



The Freethought Society News

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The First Secular Day of the Dead Celebration

by Margaret Downey

When I attended the Humanist Institute in 1996, the book *Judaism Beyond God* by **Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine** was required reading. I found reading the book to be thoroughly enjoyable, but more important, I found Wine to be thoughtful and wise. I was impressed by the logical way he presented his premise — that being Jewish was both cultural and religious, and that it is possible to separate these two components. Wine explained that many Jewish rituals and celebrations are essentially secular, and that those that are religious can be changed to be consistent with a nontheist humanist worldview.

I began to look at all rituals and celebrations as potential projects, just waiting to be redesigned. Anticipating a fast-growing nontheist community, I knew there would be a great demand for many more God-free family ceremonies. In 2001, I unveiled my Secular Celebrations website to meet those demands. I have provided my services for weddings, Baby Naming Ceremonies, Coming of Age, and funerals. Along with those God-free ceremonies, I have created unique secular traditions and rituals.

Archeological studies have unearthed evidence that the human species has always created rituals. Ancient sites reveal a wide variety of ceremonial artifacts. In some cases, written descriptions of these ceremonies exist, and in many, entire villages participated. It seems natural that human beings would want to socialize and connect in meaningful ways.

It would be easy for nontheists to dismiss the importance of religious celebrations, but I look upon these as opportunities for a holiday design challenge. I also see where, given the proper twist, the secularizing of a cultural/religious holiday could be of great advantage with outreach efforts to the nontheist community.

Critical analysis of religious doctrine has caused many to reevaluate the need for belief, but the need for social connections is a basic human necessity. Yes, there are some who would argue this notion and say that social connections can be had easily without rituals and celebrations. My secular celebrations efforts would not be appealing to those who feel this way. I accept that, and I know that there are many other ways to reach them (meetings, social occasions, events, conferences, etc.). I look for balance and inclusion however, as I develop more and more outreach efforts.

In 2013, I met a young Latina by the name of **Victoria de la Torre**. We immediately realized that we had a lot in common and decided to establish a mentor-protégé connection. She is a resident of San Diego, California, and I now live half the year in Newport Beach, which is only a few hours from de la Torre's residence. During our first brainstorming weekend, de la Torre and I talked about outreach to the Hispanic community. I am from a Hispanic family and know first-hand how important certain celebrations are and the great advantages of secularizing them.

Secularizing the traditional Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) would surely be a huge success, if we were careful and sensitive to the Hispanic culture. Dia de los Muertos is actually a celebration of life. Nontheists value their one and only life and know that their legacy is the only real "afterlife." Honoring someone's life, therefore, is a way to accept death rationally and reflect on the value of a life lived. We decided to keep almost all of the rituals in our secularized celebration, but designed them to be free from superstitions and religion. In this article, I will recapture the events of the day. I hope that around the nation many more nontheist groups will adopt the secular holiday and host Secular Day of the Dead celebrations.

(continued on next page)

Preparations leading up to the Sunday, November 2, 2014 event included gathering together traditional Hispanic decorations (sans religious icons and symbols, of course), costumes, signage, securing a venue and food preparations. We divided the duties and each of us recruited additional helpers, including family, friends, and local community leaders.

The event could not have happened without the assistance of the San Diego Coalition of Reason's local director, **Debbie Allen**. She secured the venue and was of great help before, during and after the event. When I asked Allen a few questions about the venue, she wrote the following:

*The Day of the Dead event was held at the business park of SeeScan, a research and development firm owned by **Mark Olsson**. Mark is the son-in-law of **Dr. Robert Tapp**, who is a Professor Emeritus of University of Minnesota, and the Dean Emeritus of The Humanist Institute.*

*I met Dr. Tapp and Olsson at a breakfast meeting during a conference that was organized by San Diego State University's Religious Studies Department. During that conference we hosted **Greg Epstein**, the author of Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe. Epstein is the Humanist Chaplain at Harvard University.*

During his speech he encouraged humanists to build communities for humanists and other non-believers. During that breakfast meeting I talked about the difficulties so many local humanist groups have finding appropriate venues for gatherings.

Not long after that meeting, Olsson volunteered the use of his company community room at SeeScan to the Humanist Fellowship of San Diego for monthly meetings. As his business facility expanded Olsson made additional areas at the location available to local freethought groups for events that serve the secular community. We thought he might just unlock the door for our meetings, but Olsson enjoys preparing pots of coffee and sometimes staying for the entire program.

Olsson has never asked for compensation to cover the many hidden expenses of opening up his business for our events. We owe him a great deal of thanks for his generosity and for his support of the freethought community of San Diego.

Indeed, without the use of Olsson's venue, the event simply would not have taken place. Nestled in the foothills of San Diego, the SeeScan gardens offered spectacular views and a walking trail. The patio was the perfect size to accommodate guests and the temperate weather lasted all day.

I very much appreciated the availability of a Legacy Tribute Table (a secular replacement to the religious Dia de los Muertos altar). Attendees were encouraged to place photos of dead loved ones on the table in order to generate conversations about the person's life. The table quickly filled up with sweet family photos. They were great conversation starters and lovely family stories were exchanged. It was amusing to see



Pictured above are (left) **Margaret Downey** and **Victoria de la Torre** (right). They are standing next to the Secular Day of the Dead Legacy Tribute Table. The table skirt and flags represent "Papel picado," which is the Mexican folk-art of paper cutting.

the use of "Secular Saint Candles" that honored the life of Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, Plato, and Socrates. I placed a photo of my aunt on the table and very much enjoyed having an opportunity to talk about why she was so special. So that readers of this article fully comprehend why I am promoting more Secular Dios de los Muertos events, I am reprinting the tribute to my Auntie Conchita.

Today, I displayed a photo of me with my sisters and my Auntie Conchita. In the photo, Conchita has her arms extended trying to embrace my sisters and me as our protector. That is what she was to us. She was our loving and beautiful protector.

My mother sent for Conchita —her younger sister — to act as our babysitter. My mother needed help, so she funded Conchita's trip from Puerto Rico to the United States of America.

Auntie Conchita was the first of five aunts and two uncles to immigrate to the United States. Our house soon became full of Spanish relatives — all needing jobs, trying to learn English, and looking for happiness far away from the rain forest of Puerto Rico. Of all the relatives who lived with us, Auntie Conchita was the most fun to be around.

Auntie Conchita loved singing and dancing. I developed my love of song and dance from her. There was always a record on in our house, and you could hear her voice singing along to film musicals such as South Pacific, The Pajama Game, and Oklahoma as she cooked and cleaned. But, she didn't just sing! No, she would act out an entire movie scene as if she was being filmed, and we all played along with the performance.

We made costumes and sets for our productions using old clothes, ribbons, and sheets. Because she mostly spoke only Spanish, Auntie Conchita could not pronounce the word "sheets" very well. We would laugh and laugh when she would say, "Bring me the shits, so I can make a curtain."

We would hang the sheets on the line and make a grand entrance to perform for family and friends. We never tired of finding ways to make her say the word "sheets." She knew her pronunciation would make us bend over in laughter.

You should have heard the way she pronounced the word "aspirin." She added an extra "s" in the word just to make us giggle.

Auntie Conchita was never defensive about her accent and her humorous outlook always amused us.

I was about eight years old at the time this photo was taken. At that age I was deeply concerned about what the future might hold. I was feeling scared and vulnerable. I knew about death, hunger, and sickness by then.

The world was frightening. I asked her to help me figure things out, because even then, I thought believing in an all-caring, all-knowing and loving God was just a fantasy — like believing that there was a Santa Claus. I had rejected all myths by that age, because we, as a poor family, had to deal with the realities of life's challenges every day.

On those days that she and I talked about deep questions, she would stroke my hair and in her best Doris Day voice she would sing, “Que Sera Sera. Whatever will be, will be. The future’s not ours to see. Que Sera Sera.”

The song lyrics did not provide any answers, but I knew that she loved me and sought to comfort my fears the best way she could. While it was true that, “whatever will be, will be,” we could make things better with a positive outlook and hard work — those were also the life lessons I learned from Auntie Conchita.

She worked hard and soon found a full time job. She got her own apartment and car within four years of arriving in the United States. We were all sad to see her move away from us. Her beautiful personality made many people happy to know her.

Auntie Conchita married and had two children. Through the years she became more and more religious. The Puerto Rican side of the family was also very superstitious, and it did not surprise me to learn how devoted to Catholicism she had become as she aged.

She had, after all, also believed in ghosts and the power of séances. She loved using a Ouija board to communicate with the dead when she lived with us.

When Auntie was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer, a few family members got together to visit her in Reno, Nevada. I was told that because I had become such an outspoken atheist, I should not participate in the visit. A close relative stated that she absolutely knew it would upset Auntie Conchita to see me. I asked, “Why?”

I was told that I should stay away because Auntie Conchita knew that I did not believe in a heaven, God or Jesus. In her dying days, Auntie Conchita would surely not want to be visited by an “atheist.”

I considered going to see her on my own because I knew that the speculation was not correct. My Auntie Conchita and I



had a bond that reached far beyond religion. We were connected through our love for life, hard work, laughter, music and dance.

She died before I could visit her, and today is the first time I have talked about her memory with anyone. This is why I appreciate the opportunity to share my Auntie’s legacy with you today, my likeminded friends. I am confident that you understand why religious differences should not be a factor in keeping people away from each other.

Thanks for listening and thank you for being here.

Right after my presentation, **Mike Estes** (pictured with me at left) spoke about his “awesome father.” Estes talked about his father’s principles, words of wisdom, and the guidance he provided.

The Estes tribute was sprinkled with humor, sweet stories of affection, and profound insights. The crowd enjoyed every word, and when Estes concluded with the words, “...and that is why I say my dad was an awesome father,” the audience clapped in agreement.

After hearing tributes from another four people that day, I knew that we had provided a wonderful event for the nontheist community. We created a nonreligious environment in which life legacies could be honored and loved ones remembered. Values were shared and life lessons memorialized.

This outreach to the Hispanic community ended up being very appealing to everyone who learned about it. I, therefore, encourage all nontheists groups to provide this opportunity to your local community. FS’s expense portion to co-host the 2014 Secular Day of the Dead was \$400, but the event total investment amount was \$1,000. If you support this project and see the benefits of carrying on this new secular tradition, please earmark a donation to “Dios de los Muertos.” We need funding to move forward and any size donation would be appreciated.



Pictured below is a chocolate Secular Day of the Dead cupcake. It is topped by a Sugar Skull ring.



Pictured above are **Margaret Downey** congratulating **Victoria de la Torre** for a job well done.
Pictured right is **Debbie Allen** standing next to the agenda poster.

The Lively Celebration of the First Secular Day of the Dead

by Victoria de la Torre

Brainstorming with like-minded people certainly has its advantages! During a weekend get together with my mentor, **Margaret Downey**, I talked about ways in which we could appeal to a fast-growing nontheist Hispanic community. Personally, I have a great affection for the cultural holiday known as Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead). It occurs on the two days following All Hallows Eve, or Halloween. We immediately knew that there was before us a celebration that could be secularized and re-created to appeal to nontheist Latinos and many others.

Unlike traditional Dia de los Muertos rituals, Downey and I wanted to emphasize the importance of cherishing life before death. Dogma and superstitions would have no place in our Dia de los Muertos holiday. Instead, we would emphasize life legacies and the value of living a religion-free life. Here was our chance to reclaim the holiday. For seven months, we worked hard to make our vision of a Secular Dia de los Muertos/Day of the Dead a reality.

I was in charge of preparing, delivering and setting up half the needed food, securing local volunteers, decorations, and co-hosting. Downey took on the responsibilities of providing the dessert and appetizers. She also created sign-up sheets for the piñata smash and I ordered a lovely Sugar Skull piñata filled with candy.

I thoroughly enjoyed designing craft activities for the children and I was very proud of the table that was set-up at the site for this purpose. It was particularly rewarding to see many adults at the event participating in the coloring project and Sugar Skull Mask creations.

Adults and children also enjoyed getting their faces painted. The face painter was my sister, **Ana DelaCruz**, who was more than happy to volunteer for the event. She, like me, has always enjoyed celebrating Dia de los Muertos and wanted to contribute in an artistic and creative manner. So many people had their faces painted that she worked almost nonstop! Please see photos in this article highlighting the creative work of DelaCruz.

The authentic Mexican folk art paper cutting (“Papel picado”) decorations were created by **Sandra Medina**. The paper flags added so much charm to the event.

The piñata activity brought everyone together in the late afternoon and many children took turns trying to break open the Sugar Skull piñata as their name was drawn from the jar. One adult attendee said, “It’s been so long since I’ve seen a piñata. It’s wonderful to see so many children having such a great time at a humanist event.”

Many guests expressed how happy they were to finally have a significant secular event that was family-friendly. This was such an important aspect for me. The Secular Day of the



Pictured above left to right in the front row are **Christina Frost** and **Ana DelaCruz**.
Left to right, in the back row are **Consuelo Fleming** and **Victoria de la Torre**.

Dead proved that children and adults can have a fantastic time at events that express not only the importance of humanism and secularism, but also incorporated family time — and of course, good food!

The Secular Day of the Dead meal consisted of homemade and authentic Latin-American rice, beans, and tamales (both sweet corn and beef). The food went quickly and we were happy that people had preregistered so that estimated servings would be sufficient. Downey added chips, salsa and guacamole to the buffet-style spread.

Downey also provided Secular Day of the Dead themed cupcakes that were decorated with souvenir Sugar Skull rings. Since many attendees had filled up on other food there were quite a few leftover cupcakes. They were taken to a nearby homeless shelter.

A focal point of the Secular Day of the Dead event was the importance of sharing the legacy of dead loved ones. I honored the life of my beloved grandmother, **Cecelia Cortes**. She led a beautiful life full of love for her entire family. When she died I continued the traditions and customs that she taught me. I am proud of her and her accomplishments. It was rewarding and special to share her life legacy with others. Unfortunately, some in my extended family who are still religious (cousins, aunts and uncles) told me that they were not happy with me for honoring my grandmother’s life in a way that did not include any mention of God. Some members of my family told me that I should not do anything to honor her memory since it would not be in a biblical manner. They contend that, “The only way to honor her was through spreading the gospel.”

I, however, know that as an atheist I value a person’s life more than any god. I know that our afterlife is not in heaven, but in the hearts and minds of those who recall our legacies. I say this with all sincerity, that remembering the life someone who has lived is far better than making up a story about a fictional place left to interpretations of a believer. As a humanist I do not imagine people being tortured in a fictional hell. The notion of a heavenly afterlife is just silly wishful thinking.

It was painful to hear from family members that I should not have honored my grandmother during the Secular Day of the Dead event. I reminded them that religious dogma should not divide family members. No matter the difference in religious views, people can honor and remember a deceased loved one in a beautiful and secular manner. The testimonies we heard that day from six other people proved that point and I hope this new secular holiday tradition will be carried on in other parts of the country.

I am so grateful to the volunteers who helped with this event, especially from my immediate family.

My brother, **Johnny Jones**, took wonderful pictures throughout the festivities. My mother, **Consuelo Fleming**, helped with many chores that had to be done before, during, and after the event. She cooked most of the food, helped decorate, and staffed the ticket and raffle booth.

Years ago, when I first started exploring atheism and humanism, my family was hesitant to even discuss the issue with me. Now they are very supportive of my philosophical lifestance. They, in fact, often enthusiastically ask about and attend humanist events.

My fiancé, **Chong-Ren Chien**, helped with just about everything! I could not have put the event together without his support and assistance. We will be married in June 2015 and we look forward to Downey officiating at our secular wedding ceremony.

The event was also made possible with the help and insight of **Debbie Allen**. Allen leads the Humanist Fellowship of San Diego, which was a co-sponsor of the Secular Day of the Dead event. She helped guide me in regards to the finances and advertisement, and she was an amazing volunteer the day of the event — actually saving the day by quickly solving a food warming problem!

Would I do this again? Absolutely! I encourage anyone who is looking for a secular event idea to duplicate what we did in San Diego, California. Downey and I are putting together a Secular Day of the Dead manual that will be available online soon. See the “Secular Day of the Dead” section at: www.secular-celebrations.com for more information and a printable version of our “How To” manual.



Pictured above are hungry Secular Day of the Dead attendees getting ready to enjoy the buffet-style Latin-American food. At the front of the line is Freethought Society supporter **Sherry Sutton**.



Pictured above children await the breakage of the Sugar Skull piñata. Almost every child had a chance to attempt to break the piñata open. Eventually candy was had by all — including the adults!



Ana DelaCruz is pictured left painting the faces of a young lady and her mother.

Pictured right is **Michael Dorais** wearing a Sugar Skull mask he created at the arts and craft table.

Below, attendees are pictured participating in a sing-along.



Photos of the First Secular Day of the Dead



Pictured above, sitting at the Freethought Society free literature table with **Margaret Downey** (right) is folk singer **Josephine Johnston** (left). Johnston opened the Secular Day of the Dead festivities by singing "Beautiful Sunday." To open the tribute portion of the program, Johnston sang a song she wrote to honor the legacy of poet **Emily Dickinson**.

Pictured below is face-painter **Ana DelaCruz** creating another unique Sugar Skull design for a little girl who enjoyed all the Secular Day of the Dead activities.

Pictured above is **Claudia Kellersch**, the coordinator for a local Parenting Beyond Religion group.

Chong-Ren Chien is pictured below helping serve the tamales at the buffet table.



Pictured left are the "Saint Candles" that were displayed on the secular version of the Dia de los Muertos alter. The candles can be purchased through:

philosophersguild.com