

FFRF 2015 Convention Special Insert



Ingrid Laas photo

From California, to the New York island . . .

This band never prayed for you and me! Nearly 600 convention attendees came to Madison from 39 U.S. states, the District of Columbia, Australia, Uganda and Ontario Province, Canada. The contingent included many of FFRF's State Representatives, gathering here for their annual meeting during the convention.

STANDING (left): Paul Novak, Iowa; Darrell Barker, Wash.; Bonnie and Gary Stormo, S.D.; Stephen Hirtle, Pa.; Robin Buckallew, Neb.; Sheri Bender, Ind.; Steve Aldrick, Tenn.; Steve Trunk, Calif.; Fairfid Caudle, N.Y.; Cheryl Kolbe, Ore.; Steve Salemsen, Wis.; Michael Jacobson, Nev.; Dick Hewetson, Calif.; Todd Peissig, Wis.; Michael Cermak, Pa.; Joe Harris, Mich.; Douglas Marshall, Mich.;

Charles Bender, Ind.

FRONT (left): Chris Calvey, Wis.; Dianne Cooper, Iowa; Patricia Jones, Tenn.; Sheridan Chapin, N.Y.; Margaret Downey, Pa.; Annie Laurie Gaylor, Wis.; Dan Barker, Wis.; Jim Bredeson, Wis.; Kevin Gough, Conn. In attendance but missing from the photo: Paul Newman.

Executive Board members pictured above: Stephen Hirtle (chair), Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor (co-presidents), Steve Salemsen (treasurer), Jim Bredeson (secretary) and directors Mike Cermak and Todd Peissig. Not pictured are directors Joe Cunningham and Patricia Cleveland.

Freedom from discrimination in Madison

Anita Weier was honored as Freethought Heroine for introducing a historic ordinance to make "nonreligion" a protected class in Madison, Wis. The ordinance passed with no dissent on March 31. Weier, former assistant city editor for The Capital Times, is an FFRF member who served as an alderperson for two terms (2011-15).

By Anita Weier

I decided to add "nonreligion" as a protected class in Madison's Equal Opportunities Ordinance because the ordinance already protected religious people from discrimination, so it seemed only fair and equitable to protect the nonreligious.

A protected class is a group of people whom city officials believe needs protection from discrimination in housing, employment or public accommodations. Madison's ordinance now lists 27 protected classes, including sex, race, color, national origin, citizenship status, age, handicap, marital status, arrest record or conviction record, sexual orientation and others.

I believe that discrimination against atheists and other nonreligious people is widespread, affecting employment, public school practices and selective price discounts. In Paris, 12 workers for an atheistic publication – Charlie Hebdo – were murdered. In Madison, the Freedom from Religion Foundation now does not publicize its address because of threats.

Discrimination continues

A major study, "Atheists as 'Other,'" published by the University of Minnesota in 2006, revealed that "atheists are less likely to be accepted, publicly and privately, than any others" from a long list of marginalized groups. The study looked at attitudes toward groups such



Ingrid Laas photo

Anita Weier receives the Freethought Heroine award from FFRF staff attorney Patrick Elliot at the 38th annual National Convention in Madison, Wis.

as immigrants, racial minorities, gays and Jews from the 1960s to the present, and found that every group had made great strides in social acceptance except for atheists. More Americans would disapprove of their children marrying atheists than any other class.

Locally, some businesses have offered discounts to those who show a church bulletin. The Freedom From Religion Foundation also has encountered refusals by companies to make T-shirts, print brochures or post billboards. Last year a television network refused to air an FFRF TV ad made by Ron Reagan.

Therefore, I believe that atheists, agnostics and humanists need to be protected when applying for jobs and housing and using public accommodations.

As you know, the Religious Right has assumed substantial control over our state and federal governments, a situation that leaves the nonreligious in a

perilous situation. For instance, South Carolina's state law requires "that the president of the University shall not be an atheist or infidel." Texas prohibits religious tests for public office, provided the person "acknowledges the existence of a Supreme Being." Atheists running for public office do not tend to "out" themselves.

Atheist parents have been denied custody of their children because of atheism in several states, including Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, South Dakota and Texas. Imagine the furor if this had been done to parents because they were Jewish or Mormon.

Writing the ordinance

My first step in amending the ordinance was working with a city attorney to make an official proposal. I made a mistake in using the word "atheist," which raises more ire among some than terms such as "agnostic." Also, I

realized that nonreligion could protect more people. So I amended my proposal.

I also faced a time crunch, since I would be leaving the council in April 2015, having decided not to run again. Frankly, because of dislike of atheists, I would not have introduced this measure if I were running for re-election.

I waited until January to present the measure because I did not believe that the Christmas season would be a politically favorable time.

My amendment was first submitted to the City Council, which referred it to the Equal Opportunities Commission for a recommendation. The EOC in turn referred the proposal to its Employment Subcommittee. That committee approved the amendment with no opposition, though two members abstained, saying that their employers might not like their name connected to such a proposal.

I encountered more opposition at the Equal Opportunities Commission, where the vote was 5 in favor, 3 against and one abstention. Opponents tend to be religious people.

Then I started explaining my amendment to my fellow City Council members. I was very encouraged by immediate support from many, including a relatively conservative alder (for liberal Madison). Ultimately, 14 of 20 council members signed on to co-sponsor the measure, which I believe took some political courage. After testimony by five atheists and the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the council approved the amendment unanimously on a voice vote. Though no one voted no or abstained, a few were silent.

I was surprised to find that my amendment was a first, that no other localities had approved such a protection. I am extremely proud of our City Council for setting this important precedent.



Matt Stark, retired director of the ACLU of Minnesota, shown by the portrait of Anne Nicol Gaylor in Freethought Hall’s eponymous lobby. Matt’s generous gift made the portrait possible. (Andrew Seidel photo)



Not one but two Lisas greet guests! Lisa Strand (left) is director of operations, and Lisa Treu is director of “first impressions.”



Jan Froelich (center, bright blue), FFRF’s nonprofit CPA, is applauded. Jan was first to suggest that FFRF purchase the building next door for its much-needed expansion.



Legal extern Chris Line photographs guests by “Mr. Darwin,” a life-like mannequin who inhabits the Joel B. Landon and Wanda K. Beers Freethought Library. View the photos at [flickr.com/photos/FFRF_darwin/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/FFRF_darwin/).

Freethought Hall

Grand Opening

October 9, 2015
Madison, Wisconsin

Photography
by Ingrid Laas



More than 400 FFRF and community members attended the morning open house, which preceded FFRF’s 38th annual convention.



Celebratory champagne flows.



Making mimosa toasts were Ohio members Ron Taggart, Marni Huebner-Tiborsky and Doris Jackson. Marni is president of the Ohio Freethought Society, a Cleveland-area FFRF chapter.



Dan Barker, FFRF co-president, playing the new Steinway Model A concert piano in the Charlie Brooks Auditorium. The gorgeous piano was donated by Diane Uhl, whose picture sits on top.



Librarians and FFRF members Cheryl Becker and Stef Moritz greet visitors.



Breakfast pastries went fast.



Family Values

The family of Rose Zerwick, for whom the Rose Zerwick Memorial Garden and Courtyard is named, gathered Oct. 9 in the courtyard. From left are Daryl Scherkenbach (spouse of Life Member Susan A. Zerwick), Tyler Van Fleet (daughter of Ellen Zerwick Van Fleet), Susan A. Zerwick, Jim Zerwick, Susan B. Zerwick (spouse of Jim), Ellen Zerwick Van Fleet and FFRF member David Zerwick. Jim, Ellen, Susan A. and Dave are Rose’s children. Rose was a longtime Madison member who died at age 95 and whose bequest was designated for FFRF’s building fund. Jim Zerwick serves on FFRF’s Executive Board and on the board of Nonbelief Relief Inc.



Steven Hewett, 2015 recipient of the Atheists in Foxholes award, stands by the newly placed monument in the Rose Zerwick Memorial Garden and Courtyard. (Andrew Seidel photo)



FFRF’s legal staff gathers beside generous benefactors Stephen and Diane Uhl in the Diane Uhl Legal Wing: Legal Assistant Calli Miller and Attorneys Andrew Seidel, Rebecca Markert and Elizabeth Cavell. Not pictured are Attorneys Patrick Elliott and Sam Grover.



Diane and Stephen Uhl with Dan Barker in front of the Diane Uhl Steinway concert grand!



Diane and Stephen Uhl by the Stephen Uhl Friendly Atheist Studio-to-be.



Darrell Barker, Washington, and Peter Dashavici, all the way from Australia. (Andrew Seidel photo)

FFRF’s new digital marquee rotates messages of reason with event notices. (Andrew Seidel photo)





Anita Weier being presented with her Freethought Heroine Award by FFRF Attorney Patrick Elliott, for sponsoring an ordinance making nontheists a protected class in Madison, Wis.

FFRF Awards



FFRF Co-President Dan Barker presenting Ron Reagan with the T-shirt inspired by his TV commercial for FFRF, in which he identifies himself as “an unabashed atheist, not afraid of burning in hell.” (Andrew Seidel photo)



Ron Reagan holds his “unabashed atheist” plaque. (Andrew Seidel photo)



Nebraska state Sen. Ernie Chambers being presented with his Emperor Has No Clothes Award by FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.



Legal Fellow Maddy Ziegler presenting New York high school student Thomas Sheedy with a \$5,000 Richard and Beverly Hermesen Student Activist Scholarship.



Annie Laurie presenting Taslima Nasrin with her Emperor Has No Clothes Award. The statuette is reserved for public figures who make known their dissent from religion.



Annie Laurie presenting previous Atheist in Foxhole recipient Steve Trunk, California, with FFRF's newly created statuette.



Steve Trunk, 2011 Atheist in Foxhole awardee, bestows the 2015 honor upon Steven Hewett, North Carolina.



Rita Swan receiving her “Lifetime Achievement” award from Annie Laurie on behalf of FFRF.



Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel hands Brooke Mulder her “Nothing Fails Like Prayer” plaque. Brooke won the 2015 “Nothing Fails Like Prayer” contest for delivering her secular invocation to the city of Glendale, Ariz.



FFRF Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert awarding successful FFRF plaintiff Douglas Marshall, Michigan, the “Freethinker of the Year” plaque.

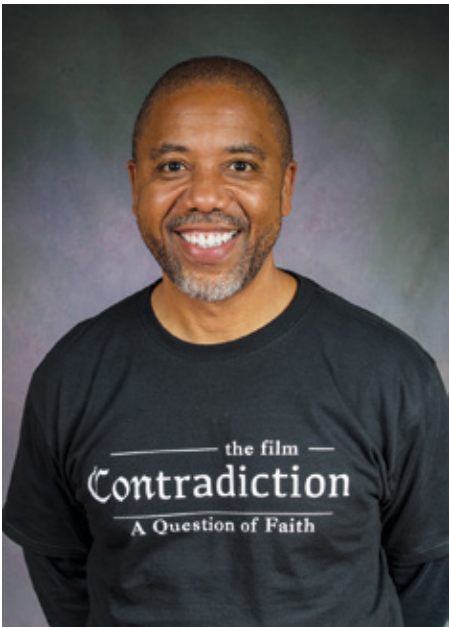


Ron Reagan, unabashed atheist.

Speakers



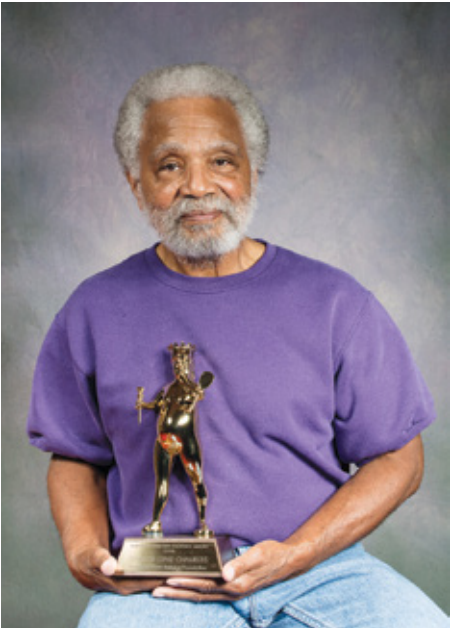
Dan Barker, talking about his new book *Life Driven Purpose*.



Filmmaker and author Jeremiah Camara.



Madison Mayor Paul Soglin, of Madison, the first mayor to “grace” FFRF’s annual Non-Prayer Breakfast. (Andrew Seidel photo)



Nebraska state Sen. Ernie Chambers.



Rita Swan, co-founder of Children’s Healthcare Is a Legal Duty.



FFRF Attorney Rebecca Markert reporting on legal activism during the past year.



FFRF Director of Operations Lisa Strand introducing the legal panel.

FFRF Chair Stephen Hirtle (left) introduced author Ken Kruse.



Liz Cavell with her advice on winning legal cases.



FFRF legal staff gave a legal activism workshop and report on legal achievements. From left are Attorney Sam Grover, Cornelius Vanderbroek Legal Fellow Maddy Ziegler, Attorneys Rebecca Markert, Patrick Elliott, Andrew Seidel, Elizabeth Cavell and Diane Uhl Legal Fellow Ryan Jayne.



Meet FFRF’s official meeters and greeters: Todd Peissig, board member; Lisa Strand, director of operations; Takara Scott-Johnston, clerical assistant; Lauryn Seering, publicist; Lisa Treu, director of “first impressions” and Jackie Douglas, membership manager.



Staffers Jackie Douglas and Eleanor McEntee with volunteer Jessica Kopish.



Bekki Huelsman, legal intern, and Calli Miller, legal assistant.



Eric Lawrence and Todd Peissig manned the raffle table to win “clean” money (pre-“In God We Trust”).



FFRF Bookkeeper Eleanor McEntee.



Bill Dunn, Freethought Today editor; Maddy Ziegler, legal fellow; and Calli Miller, legal assistant.



Buzz Kemper (center) worked with Monona Terrace staff to run the audio.



Volunteers Linda Josheff, Wisconsin, and Beth Taylor, Washington.



FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor.



Ryan Jayne, Diane Uhl Legal Fellow.

Convention Participants



Brianna Colombe, Minnesota, asks a question from the floor.



The crowd stands for Taslima Nasrin, who gave a poignant and memorable speech about living under a fatwa and being banned from Bangladesh more than 20 years.



Dick Hewetson, California, greets Rita Swan.



College student and secular activist Amanda Scott and high school activist Thomas Sheedy. Amanda thanks Adam R. Rose for his travel scholarship, making her attendance possible. (Andrew Seidel photo)



Robin and Walter Greene.



FFRF staffer Takara Scott-Johnston gets a hug from Sen. Ernie Chambers.



Michael Mpagi spoke briefly about his escape from Uganda as a gay and atheist activist. (Andrew Seidel photo)



The convention took place October 9–10 at the elegant Monona Terrace in Madison, Wisconsin, a spacious lakeside facility based on a design by Frank Lloyd Wright.



Fairfid Caudle, New York, Sheridan Chapin, New York, and Sanford Quayle, Wisconsin, found seats in the front row.



Front row: Mitch Kahle and Holly Huber, Hawaiian secular activists turned Michigan firebrands. Next row: Kathy Johnson and Judy Saint. Judy directs FFRF's Sacramento chapter.



Sue Dunn, Oregon, asks a question.



Richard Mulder and awardee Brooke Mulder, Arizona.

Convention Moments



Convention photographer Ingrid Laas kept very busy. *(Andrew Seidel photo)*



About 600 audience members fill the room.



An attractive food display in the architecturally pleasing Monona Terrace Convention Center designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.



FFRF Attorney Elizabeth Cavell staffs a sale tables. *(Andrew Seidel photo)*



Dan Barker proves it's a myth that freethinkers aren't musical. *(Andrew Seidel photo)*



Taslima Nasrin autographs a book for a 13-year-old admirer. *(Andrew Seidel photo)*

Staffer Lisa Treu greets convention-goers. *(Andrew Seidel photo)*



Cheryl Kolbe, who directs FFRF's Portland chapter, and Stephen Hirtle, FFRF's board chair, Pennsylvania. *(Andrew Seidel photo)*



Staff Attorney Sam Grover, Georgia attorney Wally Nichols and Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel were all part of successful FFRF litigation to stop daily prayer (and bullying over prayer) at an elementary school in Emanuel County, Ga.