

AOF News & Views

Sacramento, California

February 2005

Saturday, February 12

How Evolution Built a Brain

Special Points of Interest

- Relief Fund for Andhra Pradesh (page 1)
- Remembering Carl Yates and Beth Johnson (pages 4 and 5)
- KVIE Sends Thanks (page 7)
- Atheist Alliance Convention in Los Angeles — Registration Form (insert)

In lieu of a February meeting, AOFers will be participating in Sacramento's 8th annual **Darwin Day** birthday celebration. This year the Darwin educational gala takes place on **Saturday Feb. 12** (Feb. 12th in 1809 is the actual birth date of Charles Darwin). The event is held at the La Sierra Community Center in Carmichael from 2-4:30 PM. (see page 8 for details). The featured speaker is Dr. Leah Krubitzer, a professor at the University of California-Davis and a 1998 recipient of the renowned MacArthur grants (popularly termed "genius grants"). Invite your friends and family to this special celebration of science and humanity. There will be literature tables, merchandise, refreshments, a drawing for a lovely door prize, and more.

Notice! The next regular meeting of AOF (2nd Sunday) takes place March 13.

See Insert—AAI Convention
Registration Form for
Los Angeles, March 25-27

1995 Prices in 2005!
A Real Convention Bargain

Standard Fare

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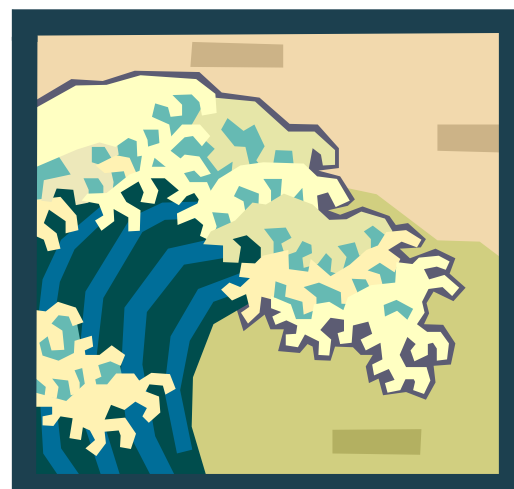
AOFers Contribute to Tsunami Relief Funds Going to India's Atheist Centre

The Atheist Centre of India has had a regional disaster relief organization in place since 1977. The Centre's main strength is in working with local community leaders, women's groups, youth clubs, Panchayat Raj institutions and other civil society organizations in the Andhra Pradesh province (along India's east coastline).

In the wake of the recent disaster, they are focused on addressing both short term (rehabilitation) and long-term (reconstruction) needs, and right now they are providing *medical attention* (via "medical camps" with referrals as necessary and provision of medicines), *food security* (groceries, utensils and safe drinking water); *habitat assis-*

tance (housing repairs and temporary shelters); *livelihood help* (work tools, boats, fishing nets etc; milk animals), and *general assistance* (clothing, toiletries).

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The AOF Line

By Kevin Schultz

This month, I continue with exploring the American Humanist Association's Grassroots Manual (AHAGM), sharing information from section 5, "Building Community."

The AHAGM provides the following definition of *community*, as defined by the book, "Community Building: What Makes It Work," by Paul Mattessich, Ph.D., and Barbara Monsey, M.P.H. (ISBN: 0940069121). Community building is, "any identifiable set of activities pursued by a community in order to increase community social capacity." So what's social capacity, and how do we increase it? Mattessich and Monsey define social capacity as, "the extent to which members of a community can work together effectively." They continue with, community building gives "...improved *capacity* to accomplish tasks and goals and a heightened sense of community -- a strengthening of social and psychological ties...not the actual accomplishment of goals."

Community building, as defined above, thus is concerned with the process of achieving goals, not so much with the actual achievement of the goals (i.e., the means rather than the ends. That's not to say that we can't lose sight of the goals, but if we care about the ends, than it makes sense to focus on things which increase the likelihood of us achieving them. That's what community building is all about.

The AHAGM lists several ways to build community: membership, a membership secretary, a membership survey, introducing community building components at regular meetings, focusing on community building in the organization's newsletter, and remaining cognizant

of current group dynamics. It also suggests some project ideas groups may take to build community. For example, focusing on a new initiative called "Humanist Communities," training humanist celebrants (an alternative to religious leaders facilitating life events), and owning a building.

As members know, AOF is a democratically-run membership organization. The AHAGM lists membership as an easy way to draw a distinction between the outside world and the AOF community members who choose to invest in the group. Membership also confers voting rights, a privilege every AOF member may exercise at our annual elections in May.

As AOF has grown, it has become necessary to have a "membership secretary." AOF's membership secretary is Betty Simonsma. Betty maintains the AOF membership database on her home computer, and processes all the paperwork required to maintain AOF's membership list.

AOF submitted a membership survey to the general membership in the spring of 2003, and from that we gathered a good deal of information.

However, group needs change over time, so it is wise to stay current with members' feedback.

One option, suggested by the AHAGM, is to include a membership survey with each new

or renewed membership. Other alternatives are to submit a mass survey to the membership, or when enough new members have joined to warrant a new sampling of membership feedback.

That's it for this month. Next issue, I will finish providing AHAGM's suggestions on building community.

The purpose of the organization, AOF, is to promote the civic understanding and acceptance of atheism in our community.

AOF Board

President: Kevin Schultz

Vice President: Kay Dickey

Secretary: Dave Flanders

Treasurer: Ken Nahigian

Directors at large:

Tina Burgess, Beverly Church

Mynga Futrell, Don Knutson

Betty Simonsma

AOF Committees

Newsletter: Mynga Futrell (Editor)

Kay Dickey (Submissions Editor)

Jerry Sloan (Mailing)

Darwin Day, Feb. 12, 2005:

Bronda Silva, Mynga Futrell,

KenNahigian, Ed McConnell, Kay Dickey

Dave Henderson

Freethought Day [~Oct. 9, 2005]:

Beverly Church, Mynga Futrell,

KenNahigian, Kay Dickey, Jerry Sloan,

Tom Ikelman

Ad Hoc:

Web Portal (Kevin Schultz, Richard Langley); Alternate Meeting Place/

Time (Jerry Sloan, Ken Nahigian,

Kevin Schultz); Youth Outreach

(Kevin Schultz, Jerry Sloan, Tina

Burgess); Connections (Kevin

Schultz, Betty Simonsma); Growing

AOF Membership (Tina Burgess,

Jerry Sloan, Kevin Schultz)

Archive: Jody Craig, Kay Dickey,

Mynga Futrell, Ken Nahigian,

Betty Simonsma

AOF's Voluntariat

Affiliation Liaisons:

Mynga Futrell, Kay Dickey (AAI),

Hank Kocol (CSH),

Ed McConnell (AA),

Beverly Church (AHA/HAGSA)

Community Service Projects:

Don Knutson

Internet Website: Pat Kelley

Meetings: Dave Flanders, Ken Nahigian

Jerry Sloan, Betty Simonsma

Membership Database:

Betty Simonsma

We welcome additional involvement from AOF members. Right now we need volunteers to perform very small tasks at our meetings. Just phone the voice mail at **447-3589** if you can help us out. Or, send an e-mail to us at

aofboard@rthoughtsrfree.org

Meeting Recap

Arguing Against Soul and Immortality

By Dave Flanders

At the January AOF meeting, Matt McCormick, Asst. Professor of Philosophy at California State University, Sacramento, offered a glimpse of how he argues against the immortality of the soul. [See box at right]

The majority of people on earth, he said, believe that there *is* life after death. Matt said he provides his students an alternative view point.

Socrates said the unexamined life is not worth living. Another philosopher, Aristotle (384-322 BCE), after doing anatomy experiments, made the mistake of assigning the function of intelligent thought (the soul) to the human heart. Apparently the biblical Jesus believed the same thing, stating Thou shalt "believe with all thy heart."

Theocracies of the past and present have exploited the oppressed, promising they will get their freedom and bliss *after* their soul survives death. Christian martyrs of the past and 9-11 Muslim martyrs placed high value in the afterlife. Those with a "strong" religion-- (militant and highly focused antagonists of secularization) think the end times will occur shortly, and thus

there must be changes in social and economic policy for the future kingdom (not democracy) on earth.

Matt described two types of souls: the *personal* soul (the-one that recognizes itself after death), and the *non-personal* soul (a "new age" concept in which the soul after death attains a universal oneness that the one dying would not recognize as themselves). With the belief in individual autonomy, new agers are unlikely to unite and change social policy.

Photo by Paul Geisert



Your mind is you. Enjoy yourself while your brain lasts!

In the Bible, Hebrews 11:1 says "Now faith is assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." With modern brain imaging devices, those things — faith, the soul (human thought)— can now be observed as spatial temporal firing patterns within the brain.

Matt held up a model of the brain for all to see.

The typical human cortex with a thickness of six business cards and unfolded the size of a large dinner napkin, contains around 30 billion neurons. Those 30 billion cells are *you*. They contain almost all your memories, knowledge, skills, and accumulated life experiences. That a

Argument

1. Everything we attribute to the soul depends on the brain to exist.
2. The brain does not survive the death of the body. (*general acceptance*)
3. Therefore, the soul does not survive the death of the body.

Why think that premise 1 is true?

- A. Brain damage = mind damage
- B. Other animals (*brain size correlates to "thought size"*)
- C. No brainless minds

(Dr. McCormick has answers for questions about "out-of-body" experiences; "life after death" experiences; claims of communication with "the other side" etc.)

thin sheet of cells sees, feels, and creates our world view is just short of incredible. The warmth of a summer day and the dreams we have for a better world are somehow the creation of these cells.

Some brain scientist are able to induce specific hallucinations on their patients including out of body experiences. Some have described the brain as a memory system that stores experiences in the way that reflects the true structure of the world, remembering sequences of events and their nested relationships and making predictions based

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Atheists and Other Freethinkers



AOF is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit educational organization. It is a member society of the Atheist Alliance International. AOF maintains affiliations with the Council for Secular Humanism, American Atheists, and the American Humanist Association.

AOF's Statement of Purpose

The purpose of the association, Atheists and Other Freethinkers, is to promote the civic understanding and acceptance of atheism in our community. To accomplish this purpose, AOF will, through educational programs, projects, and publications, extend atheistic perspectives concerning the separation of church and state and the right to think and speak freely on these perspectives.

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Subscription \$12 per year (free to members).

Reprinting of original material in this newsletter is granted to atheist, freethought, rationalist, skeptical, and secular humanist groups as long as acknowledgment is given. Exchange of newsletters with aforementioned organizations is solicited.

Carl Yates (1923 - 2004) A Venturesome Fellow

By Paul Geisert



Carl Yates

The following are remarks made at the January 9 meeting, when AOFers looked back on 2004.

AOF member Carl Yates died on October 4th.

Perhaps death is one of the major *defining* features of atheism. *A – Theism* at its simplest means “without god belief.” There are some religious groups that are without god belief and that don’t “believe in death.” Buddhism, *without* a god but *with* reincarnation comes to mind, and some aspects of Pantheism.

But I think it would be safe to say that most of us who call ourselves “atheists” are naturalists, that is, we believe all living things die and subsequently return to a natural

state of complete disorder. People leave behind their good works and ideas, and memories in the minds of others. Atheists generally understand that this life is the only life, and that it is sensible to make the best of it one can.

Naturalism, that is “realism,” perhaps makes at least for a more honest approach to life than the visions painted for those that need more security than “reality.” It is safe to say that notions of pearly gates and supernatural judgment were far from Carl’s mind as he lived his life.

He was born in Ft. Worth Texas in 1923, but he claimed California as his state. And, he had motorcycled through them all, excepting Hawaii. In addition, in his motorcycling he traversed seven of the Canadian provinces and nine of the Canadian National Parks, Ensenada, Mexico, and, as I said, ventured through all the continen-

tal United States.

Carl spent 20 years as an electrical engineer and senior programmer at Rockwell International. Some of you know he remained a “computer nut.” Another hallmark was that he was an avid reader—he read, read, and read. His interests included politics, history, and religion. He participated also in tournament chess. I’d like to mention, was one of the first 100 individuals to register as a Bright.

He met his current wife Ute in Sacramento, and even got her to take a trip to LA on his cycle—once, that is.

Carl was an AOF member for three years and on the back of his personal “business card” was “A member of Atheists and Other Freethinkers. So we offer Ute condolences, and long may his memory they be carried in the minds of AOF members.

General Meeting Recap

(Continued from page 3)

on those memories. It is this memory-prediction system that forms the basis of intelligence, perception, creativity, and even consciousness.

Intelligence is the capacity of the brain to predict the future by analogy to the past. Matt indicated a number of his students very much resented the mechanistic explanation that we are made of star dust and nothing else—no non-physical entity. He proceeded to say that after death there is no feeling of existence. Atheists and other freethinkers choose to give meaning to their lives. Perhaps a message regarding death is to value life in this world in this time, because no one gets out of here alive.

Happy Moments of 2004



Deshawn Perry attends his 1st AOF Meeting

Kay Dickey (right) greets **Deshawn** in arms of proud mom, **Tina Burgess** (left). Both Kay and Tina are board members serving AOF during the current year.

Photo by Mynga Futrell

Beth Johnson (1918 - 2004) Always Asking to Help

By Betty Simonsma

We know how time is passing us by, and we wish we had done more. That's the way I feel about Beth Johnson.

We'd meet here and I'd be aware that she was a person who'd always ask if she could help, and she would pitch in to lay out the name tags, or spread the food out. We didn't have time to find out what a great friend she could be. But, I recognized that she was an older person like me that was very content with her atheism.

Beth Johnson died of lung cancer in November at the age of 86. She left two daughters. Leslie Sinclair (who is a member of AOF), and the other daughter is Lynn (in Australia). Beth was a third generation Californian who was born in San Francisco. She taught tai-

loring and dressmaking (adult education) for the San Francisco schools.

She joined our group in July of 2000. She came to our 10th anniversary picnic at my house. Then, she came back the next day and helped me clean the two barbeque grills. That was the kind of person she was. I only hope that we, as an organization, gave her something in return.

We seem to be unable to form a community such as churches do, because we are scattered around the county. But, we do create a bonding place to say that atheists are not alone; that there are un-

told thousands of us, and we must be recognized. And, a lot of us are the Beth Johnsons who make no bones that we are content with our atheism.



Betty and Beth — Two Chipper Atheists (July, 2004)

The articles above and below are based on remarks by Betty Simonsma and Mynga Futrell at the January 9 general meeting.

A Tribute to Beth Johnson, Atheist and AOFer Living Life, Facing Death

By Mynga Futrell

Beth first shared with me back in the summer that she had cancer and it was terminal, but she insisted I not tell. She intended to go on just as she was as long as she could (see above picture). I didn't tell anyone, but I communicated with her off and on afterwards, and I'd like to add on to what Betty has already said here.

For one thing, I want to fulfill my promise to Beth's daughter Leslie that I would pass along regrets that she couldn't be here today to hear AOF's tribute. For another, I want to abandon formality a bit and be

sure you know a thing or two about Beth that may have slipped by you since she, like Carl Yates, was a very venturesome person and yet not given to speaking all that much about herself.

Having spent most of her married life in San Francisco, where her daughters grew up, Beth found herself a widow mid-life (in 1963). She filled the forty-one remaining years of that life to the fullest.

- She was, for one thing, *a sailor*. She owned her own sailboat for a

while, and 20 years ago even sailed along with others to Tahiti — one of the dozen crew members on the rented vessel.

- She moved locations during those years of widowhood (Marin county in the 60s and 70s; Corte Madera, Orangevale, and some others)—almost each time finding herself “a deal”—purchasing her bargain “fixer-upper” and turning it into a place that suited her personality and needs.

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AOF Subscription / Membership Form

Mail to: AOF, P O Box 15182, Sacramento CA 95851-0182 (Attn: Membership)

Name(s) _____ Phone () _____

Street _____ Apt. # _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

E-mail address (print legibly!) _____

Check your preference:

___ Newsletter Subscriber Only (\$12) ___ Family Membership (\$30)

___ Low-income Member (\$10) ___ Patron (\$50)

___ Single Membership (\$20) ___ Donation (\$ _____)

☐ Please check here if you do NOT want your name on lists occasionally provided to organizations similar to AOF.

Please check your preference. We can deliver your monthly newsletter via an attached pdf file to your e-mail address above. ☐ E-mail newsletter ☐ Postal mail

☐ Please check here if you DO want to be on our AOF activist list.

Beth Johnson

(Continued from page 5)

- She *herself* outfitted her van for travels, turning the vehicle into her personal RV with attendant personal style—and travel she did—solo, too—venturing across the country several times to several different places, and even up into Canada.
- She skied up until she was 80, taking great pleasure in “getting in for free” after age 75. She never broke any bones, either.

Beth was so like my own Mother in some ways, I couldn't help but be personally drawn to her. Both women reared two daughters and lived as widows for a goodly chunk of their lives. Both made *the best-tasting deviled eggs!* Both were independent women, fiercely so, and neither ever wanted to be dependent on others. They were Frank Sinatra “do it their way” people.

Unlike my own Mother, who lapsed into a dementia in her mid-80s and lost the very control she had so much relished, Beth was fortunate to carry onward with full intellectual fortitude into her ninth decade and almost right up to the end. In fact, the way Beth approached her death is a model for me, and so

indicative of the way she lived her life—with mind and eyes both wide open, in a matter-of-fact fashion, with strategy, and desirous of making the most of every day. Such dynamism!

Despite knowing her illness was terminal and death was fast approaching, she did not intend to go into any “death postponement” mode with medical interventions. Rather, she made her choices, forged ahead, getting things done, driving to Trader Joes, you name it—until she simply had no capacity remaining. Remarkably free of pain and lucid, right up almost to the end, she was fortunate that way.

As it turned out, Beth's last AOF meeting was in September. She had fully intended to come to Freethought Day in October, and she would have made it too, had the day not been so horridly windy. (She had phoned me the day before and, with an eye on the forecasted wind advisory and great disappointment in her voice, indicated that, unless the weather report proved erroneous—of course, it didn't—she probably had best not try it and I of course agreed.)

We spoke on the phone a few more times, and in our last conversation (in early November, before I left the

state for three weeks), she said she knew she wouldn't be able to make the November meeting, and, when I told her I wouldn't either because I'd be gone for three weeks, she rather matter-of-factly stated that this conversation would probably be our last. It was. Leslie tells me she was atheist to the end, too.

She also made sure I'd have her recipe for deviled eggs, scribbling it down for me as her last token of friendship. And what did I learn, when I got it in the mail?—that before I can make those eggs myself, first I have to make her *homemade zucchini relish* to put in it! That's Beth. What a gal.

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Longer term habitat improvements will follow involving: reconstruction of housing; sanitation; drainage; drinking water supply; mangrove regeneration.

AOF will be accepting donations for the next several weeks. To donate, please mail your check (make it out to **AOF**) to: “Attn: India Relief; c/o AOF; PO Box 15182; Sacramento CA 95851. 100% of funds received will go to the relief. We appreciate those who quickly sent in donations. Emil/Eleanor Bernstein; Kenton Bradley, Leslie Christianer, Mynga Futrell, Paul Geisert, Ed McConnell, Ken Nahigian, Tom Nicolette, and Richard Stolcis. The needs are massive.

KVIE's Gratitude

Thank you very much for your participation in KVIE's November/December 2004 Membership Pledge Drive. With your enthusiastic support, KVIE raised over \$932,184! During your phone bank shift on December 12, 2004, your group brought in \$14,970, helping us to bypass our goal of \$750,000.

Since membership constitutes over half of our annual revenue, your help is vital in our efforts to continue to meet our mission. The mission of KVIE, Inc. is to educate, enrich, enlighten, and inspire diverse audiences and individuals through high quality television programming and related services that enhance the quality of life for people in the communities we serve.

As a non-profit organization, volunteers are essential to our continued existence. On behalf of the staff at KVIE Public Television, thank you! You truly made a difference. I look forward to working with you in the near future.

Sincerely, Evie Turner Volunteer Coordinator

A Member's Perspective

"I don't think the major religions will ever stop fighting. They're all supposed to be the highest authority. Whether or not an atheistic world would be a more peaceful one is debatable. Personally, I think that an atheistic world might be a more peaceful world. At least it would eliminate all religious reasons for fighting, and that, in my opinion, would be no small accomplishment. What I think modern-thinking men and women need to do is gradually extricate themselves from the teachings of the fifth and sixth centuries BCE when most of the major religions were conceived."

Richard Aylright

Newsletter Submissions

Submit your newsletter items to the N&V submissions editor, Kay Dickey, at this e-mail address:

frethnkr@mindspring.com

or mail item to the AOF mailbox: PO Box 15182, Sacramento, CA 95851-0182.

Preference is given to material submitted online in a PC-compatible word processing format such as Word, Wordpad, or Notepad. (To submit, attach your file to the e-mail and send.)

AOF also welcomes succinct and substantive letters to the editor. Note: All letters are prioritized by AOF's publishing criteria deriving from the organization's Statement of Purpose.

AOF Serves End-of-2004 Meal for Needy

By Kevin Schultz

AOF members **Kay Dickey, Don Knutson, Kevin Schultz, Ken Nahigian, George Sterpka**, and community member **Lanna Seuret** volunteered several hours of their time and energy on the frosty evening of December 28 to help feed those in need in the Davis community.

The Davis Community Meals program helps needy individuals in the Davis community by providing a twice-weekly safe and friendly environment where they can receive a free and healthy meal. It is a secular organization, which AOF has partnered with since 2001. In 2002, AOF officially began assisting Davis Community Meals (many thanks to Don Knutson for coordinating and planning!).

At the event, AOF members served about 50 persons food. It is not easy to convey how compassionate one feels when one serves another. Everyone receiving a meal is friendly, courteous, and respectful. Occasionally families attend, with their chil-

dren eagerly accepting or refusing the various food items AOF members have to offer. Some children are very expressive emotionally with regard their selections! Local community musicians often participate, livening the air with music from piano, violin, accordion, flute, or guitar. One never knows what to expect musically when attending a Davis Community Meals event!

The core volunteer staff of Davis Community Meals is top-notch. If you have never attended a Davis Community Meals event, they will guide you through everything, and share a joke and a smile with you to boot.

If you would like to volunteer for an upcoming AOF Davis Community Meals event, you can mark your calendars now, because Davis Community Meals has communicated to us our scheduled dates for 2005: **March 8, June 14, September 13, and December 27**. All dates are **Tuesday evenings**. Watch your newsletters

for further information as these events approach. Important! — All events for 2005 are "clean-up" events, which means that other groups will perform the set-up and serving tasks. This means that AOF members not able to attend due to work schedules now have an opportunity to participate, as clean-up begins much later, around **6:30** and finishes by **7:00 PM**. It's a half hour or so of light work, fun, and rewarding. So, please volunteer and pitch in with the 2005 Davis Community Meals event of your choice.

Newsletter Freebie Policy

We'll be pleased to send one free newsletter to any person upon request, but after that time, please subscribe to AOF's newsletter for only \$12 per year. Or, better yet, why not become a member? That way, you'll get our newsletter FREE as part of your membership!



P.O. Box 15182
Sacramento, CA 95851-0182

We're on the Web!
www.rthoughtsrfree.org/aof.htm

February Calendar of Events

Darwin Day 20085 Celebration (*Tickets at door, \$10*)

Atheist MeetUp (*Mountain Mike's Pizza, phone for Tina at 447-3589*)

AOF Board Meeting (open to members)

Brights MeetUp (*location TBA, phone for Tom at 447-3589*)

Saturday February 12, 2 PM

Thursday, Feb. 17, 7 PM

Sunday, Feb. 20, 9:30 AM

Monday, Feb. 28, 7 PM

Next AOF General Meeting

Sunday, March 13, 2:30 PM



Directions to Darwin Day Education Gala — February 12

The Darwin Day celebration takes place at the La Sierra Community Center (John Smith Hall), 5325 Engle Road, in Carmichael. This location is just two blocks west of Fair Oaks Blvd. At Engle and Garfield. There is plenty of parking. **Important: Doors will open at 2 PM (not before). The formal program does not begin until 2:30** so that those who wish to visit the literature tables, register for the door prize, and see the sales merchandise will have the opportunity to do so. If you seek more specific information about the gala, please phone AOF's 24-hour answering recorder at 447-3589 and leave your name and telephone number for a return call. Advance tickets until 2/5/05: \$8.