

Colorado Secular Organizations

A Study of Selected Successful Local Groups and How They Do It

by

Tom Kellogg

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This is a continuation of the series *The Roots of Building a Secular Community*

Part 6 – Jefferson Humanists Featuring Chuck Mowry



The strength of this truly unique group is planning and organization, built on an incredibly strong foundation right from the start, along with a welcoming kindness. This has enabled the group to grow quickly and thrive in less than 3 years since it launched in May of 2014, in Golden, Colorado, Jefferson County. Golden is a western suburb of Denver, right at the base of the Rocky Mountains. The group is an official chapter of the AHA (American Humanist Association), and was founded by Chuck Mowry, who was also the first President. His background in organizational planning and management is quite impressive. The structure of the group was carefully planned and thought through well before the first member meeting, with attention to every detail before opening its doors. This is in total contrast to many of the other secular groups I have been involved with that just started up out of the blue with very little planning, some that succeeded and some that failed.

When attending meetings and events with the Jefferson Humanists, you are greeted with friendship and it feels like you are sitting on the couch of a beautiful, comfortable home built to last. They currently rent space at the Jefferson Unitarian Church in Golden, a very nice facility, although there are some very early ideas about looking for a place of their own. The Jefferson Humanists are now my main local group, and I'm quite active with them, working on the IT committee and planning events

Memberships are \$35 for individuals, \$50 for Dual, and Sustaining Memberships are \$100. There is an annual funding effort and members are encouraged to make pledges for larger amounts. Pledging and Memberships for 2017 total over \$21,000 from approximately 90 members.

One of the amazing abilities of the Jefferson Humanists is to appeal to both hard core atheists like me, and humanists who have a softer approach or are still on the spiritual side of the fence. Of course, this has caused some minor conflicts, such as some members wanting to take out the phrase “Good Without God” from the AHA motto that the JH promotes. This is where others and I drew a line in the sand, stating that we must be true to the teachings of secular humanism or perish in a sea of mediocrity. On the other hand, getting along with all humanists has made me tone down my radical atheist approach.



Barb Bailey, the current President



Lindy Baer, the Program Committee Chairperson

Every Monthly Meeting is well planned, with a good speaker from the local area, and occasionally pay to bring in a nationally known speaker. In fact, the Jefferson Humanists paid to have Roy Speckhardt, the Executive Director of the American Humanist Association flown out from Washington D.C. This was made into a two-day event, with a picnic reception on a Saturday, followed by the main speaking event on Sunday. These events were announced to all the local secular groups in the Denver area, who were invited to attend for free. The attendance was phenomenal. On another occasion, Becky Hale, the President of AHA was sponsored by the Jefferson Humanists to speak at a monthly meeting. She only had to drive about a hundred miles from Colorado Springs, and it was a real honor.

Also at the Monthly Meetings, supper is always served, which ranges from a fancy appetizer bar to a full-blown dinner, for a modest donation. Wine is served for a \$3 donation. People eat, drink and socialize. A free lending library at each monthly meeting has several hundred secular books to choose from.



Monthly Meeting



Edna Miller always puts on a feast

Once the monthly meetings were well established and popular, other regular and special events were slowly and carefully added, one at a time. The Jeffersonhumanists.org website has lots of information about members and events, with a link to the Meetup.com page, which has become an essential tool for announcing events, although it took a while for members to get used to it.

- First, a monthly newsletter was created, currently published by Nancy Bolt and Bob Hoffman.
- Then, FROG was added (Freethinkers Reading Opportunity Group), a monthly book club that is well attended. It is run by board member Matthew Elisha.
- I started a monthly dinner social at a local restaurant, which is going strong. Currently, we meet at the same great restaurant on the 3rd Wednesday of the month.
- The Jeffco Political Action Taskforce (JPAT) was started right after the 2016 election as a response to the election results, and meets every two weeks. It is run by member Ralph Hughes and already has over 30 participants. It was formed as a JH program, but attracts other concerned members of the community as well.
- Humanist Perspectives, a monthly 3rd Saturday Morning event explores humanism with presentations, videos, movies, discussions, round table forums and more. Coffee, juice and pastries are served. It is run by Vice President Jim Bole and me, and is just getting started.
- Periodic movie nights are scheduled at local movie theatres.
- Each summer, several barbeques and picnics are held, and In December, a winter solstice party.
- Individual events are regularly scheduled. To celebrate Darwin Day, we recently went on an evolution tour at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science. We have also been to the Denver Art Museum. A music concert was put on by the JH, along with other events.



About the Organization and How it Works

Coming from other secular groups that were more informally run, I must admit that the Jefferson Humanists seemed almost too bureaucratic at first, something that made me a little uncomfortable, with all the sub-committees and approval procedures, etc. Now, after being involved with the JH, and comparing its structure with other groups, I see an amazing role model that other groups can follow.

In past experiences with other groups, they can be loosely structured. One person may be given ownership to create and run a program or event as they see fit. This can be very motivating and allows for creativity and free expression. Single events can be a success. Regular programs and events can succeed, or they can fall apart from poor planning, lack of direction or the organizer gets burned out by being stuck with all the details and work when volunteers don't show up.

Now, let's examine how the Jefferson Humanists would handle this same kind of scenario. They have a strong working Board, and a full day annual planning retreat lead by a skilled consultant-facilitator. A proposal for a program or one-time event is created by a committee or leader and developed into an initiative, along with a plan for implementing it. This is presented to the board of directors who analyze it and determine the viability, relevance to the mission and what resources are needed, such as volunteers or money. Suggestions are made to improve the plan or it may be rejected. Once the proposal is approved by the board, careful planning takes place before implementation, with regular status updates to the board.

Different committees may also be involved with the project. For instance, the regular monthly meetings are handled by various committees who coordinate together. The Program Committee locates and schedules speakers. The Community Development Committee plans and serves the dinner or appetizers. The Administration Committee determines the budget, manages the venue and pays the expenses. The Executive Committee oversees the implementation as part of the Board of Directors.

By using this method of delegating tasks, each person involved with a project or event knows exactly what they are supposed to do, and can focus on it. No one gets overloaded with too many tasks and responsibilities. This also makes it more enjoyable with lots of comradery.

People are often on more than one committee, and board members are on committees. A committee might have only one person in it. Each committee has a chair person and they meet periodically or at events. Issues are discussed and resolved. Different board members are the liaison for each committee for communicating issues back and forth or to implement decisions made by the board.

Committees

- Executive
- Administration
- Finance and Budget
- Membership
- Facilities
- Community Development
- Education
- Program Committee for Monthly Meetings
- Program Committee for other events and programs
- Communications/Information Technology
- Newsletter
- Publicity
- Social Action
- Political Activism

How the Jefferson Humanists began

The 5 original members who started the Jefferson Humanists with Chuck Mowry were members of the Jefferson Unitarian Church (JUC) in Golden, Colorado. JH now meets at JUC. Although the Unitarians are progressive and open to all beliefs with humanist values, the 5 members and others felt that the church was a little too religious.

They realized that their beliefs were more in line with secular humanism, and their motivation and passion was to create a group looking for community without religion. They knew that many church values incorporated humanist values, such as justice, compassion, freedom, honesty and caring that are moral and ethical. These values apply to all humans. Another similarity of Churches and non-profits is that they all must focus on membership, funding, activities and publicity. However, churches add on nonsense that is contradictory to the modern understanding of reality. Religion was a first attempt to explain science, but unlike science, does not accept new truths as they are discovered.

In 2013 the 5 founders had a conversation and asked themselves, “can we really form a humanist group?”. They contacted Rachel Berman at the American Humanist Association (AHA) to find out about becoming a local chapter. Rachel sent guidelines and information about the procedure, and helped them contact all AHA members in Jefferson County.

By late 2013 there were about 10 people on board, mostly from the Jefferson Unitarian Church, and a membership drive began. Five area meetings were set up and the public was invited along with AHA members in Jefferson County to come learn about the new Chapter. Emails were sent out to announce the events, and 10 to 15 people attended each one, which attracted a good number of new members. At this point, it came down to the group having to take action on their own. Seed money would be needed to get started, so 10 generous persons together contributed \$6,000.

The founders filed and received a 501(c)(3) non-profit status from the government, and filed Articles of Incorporation with the state of Colorado. Bi-laws were carefully written together by the group, and a serious effort was under way to create the organizational foundation and structure of the Jefferson Humanists. This is where the group excels beyond any of the other local secular groups, with the exception of the Denver Secular Hub, although the Hub did have a sort of rough start. Chuck is a master of planning and building organizations, and did this professionally for many years. The planning and implementation of the Jefferson Humanists was nearly flawless.

Next, a board of directors was formed, then the sub-committees needed to cover every aspect of operations, as mentioned previously. The board met every two weeks during the start-up phase, and now meets monthly. Officer positions are President, one or more VPs, Secretary and Treasurer. The specific functions and scope of each committee were clearly defined and a chair person for each one assigned, mostly board members at first. Some positions were temporary while the group was forming.

A lot of the initial members came from the Unitarian Church or by word of mouth. Members of JUC were invited to join JH. JUC was basically OK with this, since the Humanist group was not trying to steal church members. They were only offering a group to join as an additional activity. However, in the end, some people did leave the church in favor of the humanists, and some are still in both organizations.

The group was brave enough to cross over into the atheist world, where I resided. They wanted to become a part of the Denver area secular community, and have drawn members from there. They researched the local community for names of persons who were well known, and somehow Margaret and I came up. They contacted us with an invitation to join the Jefferson Humanists.

Also, an extensive website was created to showcase the organization, with articles, features, photos and more. A document and archive library allows anyone to look up previous newsletters, articles and other documents. Meetup.com is also an important tool for announcing events.

After months of planning, the very first official membership meeting of the Jefferson humanists occurred in May of 2014, and 34 people joined the group. Kimberly Saviano from the Secular Hub was the first speaker. To have more offerings in the beginning, a free lending library was started at the first meeting with several hundred secular books donated by EvolveFISH and Boulder Atheist member Larry Bauman. There are now around 100 dues paying members, and over 200 Meetup.com members.



Chuck Mowry has an impressive background. with many accomplishments. He understands what makes a group tick, and how to motivate volunteers by making them realize that they are an important part of a great organization.

For more information on the Jefferson Humanists, go to:

www.jeffersonhumanists.org

www.meetup.com/JeffcoHumanists