

# Grass Roots News

NEWSLETTER OF THE AMERICAN HUMANIST ASSOCIATION CHAPTER ASSEMBLY

Dedicated to Promoting Chapter Development Volume XXI, Issue 1 , Spring 2007

## Chapter Assembly: Why We Serve!

Jack Sechrest  
Co-chair, Chapter Assembly

Why do we serve? It starts with a dream, a vision of the future. It is nurtured by the sense of community and acceptance we experience in a like-minded group. We value a place to meet where we can share ideas, learn new things, make new friends, and rejoice with our fellow Humanists.

In 1999, Mike Werner and I co-founded a Humanist discussion group at the DuPage Unitarian Universalist Church in Naperville, Illinois. Starting with two dozen DUUC members who were also AHA members, we experienced steady growth. In November of 2002 we organized as a membership chapter and named ourselves the Humanists of West Suburban Chicagoland.

In February of 2003, we held our first annual Darwin Day event. Fred Edwards was our speaker. Word got out that we were meeting and AHA members in the area gave us a visit. Our continuing success earned us the title of AHA Chapter of the Year in 2004. We kept our original two dozen members and were joined by another six dozen AHA members from the Western Suburbs.

We hold meetings on the second Wednesday of each month and a "Philosophers' Lunch" on the third Thursday. Our attendance in recent years has run from thirty to 115 people, with average attendance between forty and sixty. Our annual Labor Day picnics have also been well attended.

We find that people are attracted to our Chapter meetings and events for several of the following reasons: The sense of place or belonging that's offered; the fun and the learning; the tasks that are accomplished; the support provided, both to ourselves and others; the personal growth; and the friendships formed.

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## Humanist Chaplaincy of Harvard University is the AHA 2007 Chapter of the Year!



The American Humanist Association is proud to announce that the Humanist Chaplaincy of Harvard University was chosen as the 2007 Chapter of the Year. The award will be presented in June at the AHA *Blazing a Humanist Trail* conference in Portland, Oregon, along with a \$500 cash grant.

Awardees are chosen based on how well they are promoting Humanism as seen in their individual and AHA membership development over the last year, their public impact, and their program initiatives.

In April, the Humanist Chaplaincy of Harvard University held a world-class Humanist conference in Cambridge, Massachusetts with registration of over five hundred people, making one of the most well-attended Humanist conferences in American history. Salmon Rushdie received the centerpiece award of the conference for lifetime achievement in cultural Humanism. This amazing conference, organized and run by the Humanist Chaplaincy of Harvard University, is one of the many reasons that they have been awarded the AHA 2007 Chapter of the Year.

Although the Humanist Chaplaincy of Harvard University has been Charter Chapter since 1977, it has the vitality of a vibrant, young chapter—and we thank it for serving both Humanism and the AHA in such an exceptional manner.

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# Chapter Leader Profile

Paul D. Rolig, President,  
Humanists of Idaho

## 1. How were you first exposed to Humanism?

I was raised Episcopalian, and was even an altar boy in junior and senior high school. By the time I entered college, however, I was having severe doubts about the truth of religious doctrines that were to be accepted on faith. Part of this had to do with my exposure to science and mathematics, including formal logic. Another part had to do with the fact that my parents had grown up in different churches, and when they married they had to choose which one to attend. We discussed things like this at home, including which churches taught what, which parts of the Bible contained good lessons, and which parts were just pre-scientific mythologies. From this I learned that questions and issues related to religion and ethics should be thought about carefully, and not simply accepted uncritically. I could see from experience that people needed a moral code to guide them to some extent, to keep people from murdering, stealing, etc. Then a college friend loaned me a copy of Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. I was absolutely thrilled with the exposition of the basics of her philosophy of Objectivism, which explicitly rejected supernaturalism and embraced reason and rationality to develop an objective code of morality. I've considered myself pretty much an objectivist -- and hence an atheist -- ever since the early 1970s. Sometime around 1990 I became aware of *Free Inquiry*, published by the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH). I was also beginning to hear denunciations of secular humanists by religious fundamentalists, and I recognized their criticisms as attacks on reason, so I subscribed to *Free Inquiry* and eventually became a member of CSH.

## 2. How were you first exposed to the group?

I first learned that there was a Humanists of Idaho group right here in Boise around 1999. They put out a press release that was published in the *Idaho Statesman*, our local paper, announcing that one of their members was an ordained Humanist Celebrant. That really impressed and excited me because I knew firsthand the need for non-religious approaches to weddings, funerals, and other celebrations. It took a few months to get to my first meeting, but as soon as I started attending I was hooked. I liked the people and

the things they stood for. In October of 2004 our group sponsored a symposium at which Mel Lipman, American Humanist Association President, spoke. At that time, I became a member of the AHA, as well as the CSH. The Humanists of Idaho is a chapter of both organizations.

### 3. What keeps you involved with the group?

Humanists of Idaho and, to some extent, Idaho Atheists, are the only groups around that speak out much on separation of church and state. I prefer to be associated with the Humanist label because it entails so much more than just the atheist label. Both apply to me, but I like to be able to point out to people the ethical principles of Humanism. In addition to the church-state issues, we in Humanists of Idaho ally with the Interfaith Alliance of Idaho, which includes the more liberal and progressive religious leaders. They are the folks most likely to organize human rights vigils, work to reform immigration laws, welcome members of minority groups, defend the rights of gays and lesbians, and so forth, and those are things that Humanists should support and be seen supporting.

### 4. How did you get into a leadership position?

It did not take the existing leaders long to figure out that I was an interested and active member of the group. I am especially interested in activism, and I made several public appearances on behalf of the Humanists of Idaho. I've held signs in rallies promoting separation of church and state, and made speeches to the Boise City Council and Idaho State legislative committees, each time explicitly identifying myself as a Humanist. In 2005 our former president moved out of state, and I was elected to fill the office.

### 5. What are your goals for the group?

Our goals include the following:

- *Voice Humanist concerns in our area.* This includes church-state separation, promoting a positive understanding of what Humanism is (in reply to fundamentalists who accuse us of being all things evil, for example), and promoting humanistic causes such as non-discrimination, access to contraception, and evidence-based science in our schools.

- *Satisfy the needs of our membership.* This includes meetings, parties, and other events where we can socialize with like-minded people. We give people hope that there are

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## Speaker Profile

Hemant Mehta  
Chair of the Board of Directors,  
Secular Student Alliance



Hemant Mehta, a Maywood, Illinois native, is the Chair of the Board of Directors of the Secular Student Alliance and a voting member of the Secular Coalition for America. Currently living in Chicago, he recently completed his Secondary Teaching Certificate at DePaul University and this August will start as a math teacher at a high

school in Naperville, Illinois.

While an undergraduate at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Mehta and a friend started the first atheist student group on campus and affiliated the group with the Secular Student Alliance. Later that year, he received a scholarship to attend the Secular Student Alliance's Conference, becoming interested in the work of the group's leadership. After graduating with his B.A. in Math and Biology and spending a year in medical school, he began to realize that he wanted to devote more time to secular groups and pursue his interest in teaching.

Mehta is perhaps best known as the author of the recently published "I Sold My Soul on eBay," the story of his decision to auction off his faith on eBay while offering the winning bidder the right to send him to the church services of their choosing. As the bidding increased furiously, theists were vying to outbid atheists in the battle for Mehta's soul. The winning bidder, a Christian pastor, paid \$504 (which Mehta later donated to the Secular Student Alliance). They agreed to have Mehta attend ten church services and blog about his experiences on the particular Christian ministry's website. It was shortly thereafter that the media coverage exploded, the story even landing on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*. A Christian book publisher contracted Mehta to attend more church services and turn his experi-

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# Raising Money for Your Group Hosting a Fundraising Event

By Maggie Ardiente

Does your Humanist group need funds for a new project? Money toward a new building? If so, hosting a fundraising event is a great step toward accomplishing your goal.

Fundraising events are a great way to raise the profile of your group, bring new members to your organization, and raise a significant amount of money in a short amount of time. While there are many different types of fundraising events, one of the easiest, and often the biggest money-maker, is a simple house party.

But planning a house party is impossible to do alone. So first, organize an event planning committee. These volunteers are needed before, during, and after the event for a number of tasks to ensure a smooth event.

## Then take these initial steps:

1. Decide on a location. Renting space in a hotel or community center can be costly, so see if a group member would be willing to host the event at their home.

2. Create the guest list. Invite members of your group who have the capacity to give. Encourage members to invite their friends and relatives who may be interested in learning more about Humanism.

3. Design the invitation. Invitations don't have to be elegant and elaborate; a computer design program and some thick card stock paper works just fine. The invitation should have all the basic information (date, time, location, directions), but it should also be made clear that the event is a fundraiser (for example, "Help us reach our goal of \$5,000!"). And don't forget to give guests an opportunity to give even if they can't attend by returning the RSVP card (for example, "I cannot attend, but I'd like to help. My donation is enclosed.").

After you've mailed out invitations, received the RSVP cards back, and followed up with members who haven't responded, it's time for the event. Have enough food and drink available, with enough space for guests to mingle.

An hour or so into the event, the host or another speaker can speak briefly about your organization and your campaign. Then he/she will ask all the attendees to support your group. Have two or three members of the event com-

mittee distribute pledge cards and envelopes so that everyone knows it's time to donate.

After the event, analyze your results. Did you meet your fundraising goals? Were guests satisfied with the location and refreshments? What would you do differently? Consider the answers to these questions when planning your next event.

Have fun!

Tip: Special guests can help create buzz for your event. Consider inviting a famous Humanist or well-known leader to say a few words.

## BE IN THE KNOW

Get the news on all the hot-button issues concerning Humanists today.

Log onto the "Humanist News" blog at [www.theHumanist.org](http://www.theHumanist.org)

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We find people in other chapters have similar interests and would like to create links with us. We do have overlapping memberships among several local Humanist groups and are looking for ways to cooperate regionally.

We think we have something good that ought to be shared. Building more chapters and assisting those we already have are among the ways we can promote Humanism. The Chapter Assembly is a logical place for chapters to meet and plan together our future and influence the future of Humanism.

The Chapter Assembly will be holding its annual meeting on Friday, June 8<sup>th</sup> at 10:30 am in Portland during the AHA Convention. All Chapters and affiliates are invited to join us. Bring your best ideas to share.

## Calling Humanists to Support Charitable School Project On Hispaniola

A fellow Humanist, Sebastian Velez of the Museum for Comparative Zoology at Harvard University, is undertaking an exciting new project. It is a project of great significance to those who value educational opportunity for all as well as freedom of religion.

Along the border of the Dominican Republic and Haiti—in a rural area beset by dire poverty, a total lack of educational opportunities, and a regressive economic system—Vélez is taking the lead in a school-building project. The school will start with grades one through four and currently needs a building for a library, among other improvements. Admission to the school is free, regardless of whether a child is “sponsored” or not.

The majority of families in the Dominican Republic and Haiti survive on less than \$2 a day. Many of the children in the community have never been to school, and work side-by-side with adults in the fields. Without an education, the children of these Haitian sharecroppers are doomed to fall into the tragic cycle of poverty that has already trapped their relatives. But, with a functioning elementary school, children may be able to attend secondary school in later years.

Currently, virtually all NGO work in this area is done by religious organizations, as is too often the case in the poorest parts of the world. And, in some areas, children have been denied admission to school because of their religion. Together we can make Sebastián Velez’s dream come true. These children can be provided an education free of religious strictures and pressures, and a library stocked with nonsectarian, freethinking reading matter.

To donate now, go to [www.humanistcharities.org](http://www.humanistcharities.org) and click “donate” to support this work as Humanists. Through the special website we can all give securely online to an unambiguously Humanist charitable effort. As a Chapter leader, have your members support the tax-deductible efforts of Humanist Charities to provide a library building for this school.

### SAVE THE DATE:

**AHA 67th Annual Conference  
Washington, DC - L’Enfant Plaza Hotel  
June 5-8, 2008**

## Don’t Let the Religious Right Censor Your TV!

“The History of Disbelief,” a controversial three-part documentary on atheism, made waves when it aired on the BBC in the United Kingdom. Now thanks to the American Humanist Association and other groups, it comes to the United States - amid more controversy!

Will you be able to see it? Some PBS stations have declined to air the series! Others are delaying an airing to see if there’s sufficient viewer interest. And a few are placing it in an unpopular after-Midnight time slot, much to the delight of the religious right. Don’t let the dogmatists deny you your chance to see the first-ever historical account of atheism!

This is what the Religious Right has been saying about the History of Disbelief:

“Demagogic and propagandistic.” -- Janice Crouse, Concerned Women for America.

“[PBS is] revealing their bias against Christianity, against traditional faith.” -- Peter Sprigg, Family Research Council.

You should be able to decide for yourself! So should other viewers.

As a Chapter Leader, have your members call your local PBS station and ask to speak with the program manager or station manager. Say that we want to have “The History of Disbelief” aired this season in a prime time slot!

We are part of this movement because Humanism is about knowledge and reason. We have a chance to spread that message. The voices of nontheism have been silenced for too long. It’s time for your ideas to take the stage!

The American Humanist Association  
and cooperating groups present

*A Brief History of Disbelief*  
on PBS Television

### But will you be able to see it?

Some PBS stations have declined to air the series, are waiting to see if viewer interest is sufficient, or are placing it in unpopular after-midnight time slots. Call your local PBS station and ask the program or station manager when *History of Disbelief* will be aired.

## Save Darfur: Demand President Bush Make Darfur a Priority

A dire situation has been developing in Darfur and it is time to let President Bush know that enough is enough!

For the past three years, Darfur has been the site of a massive genocide. More than 400,000 people have been killed since tensions began, and more than 2 million people have been displaced to camps in Sudan or refugee camps in Chad. These people face numerous threats, such as murder, starvation, or rape, and it is uncertain if or when they will be able to return home. Tensions began in 2003, when the government-backed Janjaweed militia, along with Sudanese armed forces, became embroiled in a fight with two rebel groups, the Sudanese Liberation Army/Movement and the Justice and Equality Movement. The Sudanese government has used this fight as an excuse to slaughter the innocent civilian populations – the Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa. Entire villages have been burned and destroyed, tens of thousands have died, and women and girls are continually targeted as victims of rape.

The Bush Administration has already recognized the situation as genocide, yet very little has been done. Various peace agreements have been brokered between the Sudanese government and the rebel forces, yet the violence has failed to cease. The Sudanese government has refused to allow a UN peacekeeping force into the region, and the humanitarian aid agencies there are facing grave difficulties bringing relief.

It is vital that President Bush make Darfur a priority. Let him know that the situation in Darfur is unacceptable and action must be taken! Demand that Bush strengthen the African Union peacekeeping force in Darfur, push for the development of a strong UN peacekeeping force, and increase humanitarian aid to the region.

Please call President Bush and urge him to take action against the world's worst humanitarian crisis. For more information, please visit [www.savedarfur.org](http://www.savedarfur.org).

### The Feminist Caucus of the American Humanist Association

Join the Feminist Caucus Today!

\$15/year for an individual membership

\$25/year for an organizational membership

[www.Americanhumanist.org/hsfamily/caucus.html](http://www.Americanhumanist.org/hsfamily/caucus.html)

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others who share their basic values, and that someone is looking out for their concerns in the community. We provide stimulation through book discussions and other programs at our meetings. We have a Humanist Celebrant for all occasions.

- *Continue to participate in charitable events in our community.* Such as CROPWALK (to end hunger) and sponsorship of a needy family around the holidays. This strengthens our community and puts Humanist values into action.

- *Grow our membership roster so we can do even more.* I think our best hope is to reach those people who really are Humanists, but who simply don't know yet that the Humanist label applies to them. One way we have found that helps like-minded people to find us is to write letters to the editor on various non-partisan Humanist issues, and identify ourselves as members or officers of the Humanists of Idaho. Our chapter web page ([idaho.humanists.net](http://idaho.humanists.net)) helps people find us, as well.

#### 6. Where do you see the group in five years?

I'm hoping the Humanists of Idaho will have grown in size and become recognized in the community as a positive organization.

#### 7. Have you faced any challenges as group leader?

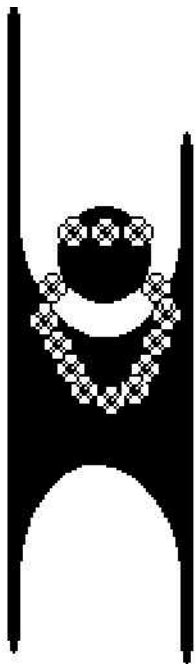
I am personally pretty introverted and analytic (hence my successful career as a software engineer). I'm also a very individualistic and laissez-faire sort of person, so I don't naturally drive other people to get things done. My wife is a great help to me to think through how to manage activities and get more people involved. My greatest motivation these days, however, is seeing the rise to power of religious fundamentalists and recognizing that those of us whom value reason and rationality need to speak out. As Edmund Burke said, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."

#### 8. What are some things you have learned, or advice you'd like to give to fellow group leaders?

It took me a while to realize the importance of providing benefits to the membership. It's easy for someone who wants to make the world a better place to focus on outward-looking activities, such as rallies, speeches, and so forth. Leaders also need to be sure that the members get personal satisfaction from belonging to the group. That means you have to organize inward-looking activities, too.

# Aloha Humanism

By Michael Friedman



From their humble beginnings in 1974 as a group of four Humanists meeting in their apartments, the Humanists of Hawaii have been bringing rational thought and compassion to the island of Oahu. The Humanists of Hawaii have been meeting once a month for over thirty years, currently at the University of Hawaii's Osher Institute, to discuss issues of importance to Humanists nationwide.

The Humanists of Hawaii have done much to spread knowledge of their group as

well as educating the islands about Humanism. Richard Dawkins, author of "The God Delusion," recently came to Honolulu on a book tour. At the event, The Humanists of Hawaii set up a table, handing out over five hundred AHA brochures on Humanism to the over two thousand people in attendance. In addition, the group had yellow polo shirts made to wear at the event, featuring a Happy Humanists on the back sporting a Hawaiian lei! Annually, the Humanists of Hawaii participate in the Gay Pride Parade as well as the Martin Luther King, Jr. Parade. Members of the group volunteer at local homeless shelters, read to children after school, assist Hawaii Public Radio in fundraising, and donate progressive magazines to the public libraries. In addition, members participate in interfaith panels and forums as much as possible.

Recently, shrinking membership has been a pressing issue, with many members in their older age losing contact with the group for physical reasons. From an all time high of sixty regular attendees at the monthly meetings, the group now averages twenty people at each meeting. The newsletter reaches a wider audience of about sixty people, and there are about thirty regular donors to the group. Andi Van der Voort, President of the Humanists of Hawaii, attributes lower membership to a lack of organized activities around the meetings as well as their infrequency.

For example, she says a few of her group members have started to attend the Unitarian Church because they offer childcare. This is an issue many local groups are dealing with and, consequently, the AHA Conference in Portland, Oregon will have a session dealing with Humanist Child Care and how to overcome the problems it creates.

For over thirty years, the Humanists of Hawaii have been delivering meaningful rationalism to Hawaii. Despite a recent decline in membership, the Humanists of Hawaii are still going strong. So what is the next step for the Humanists of Hawaii? The group is interested in starting satellite groups on the other major Hawaiian Islands, given the geographic isolation of each island. We hope to see a Greater Hawaiian Islands Humanists Association developing in the near future, bringing Humanism to each of the Hawaiian Islands.

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ences into a book. Mehta believes this may be the first ever publication of an atheist's work by a Christian publishing house. He describes his book as the story of his journey from Jainism to atheism. It also illuminates his experiences allowing Christian churches the chance to explain God to him, including his experiences at Ted Haggard's and Joel Osteen's famous mega-churches.

Hemant is a frequent speaker on behalf of humanism and atheism, having spoken at events for the Freedom from Religion Foundation, American Atheists, and Atheist Alliance International. A sampling of his speech topics includes: "My Story on eBay," "The Atheist College Movement," "Atheist Blogging and Internet Advocacy," and "What Can We Learn from Christians?" Having discovered his talent as a presenter, Mehta is willing to talk about any topic on which you might be interested in hearing from him. He will speak to local chapters and affiliates and only asks to be reimbursed for travel and lodging. In addition, he suggests that each group hosting him consider making an honorarium to the Secular Student Alliance. He can be contacted via email at [friendlyatheist@friendlyatheist.com](mailto:friendlyatheist@friendlyatheist.com). In addition, please visit his popular atheist blog that is updated multiple times daily at [www.friendlyatheist.com](http://www.friendlyatheist.com).

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