Howdy! Well here’s our second issue of the new Atheist Community News. In this issue, a larger issue than the October issue, we talk about Atheist Volunteerism, we feature a book review by one of our ACA members, another Atheist Testimonial from one of our members, and some updated information about Godless Gamers, which was blatantly missing from our last issue. We also commemorate a wonderful accomplishment for the ACA. In November of 1996, the ACA convinced then Austin Mayor Bruce Todd to create and enact an official proclamation in support of state-church separation! There’s a photograph of the event in this issue, and a reprint of the proclamation itself. Obviously we’re real proud of that.

We’ve also decided to keep pertinent information about our social events in every issue, to make sure that our members and also non-members who are reading this know about our social events. We Atheists are often told that we don’t do much as a group, or that we shouldn’t, so there! We’re one of the most active local Atheist groups that ever existed. As I said in the last issue, I intend to make ours the finest local Atheist group newsletter around. But we need help with that. If you’d like to write an article for this newsletter, you can send it to us at: joezamecki@hotmail.com

Thanks and enjoy! :o)
The Atheist Community of Austin is a local non-profit educational 501(c)3 organization founded in 1996, and is affiliated with American Atheists Inc., the American Humanist Association, and the Council for Secular Humanism, and is a member group of the Atheist Alliance Intl.

The ACA is a democratically run organization. Board Meetings are held every second Sunday of the month, and all members are welcome to attend, but only board members may vote. Board elections are held every year in May.

Regular membership in the ACA costs just $24. per year, and the membership year begins in March. You can join anytime though. We also offer student, family, senior and life memberships.

The ACA hosts a monthly lecture at the Austin History Center at the corner of 9th St. and Guadalupe St. This is a community service, and a means of disseminating information and ideas of interest to Atheists and the greater Austin community. Lecture topics usually focus on core areas of Atheist interest such as science, skepticism, the impact of religion, philosophy, church-state separation and community activism. Lectures are scheduled on the 3rd Sunday of every month starting at 12:30 pm in the “Reception Room.” Admission is always free.

Our November lecture will be held on November 20, 2005, and the speaker will be Renae Hellman and the topic will be The American Atheists Organization: Its Past, Present and Future and the Benefits of Affiliation. Renae Hellman is the Texas State Director of the American Atheists. (See http://www.atheists.org/tx/). Renae has a Bachelor of journalism and a Master of Arts in Education as well as two teaching certifications. She currently works as a Systems Analyst for the No Child Left Behind division of the Texas Education Agency. She has been a member of AA for only two years but is no stranger to fighting for worthy causes. She joined AA to take advantage of its talent and resources in her fight for separation of church and state, as well as to get to know more people like her. Just recently, AA helped her and her son fight the JR ROTC program at his high school and its harassment against those who were not Christian. Renae will talk about the history of American Atheists, some of the lawsuits it has brought forth (both successes and failures) and how being an affiliate of AA can benefit both ACA and AA. She also has an article in this issue of our newsletter about Atheist volunteerism.
Editorial...

Your Editor on some

ACA Social Events

Last month, October, the Atheist Community of Austin held yet another blood drive. It didn’t get mentioned in the Atheist Community News because by press time, I wasn’t aware of it! Anyway, giving blood is a real good idea, and we Atheists like to help out in general.

I remember back in the late ’90’s (yes the ACA has been around a while) saying to the group, “Hey let’s have a blood drive!” Again, I have to brag a bit by saying that I organized and participated in the very first blood drive the ACA ever had. I think all of two members gave blood that day. Well it was a start, and a real pleasure telling the staff there that we’d like to have a blood group account for our local Atheist group. With an account, any member of the ACA can receive blood for free, to the extent of the amount of blood that the ACA has given in that year. Apparently blood is expensive when you need it added to your body. So that helps, but more importantly, if there is a larger need for blood in the future, among more people, we will have helped by donating something that money can’t buy.

In upcoming issues of the Atheist Community News, we’ll feature information about blood drive dates, times and locations. I always go to the Central Texas Regional Blood Center on North Lamar. They have a very large building, and there is usually not much of a wait there, before getting stuck.

Now many people in our group cannot give blood. That’s ok. My girlfriend Marla has only one kidney and is diabetic, so she’s going to be my cheerleader on the sidelines. If you can’t give blood, please consider helping someone else give. We don’t have a lot of money to donate, but this we can do, and we can help ourselves do it even more.

Also as you may have already heard, our comedy night out has been re-scheduled. George Carlin re-scheduled his live performance at the Paramount theater in Austin due to Hurricane Rita. He does so many shows per year, that the new date is in December. December 30, to be exact. We’ll feature more info about that in the December issue.

For now here’s the info we’ve got nailed down. A few hours before showtime, we’d like to meet at the Hickory Street Bar across the street from the Paramount, on Congress Ave. for dinner. Then we’ll walk across that very important street, and go see the show. George’s show this time is called “Off Base and On Target.” Now as you may remember, George’s shows are always for adults only. They also usually include at least a few minutes of comedy of the Atheistic kind. Here’s a quick quote:

“I wouldn’t mind if those folks in Alabama want to put up a Ten Commandments monument on government property as long as one of those commandments is ‘Thou shalt keep thy religion to thyself!’”

You get the general idea. So if you’d like to go, and need more information about that, please feel free to e-mail me at: joezamecki@hotmail.com. I’ve seen George live twice, and I’m here to tell you, it’s well worth the roughly $38. admission price.

Also if you know of something that the ACA should be adding to its social calendar, please let me or someone in the group know! As you can see, ours is a very active local Atheist group. I often brag that we are among the MOST active local Atheist groups in the nation right now. I’ve visited several other local groups, and I’ve studied many many local group newsletters. Most of them don’t have more than one activity per week on their calendar, but three or four! I’m always very impressed with our group when I look at our social calendar.

One thing we used to do every year has been missing from our long-term calendar, and I have noticed it. The “Life of Brian Party” was an annual event when I left Texas in 1998. We used to gather at one member’s house and watch Monty Python’s Life of Brian, which is another Freethinker’s favorite. It’s hilarious to watch when you’re alone, but when there’s a whole house full of Atheists, well you can just imagine the fun. One year, we made a big event out of it by having games, door prizes and a telescope through which we watched Saturn, complete with bright, clear rings. We also had lots and lots of food and drink, so yes, it was a blast! Several people also brought gourds and sandals, (No! It is a SHOE!) so we could discuss the ramifications of following the holy gourd or the holy ...shoe. The jury is still out on that one...

If we ever do that again, I’m sure it’ll be a blast again, but we need folks to come up with ideas like this. We also obviously need someone with a nice house that can accommodate a whole lot of Atheists. I’d also like to bring and show my video called “When Christians Misbehave.” If you attended my lecture earlier this year, you saw it there. But that’s not enough! I really want to re-edit it and sell it. But that’s for the future, and I don’t know HOW I’d get permission from that graduation prayer-boogie woman to use the golden video of her in something we would sell. And the prayer warriors at the GAMOW! Maybe they wouldn’t mind, but I’m kinda scared to approach THEM! What’s that? You’d like to see my video “When Christians Misbehave?” Excellent... JZ
Atheist Community of Austin Social Calendar for November

Tuesday November 1st  7:30pm  Public debate on the afterlife, Alamo Cinema Draftware, South Lamar - ACA member Paul Wilson vs. A Catholic seminary student. for additional details: http://www.dionysium.com

Thursday Nov 3  7:30 p.m.  Happy Hour at Antonio's Tex Mex

Sunday Nov 6  11:30 a.m.  Regular weekly meeting at Crescent City Beignets

4:30 - 6:00 p.m.  Atheist Experience TV show Host: Matt Dillahunty, Co-host: Don Baker

Topic: Same-sex marriage

Monday Nov 7  7:00 p.m.  Godless Gamers

Thursday Nov 10  7:30 p.m.  Happy Hour at Antonio's Tex Mex

Friday Nov 11 All day, Atheist in Foxholes Day, Washington DC www.atheistfoxholes.org

Sunday Nov 13  10:00 - 11:30 a.m.  Board Meeting, begins at 10 a.m.

11:30 a.m.  Regular weekly meeting at Crescent City Beignets

4:30 - 6:00 p.m.  Atheist Experience TV show, Host: Russell Glasser, Co-host: Matt Dillahunty

Monday Nov 14  7:00 p.m.  Godless Gamers

Thursday Nov 17  7:30 p.m.  Happy Hour at Antonio's Tex Mex


4:30 - 6:00 p.m.  Atheist Experience TV show, Host: Russell Glasser, Co-host: Jeff Dee

Monday Nov 21  7:00 p.m.  Godless Gamers

Thursday Nov 24  7:30 p.m.  Happy Hour at Antonio's Tex Mex

Sunday Nov 27  11:30 a.m.  Regular weekly meeting at Crescent City Beignets

4:30 - 6:00 p.m.  Atheist Experience TV show, Host: Russell Glasser, Co-host: Keryn Glasser

Monday Nov 28  7:00 p.m.  Godless Gamers

“Freedom is the distance between church and state.”

Evolvefish.com bumper sticker
ACA Event Details

----Lecture Series We hold our monthly lectures at the Austin History Center, at the corner of 9th St. and Guadalupe St. We hold them on the third Sunday of each month and they start at 12:30pm in the “Reception Room.” Admission is always free, and it’s open to the public.

----Board Meetings We hold our board meetings on the second Sunday of the month, and lately we’ve held them at the very large Schlotzky’s at the corner of South Lamar and Toomey St., just South of Town Lake. That starts at 10:00am and usually lasts till 11:30am. All members are welcome, but only board members may vote at those board meetings.

----Happy Hour! We meet for Happy Hour at Antonio’s Tex Mex on Thursdays, at 7:30pm. That’s on I-35 Southbound side, just South of Research/183 and just North of St. Johns.

----Regular Weekly Meetings We meet regularly every Sunday at 11:30am at Crescent City Beignets, at 1211 West Sixth St. (A beignet is like a square donut with no hole, and they serve a lot more than that.) All Atheists and Atheist-friendly folks are welcome!

----TV Show The Atheist Experience is our tv show. It airs on Time-Warner Cable, public access channel 10, from 4:30pm - 6:00pm every Sunday. It’s a live call-in talkshow, so feel free to call in with comments and questions for the show and their audience. Members of the ACA are also invited to visit the tv studio during the show, as live studio audience members. This show is also repeated, taped, on Tuesdays at 4:30pm on Channel 10. We also need volunteer help on the show from time to time, so if you’re interested in helping out, or if you think you’d like to be a guest on the show, please e-mail: tv@atheist-community.org

----Online Radio Show “The Non-Prophets” is a regular live internet radio show on the Freethought Radio Network. It airs on alternate Saturdays from 2 PM to 3:30 PM (3-4:30 PM Eastern time) at www.freethoughtradio.com. Just click on "Listen". The show is hosted by Jeff Dee, co-hosted by Denis Loubet and produced by Russell Glasser.

----Public Demonstrations Once in a while, we grab picket signs and cameras and hit the pavement in public on issues of importance to us. Usually these can’t be scheduled far in advance, so announcements about demonstrations will likely only be heard at regular membership meetings. The last demonstration we held was at the Texas State Capitol Building on 11th at Congress Ave. We picketed the National Day of Prayer ritual/rally/bad concert held on the steps of the Capitol Building. Around 20 Atheists picketed. It was fun!

----Godless Gamers is held at Russell Glasser’s house, email rglasser@apollowebworks.com for address and directions. We play all sorts of games. Strategy games, board games, card games, role playing games, party games. It just depends on what people bring. Some recent favorites: Siege of Avalon: a board game where all the players work together to fight back the forces of darkness, find the holy grail, and fill the round table with good knights. The interesting part is that there is sometimes a traitor who works against the others. Apples to Apples: A subjective word association game, where players vote on each other’s use of random objects to match a description. For instance, "scary" is matched with "Michael Jackson"; "enormous" with "black holes", and so on.

“Hands that help are better than lips that pray.”
Col. Robert Green Ingersoll
Some national Freethought groups’ upcoming events

The 2006 national convention for the Atheist Alliance will be at the Airport Marriott in Kansas City, where their special room rate for one to four people is $65 a night. Julia Sweeney will be there to accept the Richard Dawkins award. The first freethought lobbyist in Washington, DC, Lori Lipman Brown will speak, and author-activist Fred Whitehead will talk. Atheist Alliance 1-866-HERETIC

According to Ellen Johnson in the American Atheists Newsletter, the 2006 American Atheists national convention will be held in San Antonio, Texas! More details should come soon. For more info on American Atheists: (908)276-7300.

Atheists in Foxholes Day! Join us on Veterans Day, Friday Nov. 11, 2005 on the Mall in Washington, DC as we salute and celebrate ATHEISTS IN FOXHOLES! Parade down the National Mall! Program/Rally of Speakers, entertainment, more! Welcome Banquet (Thursday night, Nov. 10) President, Congressional, and Military leaders are invited to attend and send greetings to this historic gathering! For more info: (908)276-7300

The American Humanist Association’s next national event will be the 2006 AHA CONFERENCE: “The Wave of Reason.” It’ll be the 65th annual Conference of the AHA, and will be held May 11-14, 2006 at the lovely Tampa Airport Marriott in Tampa, Florida.

For more info: Toll free: (800) 837-3792

The Council for Secular Humanism just celebrated its 25th anniversary with a World Congress last month in New York state. As of press time, their website doesn’t list another upcoming national event. But they publish a fine magazine called Free inquiry, and we strongly suggest that all Freethinkers check it out. For more info: 1-800-834-1610
On the right, we have two examples of key chains available in the Products section of our website: atheist-community.org

Also this month we celebrate the nine-year anniversary of our city proclamation. Mayor Bruce Todd signed the proclamation below and made it official. He declared that November 22-29, 1996 be called "Give Thanks for State-Church Separation Week." Yess! Can ya feel it!? From left to right: Kellen Von Houser, Howard Thompson, Austin Mayor Bruce Todd, Don Rhoades, Orin “Spike” Tyson, Joe Zamecki, Terry Gerych, and Ralph Shirley. Of course right after this, the city council held a group prayer. The irony was as thick as Texas Limestone! :o)
Atheist Testimonial

We’d like to feature an Atheist Testimonial in each issue of Atheist Community News. This is just an article written by an ACA member about how they became an Atheist. All ACA members are invited to write their Atheist Testimonial and send it to joezamecki@hotmail.com.

I was raised by my devoutly Christian parents and sent to two private Catholic schools before high school. I don't remember the name of the kindergarten, and it's long since gone anyway, but for grades 1-8, I was sent to Holy Ghost Catholic School, in the Holy Ghost Parish, in the Houston-Galveston Diocese. From the very beginning, Christianity was mandatory for me, and everyone else I knew. I believed it all at first, mainly because I was a child at the time, but also because until I went to high school, I had never met any non-Christians. My religious education was narrowly Christian in scope, to the exclusion of information about other religions and philosophies 99% of the time. We had religion classes where we studied the Bible (Good News Version) and another religion textbook. Religion classes were dominated by blatant Christian indoctrination. Around the time I was in fourth grade, I began to think more critically about religion and the clergy members around me. I asked myself questions about Christianity, instead of asking clergy members or teachers because I knew the questioning was absolutely not wanted. This was made clear to me over the years with the constant push for us students to just believe. The clergy members added to the silence here by making themselves very frightening to the children. This was the old classic tough nun and priest schooling. Our nuns and priests taught classes and made up almost half of the school faculty. They were all on mission directly from Ireland. Now, no offense to Irish people, but these nuns and priests were used to living in Ireland, a land that time seems to have forgotten in regards to individual physical and mental liberty. (It's just a really conservatively run nation, that's all.) Well these were serious Catholic Irish clergy members, and the key word here is: strict. They seemed to be brand new to American-style liberties and free-thinking. All of the physical punishment techniques you've ever heard of were employed by the clergy teachers, but also by the lay teachers. Corporal punishment was a hallmark of Holy Ghost School, when I was there. I was paddled at least five times, beginning when I was in first grade. And it was always for some insignificant infraction. In sixth grade, we were using the Bible more and more in religion classes and in organizing school masses. (Church services were held every Tuesday during school.) We were never required or even asked to read the entire Bible. I found this to be very suspicious, so I read it all. The first time, I didn't understand a lot of the terminology. Then I read it a second time after having learned more about those odd sayings like "...lie with a man, as with a woman," and "cast out." I learned that phrases and sayings like that in the Bible have deeper meanings than their literal words imply. In reading the Bible, I figured out that the Bible is crap. It's not good literature, it's bad. It's not historical, it's mythical. It's not even good mythology. But most of all, it's totally unbelievable. Then in seventh grade, we began to take physical science classes, and that involved the teaching of the theory of evolution. I was inspired by nature to begin with, but this class really put reality into perspective for me. Science class there began just like all other classes throughout the day, with a prayer. Then we sat down and learned about how the Earth is billions of years old, and life has been changing ever since it began here. It was the first school classroom I ever went to that had jars of dead animals all around the room. I thought, HERE is where evidence counts, and questions get answered. In science class we also learned about the scientific experimental method. I eventually got around to putting "God" into the method, and it didn't work. It didn't help me answer anything, and in fact, having "God" in the question at all made the question open and unfinished. I tried to figure out how someone could prove a god exists using this method, and couldn't. I tried to find out who in the world was also trying to apply this method to "God" and I couldn't find anyone who ever did. At least not at the time, and with the biased library in our school. Years of instituted silence, indoctrinated confusion, a serious problem with lacking answers and answers that were lacking, corporal punishment, a terrible playbook and a quick glimpse of how honesty-minded scientists find answers to tough questions... all together convinced me that Christianity is a scam. But at that point, I was just moving from agnosticism to "immature Atheism." I was new to it all and had never read anything positive about Atheism up until then. The Bible is the ONLY book I can credit with helping me become an Atheist. I tried other Christian churches and found the same ignorance, arrogance, and blatant lying in every one of those other churches. I studied other major religions and a few cults, and found the same basic problems in them too. After a while of studying religions, I REALIZED that I couldn't accept any of them. I never chose to become an Atheist, or even to lose my religion. It simply happened. I couldn't help it. My honesty, courtesy of my parents, has prevented me from accepting wild and irresponsible claims like the ones presented by religions. When I realized that I didn't believe in religions' claims anymore, I was about to graduate from that school. When graduation day came, and I walked up to receive my diploma, I remember thinking, "Does this mean we get to meet God now?" I didn't ask it... Of course not. This is the lesson that taught me: If you want something done, and it's important, you need to either do it yourself, or find another human or humans to help. You can't expect for problems to be solved and eliminated by an invisible friend. I'd love to hear from Christians who think they can convert me! Some Atheists don't like that, but I do, now that I'm all grown up and experienced. Please feel free to e-mail me: joezamecki@hotmail.com  Joe Zamecki
W. L. Friedrich’s Fire in the Sea (U. Of Cambridge, 2000) describes the volcanic explosion of 1628 BCE which destroyed the island of Thera and the nearby Cretan Knossos, cultural center of the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean, and in time produced the legend relayed in the Timaeus of Aristocles, or Plato, which we know as Atlantis. It was perhaps in reaction to this cataclysm that the ancient Greeks rapidly developed their extraordinary culture, which included the mathematician and astronomer Pythagoras and the geometer Euclid, whose work formed the basis of today’s physics. Was the event an act of God? Hardly: It was physics’ own “weak force” that is, through radioactive decay in the Earth’s interior, largely responsible for the heating of magma, with the resultant volcanic eruptions.

In The Road to Reality, Roger Penrose, who is Emeritus Rouse Ball Professor of Mathematics at Oxford, describes thoroughly the development of coherent mathematical systems in the attempt to discover the reality of physics. His approach is admirable. Whether introducing complex-number calculus or twistor theory (on which he has worked for nearly a half-century), he presents the necessary equations descriptively, mathematically, and diagrammatically, so that any serious reader can acquire a comprehensive understanding of cosmology.

With wry wit, Penrose chides science enthusiasts such as Brian Greene who claim that string theory is “the only game in town.” In Chapter 31 he points out that supersymmetry can claim little or no physical relevance in the form employed in particle physics and other underlying theories, noting that its chief value is simply to cancel away large batches of infinities in quantum field theory models it subsumes, at the awkward over the years, string theory claimed no fewer than 26 dimensions in order to maintain a quantum-mechanical consistency. Thanks to Penrose’s acute deconstruction, any reader who abandoned theoretical physics in disgust at the appearance of the “multiverse,” the “omnium” notion of parallel universes, can again cheerfully resume the hunt.

In Chapter 34 he lays out clearly what sort of fundamental change in the rules of quantum mechanics is now required, asserting that a physical real process is responsible for consciousness, not the reverse. In his view (pp. 1032f), conscious mentality is not equivalent to Turing’s computational functionalism, commenting “biology seems to be ultimately controlled by mathematics.” He explains on p. 1043, paraphrasing Erwin Schrödinger’s What Is Life? (1944):

Consider, for example, the miraculous way in which a seed can develop into a living plant, where the superb structure of each plant is similar in great detail to each of the others that come from the same type of seed. There is deep underlying physics here, since the DNA that controls the growth of the plant is a molecule, the persistence and reliability of its structure depending crucially upon the rules of quantum mechanics. Moreover, the plant’s growth is ultimately controlled by the same physical forces that govern the individual particles of which it is composed. The relevant ones are mainly electromagnetic in origin, but the strong nuclear force is vital in determining what nuclei are possible, and therefore what kinds of atoms there can be.

Penrose summarizes in conclusion the exciting developments occurring in the months preceding the book’s publication in February 2005, principally Edward Witten’s application of string-theoretic ideas in the context of twistor theory in standard four-dimensional spacetime physics.

Whether gently admonishing/correcting his erstwhile collaborator Stephen Hawking on the symmetry/asymmetry question or for allowing for a species of divine influence, or mathematically demonstrating the flaws in the anthropic principle, Penrose’s gentlemanly style is exactly what we would expect from one of our greatest living scientists.

And what of Schrödinger’s cat? As long as it continues to dash round in a circle in its box, increasingly gaining angular momentum and avoiding spin, it will do just fine, thank you.

Time was when the Knopf imprint guaranteed a near typo-free reading experience. But this excellent book was clearly rushed through the press, and I must fault the publisher for failing to correct the hundreds of keyboarding mistakes that sully its pages. Nevertheless I highly recommend The Road to Reality.
The Face of Atheism: What does it look like?

By Renae Hellman

Texas State Director of the American Atheists

“But you don’t look like an Atheist!”

As absurd as this statement seems, it is a response I often receive when people learn I am an Atheist. I must admit, part of me wants to play with their heads and tell them that we take on a human form after leaving our home planet in order to remain undetected until we take over the world. However, knowing how easily led most christians are, I stop myself in order to avoid a “War of the Worlds” type of panic.

Instead, I dig a bit deeper and ask myself, “What is the face of an Atheist? What stereotypes exist that we must overcome?”

Stereotypes are assumptions made and proliferated among the ignorant. We acquire stereotypes through our family, friends, school, environment, etc. and maintain them until we educate ourselves to the vast diversity of this world. I remember assuming that everyone except me was christian when I was young and ignorant. I was raised in an upper-middle class, mostly white, protestant, conservative neighborhood. It wasn’t until I began my college career that I came to the realization that not everyone was christian.

Education and worldly experience can break stereotypes. However, before a stereotype can be broken we must first ask what does an Atheist look like through a theist’s eyes? According to the many christians, we are immoral, cold, uncaring, selfish, deviant monsters that are out to ruin the “fabric of society.” In other words, they believe we are the exact opposite of them. How did this stereotype ingrain itself into our culture? Through fear, ignorance, and a really good PR campaign.

Despite the fact that christians have a long history of violent, abusive, selfish, and immoral behavior, they have been very successful in establishing the myth that acts done in the name of their god are always good. Through the years, the religious have spread the propaganda that those who do not believe in god are bad people who will be tossed into the fiery depths of hell after death. The religious seem untouchable, especially during times when fear and ignorance allow people to believe their god is angry and is making them suffer through bombings, earthquakes, hurricanes, and other natural or man-made disasters.

How do we break through this ignorance and remove the stereotype placed on Atheists? How do we make people see that Atheists are educated, intelligent, thoughtful, and caring people who have morals, family values, and feelings for their fellow human beings and their country just like everyone else?

What we need is to build a better public image through a positive public relations campaign. We need to be seen and heard by the public – not just when we are protesting or “complaining,” but when we are helping others, doing good things, and being a part of the community.

Atheist volunteerism

Volunteering your time “in the name of Atheism” is a great way to positively promote Atheism, build good relationships, and lift our visibility at a grassroots level. And, with a well planned media plug, volunteerism can raise awareness and change the way we are seen by the masses.

If we want to change the public’s perception of us, we need to get out into the communities at a local level. However, this means more than just manning the standard information booths orbannered tables and handing out pamphlets at local events, but also by showing a presence in the community. Atheists need to be seen as regular people who want to be a part of the fabric of the community. Doing so will gain more local influence for Atheist groups.
Some Atheists who see the need to raise awareness by connecting with the community do so through volunteerism. They volunteer for secular or humanist organizations such as the:

- AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICES COMMITTEE
- AMERICAN HUMANIST ASSOCIATION
- AMERICAN NATIONAL RED CROSS (Founded by Deist-Unitarian Clara Barton)
- AMERICARES
- HANDS ON HUMANITY is a project of the Universist Movement. It is operated by Atheists and other secularists, and is concentrating on the Birmingham, Ala. area. It has applied for non-profit status.
- MERCYCORPS
- NETWORK FOR GOOD (has numerous listings for helping groups, both religious and secular)
- OXFAM AMERICA
- SECOND HARVEST
- UNITED WAY OF AMERICA
- HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES (Our winged and four-legged friends need help, too!)
- PETSMART CHARITIES

When an entire local Atheist organization volunteers time, money, or energy, it is usually a highly successful strategy for the members, the group’s image, and the community. It is effective in three ways: Atheists feel good about being of service to their community; it helps "shy Atheists" socialize with the more active Atheists; and it brings positive public attention for atheists' activities, which can help change people's opinions about Atheists.

When volunteering as a group, it is important to be seen as a group. Always volunteer as a collective and make sure the name of your Atheist organization is displayed prominently using a logo that can be easily read. The logo can be displayed on shirts, banners, signs, etc.

Also, it is important to be a part of a larger Atheist or secular family, such as the American Atheists. This organization is strong in influence and resources, and the staff and their State Directors would be happy to help when and if time permits. It’s been my experience that the people at American Atheists are devoted to the cause and always willing to help a fellow Atheist whenever possible.

We must find ways to break through the negative stereotypes that plague Atheists by employing positive and constructive actions. We must strengthen the position of Atheism at all levels – from local to global. While this goal is huge, it is attainable if we work together and promote Atheism in the community in positive ways.

About the author:
Renae Hellman lives in Austin, Texas and has been a State Director for American Atheists since March 2005. Her activism includes being a voice for school-aged children and teenagers who are subjected to discrimination or harassment because they are Atheists, helping form Atheist and Freethinker groups in local middle and high schools, stopping the JROTC at a local High School from harassing Atheist JROTC students, and writing Senators and Representatives at State and Federal levels as well as editors of area newspapers to raise awareness of Atheist issues.

She began her activism shortly after her own kids started in the public school system. Having two children in the public school system and being a teacher for a short three years inspired her to get much more involved in the Atheist movement. Over the last decade or more, she saw how religion has crept back into the public schools and witnessed educators force feeding religion to their students all with the State Education Agency’s and Governor’s stamp of approval. She felt it was time to stand up for those without a legal voice in hopes that they will help change our tomorrow. By promoting Atheism in a positive manner, she hopes that Atheism will not only be tolerated but accepted – and that future Atheists will not have to endure the hostility and discrimination they face today.
Interview with Det. Sgt. Steve Schlict

A True Atheist in the Hurricane Zone!

What is the extent of your Atheism? In other words, do you consider yourself strong in your convictions on the matter of religion and Atheism? If someone asks you what your religion is, are you honest, up front and firm in your response? How do you usually answer them?

I consider myself a "strong atheist".

In my view, there is simply more empirical probable cause evidence to support the existence of the natural, material universe in plain view. On the other hand, there is no empirical probable cause evidence that any other posited immaterial and unfalsifiable realms and/or beings exist. None.

For me, this evidence also reaches the "beyond a reasonable doubt" level and does not require a possession of absolute knowledge to maintain that strong conviction.

Of course, that conviction certainly applies to even the most generic, vaguely described God.

My own personal atheism is even stronger when dealing with most of the currently popular religions as they provide enough bold claims about their immaterial realms and deities to actually examine and critique. When religious adherents provide specific details and purported qualities, by way of "holy" books and/or authoritative scripture depicting their God, his "biography" and his behavior, I am even more confident in my non-belief. I find that such details are vastly inconsistent with the material natural world as perceived by human understanding of proper behavior, practical interpersonal relationships and perception via the nervous system of the universe in plain view.

As a Gulfport Police Officer, have you ever gotten a problem over your Atheism from co-workers and bosses? How has the Gulfport Police Department viewed your Atheism? Or are they totally aware of your Atheism at all?

I have been very pro-active in replying to religious misinformation about atheism whenever the topic first arises in the course of daily events. My atheism is common knowledge among my co-workers to include the command staff and the community at large. Quite a bit of this knowledge comes from some of my personal workplace displays and my many printed letters to the editor of the local newspaper involving themes surrounding atheism and humanism and personal liberty.

There have been occasions where I have been proselytized while at work by officers, however, most of these encounters have turned into rather polite and informative exchanges and I feel that I may have provided them some improved perspective regarding the issue of atheists and atheism.

I have had very little negative reaction as a result of expressing my worldview.

Without getting too personal, when Hurricane Katrina hit, how were you and your family immediately affected?

Interestingly enough, I have written a chronology of events detailing how we were affected along with some of my perspective as an atheist and a humanist. This chronology will be published in The Humanist magazine for the November/December edition. I understand that it will also be posted in the online version for anyone interested in the full story.

In short, the storm wrecked our home and we were forced to seek shelter in a neighbor's house which fared much better. My neighbor and his family were very kind and generous to us and there really aren't enough words to express our thanks to them all.

After much of the storm had passed, I reported for duty and discovered that we actually were lucky enough to have a basic structure left of our home. That said, it really wasn't safe for my family to remain due to the aftermath conditions along the Mississippi Gulf Coast which was devastated, so I sent them out of state. It was a very emotional parting to say the least. The following nights were spent patrolling what was left of Gulfport and protecting and serving those who remained. Let me just add that I am very proud of the dedication and diligence of every member of the Gulfport Police Department who worked the radios and the streets during this tragic natural event.

During the ensuing weeks, as you worked in that hurricane zone, did you work overtime? Did you have to do some things that police officers usually don't have to do?

We were immediately placed on 12-hours shift without any days off. This was eventually relaxed to allow for one day off a week and now we have the usual two. The 12-hour shifts are still in effect indefinitely as I write this, so the overtime hours have been abundant.
Being a detective, my primary duties remained foundationally the same, which were to process crime scenes, collect evidence and process offenders. Of course, early on we were also involved in search and rescue missions and patrolling for looters and curfew violators. There were certainly occasions where duty became far less adventurous (yet perhaps even more purposeful) such as digging latrines. You have to understand that all basic infrastructure was decimated and we had no electricity, water delivery, or other facilities at that point. There were also many times that we would spend much of our shift disbursing needed aid, food and supplies to those who were unable to seek out these resources. Some of us, myself included, continued to do so even after the end of shift.

As some of you may already know, many atheist and humanist friends from around the country directly donated money to purchase much needed cleaning supplies. These supplies were then driven to my community by atheists who live in Alabama and began to immediately be disbursed as we were unloading them in Gulfport. It was truly a wonderful thing for them to do and they have my lifelong gratitude.

We assume that you also had work to do near or within relief groups who were and still are helping people survive and put their lives back together. Did you see religious help groups there as well, and if so, did you witness any religious activity in, around, or during the helping of people in need?

I did see quite a few aid groups labeled with religious identity who were helping out along side other secular emergency agencies who cared enough to respond. I never saw anything overtly ritualistic imposed upon the view of any citizen or evacuee responding to the various points of distribution (POD) in order to obtain supplies. I was told of a circumstance where a local atheist I know in Gulfport had a negative experience at a POD which was religiously motivated, however, that would be her story to tell.

We know that the Salvation Army and other religious groups are there helping, but we've also heard that some fringe religious groups may have also moved in there to "help." Groups like the Church of Scientology. Have you seen that group there, or any other fringe religious groups there?

I did not personally see them, however, the captain of my division commented to me one day that he saw two members of the Church of Scientology (wearing identifying shirts) at a site. Another local atheist observed them as well.

The main reason why the topic of Atheists in hurricane zones is in the air lately is because Bill Weir, the host of ABC's Good Morning America TV show stated in early September that "there are no Atheists in hurricane zones." We know that's not true, and Bill Weir recently gave an apology for that truly regrettable remark. However the ignorance of many Americans on this issue continues to be fueled by other Americans, including many religious leaders. So have you, an Atheist police officer in a hurricane zone seen, talked to, or worked with any other out of the closet Atheists since the hurricane hit land? We hope an opportunity has arisen for other Atheists there to make their Atheism known, but we also work towards the day when a person's religious or non-religious sentiments are never an issue. For now, we encourage all Atheists to come out of the closet and be heard and counted among the ideologically rational. Either way, you surely weren't alone in your Atheism in that hurricane zone, right?

I am absolutely not the only atheist in this hurricane zone and this incident has actually provided us an opportunity to grow closer together. Another detective in my division is a self-described non-believer and I recently met with Sandra Garcia, the leader of a local atheist meetup group in Gulfport who survived the storm. I have yet to personally meet the group members numbering up to twenty or so, however, you can rely on the fact that I will soon. It is my hope to also reunite with a lifelong atheist friend who lost his home to uninsured storm surge in Long Beach, MS, so that we can work together and get him what he needs.

It also should be noted that the vice president and executive of The Sun Herald newspaper, Mr. Stan Tiner, became interested in the atheist perspective and asked me to come down to his office for an interview.

The results of this very productive meeting can be found at http://www.sunherald.com/mld/sunherald/news/editorial/12870081.htm

Of course, Joe, your emails and that of the other members of atheist and humanist groups all over the world have also provided strong motivation for we non-believers in supernarualism to stay in contact and supply consistent support to one another.

It is my hope that we can continue the community enlightenment regarding atheism and actively and intelligently assert ourselves in refutation of the many misguided notions regarding non-belief in supernatural claims.

We greatly appreciate Det. Sgt. Schlict's hard work, sacrifice and dedication. We also appreciate his taking time out of his busy life to participate in this e-mail interview. If you personally know an Atheist in a hurricane zone, or in a combat zone, please let us know about it. We need to feature more of our people doing the hard work under especially trying circumstances that so many media pundits, politicians, clergy and others say no Atheists are doing. It's a simple matter of getting the message out to the public, though that's not so simple in itself. We already know our people are definitely in those zones, we just need to talk up examples. Not simply to educate the public, but also to remind new Atheists that being an Atheist is a great thing, and that Atheists are some of the greatest humans around.

10.
Atheist Community News

The Newsletter of the Atheist Community of Austin

PO Box 3798, Austin TX  78764