

FSGP's Friggatriskadekaphobia Treatment Center Gains National Attention

by Margaret Downey

When Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia (FSGP) supporter Dr. **Richard Dawkins** told his friend **James Randi** (The "Amazing" Randi) about the many successful anti-superstition parties the group has hosted, Randi extended an invitation for me to speak at "The Amazing Meeting Three" (TAM 3) held in Las Vegas January 14-16, 2005.

In preparation for the speaking opportunity, my personal assistant **Natasha Mikles** and I put together a twenty-five minute PowerPoint presentation that highlighted the many ways in which an Anti-Superstition Party can be hosted by groups or individuals. My purpose was to inspire conference attendees to return home with a renewed commitment to educating the public about rational thinking. "Friday-the-thirteenth provides a perfect opportunity to challenge fears, phobias, and superstitions using a clever and fun-loving method to poke fun at superstitions and myths," I said.

Spoofing superstitions has proven to be a great attention-getting-devise for FSGP. During my speech, I encouraged leaders of skeptic groups in the audience to consider ordering a party guideline binder from FSGP to assist them in hosting a party of their own (the order form can be found elsewhere in this newsletter).

I also talked about some party ideas that did not work. For example, when FSGP tried to charge an admittance fee for the 1999 Anti-Superstition Carnival and Dance, the party fell flat. Offering a free and open-to-the-public event draws more attention from the press and guarantees a higher attendance.

Stating that a fear of Friday-the-Thirteenth costs America millions of dollars, always draws interest from the press. FSGP's Anti-Superstition Party press releases emphasize how many people refuse to travel, invest in the stock market, and stay home from work due to anxiety related to irrational Friggatriskadekaphobia.

During my presentation, I showed photos of individual and group party games we offer. I also showed photos of superstition displays around the party room. There is always a sign or poster that explains the superstition's origin and highlights the silliness of the superstition. Superstitions associated with household items, clothing, and food are highlighted.

During the party, FSGP also provides free educational literature concerning baseless superstitions. Literature explaining the danger of discriminatory practices relating to unfounded superstitions are offered free to party goers. The most popular literature is Dr. Dawkins' essay "The Real Romance in the Stars." The essay crushes the notion that personalities and preferences are dictated by the time and date of a person's birth. Dr. Dawkins' essay is made available at the "Pin the Tale on the Astrologer" table.

The biggest laugh came when I showed a photo of FSGP's official Non-Prophet, **Ric Hopkins**. His photo was displayed on a large screen as I talked about the Ten Commandments of the beverage station. The audience also seemed to enjoy seeing photos of the many costumes worn by party volunteers. I was asked many questions about costuming after the presentation. My personal costume collection has provided many laughs during the years. Without the use of my costumes, the party would be boring and stiff. People loosen up when they feel free to be a little outrageous.

While I stressed the importance of having about sixteen volunteers on board before committing to host an Anti-Superstition Party, I also talked about how display tables can be left unattended. I showed a photo of the "Trash your Horoscope" table, and described how people are given the opportunity to throw away their belief in horoscopes and sign a commitment to never read a horoscope prediction again. The table is self-explanatory through the posting of signs which guide people in participation. Participants receive a congratulatory certificate afterwards in the mail if they provide contact information. This is also a sneaky way of finding out who attended the party so that membership information can be included with the certificate.

FSGP also obtains names and contact information when party attendees sign up for single participation events such as the mirror breaking ceremony, the Level the Leprechauns Bowling Game, and the Fracture the Fairy Piñata ceremony.

Towards the end of my speech I showed a five-minute film produced by **Drew Devitt**, **Chuck Villa**, and myself. The humorous film shows Villa going through an Anti-Superstition Obstacle Course guided by me dressed as the Friggatriskadekaphobia Treatment Nurse. The Philadelphia Ethical Society appeared on the credits with thanks for the use of the facility.

After my presentation, I changed into the Friggatriskadekaphobia Treatment Nurse outfit and handed out the FSGP Anti-Superstition Party Kit order forms along with my new business card. The card states the I am "offering treatment for those afflicted with an unfounded and unreasonable fear of Friday-the-thirteenth."

Someday, I hope the Friggatriskadekaphobia Treatment Nurse will be called upon to visit schools and businesses—perhaps even appearing on national television taking talk show hosts through an Anti-Superstition Obstacle Course!

As of the printing date of this newsletter, two groups from California, with the help of the FSGP party kit, are planning to host an Anti-Superstition Party on Friday, May 13, 2005. One group is gearing their party to children.

FSGP is not hosting a party in 2005, but will plan an event for October 2006.

Photos from TAM 3 January 2005 Las Vegas Conference



Pictured right are **Margaret Downey**, **Penn Jillette**, and **Emily Jillette**. Downey is dressed as the Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Nurse. Emily and Penn were married on November 23, 2004. They are expecting a baby in June 2005.

Penn said that the Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Nurse is a “strong gimmick” to convey critical thinking skills.

Pictured below left is **Teller** and Downey. When asked if he thought if the Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Nurse had media potential, Teller replied, “She looks great in the Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Nurse outfit.” He also said that Downey’s attitude “... is lively, fun, and just angry enough— which is essential.”

Jeff Knapp is pictured below accepting a “Bill of Clean Mental Health” from Downey. He broke a few superstitions at the TAM 3 conference thus qualifying him for the honor.

