

Colorado Secular Organizations

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

by

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

Part 2 – The Boulder Atheists and Marvin Straus



Every group studied for this series has a unique flavor of its own. The Boulder Atheists are very dear to my heart, and the very first secular organization I ever knew about, joined and became active with. It was the key that unlocked the door for me into the amazing secular world. Marvin Straus co-founded the group around the turn of the century in late October 2001, partly in response to 911 and Bush's handling of it. Marvin recently retired from the mainstream Colorado Secular World. I truly believe he was the most influential person in the earlier days of the Colorado Movement.

The Boulder Atheists was formed with the vision of 3 major goals: 1. Support people who are damaged by religion. 2. Create a discussion group to gather away from bars where people can freely talk about their views of religion and atheism, including Bible Bashing. 3. Activism to stop religion, especially religious groups trying to force their beliefs on good people with discrimination laws. Marvin discovered that the biggest differences between atheists that causes conflict and disagreement is #2, discussion VS #3, activism. Activism frightens people who only want to have discussions and be social. The perils of jumping into activism and being exposed with repercussions from religious groups is something most people just don't want to deal with. Marvin also learned to not assume to know how other people think. They may have different views on important issues.

When I joined the Boulder Atheists in 2008, it already had a rich history of ups and downs. When the group first started up in 2001, the internet was still an infant, and local groups did not have websites or any form of social media. To announce meetings, Marvin placed a few small ads in the Boulder newspaper for \$100. Somehow, this caught people's attention. The very first meeting attracted 42 people and the group took off. Some of those early members are still with the group. Monthly meetings became the core of the group.



Marvin says that your best friend is a public library. They offer free meeting spaces. The monthly meetings were held in a large meeting room at the main Boulder Public library. To this very day 15 years later, the monthly meetings are still held in the same room. Local speakers give presentations or relevant videos are shown. Sometimes the whole group participates in discussion sessions. Membership dues are quite reasonable, currently around \$40 per year. Other Boulder Atheist events are held all over Boulder and into the neighboring towns.

Marvin is also friends with Becky Hale, the current President of the American Humanist Association, along with Gary Betchan, her husband. They have shared many ideas over the years, especially in the earlier days when they were all pioneers in the secular movement, trying to figure out what to do.

As the group started to grow in the early days, several new regular events were added which are also still going strong. A weekly luncheon has been held every Thursday at 12:30 for many years, and has only changed restaurants a few times. They have been going to the current Mexican restaurant for only about 3 years because the previous one finally closed.

Soon, a board of directors was formed, and a real power struggle began. There were many disagreements as to how the group should be run. A big fight took place about the name of the group. Some people were frightened about belonging to an openly atheist group. They wanted a toned-down name such as freethinkers or secular humanists. Marvin stuck to his guns, because he wanted to make a bold and proud statement about atheism.

There were so many arguments and conflicts while creating the bylaws and structure of the group, Marvin quit. He didn't want to see so much complexity, disagreements and bureaucracy. The group finally imploded and fell apart, so Marvin stepped back in and picked up the pieces. He then ran the group the way he envisioned it to be run in the first place, which is pretty great.

In 2003, the biggest on-going yearly event of the Boulder Atheists started, a booth at the annual Boulder Creek Festival, one of the largest celebrations in Colorado. It has attracted a lot of new members over the years. This 3-day event is held on Memorial Day weekend, and draws around 300,000 people each year. I have volunteered for the booth every year for many years, and even ran it for a few of those. The cost to have a booth is around \$300. The main purpose for being there is to spread the good word of Atheism to passersby, to let other atheists know that we are out there, sign up new members and solicit donations (usually around \$100). It is a big party and tons of fun where we drink beer and socialize with the public. Many interesting conversations take place and we make new friends. There are at least 2 persons in the booth at all times, although usually there are 4 or 5. The more the merrier.



At the festival, no one in the booth is instructed to recite any kind of memorized canned speech (like the religious booths do). Everyone is told to just be themselves with their own version of what atheism is to them. There are a few guidelines, though. Members are told to give out information about atheism and offer handouts on where to find out more about atheism. Members talk about the Boulder Atheists and encourage folks to sign up as members. One important thing that those in the booth are briefed on is to be very positive and courteous to the public and never insult anyone for their beliefs. It is amazing that very few people stopping by are hostile because of their religious beliefs. A few heated discussions do take place with people who believe quite strongly about their religion and God.

The next regular events the Boulder Atheists started in the early days that are still going strong are two annual Solstice parties, one for the winter solstice and one for the summer solstice. In winter, the party can be a potluck at someone's home or a private party at a restaurant. The summer party is always a potluck at a park.



The very first community activism program was to “Adopt a Road”. This is a service that many cities and communities offer, so Marvin applied to the City of Boulder, and the group was given a stretch of Baseline Road along one of the busiest routes coming into Boulder from Denver. The city even made two permanent metal signs, one at each end of the designated area that are still there after many years. They say, “Adopt a Road – Boulder Atheists”. At least twice a year, a group of members meet there on a Sunday morning to pick up trash, followed by lunch.



In 2004, Marvin was instrumental in creating a video called *The Journey of Life*, which is still available in thousands of libraries across the country. It is about the life of atheists, from beginning to end, and how people lead meaningful, moral and ethical lives without any religion whatsoever.

When I first joined the Boulder Atheists, the events and programs just mentioned were most of what was going on. Soon after that, Meetup.com was first used by the group and things began to change in new directions. The next regular event added was a monthly dinner social at a restaurant. It is always on the 1st Tuesday of the month at 7:00 pm, and goes to the same restaurant for a year or two. A second monthly dinner social was recently added on a Friday night at a Chinese Restaurant in Lafayette, a town just East of Boulder.



Meetup opened the door for more events to be added, such as hikes, mountain picnics, talks, watching atheist videos, activism events and more. As I got more and more involved with the Boulder Atheists, it became clear that there was more to the vision and mission of the organization, and it needed to grow. I was elected to the Board of Directors and eventually became the President for a term.



One of the Boulder Atheist's missions is to support local student groups in the area. The University of Colorado in Boulder had SSASS (Secular Students and Skeptics Society), which was a chapter of the Secular Student Alliance, a national organization that supports student groups across the country and overseas. The Boulder Atheists networked with SSASS and shared events. They were encouraged to come to our meetings, and we even helped them with donations. One almost unbelievable accomplishment was when the two groups worked together to help bring Richard Dawkins to the University in Boulder for a talk. The event was officially co-hosted by SSASS and the Boulder Atheists for the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science.



The biggest problem with student groups it seems, is that members perpetually graduate just as they become the leaders of the group, leaving the younger classmates to start over. Sometimes a group doesn't get going again. Sadly, SSASS fell apart two years ago and is gone. So far, no known secular student groups have appeared on the radar at CU Boulder, but I've heard rumors. One of the goals of the Secular Student Alliance is to help give groups stability and longevity by networking with them and sharing useful information on how to organize and run a student group.

Other members of the Boulder Atheists and I tried and were unsuccessful at getting kids programs off the ground because there was not enough interest by members with children. Other groups have had more success with this. We found that the best way to get kids involved is to make many of the social events family friendly, with activities for the kids. We had to be careful when announcing events on Meetup, so that it didn't seem like the events were just for families with kids, otherwise other members wouldn't go.

Other regular programs were introduced, including more activism events and volunteering for community service work. A few of these programs got going, but the Boulder Atheists are currently more focused on social activities. I still run a monthly event called Alter of the Brewpub. It is a Happy Hour and dinner social that visits a different microbrewery each month. Boulder is a Mecca for Breweries.

Three years ago, right before Christmas, Marvin asked me to participate in an activism event that he thought up and sponsored. He would then write a press release about it to send to all the news media outlets in the Denver area. We drove and walked around some busy streets in Denver looking for people who seemed down on their luck. I gave 10 different people \$100 bills. While I shook their hand, Marvin took pictures. We also handed the person a little note saying that the money was given by atheists who like to help out the community as good citizens. Marvin sent the press release along with the pictures, out to every newspaper, TV and radio station in the area. It talked about how atheists are giving, good, caring and moral folks who are concerned about their fellow humans. Not one of the media outlets contacted Marvin or even mentioned anything about what we did.



Soon after that, Marvin retired from the Colorado secular movement, and moved to the Oregon coast near Newport. Well, it didn't take him long to start the very first secular group in Newport, called the Newport Non-Believers. The group has around 70 members, and 30 or so folks show up to meetings.

My family and I moved to a Denver suburb several years ago, so it is now difficult to get to Boulder very often. Virgil Anderson is the current President and doing a great job. He wants to introduce more activism programs. Before Virgil, James Barron was the President, and before that it was me. Russ Holsclaw, a long-time board member is the Secretary/Treasurer, and is very active with organizing and running events.

A recent accomplishment of the Boulder Atheists was to participate in a documentary film on different beliefs and religions for elementary and middle school students. The group got to represent the Atheist point of view and collaborated together to come up with a good presentation. Michelle Iterate was the narrator of the atheist segment, and gave the best performance of all.

Finally, I want to share with you a few of Marvin Straus' insights that he and I recently discussed:

- Finding out you are not alone is the biggest discovery an atheist makes.
- Once you come out of the closet, others will find you.
- The most successful accomplishments are made by individuals.
- Energy and drive comes from within an individual and not from the outside.
- You can't please all the people all the time.
- When people complain about your efforts, you still must do the work yourself.
- Decisions can make or break you and your group.
- Learn from negative feedback. Take criticism and move on.
- Don't count on positive energy from others.



Tom Kellogg and Marvin Straus played gigs together for years.

To learn more about the Boulder Atheists, go to:

www.Boulderatheists.org

www.Meetup.com/Boulder-Atheists/