

Freedom From Religion Foundation 46th Year in Review — 2023

By Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor, Co-Presidents

Hip-hip hooray! FFRF is more than 40,000 strong

FFRF membership in 2023 reached more than 40,000, a historic high. FFRF has more than doubled its membership in the past decade (we were at 19,801 in 2013). Thank you. (And spread the word!)

What secular growth means. The growth of the “Nones” (atheists, agnostics and “nothing in particulars”) to 29 percent of the adult population (and almost half of Generation Z) is heartening news for democracy and individual liberties. Atheists typically outperform all other religious identifications in their support for abortion rights, LGBTQ rights and other civil liberties and in opposition to white Christian nationalism. As **Kate Cohen**, our 2023 “Freethought Heroine,” put it in a superb recent Washington Post column, “Consider that the United States — to survive as a secular democracy — needs you [nonbelievers] now more than ever.”

Ruth Bader Ginsburg bust dedicated

The bust honoring the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, complete with “dissent collar” — donated by gifted sculptor Zenos Frudakis — was officially unveiled. A full house heard a talk about RBG by Legal Director Rebecca Markert, who said: “We are squarely in the dissent now, but we will fight as passionately and as fiercely as RBG did to someday have these dissenting voices be the prevailing voices.”

Announcing FFRF secular studies professorship

In October, FFRF proudly announced a professorship in secular studies at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater — only the third such professorship in the nation. **The Brian F. Bolton and Anne Nicol Gaylor Endowed Professorship in Secular Studies of \$500,000** was set up by FFRF in coordination with uber-generous FFRF member Brian Bolton, who also memorialized FFRF principal founder Anne Nicol Gaylor. With the growth of the “Nones,” it’s high time universities study our secular movement! Warmest thanks to Brian.

FFRF’s legal work and litigation

Ending violations through education and persuasion. On average, FFRF receives 42 new state/church complaints a week. In 2023, FFRF has received **2,112 reports of violations**.

707 letters of complaint. FFRF staff attorneys sent more than 700 complaint letters to violating governmental actors. A majority involved public schools, with electioneering by churches the next most common violation. FFRF attorneys sent several mass mailings (**628 letters**) to school districts.

Victories: It pays to complain! From convention to convention, **147 significant violations were halted** — most involving public school entanglements. Victories include school boards dropping prayer (such as in Lebanon, Ind., and in Norwalk, Ohio) and ending lots of religion at school events. FFRF helped remove a 20-foot cross from a public park in Albany, Calif., where Mayor Aaron Tiedemann said, “Our city looks a little bit more accepting now in a way that we think is consistent with our values.” Music to our ears!

Educating judges, lawyers and the public. Our legal staff is literally educating judges and lawyers. FFRF attorneys in 2023 presented continuing legal education courses (CLE) to the Dane County (Wis.) Bar Association, the local legal association for women and Inns of Court. Legal education ranges from blogs by attorneys to the “We Dissent” monthly podcast overseen by **FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert and Associate Counsel Liz Cavell**, with 22 podcasts and over 46,000 downloads. **Senior Counsel Patrick Elliott** presented before the **State Bar of Wisconsin**. Staff attorneys have hosted or

appeared on most of FFRF's "Ask an Atheist" Facebook Live show. FFRF attorneys are in demand as speakers around the country.

FFRF litigation carries on at full speed. FFRF won four lawsuits in 2023, including a satisfying final court victory besting Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, when the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in January 2023 in our favor against Abbott's censorship of FFRF's Bill of Rights nativity display in the Capitol.

FFRF's three other court victories:

- **Religious test for public office case in New Jersey: Tosone v. Way.** Would you believe New Jersey has a religious test to run for office? James Tosone, the plaintiff, remedied this constitutional violation in a case FFRF filed in October 2023 and successfully settled a month later! The state of New Jersey agreed to create and adopt a secular affirmation for candidates and sent a memo to all New Jersey county clerks with updated guidance on secular affirmations.

- **South Carolina Christian center funding case: Parker v. McMaster,** filed in South Carolina state court in fall 2022 on behalf of four taxpayers, challenged a \$1.5 million earmark for Christian Learning Centers of Greenville County, whose mission is to "provide biblical instruction for public school students." In a swift victory, the center withdrew its request for support.

- **Christian revival in West Virginia schools: Mays v. Cabell County Board of Education** was filed in federal court in 2022 on behalf of parents and students after Huntington High School (W.Va.) hosted a Christian revival during school hours. The district agreed to prevent staff from continuing to proselytize students in a case dismissed in late October 2023. The board agreed to settle up for \$1 in nominal damages to each plaintiff and nearly \$175,000 in attorney fees, which were paid by the board's insurer. The board voted to adopt the policy revisions requiring annual training of teachers about religion, and school administrators are tasked with monitoring and ensuring employees do not initiate or lead students in religious activities.

New litigation includes:

- **Oklahoma Catholic charter school challenge.** FFRF and a coalition of groups and plaintiffs filed a federal lawsuit in July 2023 challenging the nation's first religious public charter school approved in Oklahoma. This charter school is intended as a test case to force taxpayers in all states to subsidize religious instruction at the expense of funding for secular public schools.

Continuing litigation includes:

- **Arkansas Ten Commandments case: Orsi v. Martin,** a challenge of the Ten Commandments monument at the state Capitol, first filed in 2018, is awaiting a ruling by the federal district court judge. FFRF Attorney **Sam Grover** took part in oral arguments in 2023.

Five amicus briefs filed. FFRF filed a friend-of-the-court brief in the Supreme Court case, *Groff v. DeJoy* (in which the high court sided with an overly pious Post Office employee) as well as in four lower court cases. In October, FFRF filed a brief siding with Southwest Airline pilots forced to take a class from a Christian nationalist law firm. A shoutout to Legal Assistant **Greta Martens**, who created an archive of 50-plus FFRF amicus briefs filed in 40-some years. Find it at: ffrf.org/amicus-briefs

Advertising takes FFRF mainstream

FFRF's TV ad featuring **Ron ("unabashed atheist ... not afraid of burning in hell") Reagan** ran on "60 Minutes," "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert," "The Daily Show," "The Rachel Maddow Show," "All in with Chris Hayes" and "CBS Sunday Morning." Occasional educational ads ran in the New York Times, The Nation, The Progressive and Scientific American. Plus, we placed ads in prominent regional papers calling attention to theocratic governors in Texas, Arkansas and Florida. We commemorated "Freethought Day" with a full-page ad in USA Today marking the date in 1692 when colonial Gov. William Phips

declared “spectral evidence” inadmissible, thereby ending the Salem witch trials. **See billboards that ran in 2023** (pictured above).

Legislation/Lobbying achievements

Congressional actions. FFRF Governmental Affairs Director **Mark Dann** reports: “We won significant victories with the establishment of the Thomas Paine Memorial, defanged the National Prayer Breakfast, furthered Supreme Court expansion and Supreme Court reform, fought against Christian nationalism with the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), formed a 501(c)(4), and are prepared for the introduction including the Health Share Transparency Act, which Rep. Jared Huffman introduced in November. FFRF spearheaded a [coalition](#) of secular, religious and LGBTQ groups and individuals to diminish congressional support for the prayer breakfast. The SPLC for the first time incorporated Christian nationalism in its influential “The Year in Hate & Extremism” report, validating the analysis by FFRF and the Baptist Joint Committee of Christian nationalism’s role in the Jan. 6 attack.

Creating c(4) FFRF Action Fund. The FFRF Board created an advocacy arm, **the FFRF Action Fund**, which engages in lobbying and some limited electoral work. Launched in mid-spring, the Action Fund has created a Dynamic Scorecard rating House members. This lobbying tool incentivizes members of Congress to co-sponsor key bills. The fund is working with activist organizations to secure more such victories. A big thanks to FFRF **Director of Operations Lisa Strand**, who handled the daunting launch of the c(4) group.

State legislative actions. Since joining the staff last September, **State Policy Manager Ryan Dudley** has become an integral part of the team. He and **Senior Policy Counsel Ryan Jayne** monitored bills in all 50 states during the busy 2023 legislative session. They tracked nearly 2,000 bills. With help from Editorial Assistant **Greg Fletcher**, the team efficiently issued more than 150 timely action alerts to more than nearly 50,000 advocates. More than 16,000 advocates took action, contacting government officials over 152,000 times. One noteworthy victory came when Arkansas voters rejected a state Religious Freedom Restoration Act by a mere 7,500 votes. The Action Fund also helped to ban child marriage (a religiously based phenomenon) in three states: Connecticut, Vermont and Michigan.

The state and rapid response team drafted more than 70 press releases, and published 17 op-eds and other articles. The team tabled at the National Conference of State Legislatures.

\$125,000+ in student scholarships and support

FFRF this year has granted \$125,000-plus in scholarships to freethinking students. FFRF awarded \$17,000 in prize money to 11 major winners and 11 honorable mentions in its David Hudak Memorial Essay Contest for **Black, Indigenous and Students of Color**; \$17,400 in award money to 11 top winners and six honorable mentions in its Kenneth L. Proulx Memorial Essay Contest for **Ongoing College Students**; \$18,050 to 10 major winners and 8 honorable mentions in the Cornelius Vanderbroek Memorial Essay Contest for **Grad/Older Students**; \$19,050 to 12 major winners and 12 honorable mentions in its William Schulz Memorial High School Essay Contest for **College-bound High School Seniors** and \$9,000 to three winners of the Diane and Stephen Uhl Memorial **Law Student** Essay Competition.

\$25,000 in tuition relief. In FFRF’s fifth annual distribution of the Forward Freethought Tuition Relief Scholarships, funded by generous FFRF **benefactor Lance Bredvold**, FFRF gave \$5,000 each to four students, and \$2,500 in continuing grants to two previous recipients. All are first in their family to attend college. This scholarship is in conjunction with Black Skeptics Los Angeles. Additionally FFRF awarded \$2,750 for Lorraine Hansberry Memorial Student Scholarships to six high school students, splitting costs with other groups.

FFRF student activist awards. Two students suing the religious president of West Texas A&M University for canceling a student club benefit featuring drag queens received \$5,000 student activist awards each at FFRF's convention: **Marcus Stovall** (Out of God's Closet Stephen and Diane Uhl Student Activist Award) and **Bear Bright** (Richard and Beverly Hermsen Student Activist Award).

Other student activist honorees:

- **Eli Frost**, who received the FFRF student activist award of \$2,000 endowed by an Oregon couple for efforts to move his high school graduation from a megachurch. FFRF backed up his complaint, and his high school in Eden Prairie, Minn., is changing to a secular venue next year!
- Two elementary school students, **Tillie and Izzy Bartholomew**, who split the \$1,000 Strong Backbone Award for calling out (and recording on video) a proselytizing Christian bus driver in Portland, Ore.

Other scholarships: FFRF awarded six scholarships through the Secular Student Alliance, including the \$2,000 Al Luneman Student Activist Award; three Cliff Richards Memorial Scholarships of \$1,000 each to students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities and \$1,000 to an art student underwritten by the Yip Harburg Lyric Foundation.

FFRF's Secular 'Underground Railroad'

In 2023, \$22,500 has been given in grants for endangered nonbelievers, including \$5,000 directly to two stranded individuals, \$10,000 to IHEU's "Protect Humanists at Risk" campaign and \$2,500 for the Priya Camelia Project helping women and LGBTQ Bangladeshis. FFRF has been supporting endangered freethinkers since 2015.

'Blasphemous broadcasting' and secular media

FFRF publishes 10 issues/year of our newspaper Freethought Today, curated by Editor **PJ Slinger**. "Freethought Radio," hosted weekly by FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor, is in its 18th year, with more than 900 shows produced since April 2006. It broadcasts in 10 states and the podcast has had more than 1.4 million downloads. Listen at ffrf.org/radio or through your favorite podcast provider.

Two programs are produced in FFRF's Stephen Uhl Friendly Atheist Studio: "**Ask an Atheist**" Facebook Live airing Wednesdays at noon Central, a participatory program showcasing FFRF's expert staff plus lively guests. This year, FFRF will have produced 42 new episodes of "**Freethought Matters**," a half-hour TV special affairs interview show with Dan and Annie Laurie overseen by Multimedia Director **Bruce Johnson**, currently airing Sunday mornings in 13 cities and on FFRF's YouTube channel. It's the un-sermon!

FFRF in the news! FFRF's Director of Communications **Amit Pal** has written or overseen 367 news releases about FFRF educational or legal actions or statements, plus the Weekly Wrap. Staff and guest columnists wrote 192 blogs at Freethoughtnow.org. FFRF has 85,000 Twitter followers, 469,092 Facebook friends and a reach of 2 million and 52,400 YouTube subscribers, with more than 102,356 hours in viewing in 2023 to date. FFRF is now on Instagram and Tiktok. FFRF actions have been covered by more than 450 bonafide news articles, including 40 TV segments. See coverage at:

ffrf.org/news/media

FFRF on the road and outreach

General speaking engagements. Dan Barker and Communications Director Amit Pal traveled to India in January, where they had 10 events with rationalist groups in five states in two weeks, comparing Hindu nationalism with U.S. Christian nationalism. Dan's more than 20 other speaking engagements were in

Washington, Florida, New Jersey, D.C., California, Wisconsin and Illinois, plus international events in Poland, Sweden, Finland and Canada. Dan is doing his second formal debate in Oxford in November.

Staff attorneys speak at more than three dozen events. Liz Cavell addressed 12 events (including Florida's FreeFlo and Secular Student Alliance conferences), Rebecca Markert eight (including Notre Dame and three chapters), Sammi Lawrence four, Patrick Elliott three, Sam Grover three and Kat Grant three. These included conferences, webinars, law schools, remote and in person.

Staffing, Board, Chapters

20 chapters around the U.S.: Thanks to the hardworking volunteers who lead FFRF chapters, overseen by chapter liaison **Sadie Pattinson**. Find out more: ffrf.org/about/ffrf-chapters. P.S. The East Tennessee chapter cleans and waxes FFRF's statue to Clarence Darrow by Zenos Frudakis, donated to the Rhea County Courthouse lawn, home of the Scopes Trial.

2023 Executive Board: FFRF's Executive Board of Directors are: Stephen Hirtle, chair, Steve Salemson, treasurer; Cheryl Kolbe, secretary; Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor (co-presidents, each with a half vote) and directors at large: Jeremiah Camara and Granada Higgins (sharing a vote), Mike Cermak, Sue Kocher, Todd Peissig and David Tamayo.

FFRF's Current State Representatives help represent their states and elect the executive board. They are:

Daniel Barker-WI, Darrell Barker-WA, Charles & Sheri Bender-IN, Lance Bredvold-MT, Robin Buckallew-NE, Chris Calvey-CO, Jeremiah Camara-GA, Tom Cara-WI, John Cavin-KS, Dianne Centa-OH, Michael Cermak-PA, Sheridan Chapin-NY, Dianne Cooper-IA, Margaret Downey-PA, Mike Dubik-VA, Carolyn Golojuch-HI, Annie Laurie Gaylor-WI, Kevin Gough-CT, Ken Gould-AR, Alice Heath-MT, Ed & Mikel Hensley-KY, Granada Higgins-GA, Stephen Hirtle-PA, Ken Hofbauer-IL, Linda Hollar-TX, George & Julie Iddon-WA, Linda Josheff-WI, Sue Kocher-NC, Cheryl Kolbe-OR, Marc-Andre Lachance-ONT, Aleta Ledendecker-TN, Julie Nichols Legg-MN, Jodette Lenser-MO, Steven Lowe-DC, Douglas Marshall-MI, Rob Moore-WI, Paul Novak-IA, Julie Olsen-AK, Todd Peissig-WI, Robert Pierce-ID, Nancy Rattman-CO, Judy Saint-CA, Betsy Salemson-NH, Steve Salemson-WI, Tom Schottmiller-PA, Sue Schuetz-WI, Nick Sheridan-MD, Steve Solomon-MO, Claudette StPierre-CO, Bonnie & Gary Stormo-SD, David Tamayo-VA, Tom Waddell-ME, David and Jocelyn Williamson- FL, Lisa Willman-NM.

FFRF's distinguished Honorary Directors. Harvard's Steven Pinker, author of the classic *Enlightenment Now*, is honorary president. Other honorary directors include: Jeremiah Camara, Sean. B. Carroll, Jerry Coyne, Richard Dawkins, Daniel C. Dennett, Ernie Harburg, Jennifer Michael Hecht, Susan Jacoby, Robin Morgan, Rebecca Newberger-Goldstein, Mike Newdow, Katha Pollitt, Ron Reagan, Robert Sapolsky, Edward Sorel, Geoffrey Stone and Julia Sweeney.

FFRF Staff. FFRF's growing staff of 33 full-timers plus several part-time workers is overseen by Director of Operations Lisa Strand. New full-time employees this year include Rowan Hahn, digital communications manager, Stephanie Flowers, FFRF's first HR specialist, Matt Kenyon, administrative assistant, and Sheryl Lindmeier, webmaster/IT help desk. A list of all staff members can be found at: ffrf.org/about/staff-board

Interns/externs. FFRF was fortunate to have help from dedicated law students and undergrads in 2023, including Max Anthony, Emily Romero, Tyler Kochman, Emma Breault, Peyton Williams plus undergrads Maddie Naisbitt and Aiden Culver. Caitlin Berray remains Governmental Affairs intern.

Volunteers. Warm thanks to our 2023 army of 22 volunteers who helped at the convention or who read and judged hundreds of student essays!

See you in Denver — 2024

Thanks to the more than 500 members from 45 states, D.C., and Canada in attendance, and a stellar lineup of speakers and entertainment, the 46th annual convention in October in Madison, Wis., was a huge success. Spellbinding experts in the field of abortion rights and white Christian nationalism, as well as columnist Kate Cohen, student essayists and activists, the FFRF legal and legislative staff and even drag queens, held the audience's rapt attention. The glorious Godless Gospel gave a captivating encore performance. Special thanks to convention planners and logistics-handlers Sadie Pattison, Lisa Strand, Lily Pocs, plus Bruce Johnson and crew (for PowerPoints and stellar camera work).

Look for all convention speech in future issues of Freethought Today. Watch online now at ffrf.us/con23.

Mark your calendar for the [47th annual national convention](#), taking place in Denver on Friday, Saturday and Sunday morning, **Sept. 26-29, 2024, at the Sheraton Denver Downtown**. See you there!