance offer hope of on-going vitality.

With the many challenges facing us worldwide, there is no better time than now to act on the ideals of volunteerism and democracy built into this singular atheist association. It will be up to the member organizations themselves to supply the stamina to ensure the continued success of this volunteer organization. It is important to have "secular nation" be more than just two words on the cover of a magazine. Common goals of education and activism for a better, more rational secular society must drive our cooperation.

Editorial Cartoon

By Phil Amador

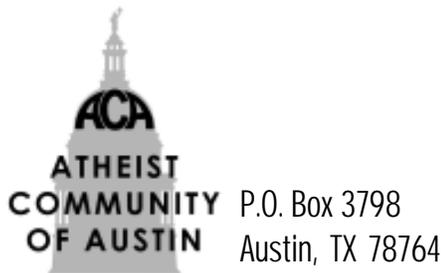


ACA Blood Drive



ACA co-chair Michelle Gadush “gives ‘til it hurts” at ACA’s blood drive on July 27. Six ACA members turned out to give blood at the Central Texas Regional Blood and Tissue Center. The staff was very appreciative of the donation and we enjoyed the opportunity to eat Fig Newtons and drink orange juice for a good cause. ACA sponsors several blood drives every year, so stay tuned for the next one!

Crossword Puzzle Answer Key



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Atheist Community of Austin.

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Contributing Writers for This Issue:

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Articles, reports, and letters to the
editor are always welcomed.

Please write to jillf@austin.rr.com.

Opinions expressed in *The Atheist* are those of
the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the
views of the Atheist Community of Austin.