Ingersoll Museum Endowment Appeal Exceeds Target

The campaign to complete the endowment fund of the Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum exceeded its ambitious target following unprecedented donor response to a spring fundraising campaign.

In early March, an email appeal announced a seed gift of $40,000 by Museum Director Tom Flynn, which would be used to match the first $40,000 in donor contributions. The appeal was repeated in Free Inquiry magazine, in the Museum’s spring fund drive mailing, and in an article in the CFI newsletter Freethought in Action.

Donor response was unexpectedly enthusiastic. A gift of $50,000 was received from “Fellow Feather,” the pseudonym of a longtime supporter of Ingersoll and Free Inquiry magazine. A gift of $40,000 was received from musicologist T.M. Scruggs. Eleven gifts exceeded $1,000. In total, $41,251 was raised.

The ultimate goal was to bring the Museum’s endowment, then standing at $280,000, up to $400,000 so that its income could fund the Museum’s routine operating expenses. The spring campaign actually exceeded that goal, bringing the endowment to more than $424,000.

Flynn and Robert Green Ingersoll Memorial Committee Chair Jeff Ingersoll (a distant relative of the Museum’s namesake) expressed surprise and delight at the result. “I’m dumfounded,” said Flynn. “I’d hoped to complete the endowment fund by year-end; instead, our generous donors met the target with the first campaign. This illustrates how profoundly Ingersoll is still beloved among his admirers.”

“This is great news! For the first time in its 100-year history, the Museum will not be under threat of closure due to a lack of basic yearly operating funds,” said Jeff Ingersoll. “The legacy of the

Giuliani Voted Mayor of Misinformation in First ‘Full of Bull’ Awards

The conspiracy peddler. The woo-woo huckster. The anti-vaxx-in-chief. The holy hypocrite. The Big Lie water carrier. The fake psychic. No, this is not the opening to a very questionable children’s fairy tale but a roundup of this year’s rogue’s gallery of the infodemic’s worst offenders.

They’re the celebrities who have built their notoriety on the promotion of
A Message from Our Director of Development

Dear Friends,

I think you will find that this issue of Freethought in Action is chock full of really great news. Within these pages, we have an update on the Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum endowment (page 1), news about the CFI Branches opening their doors again (page 8), and a report on the great work taking place within the TIES program (page 12). I hope you find something that interests you. (And I hope that you realize that this work would not be possible without you!)

Of course, it is not all good news. We need to keep our eye on the UFO mania that is sweeping the nation and stay informed about our atheist activist friends around the world who are in danger. You will find more on these topics within these pages too. Your support helps us to continue to confront these issues as they arise. Oftentimes, we are one of the only—if not the only—organization standing up to question these contentious issues or offer a helping hand to those in need. Thank you for making this work possible.

In this issue’s donor spotlight, you will read about the amazing work of Stephen Barrett, MD, founder of Quackwatch, a nonprofit focused on exposing health frauds, myths, fads, fallacies, and misconduct. In 2020, Dr. Barrett donated personal property to CFI, including his entire website and a related collection of books and documents. It was a remarkable gift, and we are honored to help arm consumers with the tools they need to avoid medical quackery in all its forms.

Throughout CFI’s history, we have received many gifts of property. Oftentimes, this comes in the form of real property, such as real estate. The benefits of making a gift of real estate include: avoid paying capital gains on the sale of the real estate, receive a charitable income tax deduction based on the value of the gift, and leave a lasting legacy to the Center for Inquiry.

If you would like to explore making a gift of real or personal property to CFI—either outright or by funding a trust that could provide income to you or a loved one—please be in touch. I am happy to explore whether this may be an option for you. You can also find additional information on our website at cfilegacy.org.

Thank you, as always, for your continued support of the Center for Inquiry. Please contact me if you have any questions about your giving or if I can help you further your philanthropic goals in any way.

Best wishes,

Connie Skingel
Director of Development

MEMBERSHIP TO CFI

Together, we unite humanists, atheists, skeptics, and freethinkers into a global community.

Please go to our website, www.centerforinquiry.org/membership.
misinformation, deception, and pseudoscience. We asked you to cast your vote to decide which among these famous fakery artists was the most Full of Bull.

It could not have been an easy choice, but the people have spoken, and the “winner” of the first ever Full of Bull Award is none other than Rudy Giuliani, Mayor of Misinformation. Giuliani’s fervent promotion of the Big Lie about the election goes dangerously beyond partisanship, and that’s not to mention his enthusiastic endorsement of pandemic-related pseudoscience. In all cases, Giuliani was disdainful of the facts and all too eager to push any load of nonsense that served his ends, no matter how untruthful, unscientific, or untethered to reality. Congratulations, Mister Mayor.

Giuliani had some stiff competition! Check out the other nominees on this ballot of unsavory characters:

Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Friend to Viruses: Who needs to worry about a family legacy when you can snare it on lies? Under the guise of defending “the children,” RFK Jr. has undermined confidence in vaccines and made the world a sicker place.

Alex Jones, Human False Flag: This ball of white-hot rage has promoted more conspiracy theories than all of Oliver Stone's movies put together, the worst perhaps being the lie that the Sandy Hook massacre was staged.

Gwyneth Paltrow, Snake Oil Profiteer: Hey, what’s wrong with cashing in on people’s insecurities by selling them pseudoscientific junk? It’s just a “lifestyle”? The phony “cures” she sells through her Goop brand may not be real, but the profits sure are.

Jerry Falwell Jr., Chip off the Bad Block: Hard to believe you could lower the ethical bar from the first Jerry Falwell, but here we are. He’s a disgraced religious-right hardliner who lives by the old saying, “Do as I say, not as I do.”

Thomas John, Mendacious Medium: This “Seatbelt Psychic” literally claims to have superpowers he does not and could not possess, powers that he says allow him to communicate with spirits … which also do not exist. He even preys on the grief of children. And people pay him for this!

Giuliani’s “victory” here is all the more astounding when compared to these other infamous figures. And in the end, the public is who really loses when these hucksters and others like them continue to spread misinformation and pseudoscience. Your support of CFI can help prevent more of this dangerous nonsense.

Supporter Spotlight: A Legacy of Fighting Health Pseudoscience—Stephen Barrett and Quackwatch

Nicole Scott

The Center for Inquiry community supports our organization and its mission in a variety of ways. Some donate money (which is a great idea), others give their time (also great), and of course some go the extra mile and do both (doubly great). However they show their support, they make possible all the important work you’re reading about in these pages.

One very special case of a supporter truly giving something of himself comes from Dr. Stephen Barrett, who donated an entire website and library to CFI. Dr. Barrett is the founder of the groundbreaking website Quackwatch, which in 2020 became part of the CFI family, and in 2021, he donated 3,600 books and more than 10,000 documents to the CFI Libraries—a “fifty-year collection of source materials [that] will remain available to future investigators.”

Barrett, an author, editor, and consumer advocate, practiced psychiatry for thirty-five years, retiring in 1993. He operates twenty-three websites and coedits the free weekly electronic newsletter Consumer Health Digest. Barrett has written thousands of articles, served as a peer-review panelist for several top medical journals, and has authored over fifty books on consumer health, medical quackery, and homeopathy.

In the late 1960s, Barrett became interested in medical quackery and launched a local nonprofit to tackle the problem of people being bamboozled by false cures and fake medicine. When CSICOP (the former name of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry) formed, Barrett was instrumental in supporting its investigations into health pseudoscience in addition to paranormal claims. He is a fellow of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry. In addition to the Quackwatch website and library, Barrett is also donating several hundred thousand dollars to support CFI's education efforts.

“I support CFI because it is one of the few organizations that is trying to make our world more rational and is here to stay,” said Barrett. In his spare time, Barrett swims competitively; he has won 140 state championship events, forty-six awards in national events, and sixteen medals in international events. He has also set nineteen state records.

Stephen Barrett’s lifelong passion has benefited millions of people, and thanks to all that he's given, it will continue to do so through the Center for Inquiry.

Nicole Scott is the managing editor of Freethought in Action.
The greatest long-term impact of the Trump administration is going to be the remaking of the federal court system. In his four years in power, President Trump nominated, and Mitch McConnell’s Senate approved, 174 District Court judges, fifty-four judges of the Courts of Appeal, and three Supreme Court Justices—Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett. These 234 lifetime appointments, including a full third of the Supreme Court, represent a dramatic shift toward a conservative and explicitly Christian interpretation of the American legal and constitutional system.

The impact of these changes is just starting to become apparent. Currently, we are reeling from the decision in the case of Fulton v. City of Philadelphia. Catholic Social Services claimed that they must be permitted to continue to receive funds from the city to certify couples to become foster parents, despite their refusal to adhere to the city’s policy of nondiscrimination toward the LGBTQ community. The chutzpah here is outrageous.

early previews of the official Pentagon report were littered with overpromising headlines about how the military “couldn’t rule out” interstellar civilizations as the source of the unidentified phenomena.

It’s a good thing that CFI’s Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI) is here to help.

This is an intriguing topic, whether you believe we’re being visited by aliens or not. As the nation’s leading skeptic organization, CSI has offered up some helpful tips for journalists and media institutions to make sure the information they deliver is grounded in reality.

“Usually the prosaic explanations get little coverage compared with the early hype,” writes CSI. “This dynamic distorts the public’s (and the media’s) perceptions. Soon the debunked claims are replaced by new claims, and the cycle starts anew.”

Some of the tips and reminders offered by CSI include:

**“Unidentified” does not equal “aliens”**: Sources often conflate sightings of something in the sky with extraterrestrials. Most UFOs become IFOs (identified flying objects).

**Just because alien life is possible, it doesn’t mean it’s here**: Many confuse the prospect that life (even intelligent life) may exist elsewhere in the universe with the idea that such life has already been discovered in our skies. It hasn’t.

**We can’t identify everything**: There are always going to be some unresolved sightings, often where very little is known or recorded.

**UFO enthusiasts have motivations**: There are always going to be officials among the sprawling defense agencies and their contractors who have to take reports of UFOs or UAPs seriously, as well as politicians and public figures for whom UFO controversies serve their particular ends.

**Talk to the actual experts**: When possible, it’s best to seek out independent, knowledgeable scientific and technical sources, not just enthusiasts and believers. CSI can connect journalists to these experts.

**Anecdotes are not data**: Statements from sources such as, “It flew away at speeds unimaginable” or “It turned in a way impossible for any aircraft today” are not reliable.

**Remember Occam’s razor**: Even highly advanced imaging equipment is susceptible to errors and human misinterpretations. Plausible, terrestrial explanations have been advanced for all the U.S. Navy videos that have caused so much fuss.

“As always, CSI is ready to help connect journalists to relevant experts—including astronomers, astrophysicists, investigators, and more—as they report what the Pentagon has to say about unidentified aerial phenomena. With the support of the CFI community, we can be a reality-based resource on all manner of “unexplained phenomena” for a long time to come.”

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Paul Fidalgo is the communications director of CFI and the editor of Freethought in Action.

CFI’s Legal Department Adapts to a Hostile Church-State Environment, Renews Focus on Consumer Protection

Nick Little

The greatest long-term impact of the Trump administration is going to be the remaking of the federal court system. In his four years in power, President Trump nominated, and Mitch McConnell’s Senate approved, 174 District Court judges, fifty-four judges of the Courts of Appeal, and three Supreme Court Justices—Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett. These 234 lifetime appointments, including a full third of the Supreme Court, represent a dramatic shift toward a conservative and explicitly Christian interpretation of the American legal and constitutional system.

The impact of these changes is just starting to become apparent. Currently, we are reeling from the decision in the case of Fulton v. City of Philadelphia. Catholic Social Services claimed that they must be permitted to continue to receive funds from the city to certify couples to become foster parents, despite their refusal to adhere to the city’s policy of nondiscrimination toward the LGBTQ community. The chutzpah here is outrageous.
Catholic Social Services insisted on being paid to do a job and yet refused to do that job—which in this case was certifying all hopeful foster parents, regardless of their sexual orientation, based on their appropriateness to foster children in need of loving homes.

And that’s just what this Court allowed. In deciding the case, it ignored the rights of LGBTQ couples, foster children, and Philadelphia taxpayers, to allow ongoing religious bigotry. While the decision is narrow, it represents yet another instance where this Court will manipulate the facts to support furthering religious privilege. It won’t be long before another case will come up to the Court, and further exemptions will be carved out of our hard won civil rights. Recently, the Supreme Court has repeatedly struck down restrictions on church services by maintaining that if any exceptions to restrictions on gatherings exist anywhere, they must also be granted to religious services, even if the two activities are not comparable. So exemptions given to allow for grocery shopping during the pandemic are held in shadow docket cases to require exemptions for religious ceremonies as well. This isn’t even equating apples to oranges; it is, quite literally, equating buying apples and oranges to standing in close proximity to large numbers of potentially infected people while singing loudly for long periods of time.

Then, of course, there’s the 800-pound gorilla in the room of culture wars: abortion. As federal courts have lurch to the Right, states with conservative legislatures have salivated at the opportunity to pass restrictive abortion laws they hope will test Court precedent on abortion rights. Beyond that, Governor Greg Abbott of Texas has just signed into law a ban on abortion after six weeks, the time of the detection of a fetal heartbeat, with no exceptions for rape and incest. CFI will continue to fight to defend abortion rights against religious and pseudoscientific restrictions, but we are fighting in a uniquely perilous legal landscape. We fear the worst.

As the federal courts have become increasingly hostile toward the notion of church-state separation and the equality of nonbelievers, we at CFI have had to reassess the focus of our legal activity. We are continuing to seek to expand the legality of secular celebrants, pushing the recognition of nonreligious equality in Washington State and California, as well as relaunching our Texas case. We are looking to further emphasize CFI’s role as a protector of consumers from pseudoscience.

We’re currently seeking to bring a lawsuit to vindicate the rights of mature teenagers to consent to be vaccinated. All too many parents are influenced by anti-vaxx propaganda and are refusing to permit their kids protection from COVID-19 and the entire spectrum of childhood diseases that have been largely defeated by vaccines. CFI believes that if a child is mature enough to make the decision, they should have the right to protect themselves. We believe that Supreme Court precedent supports this right. If we can find a plaintiff, we will file the suit. Similarly, we are trying to expand our campaign against the fraud that is homeopathy. Consumers are ripped off for billions of dollars each year by this fake medicine. While we wait on the appeals court decision in our cases against CVS and Walmart, we are looking to perform some testing on various homeopathic products and then bring suit challenging consumer fraud.

Alas, none of this work is free (especially not the homeopathic junk on pharmacy shelves ... have you seen the prices on those things?), and we’re counting on you to keep supporting CFI so we can strike a real blow for reason against quackery and pseudoscience.

Watch this space. It’s the expectation of the Legal Department that we will have further cases to report in the next Freethought in Action!

Nick Little is vice president and general counsel of the Center for Inquiry.

Ingersoll Museum Endowment Appeal Exceeds Target

(Cont’d. from page 1)

‘Great Agnostic’ is now secured for future generations to experience:

The Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum commemorates freethought orator Robert Green Ingersoll, the nineteenth century’s most famous freethought orator, who was born in Dresden, New York, house in 1833. It is operated by the Robert Green Ingersoll Memorial Committee, a project of the Council for Secular Humanism. The Council is a program of the Center for Inquiry, a tax-exempt charitable educational organization headquartered in Washington, D.C., and Amherst, New York.
CFI Insider Webinar Series Winds Down (for Now)

Melissa Myers

CFI Insider began as a way for the Center for Inquiry to stay engaged with our members and keep our community connected, even as devastating global circumstances kept us all at home. Since we started this series of live online events this past summer, we have gotten to know eleven different departments within the wide CFI universe of programs through monthly Zoom webinars.

The series came to a close in April with an event featuring CFI West Executive Director Jim Underdown and the work of the CFI Investigations Group (CFIIG). CFIIG offers a prize of $250,000 to anyone who can prove under scientific testing conditions that he or she has some type of supernatural ability. Underdown had some truly remarkable stories to tell during his appearance, recalling applicants who claimed to be able to communicate telepathically or tell whether people had both their kidneys. He even had some adventures with “Sparky the Wonder Dog,” who could allegedly do math calculations.

It is remarkable that Underdown and his investigators always manage to keep a straight face while dealing with some of the wild claims they have encountered, but the CFIIG comes to each investigation with an open mind and a generous spirit. After all, their goal is to get to the truth, not to poke fun.

In March, our guest was none other than Nick Little. CFI’s legal counsel and the driving force of our major litigation efforts, such as taking on Walmart and CVS over the deceptive sale and marketing of homeopathic products and securing the right of nonreligious couples to have their marriages solemnized by Secular Celebrants. Little is always a delightful speaker, and this event was no exception.

Back in February, we dove “into the vault” with an exploration of the CFI Libraries and its artifacts. Our Libraries Director Tim Binga came prepared with a wealth of information and visual aids as he walked us through the vast public collections. If you should find yourself in the Buffalo area this year, you can even visit! Just call our main offices to make an appointment.

Although CFI Insider has wound down for the time being, it may return as a special event in the future as we accomplish even more great things, so stay tuned!

If you missed any of our live events, each and every one of them is available to watch any time at centerforinquiry.org/video.

Melissa Myers is CFI’s field organizer and was the host of CFI Insider.

Right Now in Skeptical Inquirer

He believes it’s time for environmentalism to renounce its long dalliance with the fringe and approach the climate crisis with a firm footing in rationalism and scientific thinking.

• Ten years after it occurred, Amardeo Sarma and Anna Veronika Wendland look at the aftermath of the giant Tōhoku earthquake—the largest ever to hit Japan. Many still erroneously believe that those who fell victim to the quake and the subsequent devastating tsunami were victims of a “nuclear disaster.” In their article “Ten Years of Fukushima Disinformation,” they present some facts vs. the myths.

• Ever wonder when you can and can’t trust an ad hominem attack? Ralph Barnes and Samuel Drzanin-Nagy have got you covered in their article “Don’t Trust That Scientist!” Research reveals there are many ad hominem attacks on websites covering science issues. The websites consistent with mainstream science employ the attacks differently from those that are not.

• Brian Dunning of the Skeptoid podcast brings us a roundup of all the best pro-science characters from your favorite books, movies, and TV shows in his piece “Top Ten Pro-Science Fictional Characters.”

• Adults often assume that teens exhibit worse behavior than they really do, especially involving sex and drugs—and many prevention programs developed to address the exaggerated behavior among teens are ineffective. In his article “Teens These Days: Sex, Drugs, and Malarkey,” psychology professor Stephen Hupp takes a look at the truth and myths about infant simulator dolls and the D.A.R.E. program.

• Also in this issue: Joe Nickell brings us into the world of the role-playing detective; Harriet Hall gets our definitions straight; Stuart Vyse tells us why we should beware the child rescuers; Benjamin Radford compares the policing of paranormal communities to the Wild West; and much more!

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Skeptical Inquirer Presents Tackles the Misinformation Crisis

Barry Karr

Have you been signing up for our Skeptical Inquirer Presents online lecture series? I certainly hope so, because we've been very busy trying to bring you some of the best and brightest people discussing topics near and dear to a skeptical heart each fortnight.

Misinformation and the ongoing "infodemic" have been particularly prevalent themes lately. Our guests on Skeptical Inquirer Presents have explored conspiracy theories, anti-vaxxers, cognitive dissonance, medical myths, science denial, QAnon, and other related topics. Much of it boils down to what has become a defining crisis of our current era: How can we identify, counter, and inoculate ourselves against misinformation?

We've covered an incredible amount of ground with these presentations. We've had pioneering climate scientist and activist Michael E. Mann on his plan to fight the "New Climate War"; Dr. Paul Offit made his second appearance to update us on the progress of the COVID-19 vaccines; Andrew Norman helped us build mental immunity against "mind parasites"; and John Cook introduced us to gamification as a way to counter misinformation.

Palm computing founder Jeff Hawkins explained how our brains perceive the world around them; Mick West threw us all a lifeline to rescue our loved ones from conspiracy theory rabbit holes; Nina Burleigh exposed the cascade of failures in the previous administration's response to the pandemic; and this fellow you might have heard of, Neil deGrasse Tyson, inspired and delighted us all with his thoughts on space exploration, the importance of the skeptic movement, and Sharknado (you really had to be there).

And we're not finished! Coming up are presentations from ScienceUpFirst's Krishna Sankar on vaccine communication. David Grimes on how critical thinking can save the world, and more. Each event is hosted by Leighann Lord, stand-up comedian and cohost of the CFI podcast Point of Inquiry. (You should visit her website, veryfunnylady.com. Every Skeptical Inquirer Presents event is available to watch any time online at skepticalinquirer.org/presents (except for Neil deGrasse Tyson's, because you can't always get what you want).

It's your support that makes this wonderful series possible, so please check out the dates of our upcoming events at skepticalinquirer.org. And come join 1,000 or so of your skeptical friends for the next Skeptical Inquirer Presents.

Barry Karr is executive director of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry.

Point of Inquiry's Biggest Guest Yet: God Himself

For more than fifteen years, the Point of Inquiry podcast has featured a wide variety of true luminaries—incredible minds at the tops of their respective fields. But it will be difficult for us to top our episode from this past April when cohost Jim Underdown interviewed God himself.

Alright, so it obviously wasn't the actual Yahweh of the Bible (or any other scripture) but rather someone who actually exists. If you've spent any time on Twitter, you may have already come across the gospel of David Javerbaum, the man behind the @TheTweetOfGod account. Javerbaum has seen his take on the creator of the universe evolve into a book, a stage production starring Jim Parsons of Big Bang Theory, and now a podcast (called Godcast, of course). Javerbaum talked about getting his start in comedy writing at The Harvard Lampoon. Later he would go on to write for David Letterman, Jon Stewart, and a number of shows.

But it's not all about God. Here are some other recent highlights from the Point of Inquiry podcast.

Dinner and a Podcast: You may remember Annabelle Gurwitch from the TV show Dinner and a Movie. Soon after her appearance on Real Time with Bill Maher, Underdown interviewed the actress, comedian, and author about her new book, You're Leaving When?, a memoir about making it through life's ups and downs. Gurwitch is also a secular humanist and a skeptic, though that hasn't always been the case. She comes clean to Underdown about her time in a small New York City cult and chats about her take on religion and beliefs in general in today's world.

Inside the Mind of a Conspiracy Theorist: Have you wondered what it's like to get caught up in a conspiracy theory? What does it take for rational humans to believe in things such as QAnon, the 9/11 truther movement, and lizard people who want to take over the world? Leighann Lord talks to researcher Stephanie Kemmerer about her arduous journey into, and eventually out of, the world of conspiracy theories. Author of the recent Skeptical Inquirer cover story on QAnon, Kemmerer discusses the psychology and mindset that led her and others down the rabbit hole, the role that social media plays in pushing people into conspiracy theories, and how we can help others find their way out.

An Atheist and a Christian Walk into a Bar: Jim Underdown reaches across the aisle for a conversation with his longtime friend Pastor Joe Manno of the Revelation Church in Florida, whom he met on the set of the 1980s cop show Cagney & Lacey. They discuss how people can find the common humanity in each other despite holding very different beliefs.

Never miss an episode by subscribing via your favorite podcast service or at pointofinquiry.org/subscribe.
Leading the Way for Reason and Science in Public Policy

Aaron Green

Across the nation, from courthouses to statehouses, with old friends and new partners, the Center for Inquiry advocates tirelessly on behalf of our reality-based community—albeit recently, it’s mostly been accomplished from behind a computer screen. Nevertheless, whether showing up in person or manifesting ourselves virtually, we’re continuing our work as leaders in the effort to restore science, reason, and compassion to public policy.

We were incredibly proud and encouraged by our meeting with the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships in May. Representatives from CFI and several of its partner secular groups were hosted by the Biden administration for a substantive discussion, and we are heartened by the reception we received. Despite some after-the-fact objections by detractors on the far Right (who were shocked—that a White House meeting with atheists occurred at all), the goal of respectful dialogue to solve problems seems like a true possibility once again.

While we have a lot of territory to cover with the Biden administration and there are many changes we’d like to see, it was refreshing that CFI was able to open the meeting with the acknowledgement of some early progress. We welcomed the recently convened Scientific Integrity Task Force, mandated by Presidential Memorandum, which began a 120-day review of federal agencies, but we made it clear that the work must not end there.

The Task Force will propose guidelines for protecting scientific integrity in federal science, something that is unfortunately sorely needed after the suffocation of science by the Trump administration. CFI intends to ensure that concrete steps are taken and sufficient protections are put in place so that this type of review won’t be necessary again. Identifying where agencies have fallen short is a good start, but working alongside them to correct problems is where we can shine. That means we’ll be leveraging open-government laws, forging new relationships and alliances, and relying upon our wide network of experts to communicate not just our values but the central importance of solving collective problems collectively.

Early results from the administration give us cause for cautious optimism for the months ahead, but we must simultaneously work closely at the state and local levels as well. Access to safe, effective healthcare need not be controversial and is certain to be top of mind as we begin to see COVID-19 related restrictions lifted. A critical, freethinking, science-based approach has been necessary to respond to COVID-19, and the momentum must not be lost.

Similarly, we will continue to focus on issues related to vaccinations—working to see that mature minors can have access to vaccinations when their parents have bought into anti-vaxxer conspiracies and fighting the push against religious exemptions to mandated vaccines. We’re also working to ensure state licensure is reserved for practitioners of science-based medicine, not naturopaths and other peddlers of pseudoscience.

The challenges we face are constantly changing, so the way in which we respond to new challenges must also adapt. No matter the form or function, be it as educators, advocates, or litigants, CFI will continue to advance our mission, and we look forward to sharing more successes in the next issue of Freethought in Action.

Aaron Green is staff counsel at the Center for Inquiry.

CFI Branches Approach Something Like Normal

For some of our local Center for Inquiry branches, things may be slowly returning to something like a pre-pandemic normal. With vaccinations on the rise, some branches are feeling comfortable enough to (safely) offer some in-person activities once again. Here are some examples of what’s been happening in our local CFI communities.

CFI Indiana: On May 2, our Indiana branch reopened for Coffee and Conversation, inviting fully vaccinated participants, boasting an attendance to rival pre-shutdown numbers! Their game night returned at the end of May, and, they, too, will be having their summer picnic in real life on August 29! For more information about Indiana’s reopening activities, sign up for email updates at cfiindiana.org.

CFI Michigan: On the first of May, CFI Michigan’s Secular Service program convened at Long Lake Outdoor Center to get their hands dirty doing a little trail grooming and brush removal for the benefit of the community and the environment. Their Skeptics in the Pub group held a bonfire on May 21, giving folks a chance to enjoy a beverage and a snack in the company of like-minded friends by the cozy glow of a fire to get in the summer spirit! Our friends in Michigan are very much looking forward to further in-person events, now that everyone in the state over the age of sixteen is vaccine eligible. Follow Michigan’s reopening progress by signing up for updates at cfimichigan.org!

CFI Western New York: Right here in Buffalo, CFI WNY got back into in-person action with their Solstice Picnic this June. The event took place at the CFI headquarters on June 19. Sign up for email updates at cfiwny.org for details and information.

More about our other branches and information about their activities can be found at https://centerforinquiry.org/about/locations.
The Danger at Home: A Secular Rescue Story

Matthew Cravatta

We at Secular Rescue see our fair share of endangered atheist activists at our door requesting our help and advice. Many of the more prominent social media activists relate to us the anger and threats that are hurled at them by online extremists as well as strangers whose fury knows no bounds.

But for the large number of served and reluctant activists who don’t make a splash on social media, the greatest threats they face are typically not from online mobs but rather members of their own families: fathers, brothers, and uncles obsessed with family honor.

Bahir, a young ex-Muslim from Iraq, is a teenager mature beyond his years. Last year, he applied to Secular Rescue asking for our immediate help. Bahir was bold in refraining from using an alias in the public sphere, but the primary source of his danger and fears came from his abusive Shiite family. Even his mother was a source of danger, and he provided us with the audio recordings to prove it.

When Bahir was a boy, he was full of questions about the world around him—kids usually are—about nature, people, God, and the words and stories of the Qur’an, which he was forced to read as soon as he was able. He had a typical upbringing as a young Muslim, though even in his early childhood years, the questions in his mind gnawed at him. The seeds of doubt were there.

“Why did cavemen not have prophets?” he wondered aloud. Only God knows.

In too many Muslim-majority countries, such inquisitiveness about the dominant faith can bring swift and brutal punishment, especially for children. Fearing retribution, Bahir reverted to silence at home, instead covertly seeking answers to the questions that occupied him.

Years later, after his family moved to a nearby country, Bahir’s father learned of his son’s growing apostasy after an argument about human rights got out of hand. Bahir was severely beaten, kicked out of the house, and then forced to sleep in the basement. His father threatened to send him off to Syria. Bahir knew what that meant. He made an appointment at the local United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office and brought with him the evidence he felt he needed to show the danger he was in. He requested asylum but was turned away because he was too young. He went to the police, who promptly placed him in a children’s shelter, where they confiscated his phone, wallet, and everything he owned. According to Bahir, the conditions and rules were as bad as prison. He wasn’t even allowed to venture outside into the sunshine.

Bahir went back home days later, and his father declared he intended to sell the house and take everyone away because he was too young. He requested asylum but was turned down. He appealed, and then appealed again, leaving Bahir to fend for himself.

Depression and suicidal notions crept into Bahir’s mind; he tried to overdose but then called for an ambulance, which took him to the hospital where his stomach was pumped clean and he began to recover. But having no money, he removed the pump from his throat and fled the hospital.

Secular Rescue connected Bahir to one of our most trusted psychotherapists, who is an ex-Muslim himself and knows the anguish and pain of those like Bahir. He took Bahir under his wing and began sessions to help him with his depression and accumulated pain. A generous Secular Rescue volunteer sent Bahir some money for living costs and medication, and Bahir began to improve. He even found work and began to study for school entrance exams (which eventually were canceled because of the pandemic). With aid from Secular Rescue, he has shown steady improvement in his health and outlook. He hopes to be accepted into university, far from the antagonism and spite of his father—far from his physical and emotional abuse—with a whole future laid out before him.

“Ever since I started studying again, that’s all I’ve done,” he told us in mid-May. “I’ve found some labor every once in a while, and I booked my tests, but then [the president of the host country] announced a new lockdown. Now I’m waiting for this lockdown to end so I can get a job,” he said.

With his exams canceled again, Bahir won’t be going to college next year as he hoped, but he is now targeting the following year, which means he will need to survive another year in the new country. We will walk with him for as long as he needs us at his side. We are part of his family now.

It’s not just Bahir, of course. Secular Rescue hears from persecuted freethinkers around the world every day. To help even more people like Bahir, to grow our family, we need to grow our resources. That’s where you come in, and we know we can count on your support.

“I don’t know what’s next,” Bahir told us, “but everything is ok. I just hope to get away from this hellhole and then take my tests somewhere else. Thank you from the depths of my heart!”

To support Secular Rescue, please visit secularrescue.org/donate.

Matthew Cravatta is the coordinator of Secular Rescue.
I bequeath myself to the earth to grow from the grass I love, if you want me again look for me under your bootsoles.

—Walt Whitman

I would rather live and love where death is king than have eternal life where love is not.

—Robert Green Ingersoll

Oft have I wandered in lands of the dead. They call to me, these places, wherever I go. Despite the din of cities, their whispers reach my ears. Amid the quiet of the countryside, they sing to the sun, and their shining notes draw me.

Fascinated, I approach. Sometimes the way is gated; I lift the latch gently, to show the mute guardian I mean no harm, and pass, allowing it to return to its post. Enchantment enfolds me.

I step softly; for all here are sleeping. They sleep, and yet they speak, or rather, their stony-faced attendants speak for them. Mostly these murmur vaguely, but sometimes they cry out and pierce me with their pain. A tiny chunk of granite, pillow to a toddler, stops me, offering a flower, and says two words: “Our Darling.” I weep.

So very, very often it is children who lie here, and often together, under one stone, though whether that choice was sentiment or the hard reality of cost cannot be judged. I worry, though, at tall stones that begin with one inscription that is followed by another, and another, and another, clearly added later.

Did those parents deliberately buy a large stone, grimly and silently acknowledging the reality that awaited them? Was this a standard product for the hard-handed masons who made them? The thought is unbecarable but inescapable.

Here James H. and Eleanor buried three, the oldest of whom was only four. There James and Sarah buried four aged one, two, nine, and fifteen—a son so close to manhood he must have been there in hope and his death its shattering. Worst of all I have seen, M.D. and Ruth, who both lived to nearly eighty and whose handsome and perfectly preserved marker testifies to their prosperous lot in life, buried five together whose days were carefully tallied: the youngest was seven months and twenty-three days; the eldest was sixteen years, eight months, and nine days, a daughter they likely expected to lean upon in their age. When she died in 1855, they were both in their mid-fifties. Below this roll, as on so many others I have seen, are only the words “Our Children.”

Rarely, oh so rarely, are inhabitants here permitted to speak for themselves. A pillar of pure white marble that is short but must have cost its rural buyers dearly relates that Lee L. died on Valentine's Day of the year 1878, aged ten years, four months, and three days. In crisp and careful lettering, it says, “His last words were Good by papa meet me in heaven.” That piping little-boy voice will always haunt me.

More often I hear the words of those who mourned. While most, struck dumb by death, say nothing or choose a Bible verse or trite phrase to cloak their desolation, some summon the strength to speak. Beneath the statue of a seated woman, deep in thought and holding an open book, Emeline’s survivors say of her, “She was a kind and affectionate wife & fond mother and friend to all.”

Such figures are rare, but often more eloquent than the words of plainer stones—though it may take time to read their story. Deep in the Illinois countryside, visiting a cemetery I had been told about by a dear friend whose ancestor was buried there. I glimpsed from the corner of my eye what seemed to be a female figure. When I moved to examine it more closely, it revealed itself as a low stone chair, draped with a shawl, ever so carefully shaped to suggest the woman absent from it now.

I had seen empty-chair stones before but never one so small or so cleverly ambiguous, and I wondered at the choice. Wondered, until I read the hidden inscription and realized that the dead woman was a young mother. Then I knew: it was placed there so her little children could come to visit and climb into her sun-warmed lap as they always had. And again, I wept.

The land of the dead is indeed watered by tears, soaked through with sorrow. It is the sorrow of all humanity through all time, weeping that love must end. And while I add my tears to that river, it is the love from which it springs that draws me.

It is everywhere here, even when we must pause to decipher it. A handsome stone proclaims to me forthrightly, “Das Wiedersehen Hoffen ist der getrennten Trost,” and I translate to hear, “The hope of seeing one another again is consolation to the separated.” It is the pain of parting that abides in these places, the anguish that is the inevitable accompaniment of love.

How else, indeed, would we know that we love at all? Is it not that very pain, which cries “I can't bear to see you go” or even “I can't live without you!” the diagnostic symptom of the condition? When severing a connection feels like a knife-stroke, we must admit to our heart's condition, even if that admission comes sometimes too late to save us.

We are brought to our knees, like the beautiful woman of stone in the Indiana countryside, head bowed, who showed me, cradled by one hand in the folds of her dress, carved flowers, and built among them a tiny bird’s nest. Abandoned now, it yet spoke clearly: “From love comes life. It flies away, but this, the truth, remains.”

Janet L. Factor grew up in Barberton, Ohio, and graduated from Hiram College, where she absorbed the ideals of the liberal arts tradition. She is the founder of Springfield (Illinois) Area Freethinkers.
A SKEPTICAL EYE

Tracking the Devil's Footprints

Joe Nickell

Among the supernatural claims I have investigated during my five decades of work are those involving the Devil—a dubious character to be sure. In the Spring 2018 FREETHOUGHT IN ACTION, I discussed my 1971 encounter with a curious Devil baby mummy, which was one of my earliest cases. (Despite its hooves being real, that cryptic creature was a fake assemblage.) Here I look into three other far-flung cases: the cloven hoofprints outside the Amityville horror house in 1975, the phenomenon of Satan's step in a centuries-old Munich cathedral, and, finally, a classic strange mystery of Devonshire, England, in 1855. (For more on each, please see my 2013 book The Science of Miracles.)

Devil's Work at Amityville

One of the many spine-tingling events related in the book The Amityville Horror (1977), and a subsequent movie, was the reputed appearance of cloven hoofprints in the snow just outside the house. This was part of the bogus admixture of claims there: part traditional haunting, part poltergeist attack, and part demonic possession, including elements seemingly pilfered from the movie The Exorcist.

As it happened, research revealed that there had been no snowfall at the time George Lutz claimed to have found the cloven, supposedly Satanic tracks! Although psychics had agreed that a “demonic spirit” possessed the house and recommended exorcism, the myriad fanciful phenomena proved to be part of an elaborate hoax.

In my own investigation, I talked with Barbara Cromarty, who, with her husband, purchased the house after it was given up by the Lutz family. As a consultant to the In Search Of and That's Incredible television series, I learned from Cromarty secrets that she herself had discovered. For example, as to doors and windows ostensibly damaged by demons, she noted that the original hardware was still in place and there were no disturbances of the paint and varnish. Lutz attorney William Weber later confessed, “We created this horror story over many bottles of wine that George Lutz was drinking.” The motive was to produce a bestselling book.

Satan's Step in Munich

On a lengthy investigative tour of Germany in 2002 with skeptic Martin Mahner, I visited Munich’s twin-towered Frauenkirch (“Church of Our Lady”) erected between 1468 and 1488. A curious legend accompanied the impression of a foot, said to be Der Teufelstritt, or “the Devil's Step,” located in the foyer. There are many versions (folklorists call them variants) of the legendary happening, but most have a punchline in which the sneaky Devil had occasion to stamp his foot—either in glee or in anger—upon one of the paving stones, leaving its supernatural impression.

However, the imprint is of a shod human foot rather than a cloven one, and a study of the accounts suggests the footprint marks a certain vantage point: Standing there any time between 1620 and 1858 one could have witnessed the illusion that there were no windows in the church! Most were hidden by the great pillars, while during the period mentioned a baroque high altar had covered a remaining great window, resulting in the cumulative missing-windows effect—a folk novelty.

The next morning of our visit, while I examined the imprint (lying face down with a magnifier in the frequent manner of Sherlock Holmes), my friend Mahner was tactfully striking up a conversation with the churchwarden. He informed me that the floor had been restored and that the Teufelstritt was merely a reconstruction made (as I observed) from some kind of casting material. Thus piecing the evidence together suggests that when the original footprint’s purpose was no longer remembered, the legend of the Devil's Step was coined—by that notorious legend maker, Anonymous.

Devonshire’s Devil Tracks

This famous mystery began on the morning of February 9, 1855, in several South Devon towns, when people awoke to discover numerous odd tracks in the snow. Said to be like uniform hoofprints, they were immediately dubbed “The Devil’s Footprints” and caused an enduring sensation. Accounts of the tracks claimed the tracks ran in a straight line—even when they were found atop high walls and traversed the roofs of houses and outbuildings. How could there be such consistency—even the stride never changing—in a line of tracks that ran over a hundred miles? Theories postulated such varied culprits as an escaped kangaroo, a badger, assorted foxes, birds (remember the roofs), cats, and more.

In fact, as the theories themselves indicated, the tracks were not uniform. Although reported by hundreds of witnesses, each saw only a limited segment. Supposed similarities were due to the early newspapers trying to make a single phenomenon of what we now know were clearly contradictory descriptions. Indeed, some lines of tracks were not continuous, and it was necessary to make a greatly zigzagging line to connect all the villages where lines of tracks appeared. We must add to that the fact that some of the prints had “claws” and “toes,” while others were “cloven” or were obviously pony tracks, and so on.

I concluded the entire phenomenon was one of psychological contagion—the spreading of a belief, idea, or behavior from person to person by means of suggestion.

Joe Nickell, PhD, is the senior research fellow of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry and the author, coauthor, or editor of nearly fifty books.
Right Now in Free Inquiry

Subscribers to Free Inquiry, the world’s leading secular humanist magazine, are enjoying stories such as these in the August-September 2021 issue:

- Katherine Stewart recounts her experiences in churches and at Christian meetings and conferences across the United States highlighting the emphasis placed on voting for the “right” (Republican) candidates.
- Dariusz Jemielniak explores the investigative possibilities in researching the power of prayer and its effect on people’s health.
- Wayne Gustav Johnson highlights the difference between a fact and a theory in the scientific community and how religious people use the inconsistencies to perpetrate their arguments.
- Brian Bolton showcases how Jesus accepted and promoted slavery. So why is it not okay that Thomas Jefferson did as well?
- Also in this issue: Ibn Warraq provides a look at unbelief in China and Siam; S. T. Joshi comments on the possible civil war that can erupt in America; Hank Fox relays how not knowing how certain candies are made does not equal an act of God; CFI CEO Robyn E. Blumner questions what disasters we may experience from the U.S. Supreme Court in the near future; and much, much more!

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All Zoomed Out: TIES and the Transition Back to ‘Normal’ Teaching

Bertha Vazquez

This challenging school year is thankfully drawing to a close. Teachers are heaving a sigh of relief. As I’ve written in previous issues of Freethought in Action (FIA), teachers have had to learn a whole new assortment of communication methods, assessment strategies, and online lesson planning. We’ve been dealing with new technical issues, recurring quarantines, humanist magazine, are

In my own classroom, I guided students at different levels through both the middle and high school TIES units without the need for asynchronous learning. I also assigned the units as independent work (asynchronous) to students who moved from online classes to physical ones in the middle of the unit or vice versa. I used the units for students who missed class for two weeks and for those who missed my unit entirely because they were with another teacher. If this sounds messy and crazy, that’s because it was!

I was not the only teacher who thought the units were a godsend (metaphorically speaking, of course). The units have been downloaded more than 2,000 times since they were created in March 2020. Since the last issue of FIA, we have presented them virtually in Alabama, Georgia, Kansas, and North Carolina. The season’s highlight was our presentation at the National Science Teachers Association Virtual Conference on March 28. It’s satisfying to receive comments in emails such as: “Thank you so much for your amazing presentation; we have Evolution up next in our curriculum and could not be more excited,” from Rachel in New Jersey, and “Thank you, Bertha! Your resources are amazing. Kansas schools still struggle with evolution to this day. We need all the help we can get,” from Timothy in Kansas.

Our next virtual stops are in Colorado, Florida, and Louisiana, and our first face-to-face session in over a year is scheduled for July 12. I’ll be traveling to Jackson, Mississippi, for a full day session with the science teachers in the Rankin County School District. Virtual workshops have kept teachers afloat, but it will be great to speak with teachers in person again.

The TIES team did not schedule the usual monthly evening webinars as we have in the past because many teachers voiced their “Zoom fatigue” loud and clear. Teachers are in virtual meetings all day long, often with many students physically sitting a few feet away at the same time. This constant maneuvering between the two modalities has left many teachers too “Zoomed out” to attend evening webinars.

Finally, I am excited to report that we have signed a book contract with Keystone Canyon Press to publish the first TIES book, On Teaching Evolution. The book is a compilation of the work of a dozen TIES presenters who share their best practices in each chapter. We would love to be able to purchase extra copies of the book to give away at TIES workshops and science teacher conferences. I am grateful to Dr. Lawrence Bonchek for making this book a reality with his generous donations and to my friend Richard Dawkins for writing an excellent foreword for the book.

It’s incredible what TIES has been able to accomplish since that fateful day in 2014, when Dawkins shared his wisdom with me and my fellow middle school teachers in Miami-Dade County, Florida, and the idea for TIES was born. Every achievement and every milestone has been made possible because of your support. You understand the vital importance of quality, fact-based science education for our kids. Let’s keep going!

To support TIES, please visit tieseducation.org/donate.

Bertha Vazquez is the director of the Teacher Institute for Evolutionary Science.