

Grass Roots News

NEWSLETTER OF THE AMERICAN HUMANIST ASSOCIATION CHAPTER ASSEMBLY
Dedicated to Promoting Chapter Development Volume XX, Issue 3, July/August 2005

Albuquerque & the year ahead

Chapter Assembly Chair's Letter
by Robert Finch

Over the past few years the Chapter Assembly (CA) has worked on a number of projects aimed at improving American Humanist Association chapter programs. These projects have included:

- Revising the charter of the Chapter Assembly
- Revising the bylaws of the Chapter Assembly
- Defining policy for handling grants
- Helping with the initiative for Membership Chapters
- Developing policy goals for the chapter programs
- Producing a manual for chapter leaders

The first two items were aimed at growing the entire AHA organization while securing the position of chapters as an integral part of the whole. Contrary to ancient history, the CA isn't seeking to break away from the AHA, which by and large has done a good job for the CA. CA leadership has been working with the staff of the national office in the production of the CA newsletter, Grass Roots News. In addition to being chair of the CA, I've been a member of the AHA board and the Committee of Trustees and Grants (COTG). The CA has also started a group of around 25 people, including some staff members and several honored "alumni" of the Chapter Assembly, called the Chapter Supporters. Last year the Chapter Supporters helped define some of the major concerns of chapter leaders. This resulted in a proposal to subsidize young people's travel to the annual conference, which was under consideration at the AHA 2005 conference in Albuquerque.

There has long been a need for a scholarly journal in which our members could publish suitable articles. For ten years Humanists of Houston published such a journal, Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism. They

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On Writing Op-Ed Pieces

By Amy Collette

One of the best and easiest ways to influence people is to write opinion-editorials, better known as op-eds. Millions of people read the op-eds in their newspapers every day, and much of it ends up influencing opinions and policies. There are many tips for writing them and getting published.

First, some guidelines: keep it short. Editors have only so much space that can be filled. As a general rule, aim for 750 words or less, but check with the individual paper to see what they expect. Since it will be short, every word must count. Try to focus on one single topic or issue. Don't waffle on your position, and avoid the passive tense. It should be bold and passionate, as well as clear. Make your point in the first five sentences of your piece, make your arguments in the body, and then finish with a kicker.

It's worth noting that the "op" in "op-ed" originally stood, not for "opinion," but "opposite." So it's no surprise that editors are looking for opposing views to run on the op-ed page. Just be sure your opposing view doesn't degenerate into a rant. The purpose is to convince readers to draw the same conclusion that you have drawn. Thus an op-ed should be strongly grounded in fact.

Most importantly, keep the op-ed timely. An article written a week after a story has moved on won't be published. News moves fast. If you intend on writing a response to a juncture in the news, send it as soon as possible (usually the same day or the next). For enduring issues you might try to keep three to five pieces ready to go for when the issue reemerges in the public consciousness. A little bit of updating and the piece can be sent off. If an anniversary is coming up, write something topical in advance. Newspapers and press organizations already have obituaries and stories writ-

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AHA Chapterzone

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President's Message

By Bill Potts, President, Humanist Association of the Greater Sacramento Area (HAGSA)

Previously published in Human Interest, HAGSA's monthly newsletter

Unless you're living the life of a hermit, you'll have taken some note of the ideologies of some of the judges George W. Bush has been nominating of late. Given the disregard some of them have for church/state separation, it's worth revisiting the First Amendment.

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof ...

That first statement is commonly known as the Establishment Clause. It neither favors a specific religion, nor does it favor religion over non-religion. Those who insist that America is a "Christian nation" disagree. They believe (or claim to believe) that religion is, indeed, favored over non-religion. If the statement referred to "a religion," rather than just to "religion," their position might possibly be supportable. However, given the extreme care taken by the framers of the Constitution, the omission of the indefinite article was almost certainly a conscious one. Even more important is the omission, throughout the Constitution, of any mention of a deity.

Those who claim to speak for the Christian community (e.g., Rev. Jerry Falwell) point to the "Year of our Lord" reference in the paragraph preceding the signatures to the Constitution as evidence of religious intent. This is as fatuous as claiming that anyone who places AD (Anno Domini) after a date is expressing a religious belief. The former was common practice in the eighteenth Century and is still often used for proclamations and similar documents. The use of AD and BC is common in history texts and elsewhere.

The best response to the views of the "Christian nation" advocates is a very old one. It is contained in Jefferson's famous January 1, 1802 letter to the Danbury (Connecticut) Baptists, in which he said:

Albuquerque & the year ahead *(continued from page 1)*

then proposed that the journal be expanded to cover the whole country. I am happy to say that this is now an accomplished fact, under the continuing editorship of Dr. Marian Hillar. EPH, as it is affectionately known, is being sold by subscription and was available in the bookstore at the AHA conference in Albuquerque and can be found online at www.EssaysinHumanism.org. It is peer reviewed, as is the case for other scholarly journals. The editors, of which I am one, are now calling for submissions for the next edition.

A series of conference sessions on topics of interest to chapters and Chapter Supporters was held on Thursday, May 5, starting with the well-attended Chapter Summit on the Sense of Community in Chapters. It was clear that the overwhelming majority of those attending favored the development of a sense of community. Other sessions included the Grassroots Fundraising Seminar conducted by Roberto Martinez and a presentation on Student Outreach for Local Groups by Lisa Swinehart. Roy Speckhardt and Jende Huang talked about getting the most out of the AHA's field resources. Everyone agreed that these presentations were excellent. Further information on the contents of the sessions can be obtained from Roy Speckhardt at the AHA national office.

The Chapter Supporters meeting consisted largely of a review of the proposal to subsidize young people's travel. The talking continued at the CA business meeting on May 6. As an alternative, Lisa Swinehart asked that the group consider the funding of a student campus coordinator for the Secular Student Alliance (SCA), for which she presented a formal proposal. A third possibility came from Roy Speckhardt, who proposed that the balance of the CA treasury be used to offset young people's membership fees. Some straw polls were taken on these proposals and are detailed in the meeting minutes. In short, it was clear that the SSA campus organizer concept was the most popular and the travel subsidy idea wasn't well received. I promised further investigation by the executive council.

Bernie Schatz presented the treasurer's report. There is an amount of \$119,268.07 being held by the AHA Humanist Foundation as the Fund for Chapter Expansion (FCE). The balance of the CA treasury is being held by the AHA national office and stands at

close to \$4,000. The foregoing discussion raised again the question of what to do with the balance of the CA treasury. This will also have to be readdressed. One possibility is to add it to the FCE.

Paula Rochelle reported for the Committee of Trustees and Grants. She went over the procedures for applying for a grant and gave a short history of the COTG and awards made this year. Other members of the committee were introduced and each summarized one of the grants made in the past year. Paula reported that several grants were made in support of advertising, each with zero success. The committee is considering not accepting grant applications for advertising funds.

Election of officers also took place at the conference. Jack Sechrest was elected vice chair unopposed. Hilton Brown was nominated to the executive committee on an interim basis, pending confirmation by the AHA board. He was then elected secretary by acclamation. Bernie and I are continuing terms as treasurer and chair, respectively.

Jende Huang gave a report on his work as field organizer. The AHA Grassroots Manual has gotten lots of positive comments, including a review in the most recent issue of the International Humanist News. All input from chapter leaders has been positive. Jende asked for specific feedback on the contents of the manual. He also noted a slow demographic shift towards affiliates in the AHA field. In July of 2002 there were nineteen affiliates and sixty-two chapters. The CA now has forty-seven affiliates and sixty-four chapters. Jende announced that he has recently accepted an invitation to serve as a Peace Corps volunteer in Cape Verde on the continent of Africa. He explained that he reached a career goal in his life when he was offered a position at the AHA and could think of nowhere else that he would rather have spent his past three years. We are sorry to see Jende leave but we all wish him every success.

The Chapter Supporters had some discussion at Albuquerque on directions for next year. I expect to continue work on the AHA board, aiming to clarify the AHA's Strategic Plan and am looking forward to working with the new CA executive council members, including Jack Sechrest, Beverly Church, and Hilton Brown. Jack has indicated some interest in working on

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Mayor Street: Tear Up that BSA Rent-free Agreement!

By Margaret Downey

Previously published in the May/June 2005 issue of The Greater Philadelphia Story, the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia (FSGP) bimonthly newsletter

Question: What does an activist group do after conducting an unsuccessful letter-writing campaign requesting that the mayor of Philadelphia either start charging the Boy Scouts of America rent or kick them out of a city owned building at 22nd and Winter Streets?

Answer: Hold a public demonstration, hand out protest literature to passersby, and conduct media interviews with any journalist who covers the event!

That is exactly what representatives from the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia (FSGP), Scouting For All (S4A), and Delaware Valley Americans United for Separation of Church and State (DVAU) did on October 19, 2004. The demonstration was held at Dilworth Plaza, located next to the Philadelphia City Hall building.

A representative for S4A, Assistant Regional Director Lori Martin, told journalists who attended the demonstration that “BSA’s sweetheart deal with the City of Philadelphia must end.”

Martin went on to say that there are many other non-discriminatory youth groups located in the Philadelphia metropolitan area that better deserve the use of a rent-free facility. Martin called for the immediate collection of rent from the BSA or the immediate eviction of the BSA from the city-owned building they have occupied since 1928.

During an interview with a CNN journalist, DVAU President Janice Rael explained the danger of using public money to finance a private religious group such as the BSA. Rael said, “If taxpayer funds and city

wealth are used to support any youth group, it should not be a group whose policy is to discriminate against minorities. The Boy Scouts of America should not receive special benefits from any government branch as long as it retains its biased policies.”

Margaret Downey, FSGP president, told reporters that the City of Philadelphia’s 1982 Fair Practices Ordinance requires that organizations that use city-owned property must not practice discrimination of any kind. Downey contends that the BSA should not only begin paying full market value rent for the building they occupy at 22nd and Winter Streets but that the BSA should also pay back rent effective on the date that the US Supreme Court recognized them as a “private organization.”

That date is June 2000,” Downey stated. “The citizens of Philadelphia have suffered mass transit fare hikes, library hour cut-backs, cuts to city employee benefits, and many other budgetary difficulties. It is time for the BSA to pay their own way,” she added.

The demonstration was noticed by many passersby and free literature was accepted by people who were interested in knowing how they could stop the BSA from taking advantage of taxpayer dollars—all the while in violation of anti-discrimination laws as well as policies and traditions firmly established in the City of Philadelphia.

Downey followed up the demonstration by personally visiting the office of Philadelphia City Council President, the Honorable Anna C. Verna. The visit proved fruitless. Verna was unconcerned and uninterested.

The next step is to make an attempt to speak about the issue at a city council meeting. Downey is gathering names of those who want to speak about this issue. Please contact her as soon as possible if you are interested in testifying in front of the Philadelphia City Council.

Margaret Downey

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~~ Don't miss the March on Washington Against Over Incarceration~~

Over Two Million Imprisoned - Too Many. August 13, 2005. 9am - 2pm

Lafayette Park, Washington, DC. www.journeyforjustice.org

On Writing Op-Ed Pieces

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ten ahead of time for many occasions and subjects. It's a perfectly appropriate thing to do.

While these guidelines will help you write a good op-ed piece, there are also little tricks to help your article rise to the top and get published. Professional writers encourage people to contact the organization and talk to a few people to tell them that you're sending them an op-ed and what you're writing it about. Such notice increases your chances of getting published. On an enduring issue don't be afraid to be persistent. If one newspaper doesn't print your op-ed for a week, you can send it off to another. Don't give up if you might still get published elsewhere.

The op-ed section is for issues and ideas that aren't covered elsewhere in the editorials or the paper. Editors prefer something they haven't written already or could write about themselves. A good way of doing this is to present a "conceptual scoop," a novel way of seeing an issue. Looking at the news from a different angle can produce an excellent (and publishable) op-ed.

Lastly, although everyone wants to get published in a big-name newspaper, remember that there are thousands of smaller newspapers, magazines, and journals published in the United States. All of them would appreciate a well-written op-ed piece—and there's a lot less competition for those. The New York Times gets around 1,200 submissions a week. A local paper receives far less, though it could be just as influential for its readers.

With these tips, a little persistence, and a bit of luck, you should be able to get op-ed pieces published in the media. Good luck, and happy writing!

Atheists in Foxholes March
November 11, 2005
National Mall, Washington, DC

Speaker Profile

Mel Lipman, President of the American Humanist Association

By Amy Collette

Mel Lipman teaches constitutional law at the Nevada campus of the University of Phoenix and currently serves as the President of the American Humanist Association. Previously he had been a board member of the Nevada Civil Liberties Union, was one of the founding members of the Humanist Association of Las Vegas and Southern Nevada (of which he remains a board member and spokesperson), and was a supervising examiner for the Federal Reserve Board. He is also a Humanist minister licensed in the state of Nevada and a member of the Las Vegas Interfaith Council.

Lipman became involved in the freethought movement after one of his children asked if he believed in God. Currently he hails from Las Vegas, Nevada, his home for the past thirty years. He frequently lectures on church-state issues and on the Humanist perspective. Lipman often makes use of letters to the editor and appearances on talk shows to clarify the Humanist philosophy and change people's attitudes on the community of reason. He declares, "My biggest concern is to counter the propaganda from people who think that people who don't believe in a supernatural being can't live moral, ethical lives."

Mr. Lipman is available to speak on the following topics: "The Future of Humanism," "The Road to Theocracy," "Humanists as Second Class Citizens," "Humanist Manifesto III," "Morality Without God," church/state issues, and any discussion of AHA activities. He is also a licensed Humanist Minister available for all ceremonies in Nevada and possibly other states. He requests no speaking fees but would ask the host to provide an inexpensive motel and airfare. However, he is still willing to speak if the host organization cannot afford to pay.

He can be contacted directly by email at mlipman@americanhumanist.org.

Chapter Leader Profile

Gene Giermann, Prescott Arizona

Gene Giermann:

Former chair of the Yavapai County Democratic Party, member of the State Democratic Committee, former president of the Prescott Astronomy Club, former chapter leader of Arizonans for Death With Dignity, former state board member of Arizonans for Death with Dignity, member of the Diversity Alliance of Yavapai County, activist in Martin Luther King Day celebrations, activist in Cinco de Mayo celebrations, member of the Community Partnership for Comfort Care (end of life issues), a member of the American Civil Liberties Union.

-How were you first exposed to Humanism?

As a child, I was fortunate to be raised by a Roman Catholic Republican mother and a Methodist Democrat father. Due to the differences, I learned early on that there was more than one side to any story. As a result, I grew up to be an Atheist Libertarian. Libertarianism probably was a defining time in my life. It taught me that we all have a right to pursue our own goals without infringing on others.

-How were you first exposed to the group?

There was an article in our local, right-wing newspaper stating that there was a Humanist group forming in Prescott. I felt it would be a good opportunity to get involved with many nonbelievers. As a former member of American Atheists I felt they were too strident for my tastes. Again, they acted like they had a direct pipeline to the truth. I felt that Humanism was a much gentler group and I wanted to see what they had to offer.

-What keeps you involved with the group?

I thoroughly enjoy the discussions we have. We bring an extremely diverse knowledge base and talk through issues openly without rancor. We can look at issues from all kinds of perspectives and it gives each of us an increased understanding of these issues.

-How did you get into a leadership position?

The opportunity occurred and I am not shy about assuming a leadership position. I detest dictatorships

and welcome each and every voice in our discussions. Seldom do we get opinions that are not in the mainstream of Humanist thought.

-What are your goals for the group?

I wish to keep our discussion group going. We are community activists in various areas and the group opinion seems to favor social activism in the community in our respective groups and not evangelizing Humanism to the community as the Humanists of Prescott.

-Where do you see the group in five years?

I believe we still will be a viable group with new folks joining. Growth seems to be part and parcel of any organization. We will continue to be community activists. I am past chair of the county Democratic Party and will continue to be active in politics.

-Have you faced any challenges as group leader?

We have some who feel we should be out in the community proselytizing our beliefs and others who feel we should remain a discussion group. Our big challenge is to get those who wish to proselytize to become active in other community groups.

-What are some things you have learned, or advice you'd like to give to fellow group leaders?

My greatest fear is that we will be branded as obstructionists if we fail to lead by example. We have to be activists in the community. We are involved in the GLBT community, leaders in the Diversity Alliance, leaders in environmental community, leaders in the political community, leaders in the scientific community, members formed the local Planned Parenthood organization, formed the local ACLU, animal rights activists, active in growth issues in the community, and many other areas.

I believe we have a strong base with a great deal of pride in our accomplishments in the community and act as a positive influence as opposed to being against what the right proposes. Act not react.

Albuquerque & the year ahead

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a Humanist curriculum, perhaps similar to the one given in the AHA Grassroots Manual. Hilton has suggested that he could work on the procedure for designating representatives to the annual CA meeting. Please let Jack, Hilton, and myself have your feedback on these subjects as well as on the other issues mentioned in this report. I should also be interested in having suggestions for annual meeting session topics of interest to chapter members.

For their help over the years, I want to offer special thanks to Charlie Archibald, Bette Chambers, Edd Doerr, Arthur Jackson, Mel Lipman, Lois Lyons, Phil Paulson, Paula Rochelle, Bernie Schatz, and several others. Among the staff I want to thank Tony Hileman, Roy Speckhardt, and Jende Huang for their tireless efforts.

Robert D. Finch

Who's Who in Humanism?

You are! The AHA has created a perpetual archive of the life stories of members, recording how Humanism has been central to their lives. The goal is the preservation of the institutional history of the American Humanist Association as seen through the lens of its individual members, benefactors, leaders, and awardees. Sponsored by the Humanist Foundation of the AHA, our endowment fund, the Heritage Program retains the personal histories of our most valued resource, our members themselves.

Participation is as easy as writing your memoirs. You may use all the pages you require. If you have access to electronic submissions, we recommend MS Word or similar documents. If you wish, you may attach your curriculum vitae as well as any labeled photographs of yourself, of Humanist events you have attended, group photos, and so on. Nothing will be quoted without prior express permission during your lifetime, and researchers will be carefully screened to establish their credentials.

Contact the AHA at 1777 T Street NW,
Washington, DC 20009-7125, 1-800-837-3792,
heritage@americanhumanist.org.

President's Message

By Bill Potts, President, Humanist Association of the Greater Sacramento Area (HAGSA)

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'I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between Church & State.'

Jefferson put a great deal of thought into his letter. After first writing a draft, he solicited input from three members of his cabinet, including his Attorney General, Levi Lincoln. Although writing the letter at all, in response to an address of the Danbury Baptists, was politically motivated, it appears to truly represent Jefferson's sincere sentiments. Most people were not aware of the letter until Jefferson's writings were published in 1853. Twenty-five years later, in 1878, his "wall of separation" statement was cited in a Supreme Court case (Reynolds v. United States), in the following opinion, delivered by Chief Justice Waite:

"... it may be accepted almost as an authoritative declaration of the scope and effect of the [first] amendment."

It was subsequently cited in 1947 and 1948 (McCullum v. Board of Education). A number of Supreme Court justices, including Potter Stewart and the current Chief Justice, William Rehnquist, have taken issue with the use of Jefferson's statement. Stewart objected to the use of a metaphor that was "a phrase nowhere to be found in the Constitution." Rehnquist complains that the Establishment Clause "has been expressly freighted with Jefferson's misleading metaphor for nearly 40 years." Many more, of course, have vehemently defended that metaphor. The fact that the neither the Constitution nor any of the amendments contain any metaphors does not rule out the use of metaphors in describing intent.

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