



# The Freethought Society News

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A limited number of hard copies are produced for meetings and special events.

The newsletter is published by the Freethought Society (FS) and offers information written specifically for the nontheist community.

Articles in this newsletter, however, do not necessarily represent the opinions of the FS Board of Directors.

Attention writers!

Interesting articles about freethought issues are welcomed.

Submissions will be reviewed and approved for publication by the FS Editorial Board.

Article word count maximum is 5,000.

Please submit articles with a bio and photo, a suggested title, and relevant photos/clip art to:

[newsletter@FtSociety.org](mailto:newsletter@FtSociety.org)

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## *The Friggatriskaidekaphobia 2011 Party*

by Margaret Downey

**Brian Tracy** (a very clever fellow and founder of a human resource company based in Solana Beach, California) has said, "I've found that luck is quite predictable. If you want more luck, take more chances. Be more active. Show up more often."

The Freethought Society (FS) did exactly that! FS took a chance that people would be interested in challenging superstitions on Friday, May 13, 2011 and opened a Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Center at the Corinthian Yacht Club in Essington, Pennsylvania. The event required months of planning, but FS volunteers were active and showed up often to make it happen.

**Carol Everhart Roper** designed a fantastic poster to help advertise the event. She posted event information in every online venue she could. Members of the Philadelphia Coalition of Reason helped spread the word and volunteers placed posters in bookstores and on community bulletin boards in and around the Philadelphia area. The anti-superstition party concept caught the attention of a well-respected *Philadelphia Inquirer* journalist, **Faye Flam**. On the day of the event, the article she wrote about superstitions was printed on the newspaper's front page. The article contributed to the great number of attendees, which was estimated to be between 125-150 people. Flam's article quoted me as saying "We want people to know they are in charge of their destiny and life choices. Some superstitions, such as the African belief that albino children bring bad luck, are cruel and dangerous."

The fact is that Friday-the-Thirteenth superstitions have a negative effect on the economy. Superstitious people do not make major purchases (a new home, car or stock) and will not conduct certain activities (getting married, driving, conducting business, etc.). Their fear is based on irrational thinking and assumptions of misfortune. Even the cameraman that WPVI (Channel 6) assigned to film the event admitted that he was anxious to complete a few interviews and quickly depart the scene. He was upset about being in a place where superstitions were being broken — on purpose! I gave him some "professional advice" and encouraged him to use his critical thinking skills as often as possible. The interview aired as a special segment on the 11:00 PM news. It seems that no "bad luck" befell the cameraman and he was able to complete his assignment.

Three stars of rationality attended the party. **David Silverman** (President of [American Atheists](#)) and his family traveled by train from New Jersey in order to attend the event. FS volunteer extraordinaire **Tom Melchiorre** took on the role of "Train to Party Chauffeur." He also posted direction signs around the area. Silverman and his family said that they had a great time. **Tom Flynn** (Executive Director of [The Council for Secular Humanism](#) and Editor of *Free Inquiry* magazine) entertained everyone with his great stories and gregarious personality. He took time from a speaking tour in order to attend the party and participate as a game leader. **P. Z. Myers** flew to Pennsylvania from Minnesota to attend the party. I was proud to host Myers as my house guest for a few days and he wrote a nice review about the party on his science blog ([Pharyngula](#)). Myers led the mirror breaking ceremony and also held the fairy piñata during the "Fracture the Fairy" game.

Photos and more information about the great volunteers who showed up and were actively involved in making the 2011 Anti-Superstition party a big success are highlighted in this newsletter. ◆

# 2011 Friday the Thirteenth Photos



**Binh Nguyen** (pictured above) from "[The Pros](#)" DJ service enjoyed seeing attendees do the Ladder Limbo, break a mirror, bowl down Leprechauns, dance with open umbrellas and trash their horoscopes as he played music in the background. The play list highlighted songs related to superstitions.

Below are **Carol Everhart Roper** (standing), **Tom Flynn** and **Margaret Downey**. Roper greeted attendees as the Miss Fortune Teller and conducted the "Trash Your Horoscope" dance. Downey is dressed as a [Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Nurse](#).



Pictured above are **David Silverman** (left), **Rayanne Silverman** (center) and **Hildy Silverman** (right), as they show no fear of walking under a ladder.



**P. Z. Myers** (right) and **Shaun McGonigal** (left) are pictured below admiring the giant black cat head placed on the front lawn of the Corinthian Yacht Club.

Myers spoke briefly at the party and helped conduct the mirror breaking ceremony. Myers also dangled the fairy piñata from the top of a ladder as it was being swung at by an attendee.





Pictured above left is **Noah Balistra** sitting for his Friday-the-Thirteenth caricature, being drawn by “Nurse Emily.” Caricature artist **Emily Anthony** is pictured sitting under an umbrella with **John J. Byrne**.

Below left are **Carl Silverman** and his wife **Jean Silverman** as they enjoy slow dancing under an open umbrella.

**Monica Jones** is pictured breaking a mirror, as **P. Z. Myers** (left), **Margaret Downey** and DJ **Binh Nguyen** stand by. Jones is wearing protective goggles and signed a “hold harmless” agreement prior to the mirror breaking ceremony. She reports that only good things happened to her since her participation in the Freethought Society’s Friday-the-Thirteenth party.



# FS Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> Party — Predictably Great!

by Carol Everhart Roper

It was a sunny, gorgeous day, not too hot, not too cold, but it was Friday-the-Thirteenth! What might be in store? If you're a skeptic, then the only thing Friday-the-Thirteenth means to you is a great freethought party! And The Freethought Society (FS) knows how to throw a Friggatriskaidekaphobia bash!

FS president, **Margaret Downey** 'lucked into' a fantastic venue — the Corinthian Yacht Club — located on the Delaware River in Essington, Pennsylvania. Driving along the river road, you come to a long driveway, wending its way through a lovely, spacious lawn, bringing you to the street side of a classic Philadelphia mansion. Out front, alongside the professionally landscaped foundation, was a huge

inflated black cat head swaying gently in the breeze, daring the fearful to enter. Downey borrowed the cat head from a Pocopson veterinarian who supported the concept of discouraging the superstition that a black cat is unlucky.

Once inside, the ticket table was spellbindingly manned by **Tom Schottmiller** and **Noah Balistra**. Nearby, **Andrew Barrett** sat on a comfy sofa selling the book *Imagine No Superstition*. A box full of books was donated to FS as a fund raising tool by the author, **Stephen Uhl**.

Wandering through the multi-room event, attendees encountered assorted tableaux. The "Superstition Museum" created by Downey showcased all sorts of unearthly beliefs, from the familiar to others foreign and little-known. Each table highlighted a different category of superstitions including food, clothing, household items, animals and other oddities. Cocktail tables were decorated with assorted 'entertainment' items such as a Ouija board, a wishing well and Tarot cards. Luck prevailed as no one fell victim to any magic spells!

The mood was festive. Medical personnel "Doctors of Superstition" (aka Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Nurses and Doctors) wandered the rooms ready to help exorcise any residual superstition still eerily lurking back in the primitive recesses of one's mind.

FS was fortunate to have three special guests in attendance — the estimable **Tom Flynn** from the Center for Inquiry, American Atheists president **Dave Silverman** (and his family) and scientist **P. Z. Myers** — each of whom worked the crowd like the pros they are.

I played the part of the floozy fortune teller/psychic, poised to predict a fun time that evening for all! Myers looked floored and a bit suspicious when I asked him his 'astrological sign' — that is until I explained the joke.

FS hired a fabulous DJ who played tune after



I captured this photo of **Glen Loev** (left), **Margaret Downey** (center) and **Shaun McGonigal** (right) just before they began their anti-superstition shift at the Freethought Society Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Center.

superstitious tune, heralding the tone for the visionary games that were scheduled. Among the many revealing experiences were horoscope trashing, limboing under a ladder, dancing with an open umbrella, fracturing a fairy piñata, Leprechaun bowling and much more. FS awarded a prize for the "most enthusiastic participant" for each one of these activities.

The cash bar was well-managed — and well-attended. A few snack trays were located near the bar. As large as the venue was, there was a time when the crowds were barely passable! Estimates of the crowd size ranged from 125 to over 150. I am almost certain that the final count was at least 150!

As I had foretold, everyone seemed to have a great time. Lots of cameras were capturing souls and if you wanted a break from the action, a comfortable sitting room was available. For a nice change of pace, one could simply walk out the double doors to a deck. A few people took a walk to the water's edge, or walked on water — supernatural powers permitting.

I thoroughly enjoyed the entire event. Downey's hosting magic was evident everywhere. My husband **Lee Roper** attended as did many of my friends including **Rick Wingrove** and **Ellen Birch** who drove to the event together from Virginia. They won the prize for having traveled the farthest. I met folks I knew online, but had never seen in person. It was great to finally meet **Ed Baker**, **Shaun McGonigal**, and my co-FS webmaster (a true computer magician) **Brian Fields**. I overheard parts of many wonderful conversations, but did not linger too long at any one table or group. Both **Jack Chastain** and I took tons of photos and we magically seemed to know that each of us should capture different aspects of the party. You can view my photos at the following link:

<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.149243355146198.35507.147128532024347>

Chastain's photos can be seen at this link:

<https://picasaweb.google.com/jack.chastain/Friggatriskaidekaphobia2011#>

With such a fantastic turnout FS actually had 'good luck' on Friday-the-Thirteenth. I look forward to many more such events in our highly auspicious future; but...

What *are* those faint smudges in the photos? ◆

# *FS Friggatriskaidekaphobia Party Cures All*

by Glen Loev

The Freethought Society's (FS) 2011 Friday-the-Thirteenth Anti-Superstition party was a blast! I didn't know what to expect, but the event turned out to be much better, much livelier and much more fun than I anticipated.

**Margaret Downey**, FS's founder and current president was the driving force behind the event. As usual she put her all into making the party a success. She pre-planned even the smallest details.

My 13 year-old-son **Noah Loev Balistra** and I arrived about an hour before the starting time. We volunteered to help set up the space. By the time we had arrived, Downey, her husband **Tom Schottmiller** and a few others had already done the lion's share of the work. I was impressed with the interesting arrangements of museum-like displays, tables with funny centerpieces and a nicely decorated entertainment area.

The Corinthian Yacht Club venue was a challenge for our event. Basically it was a long oblong space with adjacent smaller rooms. There are connections at either end that further divided into cozy rooms. One end had a larger space where there was a bar and dance area. We set up a lectern, microphone and DJ in order to encourage dancing and game playing. The layout proved perfect to not only dance, but the smaller rooms off to the side provided nice areas for conversations.

Some volunteers were dressed as Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment personnel, clairvoyants or other sundry apparitions. After everything was in order, the volunteers were treated to a nice selection of sandwiches that Downey pre-ordered from the Club. She made sure special guests **P. Z. Myers**, **Tom Flynn** and **David Silverman** were well-fed prior to the start of the party. Downey gave each of the special guests four drink tickets and a special "thank you for attending" gift.

When guests began to arrive, I was stationed at the ticket desk with Schottmiller. My son and a few other FS volunteers rotated the ticket sales job with us. We were kept busy collecting money, stamping hands, filling out name badges — all the while keeping track of the number of attendees. We also collected contact information from as many first-time guests as possible. I was happy to welcome the steady stream of attendees of all ages — families, single adults, students, long-time supporters of FS and many new faces. Wanting to get people past the entrance table quickly, we ended up losing track of the exact number of attendees.

I spent about half my time at the sign-in table. When I wasn't working the table I walked around the party, clipboard in hand, offering to administer anti-superstition "check-ups." Downey presented those who passed "the test" with a "Clean Bill of Mental Health" certificate. Many people were recognized that night for being superstition-free. The test included asking people questions such as:

*Are you upset if a black cat crosses your path?*

*Do you agree that checking your horoscope is irrational and a waste of time?*

*Can you spill salt without feeling compelled to throw some over your shoulder?*

*Have you "Trashed Your Horoscope?"*

*Did you register your name to "Fracture the Fairy" piñata?*

*Are you willing to break a mirror without fear of having bad luck?*

This party was a lot of fun for me. I liked wearing the Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Doctor costume and I enjoyed having an assigned "task." Being in character made it much easier for me to approach people. It wasn't a surprise to me that everyone I talked to that night passed the anti-superstition test with flying colors!

Altogether, the event went very smoothly. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves, dancing, drinking, nibbling on cheese and crackers and participating in all the fun activities that took place throughout the evening. Party attendees had fun breaking a piñata, doing the Ladder Limbo, dancing inside with open umbrellas, getting their caricatures drawn, and so much more. Attendees also had the opportunity to talk with the featured special guests. Many of us were able to catch up with long-time friends and made new connections with like-minded individuals.

I am already looking forward to the next FS anti-superstition party which will take place on **Friday, September 13, 2013**. Please plan to either attend or volunteer. And, no worries, FS will still be around to party, regardless of the Mayan calendar superstition that the world is going to end on December 22, 2012! ♦



**Pictured above are Tom Schottmiller (left) and Glen Loev working the ticket table.**

# *Frigg Cures of the Past and Future*

by Shaun McGonigal

Come one, come all! The Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Doctor has ordered you to be well! While clairvoyance will not help you to determine the best road to recovery, patronage of your local skeptic events just might. In my 'professional' opinion, the best remedy for your superstition ailment is to rid yourself of anxieties related to stepping on cracks, breaking mirrors, and affording funding of your fortune teller's woo-woo addiction.

Instead of collecting “lucky charms,” reading horoscopes or avoiding adorable black cats, you should instead plan to visit a Freethought Society (FS) Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Center and find a cure for any hidden pesky superstitions.

The 2011 FS Treatment Center was open four hours on Friday, May 13<sup>th</sup> at the Corinthian Yacht Club and if you missed it, do not fear — another opportunity to receive anti-superstition treatment will occur in Philadelphia again in about two years. Mark your calendars and start planning to have a great time on **Friday, September 13, 2013**. Watch for event details in future issues of the *Freethought News*.

Since I have attended several FS anti-superstition parties in the past, I can attest to the fact that the party is a proximal cause of enlightenment and mirth. In 2008, I met **James “The Amazing” Randi**. His affable good humor was apparent with his opening statement and jokes throughout the evening. In 2006, I met and talked to **Michael Shermer** as he participated in helping FS dispel misconceptions of Friday-the-Thirteenth. This year it was an honor to meet and talk with **Tom Flynn, P. Z. Myers, David Silverman** and other people who I respect and admire.

It was great to see so many people attending from a wide variety of locations. I was impressed that the party crowd consisted of a mix of older and younger, outspoken and quiet people. The common thread was that everyone seemed to really like the entire anti-superstition concept. The atmosphere was conducive to having conversations with the big name attendees.

There was a shared catharsis in the room as people collectively and symbolically mocked and tossed aside symbols of

superstition. There were no signs of apprehension — only joy at partying with like-minded people. We had a sense of community as we celebrated scientific literacy, healthy skepticism, and the willingness to rid ourselves of primitive beliefs that our culture continues to hold. It was the kind of party that allows a person to see beyond where we disagree and to see many of the things about which we collectively agree.

I hear there may be more anti-superstition parties before 2013 in other areas of the country. There are plans underway to make events grander and more entertaining than ever. Watch for details provided by party planner and president of FS, **Margaret Downey**.

Future events will offer us opportunities to schmooze with all kinds of wonderful people, who have demonstrated the admirable quality of desiring to rid the public of unnecessary superstitions. Party goers are guaranteed to improve their self-confidence by challenging negative and irrational attitudes about Friday-the-Thirteenth, the number 13 and many other impulses spurred on out of fear of the unknown. Education about superstitions develops critical thinking skills and FS is on the cutting edge of how to provide an educational opportunity.

The 2011 FS Anti-Superstition party provided a mixture of education and entertainment, from free literature to party games. For instance, the party allowed people to literally and figuratively throw away zodiac signs. Those who did so also agreed to never take horoscopes seriously. They were later awarded a certificate to display. We also enjoyed witnessing the wanton destruction of a mirror.

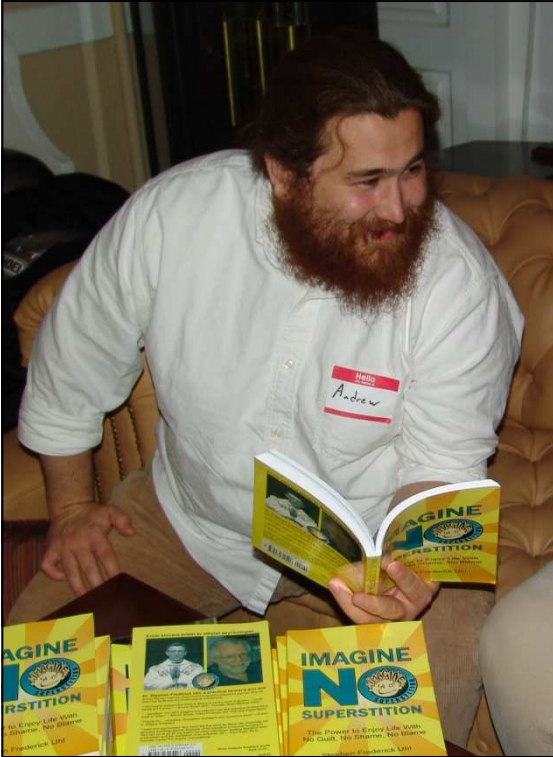
Many people thoroughly enjoyed Ladder Limbo and dancing with umbrellas open (both of which are life-goals of mine, for sure). How could you resist?

So, if you're a skeptic, want to know more about skepticism, or simply want a chance to break a mirror to the cheers of many like-minded people, then join us next time for an evening of dancing, fracturing a fairy piñata, bowling down Leprechauns, socializing with infamous and famous friends and so much more. I hear it's bad luck *not* to attend! ♦



Pictured above are **Brian Sapient** (left) **Staks Rosch** (center) and **Shaun McGonigal** (right). Sapient co-founded the Rational Response Squad. Rosch is the coordinator of the Philadelphia Coalition of Reason and is the host of the Dangerous Talk radio program which can be heard on WCHE 1520 AM. McGonigal is wearing a Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Doctor costume.

# More 2011 Friday the Thirteenth Photos



Pictured above (left) is **Andrew Barrett** sharing a funny paragraph in **Stephen Uhl's** book *Imagine No Superstition*.

In the photo above (right), a party attendee registers to receive a "Trash Your Horoscope" congratulations certificate.

**P. Z. Myers** is pictured below talking to fans of his "Pharyngula" blog. Barely visible in the background is Executive Director of The Council for Secular Humanism and Editor of *Free Inquiry* magazine, **Tom Flynn**. Flynn helped host several anti-superstition games and delivered a very funny opening statement about superstitions. His fans kept Flynn busy all night.



**Glen Schmiesing** and the FS black cat mascot are pictured above. Schmiesing is pulling the leashed fake black cat along the floor demonstrating his lack of related superstitious fears.