

COWTOWN



HUMANIST

September

2009

The Humanists of Ft Worth meet on the 2nd Wednesday of each month at the Unitarian Universalist building 901 Page Ave at 7 PM



From the Chair

The largest crowd we've had in many months enjoyed the presentation last month by the chairperson of Metroplex Atheists, Terry McDonald. Many visitors came for the first time and the discussion following Terry's talk was spirited and encouraging. There is no doubt that freethinking is spreading and growing, even in north Texas.

Our past two meetings have concentrated on all facets of humanism, all the many variations, its history, its possibilities, its value and contributions to the progress of humankind. It's time now to move on to other subjects.

The topic I want to talk about at our September meeting will be a controversial one and an interesting one to debate, that of the media in this country, its control and its power.

I hope you (and you and you and you) will come and even bring a friend who you think might appreciate a freethinking discussion on a very important subject. Come join people who do not think alike, but who, alike, think. That's WEDNESDAY, SEP 9, 7 P.M. at the Westside UU Church, 901 Page Avenue.



I occasionally attend the weekly gathering of the Metroplex Atheists, held each Wednesday at Gilligan's Bar and Grill 400 E Abrams St in Arlington; time 6:30 PM

Last month Ms Noelle Dildine, was in attendance explaining her organization, Secular Center, headquartered in Houston. see: www.secularcenter.org and it's outreach to the community by offering the services espoused by the religious community. Their motto is "Godless for Good" rather catchy eh what?



From The Sedalia (Missouri) Democrat

T-shirts worn by the Smith-Cotton High School band have evolved into controversy among parents.

The shirts, which were designed to promote the band's fall program, are light gray and feature an image of a monkey progressing through stages and eventually emerging as a man. Each figure holds a brass instrument. Several instruments decorate the background and the words "Smith-Cotton High School Tiger Pride Marching Band" and "Brass Evolutions 2009" are emblazoned above and below the image.

Assistant Band Director Brian Kloppenburg said the shirts were designed by him, Band Director Jordan Summers and Main Street Logo. Kloppenburg said the shirts were intended to portray how brass instruments have evolved in music from the 1960s to modern day. Summers said they chose the evolution of man because it was "recognizable." The playlist of songs the band is slated to perform revolve around the theme "Brass Evolutions."

The band debuted the T-shirts when it marched in the Missouri State Fair parade. Summers said he was surprised when he received a direct complaint after the parade.

Secular kids' camp in Collin County aims to provide questions, not answers

M By AVI SELK / The Dallas Morning News
aselk@dallasnews.com

"Mommy," 5-year-old Joseph recently asked Amie Parsons, "if Jesus was a carpenter and was real, and God isn't real, does that mean Jesus built the schools and buildings?"

Parsons, who describes herself as nonreligious, was delighted by her son's slightly confused question.

"We tell him to ask lots of questions," she said. "We're not real big into telling him what to think or what to believe."

On Sunday, Parsons watched Joseph play with nearly 40 other kids on an 18-acre farm in Princeton that she had helped convert into Camp Quest Texas, the state's first camp for the children of atheists, agnostics and other "free thinkers."

The eight-hour program began with Parsons reading the children the Apache story of fire. She asked the kids to devise their own creation myths.

Joseph, for his part, seemed more interested in playing with farm animals and hurling water balloons at his counselor than in discussing belief systems – and Parsons said that was exactly what she hoped for when she organized the camp.

"Our job isn't to tell children what to think," she said. "It's about opening up their minds and learning how to ask good questions."

The campers, ages 5 to 15, played with llamas and kangaroos, examined fossils and staged their own UFO sightings.

Their counselors refrained from bringing up religion directly, though they encouraged the kids to embrace scientific skepticism.

Many of the parents had more modest goals, hoping their children would have some fun – and maybe make a few friends from among North Texas' small but growing community of nonbelievers.

Forrest Jules, 14, doesn't believe in heaven. The lanky, studious ninth-grader said he wants to be put in the ocean when he dies "so fish will turn my body into a reef – so I can have a purpose."

Forrest was at camp hoping to meet some nonbelievers his age. All his friends in Allen believe in God, he said, and he tries to keep his atheism a secret from them.

"They'd probably avoid me if they knew," he said.

Forrest's 11-year-old sister, whose parents didn't want her first name to be used, has her own dilemma. When she recites the Pledge of Allegiance, she skips over the phrase "under God." This year, she wants to be her school's reporter, but the job would require her to recite the entire pledge on camera.

"I want to do it, but I don't want to be a hypocrite," she said, adding that she hasn't decided what to do.

Another boy, 14, whose stepfather requested his anonymity, started home-schooling this year after enduring years of bullying for his open atheism.

Despite evidence that atheists are multiplying nationwide, they are still widely regarded with suspicion in a country that stamps "In God We Trust" on its currency.

"Americans are more hostile toward atheists than they are towards Nazis," joked Darren Sherkat, a sociologist at Southern Illinois University.

Sherkat said his research shows that nearly one-fifth of Americans report not believing in a god, up from less than 15 percent in the 1980s. Some of those people do accept the notion of a "higher power," he said.

The Dallas-Fort Worth area already boasts a handful of atheist and agnostic organizations – sprinkled among its thousands of churches.

They include the 500-member North Texas Church of Free-thought, which sponsored the camp. Other groups, including the Metroplex Atheists, put up D-FW's first atheist billboards in March.

And Sunday's event is just the latest incarnation of Camp Quest, which has expanded across the hemisphere since the first camp in Kentucky in 1996.

Despite their growing numbers and sense of community, many atheists interviewed Sunday referred to themselves as "closeted" or "underground." Several did not want their full names printed for fear of social or professional repercussions.

They may have good reason to be careful. A 2003 survey by researchers at the University of Minnesota found that atheists were less trusted than people in any other religious or racial minority in the country.

"It's very hard to be a free-thinking parent in Texas, where it's viewed as a moral obligation to put your children in Sunday school," said Zachary Moore, executive director of the Church of Freethought.

Excerpt of Zach Moore's interview in the Dallas Morning News

One of the reasons the NTCOF was formed was to provide a sense of support and community to people who feel isolated because they don't share their neighbors' supernatural beliefs.

Today, your church will host Camp Quest Texas, a summer camp for freethinking kids. Why?

Just as freethinking adults need social support from groups like the NTCOF, our children need it even more. Many of our kids are ostracized at school or in their neighborhoods because their parents are freethinkers, or because they're developing their own freethinking perspective. It can also be challenging to be a freethinking parent when most people assume that you're immoral if you don't teach your children to believe in a god. Camp Quest Texas provides a valuable resource for parents, plus it's full of fun activities for kids that reinforce our freethinking values – science, critical thinking, ethics and religious tolerance.

This Q&A was conducted and condensed by Dallas Morning News columnist Rod Dreher. His e-mail address is rdreher@dallasnews.com. Zachary Moore may be reached at exec@churchoffreethought.org.

I mentioned on at least one occasion my enjoyment of the Minnesota Humanist newsletter—I especially enjoyed this month's effort

See: www.humanistsofmn.org

The Following is forwarded from Terry McDonald, president of the Metroplex Atheists

This email is being sent to the Metroplex Atheist Yahoo Forum and every Texas atheist I can identify in my address book. If you didn't want to receive it, I apologize but I'm trying to get this message to as broad an atheist audience as possible. I apologize, too, if you get more than one copy of it.

I am also sending it to leaders of the DFW Coalition of Reason and asking that they distribute it to their membership.

Victor Stenger, author of *God: The Failed Hypothesis*, *Quantum Gods* and many other books. He's a physicist and a philosopher. He'll be selling and signing his latest book to be released in September, *The New Atheism*.

Dan Barker, author of *Loosing Faith in Faith* and other books. He's the Co-President of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the largest atheist/agnostic organization in the U. S.

Stuart Bechman, the president of Atheist Alliance International. He is a long time atheist activist and has also served on the local boards of Americans United for the Separation of Church & State and the American Civil Liberties Union.

Kathleen Johnson, Vice President and Military Director for American Atheists. She started her career as an atheist activist by founding the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers (MAAF) and serving as the organization's first president.

can't wait to hear all of them speak and I hope I am joined by a bunch of us from North Texas.

Paul Mitchell has asked that I try to give him an estimate of the number of people who will be attending from the North Texas area. He's in the process of trying to get the best deal from several hotels/motels in the area of the convention.

If you think you are going to try to get to the convention please send me an email with "I want to go to the TFC." in the subject box. If you do go, you may be saving money on your hotel bill.

Thank you for your help, Terry

Terry may be reached at:

GreetingCardGuru@Verizon.net

TEXAS FREETHOUGHT CONVENTION
 Bringing together atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, secularists, non-believers and humanists from across Texas!

November 14, 2009
 Saturday, 12 noon - 8 p.m.
 Alzafar Shrine Temple, San Antonio

JOIN US for a day of exciting activities, from inspiring and informative lectures to social events including networking, live music, food, community and conversation with other like-minded freethinkers.

The Texas Freethought Convention is a family-friendly event with plenty of activities for kids of ALL ages!

For more information or to purchase Convention tickets online, visit our website at: www.texasfreethoughtconvention.com

While the shirts don't directly violate the district's dress code, Assistant Superintendent Brad Pollitt said complaints by parents made him take action.

"I made the decision to have the band members turn the shirts in after several concerned parents brought the shirts to my attention," Pollitt said.

Pollitt said the district is required by law to remain neutral where religion is concerned.

"If the shirts had said 'Brass Resurrections' and had a picture of Jesus on the cross, we would have done the same thing," he said.

Band parent Sherry Melby, who is a teacher in the district, stands behind Pollitt's decision. Melby said she associated the image on the T-shirt with Charles Darwin's theory of evolution.

"I was disappointed with the image on the shirt," Melby said. "I don't think evolution should be associated with our school."

Parent Alena Hoeffling said she is infuriated with administration's decision to pull the attire.

"Whatever happened to the separation of church and state," she said.

Hoeffling said she is both a scientific person and a practicing Catholic and enjoyed the "play on words."

"I thought it was funny," she said. "I didn't think much of it."

However, the T-shirt's imagery became a hot topic at a recent TIMPO (band booster) meeting. Hoeffling said that's where she learned the evolution T-shirts were causing a stir.

"Parents were informed the shirts had to be turned in," Hoeffling said. "I couldn't believe it."

Hoeffling said she enrolled her children in public school so they could have choices.

"If I wanted my children to be sheltered, I would have enrolled them in private school," she said.

On Friday afternoon after practice, band members piled the shirts on a table. While most were apathetic about the shirts, others felt the drama surrounding the shirts was unwarranted.

"It's not like we are saying God is bad," sophomore band member Denyel Luke said. "We aren't promoting evolution

." High School junior Adam Tilley said he understood why the shirts were repossessed.

"I can see where the parents are coming from," he said. "Evolution has always been controversial." The 17-year-old trombone player said his parents "didn't care" about the shirt because it was the "name of the band's show."

Senior Drum Major Mike Howard said he was disappointed when he had to return the shirt.

"I liked the shirt because it was unique," Howard said. "The theory of evolution never even crossed my mind."

While Howard was discouraged when he wasn't given a choice whether to wear the shirt, he said he wouldn't want to offend anyone. "Our fans are the community," he said. Summers said a new T-shirt is currently in the design stages, but declined to comment on the image.

"It has to be approved first," he said.

Pollitt said the district would now have to absorb the cost of the T-shirts — \$700 — that would have been paid for by the band parents. Pollitt said an anonymous donor had originally planned to pay half the cost, but declined after the evolution image was placed on the shirts. However, the donor does plan to fund half the price of the new T-shirts.

Sedalia School District 200 Board of Education member Michael Stees said it was unfortunate the T-shirt design was mis-conceived and he hopes the band can just move forward.

"This is an exciting time for the band," Stees said. "They don't need any negativity."

Pollitt said the band's new shirts would be approved by the activities director and administration before being printed.

"We support whatever steps the school district has to take," Summers said.

If you're interested in getting one of the shirts, e-mail Main Street at mainstreet@sedaliamissouri.com. It's also on [Facebook](#).

Outside faith, a rising tide of 'nones'

Updated: September 03, 2009

A few years ago, Tyler Manley would have considered himself a Presbyterian.

If asked about his religion today, he will confess he doesn't have one. Nor does he believe in God.

The United States remains one of the most religious countries in the world, but Manley is part of one of the steadiest trends in the national landscape of faith ... the growing number of Americans who profess no religious affiliation.

Social scientists often call them the "nones" ... a broad category that includes atheists and agnostics, as well as those who believe in a higher power but don't cite a particular faith.

Studies indicate they make up as much as 16 percent of the U.S. population, and researchers expect that the numbers will continue to grow.

"You're just getting a lot of people drifting away," said Barry A. Kosmin, research professor in the Public Policy & Law Program at Trinity College in Hartford, Conn.

For Manley, who studies philosophy at the University at Buffalo, the drifting was the result of understanding that "human conscience comes before religion."

"It's important that you critically examine your own beliefs," he said.

Kosmin's latest American Religious Identification Survey, published in March, estimated the population of U.S. "nones" at 34 million ... roughly 15 percent of the total ... up from 29 million in 2001 and 14 million in 1990.

A survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found that 16 percent of U.S. adults had no religious affiliation. Data from the General Social Surveys indicates that 16.4 percent of Americans are nonreligious, up from 5.1 percent in 1972.

Researchers once observed a familiar pattern of religious disaffiliation among young adults, who then would reaffiliate later on, said Darren E. Sherkat, a sociologist at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale.

But that pattern is breaking down, said Sherkat, who analyzes data from the General Social Surveys.

"We're seeing greater stability of non-affiliation, and we're also seeing greater numbers of parents raising their children without affiliation, which was really quite rare in earlier generations," he said.

Even in the Buffalo Niagara region ... which had the highest percentage of residents in the country adhering to a particular faith, according to a 2000 study by the Glenmary Research Center ... the slippage is evident in houses of worship, where empty pews have led to church closings and mergers.

Fred Mohr's faith journey once meandered through Billy Graham crusades, a liberal Protestant church and an evangelical Christian congregation.

Now "none" applies to him, too.

"If I'm honest, I mostly say I'm agnostic," the Town of Tonawanda resident said.

Mohr, 66, described a slow movement toward his agnosticism and doesn't recall any particular moment when his skepticism of religion set in.

"I still have a lot of respect for the church I belonged to," he said.

And he doesn't think he's all that different from many faithful parishioners.

"There's some people who go to church regularly, and they're basically skeptical, too," said Mohr, who occasionally attends functions at the Center for Inquiry, a national think tank based in Amherst that promotes secular humanism.

Want more? Cut and past the following:

www.buffalonews.com/home/story/783014.html

Hement Mehta, from [Friendly Atheist](#), gave a talk at the [Secular Student Alliance](#) on Atheism and Dating. It's a short talk, but very funny and actually has some decent advice for people who aren't sure how to approach dating without scaring people away with their atheism.

Cut and past the following:

<http://www.examiner.com/x-8776-Boston-Atheism-Examiner~y2009m8d10-Hement-Mehta-on-Atheism-and-Dating?cid=exrss-Boston-Atheism-Examiner>

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