

# 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 4 – Pikes Peak Atheists and Pikes Peak Atheist Families

With Crystal Starkey



The main key to this group is community passion. Pikes Peak Atheists and Pikes Peak Atheist Families is in Colorado Springs. The more I learned about this group, the more impressed I became. It almost makes me want to move to The Springs. The interview was with Crystal Starkey, one of the main organizers, who provided me with many of the details. Her name is attached to many of the events and activities. This organization has more energy and passion than I have ever seen.

The group is a challenge to write about because they have so many events and activities going on. I would be writing a novel to cover everything they do. The dilemma is to try and cover all of this in one article, condensing details without leaving important items out. For starters, they do all sorts of social events and parties for adults, families and kids.

Activism and outreach programs they do are amazing, helping the needy with food and necessities, homeless youth and families, domestic violence victims, and other human rights causes. They also help abused and abandoned animals, and they have adopted a 2-mile section of a creek to take care of with regular trash clean-up events. They are a member of the Foundation Beyond Belief's Beyond Belief Network (BBN), and received honors as BBN's 2014 Rookie Team of the Year.



**The group was started in 2011** by a few atheist parents. They first started out as a secret Facebook page, since Colorado Springs is extremely religious. It grew into Pikes Peak Atheist Families on Meetup, with Crystal taking over the reins in 2013. A leadership team was added in 2014, as well as the more adult-focused Pikes Peak Atheists. Eventually, the two groups merged together as Pikes Peak Atheists and Pikes Peak Atheist Families. A Meetup page and Facebook page are now their main communication tools. There is not yet a website.

The organizational structure is informal. There is no board of directors. A 9 member leadership team meets periodically. As of December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2016, there were 524 members on Meetup and 396 on Facebook, although many members are on both places. These are the only counts known because there are no official members and no dues are collected. Events are funded by individuals pitching in. Most gatherings are held at people's homes or at public locations such as restaurants. There are family potlucks that include bringing food to share and bringing your own liquor (for the adults).



The initial concept was to create a family-oriented group of parents and kids. Here is a description of the Meetup group, initially called Pikes Peak Atheist Parents:

Pikes Peak Atheist Parents (PPAP) meetups are a way for atheist parents to get together, support each other and find like-minded peers for our children. The majority of our events are in the Pikes Peak region of Colorado, but there are a handful each year in the Denver area, and events may occur state-wide.

As atheist parents, we want a safe way for our kids to meet and talk freely. We want our young children to be able to get together and play and learn about science and nature. We want our school-aged kids to have a safe group to hang out with, minus the pressure that overly religious peers may place on them. For our pre-teens and teens, we want them to have a safe group of peers with whom they can share experiences.

Everyone in the group is welcome to set up Meet-Ups, so long as they are relevant to atheist parents. Play dates, fun family events, a parent's meeting over coffee or a night out, an event for teens, an atheist speaker coming to town... all of these are great things to post as events.

We are supporters of the separation of church and state. We are also supportive of other local atheist/ humanist and secular groups, and welcome cross-posted events so long as they will likely find interest within our group. We are inclusive with regard to race, gender, sexual orientation, economic background, national origin, primary language spoken, disability, etc... We tend to be a pretty relaxed group and welcome you to come to an event to learn about raising children without religion if you are interested in learning more.

**Supporting families and children has always been the goal of Pikes Peak Atheist Families (PPAF).** Kid-friendly events are particularly hard for secular groups to get going, but they seem to have mastered it. Play dates take place at homes with kids or at public venues and mountain parks. The kids have become used to playing with other children of different ages, and play well together.



Here are Crystal's own words, edited down a little, concerning the evolution from an almost strictly playdate group into a larger community group:

“Members wanted more than the couple of (mostly weekday) events a week that I was able to host. Evening events, adult events, weekend activities, etc... were all requested. I knew that I could not host so many events myself.

There was another atheist group in town, and they were focused on adult events, so I tried to work with them, hoping that we could cross-promote each other's events and build our groups together. However, the organizer of the other group was controlling and unwilling to collaborate. Some of his members wanted to be more involved in hosting events, and in leadership positions within the group, but he was unwilling to let others lead events, and had even kicked people out of his group for imagined infractions. There was a lot of dissatisfaction within the group and with my friends and acquaintances who wanted to be more involved with the atheist organizations in Colorado Springs. I invited them to join me. And they did. And we created the second group at our first meeting, Pikes Peak Atheists, the adult version of the play group.

This was very defining in our group history because before we branched out, we only appealed to people with young children. Once we had a leadership team we could focus on so many more areas (adult events, Round Table Discussions, Charity and Community Service events, physical fitness events, weekend potlucks and parties, etc...). Having a leadership team also allowed us to branch out onto Facebook, and to better define what we are.

After that point, we had lots of people (originally a leadership team of 10 plus some event hosts) running lots of different events. And that continues to this day and to the calendar that you see now. One person cannot successfully run a group like this and have broad appeal. We will never be all things to all people, but we certainly have a much broader appeal than we ever could have before. I still run a lot of events, but as a combined team, we can truly continue to build our group to a stronger community

Once Pikes Peak Atheists (PPA) was formed, the group started having some adult only events, such as parties, Round Table Discussions, and Meet and Greet bar nights. The gender mix in PPA is about 50/50 male to female, which is a more balanced number of women than many other atheist groups are able to attract. Adult-only events allow for unrestricted adult conversations and behavior, without worrying about the kids. Parents and other adults can socialize freely. Drinking is allowed, and at some adult parties, pot smoking is allowed, which is perfectly legal in Colorado. These events are known as “420 friendly”, an established term used without specifically mentioning pot.

The PPA and PPAF groups started combining parties that were both adult-friendly and kid-friendly, which worked out well. During evening activities, kids will often play together for a while, then watch a movie while adults hang out together in another room playing board games or socializing. Adults can bring alcohol, and so far this has not been a problem. These events are **not** 420 friendly.



As mentioned previously, the two separate groups combined into one organization. Basically, there are three types of social events: family-friendly, adult-only and supervised kid's events or play dates. Activism such as community service work is also an important part.

**Their Meetup.com page is always full of events** – Here is a typical 3 months or so of events and activities, both summer and winter events, although not listed in exact chronological order. Attendance is usually very good.

- Coffee and Chat – New Day Café
- Colorado Springs Take Steps for Crohn's & Colitis
- Talk Like a Pirate Day Mexican Food Potluck – Kids Welcome
- Texas Hold 'Em Poker Game Night
- 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Wishing Star Farm Fall Festival – Private Party – Fun for Everyone
- Round Table Discussion – Why Are You an Atheist?
- Creek Week Trash Cleanup
- Cool Science Carnival Day @ UCCS
- Game Night!
- 4 Regional Science Fair Winners Present – Science on tap – Family Friendly
- Red Rock Canyon Hike – 31<sup>st</sup> Street Entrance
- Make Halloween Cookies, Plus Coffee and Tea for Parents
- Pumpkin Patch and Fall Fun Play Date
- Black Forest Animal Sanctuary Volunteer Day! Adults, Teens, Kids 6
- Treat Steet!!! Family Friendly Halloween Fun
- All Hallow's Eve Adult Only Costume Party
- Round Table Discussion – Atheists Reaching Out

- Ute Valley Hike – Main Entrance
- Bear Creek Canyon Hike to Cabin
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Pasta Sauce Cook-off Competition and Potluck
- Denver Zoo Free Day
- Garden of the Gods Hike – Palmer Trail
- Rampart Park Play Date
- Jump N Jacks Bounce House Play Date
- Thanksgiving Day – Do You Want Some People to Hang Out With?
- Opt Outside – Family Walk on Black Friday
- Holiday Toy (etc...) Drive for TESSA!
- Leash and Toy Donation Drive for Black Forest Animal Sanctuary
- New Year’s Eve Party – Adults Only
- Camping – Lake Isabel Group Site (next summer)

And it goes on and on.

Pikes Peak Atheists and Pikes Peak Atheist Families is a growing community of freethinkers who all work together and share a common vision of a real secular community. I have now studied how different groups work, and seen how each one is unique. It seems that one common thread is a few individuals who lead the way for others to build on. They must stay on top of things to keep steering the organization in the right direction by constantly learning what works and what doesn’t work, then taking the initiative to properly adjust the course.

Again, here are Crystal’s own words on passion and what motivates her to be so active and involved. It must be catching because she has really helped to inspire others as a positive role model. Read this carefully because it demonstrates how energy comes from within an individual.

“Passion: What drives me - I am driven by the desire to make the world a better place for everyone. In my own little bubble of Pikes Peak Atheists and Pikes Peak Atheist Families in the Colorado Springs area, that means building a community together. Before this group, I never had a big social group or a lot of friends that I was involved with, and now I have so many good friends that I cannot count them on all of my fingers and all of my toes put together. It is empowering. And we do so many great things for local charities and our local community. And we help our members when they need help. And it feels good. It feels so good to have this group of people, this family. There is so much love and kindness and awesomeness within the members of our group. And it gets bigger, better, stronger every single day.”

## Activism and Community Service Work

**TESSA** is the secular organization for domestic violence victims that the group supports. PPA has done basic needs drives for stuff like pillows, bedding, and basic household items. They did a school supply drive for them, and an annual drive for their Holiday Shoppe. The website for TESSA is [www.tessacs.org](http://www.tessacs.org)

**Urban Peak** is another secular organization that they like to support, helping homeless youth ages 15-20. They especially like to support them because many of the youth become homeless due to religious issues, such as youth not being accepted by their parents because they are LGBTQ. PPA has done a couple of emergency drives for them, generally when it gets frigid outside and blankets, gloves, hats, etc. are collected. They have also participated in their annual "Off the Street Community Breakfast" annual fundraiser. They plan to help them again soon. Urban Peak's website is [www.urbanpeak.org](http://www.urbanpeak.org)

**Black Forest Animal Sanctuary** helps abused and abandoned domestic animals (everything from horses and llamas to cats and dogs, assorted fowl, sheep, pigs, etc.). PPA hosts events to support this great cause. Their website is <http://bfasfarm.org/>

**"Taking Care of Each Other"** is for members in need within the community. They have done meal trains and collected various items, such as a washer and dryer for a family with babies in cloth diapers, and a bicycle for someone who needed it as their only form of transportation to and from work.

**Beyond Belief Network** is the previously mentioned organization which helps support PPA's charity and community service activities. It is part of Foundation Beyond Belief. PPA was their Rookie Team of the Year for 2014. More info on them can be found at: [foundationbeyondbelief.org/bbn](http://foundationbeyondbelief.org/bbn)

**Adopt a Creek Program** is sponsored by the Fountain Creek Watershed District for Flood Control, along with 20 other community organizations. Cleanup events are hosted along the 2-mile adopted section of a creek.

## Conclusion

It was an amazing journey writing about the Pikes Peak Atheists and Pikes Peak Atheist Families. There is more that they do, but this should paint a picture. I still don't really understand how the hell they do it, but now know more about where the energy comes from, and I am impressed. Thanks to Crystal Starkey for assisting me with this endeavor.

For more information about Pikes Peak Atheist and Pikes Peak Atheist Families, go to: <https://www.meetup.com/Pikes-Peak-Atheists-and-Pikes-Peak-Atheist-Families/>