

AOF News & Views

Sacramento, California

January 2010

Special Points of Interest

2010 Darwin Day Birthday Gala—Get Your Tickets Today! (page 1, flyer insert)

Noted Evolution Figure PZ Myers to Speak in Sacramento! (page 3)

Rasputin, the Unkillable Monk, by Ken Nahigian (pages 4, 6)

An Agnostic Christmas, by Robert Ingersoll (page 5)

Sunday, January 10, 1:30-4:00 p.m. Follow-Up on Fundamentalist Proselytizing Controversy at American River College: Professor Natasha Fratello Breitenbach

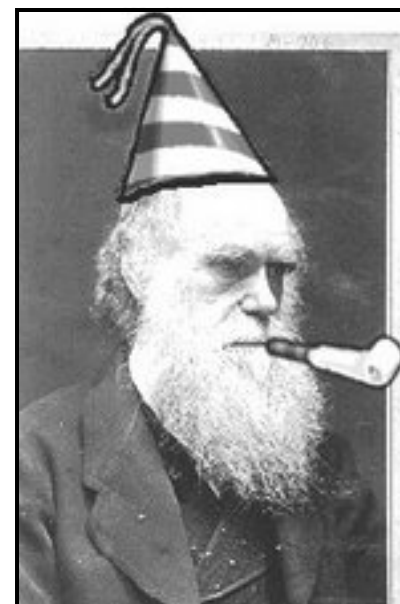
In 2007, some fundamentalist Christian students and community citizens organized and targeted non-Christian students and other minority groups at American River College with malicious propaganda. Over the course of the next year, these individuals garnered local and national media attention for their continued efforts. During this time, faculty, staff, and administrators came together to promote an atmosphere of civility, respect, and the free exchange of ideas in accordance with the college's stated values. One early attempt at promoting these ideals was **Professor Natasha Fratello Breitenbach's** panel on Questions of Faith. The panel was comprised of local religious leaders plus Hank Kocol, a representative of Atheists and Other Freethinkers. The professor will talk about her choice to get involved, the original panel and other efforts that followed, and give an update on the campus atmosphere today.



February 7, 2010, 2:00-5:00 p.m. Save the Date! 13th Annual Sacramento Darwin Day Birthday Gala

Dr. Andrew Marshall, UC Davis ecologist and evolutionary anthropologist, will be the guest speaker at Sacramento's 13th Annual Darwin Day Gala at the La Sierra Community Center in Carmichael on Sunday, February 7, 2010.

Dr. Marshall's presentation will explain the importance of evolutionary biology in successful conservation efforts, using his studies in the rainforests of Borneo as examples. Harvard-educated, Dr. Marshall has worked with National Geographic and the Nature Conservancy, and he was recently awarded the Hellman Grant for research on Bornean rainforest plants.



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AOF Line

Sacramento's "Scene" Grows

Happy New Year! The Sacramento "scene" keeps growing! We even have a Sacramento Coalition of Reason now to coordinate groups! Best wishes to everyone in the coming year. Regrets in advance to anyone not included—let us know and we will post a note in an upcoming issue.

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

2010 Sacramento Directory Of Like-Minded Organizations (Note: not all are freethought groups!)

1. Humanist Association of the Greater Sacramento Area (HAGSA): <http://www.hagsa.org>
2. Humanists of Sun City: E-mail: healthphys@hotmail.com
3. First Atheist Church of True Science (FACTS): <http://www.restorethepledge.com/>
4. Sacramento Freethinkers, Atheists, and Nonbelievers (SacFAN): <http://www.meetup.com/SacFAN/>
5. Sacramento Brights Meetup: <http://www.meetup.com/Brights-Action-Sacramento/>
6. UC-Davis Agnostic and Atheist Student Association (AGASA): <http://davisagasa.livejournal.com/>
7. ARC Freethinkers: hlavnaa@imail.losrios.edu
8. Sacramento City College Freethinkers: <http://saccityfreethinkers.wordpress.com/>
9. Freethinkers of Sierra College: <http://www.secularstudents.org/sierra>
10. Sacramento Organization for Rational Thinking (SORT): <http://home.comcast.net/~kitray2/site/>
11. Sacramento Area Skeptics: <http://www.sacskeptics.org/>
12. Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento (UUSS): <http://uuss.org/>
13. Sacramento Coalition of Reason: <http://sacramentocor.org/>
14. Sacramento Darwin Day : <http://sacdarwinday.blogspot.com/>
15. Sacramento Freethought Day: <http://freethoughtday.org>
16. Sacramento Chapter of Americans United for Separation of Church and State (church-state issues **only**): <http://au-sac.org>
17. Links to many local groups: <http://RThoughtsRFree.org>

AOF Board (2010)

President: Beverly Church

Vice President: Open

Secretary: Jillian Stanley

Treasurer: Ken Nahigian

Directors at large: Beverly Church, Paul Geisert, David Flanders, Brian Jones, Ken Nahigian, Mario Sandri, Jillian Stanley

AOF Standing Committees

All AOF members are urged to volunteer in the organization. There are openings in every committee listed here. Please contact the chair or coordinator of any area of interest to you to learn details of getting involved. We would love to have your participation! Phone AOF 916-447-3589 or e-mail aofboard@aofonline.org for direct contact to relevant personnel.

Programs and Events Committee

Program Planning (Team Coordinator, Debora Smith)
Meeting Matters / Logistics (Team Coordinator, Open)
Social Activities (Team Coordinator, Open)

Membership Committee

Members Tracking (Team Coordinator, Ken Nahigian)
"Freethought Friends" (Team Coordinator, Jillian Stanley)
Outreach / Recruiting (Team Coordinator, Steve Campbell)

Communications Committee

Beverly Church, Chair
AOF News Team (newsletter editor, events editor, public editor, postmaster, webmaster)

Education, Activism and Service Committee

Service Projects Coordinator: Don Knutson
Education/Action Coordinator: Mynga Futrell

Freethought Day 2010: Date to be announced

Beverly Church, Chair. (Save the date! – It's a celebration of reason and church/state separation)

Darwin Day 2010: Sunday, February 7

Mynga Futrell and Bronda Silva, Co-Chairs
(Save the date! – It's a celebration of science and humanity)

AOF Voluntariat

Affiliation Liaisons

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

AOF News Team

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Postmaster: Jerry Sloan
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(Openings for Events Editor and Public Editor)

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*Noted Evolution Figure to Speak to Campus Groups:
Jan 21, 6:30, and Jan 26, 7:00 p.m.*
PZ Myers Coming to Sacramento!

PZ Myers is Associate Professor of Biology at University of Minnesota, Morris. He is author of the science blog Pharyngula, 2009 "Humanist of the Year," and noted atheist activist and critic of intelligent design.

The UC Davis student group **Agnostic & Atheist Student Association (AGASA)** is presenting a lecture by PZ Myers on **Thursday, January 21, at 6:30 p.m. in the Davis campus Chemistry Bldg, Room 194.** It seems this event is free as of this writing.



PZ Myers, author of the popular blog Pharyngula, <http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula>

The **Sacramento City Freethinkers** group is also proud to announce they will be hosting **PZ Myers** at Sacramento City College on **Tuesday, January 26, 2010, at 7:00 p.m., at the Student Center.** This event is **FREE** for Los Rios students and faculty, and \$5 at the door for all others. PZ will be speaking on **"Evolution in light of creationism and intelligent design."** His presentation will be followed by an audience Q&A. This event is co-sponsored by the Speakers Bureau of the Secular Student Alliance.

Jan 21 details: <http://www.meetup.com/sacskeptics/calendar/12094192/>

Jan 26 details: <http://saccityfreethinkers.wordpress.com/>

Hope to see you there!

Is your AOF Membership or Newsletter Subscription about to expire?



See the date on your mailing label or check your records. **Don't miss a single month!**

To Renew, use the form on Page 6, or visit:

<http://www.aofonline.org/support>

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 of atheism and the acceptance of atheists in our community. Through educational programs, projects, and publications, AOF will extend secular perspectives, including the separation of religion and government 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

Rasputin: The Unkillable Monk

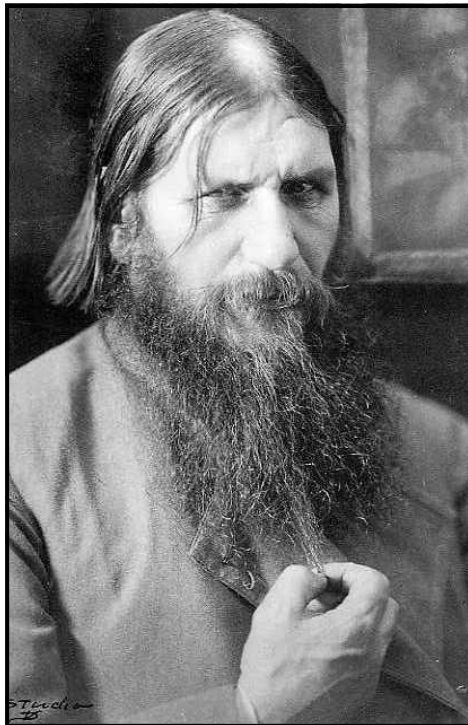
By Ken Nahigian

Born into squat poverty in the fly-speck village of Pokrovskoye, in a Siberian fairyland where the crackle of winter ice is like gunshots and summer is a bog under clouds of midges, he grew up to a singular truth: to live you must have blood of iron and flesh of flint. Grigory Efimovich Rasputin did. By mid-age he was the most notorious monk ever, of Russian Orthodox flavor at least. The tales told—of his physical strength, tireless fornications, mystical ecstasies and rages, near-hypnotic hold on the Russian royal family, ability to dine on cyanide or take dagger wounds to the stomach or absorb high-caliber bullets and spit them out like melon seeds—and not least, that windstorm-style beard, those black, sucking, manic eyes—have been the very fabric of nightmares, and still scare Russian infants into eating their beets.

He was born on January 10, 1869. His parents were Efim and Anna, normal, respected villagers. His siblings, sister and brother, died young under tragic circumstances. Around age 18 he spent penance time in a monastery, perhaps for a theft, and befriended a local hermit, and may have been involved with a flagellant/orgiastic sect, the Khlysty. It all may have inspired him to become a mystic and pilgrim. Leaving home in 1901, he walked to Greece, Jerusalem and St. Petersburg. On the way he built a reputation as a healer and visionary, and left a trail of deflowered maidens.

During his Siberian peregrinations, destiny found him. He caught news of Alexei Nikolaevich, the Tsarevich (Romanov heir apparent). Ill with hemophilia, the blood disorder, little Alexei would soon die—so said the helpless doctors. Rasputin saw opportunity. At the capital he fostered links to the St. Petersburg Seminary and presented himself as Fa-

ther Gregori, a holy man. Soon he drew disciples, pious nobles and desperate peasants who sought healing, advice and absolution. He made political connections. From his modest flat, Rasputin let out word that he could heal the Tsarevich. Caught up by his commanding manner and weird self-conviction, and verged on despair, the Empress Alexandra begged him to try. Remarkably, he succeeded. “Father Gregori” helped Alexei through several painful attacks of internal and exter-



"... our Savior and Holy Fathers have denounced sin, since it is the work of the Evil One. But how can you drive out evil except by sincere repentance? And how can you sincerely repent if you have not sinned?"

"God has sent me to save our dear sovereign and Holy Russia.

Despite my terrible sins, I am a Christ in miniature."

nal bleeding. Precisely how is unknown. Was it hypnotism, folk medicine, luck, prayer? Or was it simply that he withheld aspirin, the pain-

relieving wonder drug of the day, which actually exacerbates hemophilia? But as a result Rasputin gained a foothold in the royal court, then another, and became a periodic visitor, and grew in power. Not all were pleased.

For one, he was *scary*. He had stern convictions, spiritual and political. He showed no especial deference for royalty, speaking gruffly and frankly to the Tsar as if to a peasant. Even at court functions he wore the same black tar boots, the same ragged overcoat. Amid the royal murk and intrigue, Rasputin glittered, sharp and deadly as a knife in an alley.

There were rumors of magic, of course; even the Archbishop of Russia thought the monk could call thunderstorms at whim. He had a talent for seeing emotional flaws and hairline cracks, and exploiting them. His fanaticism was contagious, the kind that calls and breeds other fanatics.

The carousing and unfettered womanizing was awkward too, by a bit. Rasputin had a secret doctrine—to reach salvation through sin. With his dark magnetism, he easily convinced young women to help him seek God. (This line has never worked for me; it had to be the delivery.)

Despite this, and despite public rebukes from officials and even the Holy Synod, his hold on the Tsar's family was unshakable. No doubt it helped to be the sole hope for Alexei's life. But when the Great War began, Rasputin went too far. He advised the Tsar to take direct command at the front. With the Tsar away, he convinced Alexandra to replace some public officials with his own hand-picked candi-

(Continued on page 6)

A Short Essay

An Agnostic Christmas

By Robert Green Ingersoll

AGAIN we celebrate the victory of Light over Darkness, of the God of day over the hosts of night. Again Samson is victorious over Delilah, and Hercules triumphs once more over Omphale. In the embrace of Isis, Osiris rises from the dead, and the scowling Typhon is defeated once more. Again Apollo, with unerring aim, with his arrow from the quiver of light, destroys the serpent of shadow. This is the festival of Thor, of Baldur and of Prometheus. Again Buddha by a miracle escapes from the tyrant of Madura, Zoroaster foils the King, Bacchus laughs at the rage of Cadmus, and Chrishna eludes the tyrant.

This is the festival of the sun-god, and as such let its observance be universal.

This is the great day of the first religion, the mother of all religions -- the worship of the sun.

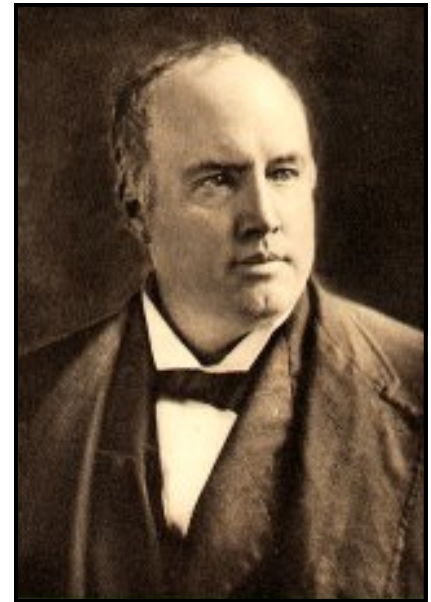
Sun worship is not only the first, but the most natural and most reasonable of all. And not only the most natural and the most reasonable, but by far the most poetic, the most beautiful.

The sun is the god of benefits, of growth, of life, of warmth, of happiness, of joy. The sun is the all-seeing, the all-pitying, the all-loving.

This bright God knew no hatred, no malice, never sought for revenge.

All evil qualities were in the breast of the God of darkness, of shadow, of night. And so I say again, this is the festival of Light. This is the anniversary of the triumph of the Sun over the hosts of Darkness.

Let us all hope for the triumph of Light -- of Right and Reason -- for the victory of Fact over Falsehood, of Science over Superstition.



And so hoping, let us celebrate the venerable festival of the Sun.

—First published in *The Journal*, New York, December 25, 1892.

Colonel Robert Green Ingersoll (August 11, 1833 – July 21, 1899) was a Civil War veteran, American political leader, and orator during the Golden Age of Freethought, noted for his broad range of culture and his defense of agnosticism.

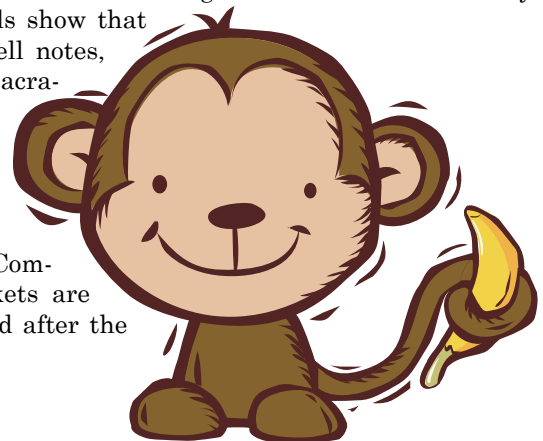
(Continued from page 1)

This year's celebration of science and humanity is expected to build on the success of 2009's Darwin bicentennial birthday event, which drew over 400 people. "Our event draws a varied audience," says Bronda Silva, who co-chairs the event along with Mynga Futrell. "They come not only to learn from the presentation, but also to enjoy the festive atmosphere, which includes science music and birthday cake."

Organizers of the Darwin Day celebration are shocked that, despite the overwhelming evidence that evolutionary processes led to the development of life on our planet, recent polls show that only 40% of Americans accept the fact of evolution. As Dr. Futrell notes, "There's so much public confusion. Our 'educational gala' offers Sacramento area citizens a chance to become better informed about the matter. There will be plenty of supplemental educational literature available. Tables are staffed by the several educational and community organizations that sponsor the main presentation."

Doors open at 2:00 p.m. and the program will begin at 2:30. The Community Center is located at 5325 Engle Road, Carmichael. Tickets are \$10.00 general/\$5.00 student with ID. Refreshments will be served after the presentation.

More information is available online at: SacDarwinDay.info



AOF Subscription / Membership Form

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

Name(s) _____ Phone: _____

Street _____ Apt. # _____

City _____ State _____ ZIP + 4 _____

E-mail address (please print!) _____

Membership Level (please circle one):

Patron (\$50) Family (\$30) Individual (\$20) Low-income (\$10)

Note: Membership does not include a newsletter subscription

Newsletter subscription:

___ Send my printed newsletter by postal mail (\$12 extra)

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Additional Donation: \$ _____

Total enclosed: \$ _____

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permitted by law. Non-members may receive the AOF Newsletter (same rate - \$12 printed, free via email).

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

Please check here if you DO want to be an AOF Activist (e-mail address required).

Rasputin, continued

(Continued from page 4)

dates. As he imposed his iron will, his enemies began to move.

In December, 1916, three nobles lured Rasputin to the Yusupov Palace on pretext of meeting the Tsar's beautiful niece. The monk had once survived a dagger stab from a former lady friend, deep enough to expose entrails, so the nobles took no chances. Awaiting the tryst, he munched tea cakes and wine, supposedly laced with enough cyanide "to kill five men." It had no effect. In dismay, one noble pulled a pistol and shot the monk point blank. Rasputin fell, got up, looked at him with those poisonous black eyes, then slammed him to a wall and began to throttle him like a chicken. The nobles fought off the angry monk and chased him outside. They shot him three more times, once in the head; clubbed him bloody; wrapped him in a sheet and threw him in the icy Neva River. Officials recovered the body later. The cause of death? Drowning.

To be fair, some of the details are apocryphal and disputed. And the story omits a lot—for example, Rasputin actually had a wife, Praskovia, who gamely endured his shenanigans ("He has enough for all," she said), and a son and daughters in Pokrovskoye. One daughter, Maria (d. 1977), eventually became a cabaret dancer in Bucharest, a performer with Ringling Brothers, and finally an American citizen in 1945. She claimed to possess her father's huge phallus, preserved in a jar of formaldehyde. In the 1970's she sold it to an antiques dealer. In 1994 an unidentified collector asked the Bonhams auction house to test what he thought was the relic—it was a sea cucumber. A Russian museum now claims to have the true relic.

It makes a grand end to the story, one of the cases where the myth seems truer than history. What better destiny for the unwashed, half-crazed, oversexed iron monk, who unwittingly helped bring down the Romanov dynasty, than his member to become a museum piece, a prize sought by collectors? Truly he would be proud.

Quick
Quote

“ A man who dares to waste one hour of time has not discovered the value of life. —Charles Darwin ”

Elections! Plus, The Case Against Christ December Meeting Write-Up

By Debora Smith

Matt McCormick, CSUS Professor of Philosophy, gave a great presentation on the content of his upcoming book about the evidence (or lack thereof) for the divinity of Christ. If Matt's class lectures are anything like his talk at AOF, his classes must be very popular.

Matt came at the subject from many angles, but primarily looked at the most basic tenet of Christianity, the resurrection, and at what grounds exist for believing that it occurred. He pointed out that the four gospels were written many years after Jesus' life, and that two of the authors (Matthew and Luke) relied heavily on the earlier version written by Mark. None of these authors knew Jesus, and there's no way of knowing how many people the stories passed through before they were recorded by the gospel writers of the NT. Matt then gave an example of a bag of money changing hands multiple times to illustrate the extremely low probability that information can be passed through multiple sources without data loss or change.

He also spoke about the reliability of the miracle-witnesses, and used an analogy (the "miracles" at Lourdes) to make the point that the odds are infinitesimally small (.00000165 chance that the Lourdes miracle testimony is reliable) that real miracles were being performed by Jesus.

Another aspect Matt included was the evidence from the Salem Witch Trials. He pointed out that the events surrounding the witch trials were exceedingly well-documented, but that despite this wealth of eye-witness reports that magic/witchcraft was occurring, very few

people believe today that the people executed in Salem were actually guilty of the crime of witchcraft. The evidence of Jesus' supernatural works is orders of magnitude less than that of the Salem witches' magical works.

The talk ended with a hypothetical situation: you are arrested and (falsely) accused of murder. The prosecution provides testimony from four men. It comes out that none of them saw you do it, or have ever met you. They heard you did it from some people who talked to some other people.... Then it comes out that the supposed crime happened many years ago. Two of the men got their stories directly from one of the other men. There are still many discrepancies in their stories. Then they put a surprise witness on the stand (Paul) who had a vision in a trance, and a voice told him you did it. He says everyone knows you're guilty. The jury finds you guilty. When asked why, they said they just had faith that you did it, and they were always taught that you had done it, and you might have done it (and they couldn't let a guilty person go free), and no one can prove that you didn't do it. Of course, it was a Christian jury.



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.



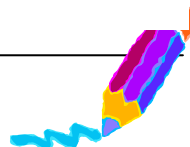
Photo: Noel Neuberger, SN&R

Read all about it! AOF's Jerry Sloan was recently featured in the *Sacramento News and Review*: <http://www.newsreview.com/sacramento/content?oid=1342610>. The SN&R honored Jerry and fellow activist Marghe Covino as two "Local Activists With Staying Power." Congratulations!

Newsletter Freebie Policy

This newsletter is free by e-mail to everyone. Just send your e-mail address. If you prefer printed copy by postal mail, AOF will send one free issue on your request; after that, please subscribe at \$12 per year. For details, see the signup form on page six.

Want to send a letter to the Editor?
E-mail newsletter@aofonline.org!





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Sacramento, CA 95851-0182

We're on the Web!
aofonline.org

January/February Calendar of Events

AOF Dinner Social @ Café Morocco, 1221 Alhambra Blvd. Contact: 419-2105 or shastaseer@sbcglobal.net	Thursday, January 7, 6:30 p.m.
AOF Adopt-A-Highway Cleanup Event	Saturday, January 9, 8:00-10:00 a.m.
AOF January General Meeting	Sunday, January 10, 1:30-4:00 p.m.
13th Annual Sacramento Darwin Day Birthday Gala	Sunday, February 7, 2:00-5:00 p.m.

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" (Oct 2010), and (2) a science and humanity celebration - Sacramento's "Darwin Day Educational Gala" (2010-02-07). 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.

