

AOF News & Views

Sacramento, California

May 2008

Special Points of Interest

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Fifteen Years! Two Days of Celebration Saturday and Sunday, May 10-11



Yes, it is going to be a birthday celebration – complete with **birthday cake**. We will all sing “**Happy 15th Birthday**” to Atheists & Other Freethinkers, which had its organizational meeting in **May of 1993** (even though its name wasn’t decided for a couple more months). We will try to contact former members who now live out of town and invite them to come and join the fun.



First, on **Saturday, May 10**, join us in celebrating AOF’s 15th anniversary with a **BBQ, cake and music** (and if the weather turns hot, a dip in the pool) at **4 P.M.**, at Deb Smith’s house. This will be an informal get-together to celebrate AOF, its founders, and the efforts of all who have donated their time over the years to make this wonderful organization successful. **For address and directions, call Debora at 933-8933.**

Second, on **Sunday, May 11 (1:30—4 PM)** AOF **pro-**
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Save the Date!—AOF to Host Atheist Leader From India on June 22 By Mynga Futrell

Atheists and Other Freethinkers has been informed that its members, along with other citizens in the Sacramento community, will soon have the good fortune to meet **Dr. Goparaju Vijayam** of the Atheist Centre of Vijawada, India. As the Centre’s Executive Director, he leads what is undoubtedly the most influential atheist charity in the world.

Under the sponsorship of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, Dr. Vijayam, the Executive Director of the Centre, is traveling to the United States to speak at the World Humanist Congress in Washington, DC. Then, with the cooperation of various member societies of Atheist



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Consciousness, Naturalism, and Supernaturalism President's Message By Paul Storey

I just attended a conference entitled "Toward a Science of Consciousness" from April 8-12. During the week long event, about four hundred papers were presented on every aspect of consciousness that the human mind can dream up.

Ever since Descartes formulated his concept of separation of the mind and brain, known as dualism, a controversy has raged concerning what constitutes the mind and where it is located.

Today, we know the brain is a great tangle of 100 billion (10^{11}) neurons, each having 7,000 synapses with other neurons, bringing the total synapses to 100 trillion (10^{14}). Consciousness seems to be dispersed both in time and space within the complex mass.

Science is progressively shedding light where consciousness resides. Use of brain scanning machines, known as fMRI, shows areas of the brain used in imagining playing tennis, and different parts used in imagining walking through a home. Computer simulations of neural networks are used to test theories, and to offer tentative explanations to psychological anomalies of our perception. The fascination of the topic was evident by the wide range

of presentations.

I would separate the theories of consciousness along two major lines, the dualists and monists. Dualists argue there is something mysterious in what we experience, that science cannot explain, because it is subjective first person perception, the redness of red, what it feels like to be me right now. They even go so far to claim that consciousness should be a fundamental dimension of the universe, like energy, matter, and space-time. The monists feel consciousness can be explained in physical terms. We can translate these philosophical sides into the well known differences between the supernaturalists and the naturalists. The argument over the existence of a soul is now taking place in the context of consciousness.

You probably don't have to guess where I stand on the spectrum. I presented a poster, which has been submitted to a journal, awaiting peer review to see if it will be published. If so, I may be famous and could be remembered for millennia as the originator of a brilliant framework of ideas on how to measure consciousness in engineering units. Otherwise, I may be remembered by some locals for a few years as having been president of AOF.

Easter Highway Clean-Up Recap By Don Knutson

Mynga Futrell, Don Knutson, Ken Nahigian, Robert Poeschel, Richard Prowse and John Reiger constituted the AOF crew which carried out the last cleanup of our two-mile stretch of Highway 99 north of Elkhorn Blvd. on Easter Sunday, March 23. It was a glorious and spectacular morning with wild turkeys cackling and snowy egrets making their slow, calm and sophisticated strides alongside the highway. With the use of the van of Debra, Richard's wife, the cleanup went very smoothly with some 25 bags worth of trash and debris collected and ultimately prevented from reaching our tributaries to further contaminate our oceans. We will return to carry out the same noble task this time on a **SATURDAY, MAY 24 @ 8A.M.**

AOF Board (2007-2008)

President: Paul Storey
Vice President: Mynga Futrell
Secretary: Nancy Gilbert
Treasurer: Ken Nahigian
Directors at large:

Alice Corley, Kay Dickey,
Don Knutson, Kevin Schultz,
Debora Smith

AOF Committees

Newsletter: Kevin Schultz (Editor)
Tom Nicolette (Mailing)

Freethought Day, Oct. 5, 2008

Beverly Church, Mynga Futrell, Carla Corbett, Kay Dickey, Jerry Sloan, Tom Ikelman, Kevin Schultz, Brian Krofchok

Darwin Day, Feb. 15, 2009:

Bronda Silva, Mynga Futrell,
Dave Henderson, Ed McConnell,
Kay Dickey, Ken Nahigian,

Ad Hoc Committees:

Web Portal (Kevin Schultz, Richard Langley); Alternate Meeting Place/ Time (Jerry Sloan, Ken Nahigian, Kevin Schultz); Youth Outreach (Jerry Sloan, Tina Burgess, Mynga Futrell); Connections (Kevin Schultz, Betty Simonsma); Growing AOF Membership (Jerry Sloan, Kevin Schultz)

Archive: Kay Dickey, Mynga Futrell,
Ken Nahigian, Betty Simonsma

AOF's Voluntariat

Affiliation Liaisons:

Mynga Futrell, Kay Dickey (AAI)
Hank Kocol (CSH)
Kevin Schultz (AA)
Beverly Church (AHA/HAGSA)

Community Service Projects:

Don Knutson

Internet Website:

Kevin Schultz

Meetings:

Dave Flanders, Ken Nahigian
Jerry Sloan, Betty Simonsma

Membership Database:

Ken Nahigian

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@aofonline.org

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A Look At Local Reporting On Religion

April Meeting Write-Up

By Mynga Futrell

At the April AOF meeting, two writers from the Sacramento News & Review, an alternative news weekly, gave those attending an “insiders view” of how they are approaching fairness, accuracy and diversity

with an overview of what brought alternative news reporting to the forefront and then delved into the California situation and the genesis of SN&R as one of three northern California alternative weeklies.



Keleigh Friedrich, who describes herself as more of “a seeker,” always inquisitive about matters in this realm, is the writer of the Higher Ground and Sacreligious columns for SN&R. She spoke primarily on what led those columns to be

created in the first place and how she is approaching them today. She provided a highly interesting example from her new column.

when reporting on issues that involve religion, spirituality and ethics. They have a civic commitment to including the nonreligious when dealing with topics in the “religion” realm.

Kel Munger, who labels herself definitely of “a skeptical bent,” began

There was a vivacious question and answer period, with questions covering such matters as “What if Rupert Murdoch were to buy SN&R?” to “What is spirituality?”

(Continued from page 1)

gram will be focusing on that topic near and dear – AOF itself! It will be a two-part event. First, there will be a **whirlwind tour of organization’s eventful happenings**, starting with “Day One.” **Dave Flanders** is preparing a one-hour video consisting of excerpts from some of the more interesting guest speakers across the years. **Paul Storey** has provided Dave with the raw material for the editing.

After viewing the video, the “**in the round**” time will begin, in which all in attendance can “have their say” about the organization. First will come those who wish to **look back and share a favorite memory** of AOF of days gone by. Then **those who prefer to look forward will have their turn** to offer suggestions for new directions and activities! Warning: All speakers will be timed, so make sure your remarks will be succinct!

Calendar of Events for Sacramento Community Freethinkers



<http://sacportal.humanists.net/calendar>

Subscribe to all the local happenings online!

Atheists and Other Freethinkers



AOF is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit educational organization. It is one of 50 member societies of the **Atheist Alliance International** (“a positive voice for atheism”). AOF

also 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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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.

Historical Figures Series

Anthony Comstock: Saving the Children

By Ken Nahigian

Anthony Comstock, self-styled "Weeder in God's garden," hated vice from the start—as a teenager, he broke into a local saloon to drain the merchandise. Born in Connecticut of sturdy Puritan stock (1844), he joined the Union army at age 19. All the horrors of the Civil War—the disease, torn bodies, battlefield amputations—barely perturbed his Victorian rectitude. But the soldiers' profanity was unacceptable. He vowed to do something. After the war, he did.

Moving to New York City, joining the Young Men's Christian Association, Comstock launched his campaign. A local printer sold pornography, a salon keeper staged cockfights. Comstock had them arrested. One can imagine the stern young Comstock, in black frock coat and mutton-chop mustache, dragging policemen to crime scenes, quoting obscure blue laws and demanding duty be done. But he was not above personal action; when the saloon keeper threatened Comstock, the crusader drew a revolver, crying, "I'll put daylight through you."

His war on moral turpitude soon drew the eyes of R. R. McBurney, secretary of the YMCA, and Morris Jesup, a philanthropist. In 1873 they helped Comstock establish the New York Society for Suppression of Vice, setting him up as secretary. They also helped him wangle an appointment as a US Postal agent (unpaid), with authority to make arrests. From that platform he successfully lobbied for the Comstock Law, forbidding "obscenity" in the US mail. Now he had real power.

Dime novels, Penny Dreadfuls and the lurid "Yellow Dailies" (today we call them tabloids)—these drew his hottest ire. "Feeders for brothels," he said. Anything sexual was right out, including marital instruction manuals. Haunting newsstands and publisher pressrooms, Comstock found much to abhor. Ultimately he destroyed or seized nearly 4 million pictures and 16 freight-car loads of plates, books and other "smut," according to a biographer, fining or jailing 2,682 people. He even prevented postal delivery to medical students of some anatomy texts.

Some cases achieved infamy. As in 1872, when he accused Victoria Woodhull of

peddling pornography. Woodhull was a noted spiritualist, suffragist, advocate of free love, and the first female broker on Wall Street (in the day, "free love" meant marriage based on individual choice and affection, not compulsion). The pornography was an article exposing the secret affair between the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher and a married parishioner. The affair was real. The case was dismissed. Still, Woodhull and her sister spent months in prison.

In 1877, Comstock arrested D. M. Ben-



Anthony Comstock, "anti-obscenity crusader." Source: Public domain: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthony_Comstock, last accessed April 26, 2008.

nett, founder of the Truth Seeker Society, the oldest freethought organization still extant. Bennett's crime was to publish a scientific tract (written by a former minister) on marsupial reproduction, and to publish his essay, "An Open Letter to Jesus Christ." Later Comstock entrapped Bennett for mailing a free-love pamphlet. The notorious trial became a *cause célèbre*, and Bennett spent 13 months at hard labor in Albany Penitentiary.

In 1899 and 1902 Comstock brought suffragist Ida Craddock to court for distributing educational pamphlets on sex

within marriage. Comstock even locked horns with George Bernard Shaw, in 1905, over supposed obscenity in Shaw's play, "Mr. Warren's Profession."

The case-list continues like an itinerary of Victorian-era liberalism and free-thought. He arrested Emma Goldman (1910) for her exposé of prostitution. Finding the article unobjectionable, the court released her. He prosecuted William Sanger (1914) for mailing a copy of *Family Limitation*, by his wife Margaret Sanger, founder of the modern birth control movement. Sanger spent 30 days in prison. His wife had fled to England, but bravely returned to face her own charges.

In his decline by then, Comstock bragged that he had convicted enough "libertines" to fill a 61-car passenger train, driving fifteen of them to suicide. One was Ida Craddock, who slashed her wrist after losing her third court battle. When the news came to Comstock, his offhand remark was, "A bloody end to a bloody life."

His most notorious case was in 1913. Passing an art store, Comstock spied a print of a nude woman in the window. He demanded the clerk take it down. "But that is *September Morning*," said the clerk (the famous painting by Paul Chabas). Comstock had not heard of it. "There's too little morning and too much maid," he snapped back. The court case ignited a storm of ridicule.

Comstock died in Summit, NY, in 1915, weakened by the strain of his crusades (his house there is a minor local landmark, though decayed). The New York Times eulogized him: "The country has lost a benefactor and hero." In fact, Anthony Comstock did some real good: ridding newspaper ads of swindles and useless medicines, and shutting down the notoriously corrupt Louisiana Lottery. But a new word, *Comstockery*, coined by George Bernard Shaw, came to describe the busy-body attempt to control what others read and think.

For good or ill, he did inspire one man before his death: a young law student who came to admire his cause, his philosophy and his methods. The young man's name was J. Edgar Hoover.

Set Sail For Atheism!

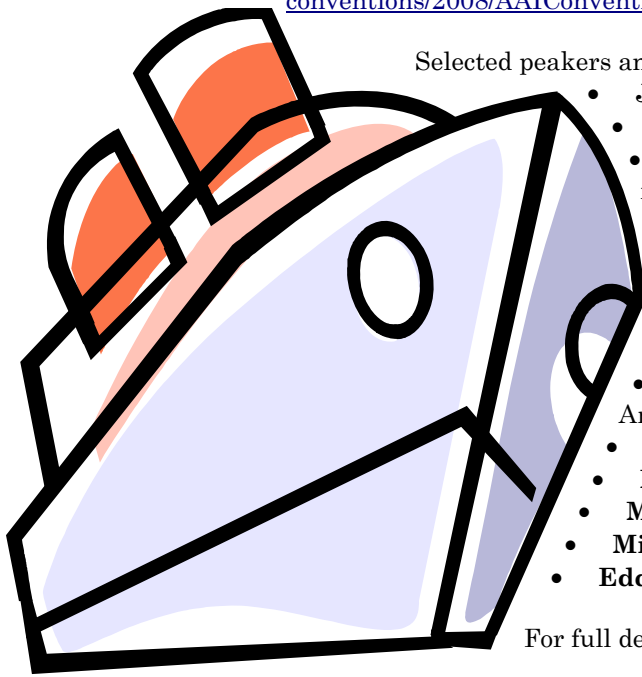
Save the Date! 2008 Atheist Alliance International Convention, September 25-28: "Unsinkable Atheism"

By Mynga Futrell

"Unsinkable Atheism," the 14th Annual Atheist Alliance International (AAI) Convention, will be held the weekend of September 25--28, 2008 on the beautiful and historic Queen Mary, which is permanently docked in Long Beach, California.

The convention cost includes a souvenir speakers booklet, Friday-night hors d'oeuvres and dessert service, entertainment, a Friday night USO-style dance party, admission to exhibition hall, Saturday morning workshops, Saturday afternoon plenary, Saturday Happy Hour with hors d'oeuvres and music, Saturday night plenary with a musical presentation, Sunday Continental Breakfast, Sunday plenary, and Closing Ceremony.

For more detailed information download the schedule/registration information PDF: <http://www.atheistalliance.org/conventions/2008/AAIConventionDescription2008.pdf>.



Selected speakers and Workshop Presenters:

- **Jennifer Bardi** - Editor of the Humanist magazine
- **August Berkshire** - President of Minnesota Atheists
- **Matt Cherry** - Executive Director for the Institute for Humanist Studies
- **Scott Cozza** - Co-Founder of Scouting For All
- **Annie Laurie Gaylor** - Freedom From Religion Foundation President
- **Ellen Johnson** - American Atheists President
- **Cathy Jones** - Godless Grief, Writer and Humorist
- **Lori Lipman Brown** - Lobbyist for the Secular Coalition for America
- **PZ Myers** - Biologist, University of Minnesota, Pharyngula
- **Michael Newdow** - Attorney and Physician
- **Michele Rundgren** - Comedienne
- **Michael Shermer** - Publisher of Skeptic Magazine
- **Eddie Tabash** - Lawyer and Atheist/Secular Humanist

For full details: <http://atheistalliance.org/conventions/2008/>

June & July Regional and National Events

Plan a hot start to your summer:

- June 5-8: Combined into one—the **American Humanist Association (AHA)** convenes their **67th Annual Conference**; the **International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU)** convenes their **17th World Humanist Conference**; the **IHEYO** hosts their **5th International Youth Conference**; and the **Secular Student Alliance (SSA)** hosts their **8th Annual National Conference**. **Washington, D.C.**. Complete info: <http://americanhumanist.org/conference/>.
- June 9: **Lobby Day, hosted by the Secular Coalition for America**. **Washington, D.C.** http://www.secular.org/lobby_day_2008.html
- June 19-22: **The Amazing Meeting 6 Conference (James Randi Educational Foundation)**. **Las Vegas**. <http://www.randi.org/joom/registrationpro/index.php>
- June 25-29: **Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly**. **Fort Lauderdale, FL**. generalassembly@uua.org.
- June 27-29: **Inaugural California Family Free-thought Campout**. **Lake Isabella, Kern County**. <http://www.bakersfieldlife.com/home/Blog/davesalyers/24101> (also see page seven for write-up).
- July 13-19: **Camp Quest West 2008**. **Lake Vera, Nevada**. <http://west.camp-quest.org/>

AOF Subscription / Membership Form

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

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Street _____ Apt. # _____

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E-mail address (print legibly!) _____

Check your preference:

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

Please check here if you DO want to be on our AOF activist list (e-mail address required).

We can arrange to deliver your monthly newsletter electronically via the e-mail address you print above. Please check the mode you prefer. E-mail Postal mail

Dr. Vijayam Carries On The Work of Gora Atheist Centre Leader to Visit

(Continued from page 1)

Alliance International, of which AOF is a member society, he will be traveling onward to various spots in the U.S. to describe the humanitarian work of the Centre. He will arrive in Sacramento on the summer solstice weekend (June 21-22).

AOF will be hosting Dr. Vijayam that weekend to hear him describe how the Atheist Centre is addressing the inequities and sufferings of the Indian people while simultaneously promoting the idea of living as a community based on secular and humanist values. (The venue and time are yet to be determined. The June *AOF News & Views* will have all the details.)

In the meantime, take notice of the fact that the Indian government has given recognition to the social reform work of Atheist Centre with a commemorative stamp featuring Dr. Vijayam's father, Gora, founder of the Centre.

Atheist Centre, in Andhra Pradesh

region, works for the eradication of untouchability, caste and other institutional parochialisms. It is devoted to promoting scientific values and skepticism. The staff educates citizens on how to overcome social taboos and superstitions such as witchcraft and sorcery that exploit or harm individuals and the community. It aims to end child marriages. It is the area's most efficient first responder in the aftermath of natural disasters such as the recurring cyclones. It immediately sends out well-organized teams with water and medical supplies to do rescue and recovery work. (AOF donated to the work of the Centre following the tsunami disaster three years ago.) It also offers many job training programs. All in all, Atheist Centre is a thriving atheist organization, probably the most successful in history.

Please save the date (June 22) and look forward to an opportunity to meet Dr. Vijayam and learn about this extraordinary enterprise.

Community Events of Interest

- **Humanist Association of the Greater Sacramento Area (HAGSA), Friday, May 2, 7-9PM and Sunday, May 18, 3-5 PM:** More info: <http://hagsa.org>
- **Humanists of Sun City, May 4, 1PM:** Topic to be announced. More info: healthphys@aol.com.
- **Atheist Meetup Movie Event: "Expelled", Sunday, May 4, 3-5PM.** 1664 Woodleaf Cir, Roseville. Please RSVP: 916-543-4788
- **First Amendmism Church of True Science (FACTS), May 5, 7-9PM:** General Meeting. Home of AOF board member Bev Church, 120 Eastbrook Circle, Sacramento. More info: <http://restorethepledge.com/FACTS/>
- **Americans United for Separation of Church and State, Sacramento Chapter, Monday, May 12, 7-9PM.** Planning meeting. More info: <http://au-sac.org>
- **Sacramento Valley Astronomical Society, Friday, May 16, 8-10PM.** Topic to be announced. More info: <http://www.svas.org>
- **Atheist Meetup May Meeting, Colonial Heights Library, Tuesday, May 20, 6-8PM.** More info: <http://atheists.meetup.com/637>
- **Sacramento Organization for Rational Thinking (SORT), Tuesday, May 27, 7:30-9PM.** Topic to be announced. More info: <http://home.surewest.net/kitray/>

Seth Shostak and Darwin Day

By Nancy Gilbert

Darwin Day Attendees, were honored and treated to have Seth Shostak as their speaker this year. His enthusiasm, humor and warmth were appealing, in addition to his cognitive sharings.

Dr. Shostak is the Senior Astronomer at the SETI (the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence) Institute in Mountain View, CA and the 2004 recipient of the Klumpke-Roberts Award from the Astronomical Society of the Pacific for his outstanding contributions to the public understanding and appreciation of astronomy.

Before his involvement with SETI research, he was busy searching for clues to the ultimate fate of the universe by analyzing galaxy motion. While working at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, he founded and ran a computer animation company called DIGIMA.

Shostak is responsible for numerous outreach activities. He is editor for "Explorer", a monthly publication for supporters of the Institute; gives more than 50 talks annually; and writes magazine articles and books about SETI (his main passion).



Of note for AOF readers, he is the host for the SETI Institute's weekly radio program "Are We Alone?" in which Shostak interviews guests about the latest scientific research on a variety of topics, from paleontology to astrobiology. "Are We Alone?" is available for download at the SETI

Institute's website and through podcasts.

Also, once a month he finds time to host "Skeptical Sunday", a show focused on debunking pseudo-science, U.F.O.s, and practices such as astrology and dowsing. Both of these are likely to be of interest to AOFers. Try <http://radio.seti.org> , <http://podcast.seti.org>

Dr. Shostak has authored or co-authored:

- *Life in the Universe*, by Jeffrey O. Bennett, Bruce Jakosky & Seth Shostak (1980)
- *Sharing the Universe: Perspectives on Extraterrestrial Life*, by Seth Shostak (1998)
- *Cosmic Company: The Search for Life in the Universe*, by Seth Shostak & Alex Barnett (2003)

Newsletter Submissions

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

newsletter@aofonline.org

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

Preference is given to material 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.

California Family Freethought Campout June 27-29, 2008

You are invited to attend the **first Freethought Family Campout for California** on the dates of **June 27-29, 2008, at Lake Isabella in Kern County in California**. The Campout will be open to freethinker adults and families, including humanists, atheists, agnostics, ignostics, skeptics, naturalists, naturalistic pantheists, and so forth.

You can come just to relax and socialize with other nature oriented folks, or participate in some of the volunteer run activities such as hikes, crafts for kids and adults, drum circle, geocaching, and astronomy. There is a local Audubon Society sanctuary close to Lake Isabella for bird watching and wildlife viewing and multiple forms of camping and lodging options in the area.

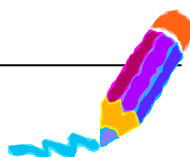
This is a no-cost event other than your own self-arrangements for food and lodging.

Complete info: <http://www.bakersfieldlife.com/home/Blog/davesalyers/24101>

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!

Want the latest AOF board minutes?
E-mail aofboard@aofonline.org





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

We're on the Web!
aofonline.org

May Calendar of Events

May Movie Night Friday, May 9, 7-9 PM

15th Anniversary—AOF Party Saturday, May 10, 4-? PM

15th Anniversary—May AOF General Meeting Sunday, May 11, 1:30-4 PM

AOF Adopt-A-Highway Event **SATURDAY**, May 24, 8-10 AM

Save the Date! AOF to Host Atheist Centre Leader From India Sunday, June 22, time TBA

Save the Date: AHA/IHEU/IHEYO/SSA Joint Conferences (see page four to see what those acronyms stand for) Thursday-Sunday, June 5-8

Save the Date: 14th Atheist Alliance Intl. (AAI) Convention Sep. 26-28, on the Queen Mary

AOF meetings are open to the public and are generally held on the second Sunday of the month, from 1:30 - 4 PM at the Sierra 2 Community Center, Room 10. Note: The months of February and October are exceptions, since AOF co-produces two public education events: (1) an outdoor fair in October - "Sacramento's Freethought Day" (2008-10-05), and (2) a science and humanity celebration - Sacramento's "Darwin Day Educational Gala" (2009-02-15). Watch the newsletter for details.

Directions to AOF's General Meetings

The Sierra 2 Center is located at 2791 24th Street in Sacramento, just south of Broadway and the Department of Motor Vehicles. Visitors are welcome. Parking is available on the street or in the rear, off 4th Avenue. AOF Board meetings are held at alternating sites, so please inquire about the location. For AOF's 24-hour recorder, call 447-3589. Leave your name and a number (repeat for clarity) and someone will phone back to answer your questions about AOF.

