

Notes on the History of HUSBAY

Delivered December 20th at the celebration of Our 15th Anniversary

By N. W. Smith

I was inspired to start a humanist organization in Sarasota by humanist meetings I attended at Gainesville, Florida where I spent 1995-1999 winters using the University of Florida library to research and complete a book that I was writing. While there I decided that I would move to Sarasota for my permanent home and found that it had nearly everything I could want in a community except a humanist organization. The only remedy was to start one. That would also allow me to meet some interesting and rational people that I would have no other way to meet. So while still in Gainesville I began communicating with the Council of Secular Humanism, which sent me a lot of information about forming and running a humanist organization. The Council put me in touch with Jan Eisler, and we made some preliminary plans. I completed my book and moved to Sarasota.

The Council provided me with mailing labels for all the people who were subscribers to "Free Inquiry" and lived within a certain radius of my location. The Council also paid for two mailings. Jan Eisler drove down from St. Petersburg at least twice and helped me with getting the announcements ready for mailing and working out some organizational plans. She also drove down for our first meeting and brought a big platter of fruit that she put on the table we were sitting around.

We began HUSBAY in the winter of 1999. We sent out a prospectus and the notice of a meeting. One advantage in being the organizer is that prior to the actual assemblage of the new organization there are no restraints on the organizer. And so by a unanimous vote of one, I named the organization The Thales Society: Secular Humanists of Sarasota. Thales was the Greek philosopher of about 600 BCE who was the first known person to systematically replace mythology with rational thought using observations from nature.

We held our first organizing meeting at Longwood County Park Recreation Center on March 23, 1999. We chose that location because the rent was only \$14 and we had no funds. The meeting room was a little shabby. Six people came. The names of those attending were Bob Phillipoff, Fred Sargent, Len Leskinen, Jan, and myself, and two others I am not sure of--just six of us not counting Jan. We discussed what we wanted the organization to do and what sort of bylaws to develop. Walter Derdeyn had called me to say that he would like to attend but the meeting time of 6:30 pm, interfered with his dinner hour. He did, however, attend our first breakfast meeting on January 8th and

remained a supporter until his death twelve years later at age 100. At the first meeting we decided to have meetings once a month at which we might discuss issues, hear speakers, or consider social action. Fred Sargent agreed to write bylaws for us.

The second meeting was April 26, 1999 at Gulf Gate Library. It called for a discussion of the name of the organization. Marion Wells, Tom Barker, and Jacqui and Ernie Kinnie attended these early meetings. There were two young women whose names I don't recall but one of which taught in rural schools and was upset over religious practices in the schools and the other with a Ku Klux Klan neighbor who considered her and her children to be evil non-believers and would not allow their children to play with hers. For the next meeting we called for a discussion of the name of the organization and its activities as well as a "Discussion of how freethinkers can deal with opposition". This topic was chosen because of the problems the two young women were facing. Those present, especially the young women, seemed to think the name Thales was too obscure and not snappy enough, though Jan and I preferred it. Suggestions were for Freethinkers or Freethought, and we used this name for a short time. We also reviewed a preliminary version of the bylaws and the tenants of the organization written by Fred Sargent and made recommendations.

At the outset I was President pro tem, treasurer (using an envelope for banking and a ledger book for recording), secretary, and newsletter producer for the first few months but happily turned the newsletter over to Jacqui Kinnie who launched our first formal newsletter before the first meeting with speaker in the fall of the 1999-2000 season. That season we did begin our speaker series, although not yet an every-month event. The first presentation was at Barnes & Noble on Nov. 19, 1999 by Joe Simonetta who had attended the second organizational meetings. About 45 people came, a number that far exceeded our expectations.

Our third meeting was December 14, 1999 at Longwood County Park. The name of the organization continued to be a matter of debate, and at this meeting I suggested changing our name From Freethinkers to humanists in order to emphasize the human-centered approach as well as the ethical aspects of our group; but no formal action was taken. Prior to the first formal newsletter, Jacqui was pressing me for a name she could use in the newsletter. In order to encourage and recognize members from farther away than Sarasota, I decided to refer to Sarasota Bay Area rather than just Sarasota and to call the organization Humanists of Sarasota Bay Area. HUSBAY became a useful acronym. After a little discussion with her and Ernie I gave her the name HUSBAY to use, and that is what it became. I think it was a matter of agreement by the three of us. I don't think we ever voted on this (although we formally approved it at an annual membership meeting in 2004), but we were still functioning quite informally at that time with only about 8-10 active members. I also inaugurated a breakfast

group to meet at 9:15 am on Saturdays at Cafe of the Arts to begin Jan. 8, 2000. After a few meetings there, a rather expensive place with a limited menu, on January 30, 2000 we moved to Sunday night gatherings at the Holiday Inn near the airport on US 41. This turned out to be rather unsatisfactory, so after a few weeks we changed to Saturday morning breakfast at the same location. This worked out fairly well. The restaurant seemed a rather central point for Sarasota and Bradenton people, but few came from Bradenton, and it was too far away for those living on the south side of Sarasota. Usually about four to eight attended, and we had some lively discussions--the group being small enough that we could all participate as a single group and seldom break into smaller conversation groups. One member wanted to have meetings in our homes where we could drink coffee and talk about such matters as our grandchildren. Another wanted to select a topic ahead of time on which each of us would prepare a formal presentation and then we would discuss it something like a graduate seminar. Both of these people left after a short time.

At the December 1999 meeting we adopted the bylaws and first set yearly dues at \$20, changing it to 25 a few years later and to 30 in 2011. In the beginning we had no treasury even for buying stamps. It was during these early meetings that we also decided to have a monthly speaker series beginning in 2000. On March 23, 2000 Tom Barker, one of our early members who served as an escort for women with abortion appointments at the Women's Health Center, spoke on "Through the looking glass: Reflections of a Clinic Escort". That was our last meeting at Longwood Park. Our speaker series began its first full season in November 2000. We scheduled five meetings from November 2000 to March 2001 with four of the speakers from our own membership: Marion Wells on "Pharoah--God of the Bible", Katherine Izzo on "The Making of a Woman Judge", Ernest Kinnie on "Amoral Science--Brainless Religion", and Richard LaBrecque on "Freedom and Science". The only non-member, Betty Pelletz from the Jewish Humanists, spoke on "A View of Jewish Humanism". Our many-talented members have continued to be among our speakers but not to the extent of that first season. Our difficulty in finding a low cost or free place to hold our speaker series meetings was solved when Walter Derdyn offered the use of his condo meeting room at the Regency House, and that first series was held there. We used this pleasant facility for about two years. When the Fruitville Library was completed east of I-75 in 2002 we moved our meetings there because of its easy accessibility and plentiful parking.

Our first annual membership meeting took place January 25, 2001 at the home of the Kinnies at Harpers Croft in the Meadows. Those attending were Tom Barker, Walter Derdeyn, Ernest Kinnie, Jacqueline Kinnie, Len Leskinen, Fred Sargent, Jack O'Sullivan, Penny Upton, and myself. Attending as guests were Monte Feldman and Jean O'Keefe who later joined us.

In the fall of 2003 we changed our weekly Saturday breakfasts to a lunch on

Wednesdays at a downtown restaurant. We began having the lunches through the summer, which had not been the case of the breakfasts. This became the most successful of our several experiments with a weekly gathering. Attendance was at first from about eight to more than twenty but is now usually twenty upward. We changed lunch locations numerous times but have found a semi-permanent home at New Dynasty restaurant where special interest groups meet after the lunch with often more than twenty attending. This restaurant provides the advantages of a semi-private room of our own, a reasonable noise level, inexpensive food with a large buffet style selection, highly efficient waitresses, and flexible seating.

In 2003 we sent our last newsletter by postal mail and turned entirely to electronic transmission. The mailed newsletter was an expensive and time-consuming chore. Jacqui was editor for several years and sent out beautifully designed weekly announcements. Fred Bennett took over the task around 2007 and continued to provide that service with a monthly mailing until May 2013 when Vienna Taylor took over. In May 2003 we held our first picnic. During the year our membership of 22 doubled to 45. We added special interest groups: philosophical discussion, film review, and wine tasting. In 2004 a historical group and an investment group began although neither of these have continued. Also in 2004 we began a website hosted by Humanist.net. This allowed for the possibility of book, film, and theater reviews and the posting of papers of various persuasions. Again, the designer of this attractive site and the overseer of it was Jacqui Kinnie. In 2013 Barry Zack took over and incorporated new features. In 2011 we began our first annual Darwin Day celebration with a speaker. Jack O'Sullivan ably greeted people with the role of Charles Darwin. In 2012 we continued our lecture series with six per year rather than the five we started with and later seven per year. For the first three years I organized the series and recruited the speakers. Jack O'Sullivan took it over for the next two years and then Jack Bethune for a year followed by Meigs Glidewell, then a committee led by Vienna Taylor. After that, committees have shouldered the burden chaired by our Vice-President.

In 2004 we joined the Humanists of Florida. We remained affiliated with the Council for Secular Humanism under which we had our tax-free status as an educational organization, but we lost that connection when the Council had to shut down its local groups program, ASHS, as required by the IRS in order to have a new organization with new exemptions that would overcome problems with the old one. In 2009 the Council then started a new program called the Affiliated Local Groups Program and invited former members to join. Somehow we did not receive the information and have been missing from their roster ever since. Our president has requested our reinstatement. We have also affiliated with the American Humanists Association, the Center for Inquiry, the Secular Coalition for America, and the Tampa Bay Coalition of Reason.

In 2000 we started a film group led by Jacque Kinnie. It meets once a month

to see a film selected by the group and to discuss it. Shortly afterward we started a wine tasting group led at first by Bill Rau and then by Ursula Levy. A philosophical discussion group also started and had three or four meetings involving brief presentations by designated persons and then a discussion. The meetings were well attended and the discussions were lively. The meetings did not continue but were restarted in 2009 by Les Downing. He was followed by Katherine White for about a year. About 2011 Jack Wayne began leading it with four-part series of topics. During his absence for the summer, Richard Kessler has led it. I started a book review group in 2011 for non-fiction, and Barry Zack started a writer's group in the same year. The film group, our oldest, continues unabated.

In 2011 or 2012 we started a current issues group by Mike & Holly Gruenfeld that was well attended. It is now led by a rotating group of members. Also in 2009 Judy Helgager volunteered to be our first person to lead a Caring Committee to offer comfort to our members who have become ill or injured. In 2008 Darwin Soder started our sponsorship of Potter Park involving about three clean-ups per year. A sign near the entrance to the park announces the sponsorship. Our 2009 membership climbed to over 80 and exceeded 100 in 2010. We obtained a status of incorporation in 2011 thanks to the hundreds of hours of hard work that Jacquie Kinnie put into it. That gives board members some protection against possible law suits and enables members to give tax deductible donations to the organization. According to a Supreme Court decision our corporation is now a legal person. The full name of Humanists of Sarasota Bay Area was too long for incorporation, so we dropped "Area".

In 2014 we appointed a committee to look into the possibility of providing a scholarship to a student, probably a graduate student, who wants to have a career that is connected to secular humanism. Jack Kent chairs that committee.

Our latest proposal for a SIG (Special Interest Group) group is tentatively called Compassionate Choices and will deal with end of life issues.

During the first five years we encountered many bumps that are typical of a new organization. Most of these have been smoothed out, such as a suitable place to hold our monthly lectures. Getting people to serve as officers or other functions still remains as a distinct bump. As for myself, after nine years (1999-2008) as president, I did not wish to continue in that function any longer. Meigs Glidewell generously stepped in to fill the role (2008). She was followed by Jacquie Kinnie for three years (2009-2011) and then Dave Helgager beginning in 2012 who has skillfully handled increasingly complex activities of the organization. After trying many different sites for our lecture series, in 2011 we began using the Center for Arts and Humanity. It is more expensive than previous locations but superior to them, and with our larger membership and consequent healthy treasury we have been able to afford it.

On July 4, 2013, the Hobby Lobby Stores, a chain from Oklahoma City,

Oklahoma, published a full-page ad in the Sarasota Herald Tribune entitled "In God We Trust." The ad supposedly quoted statements from presidents, Supreme Court justices, The Congress, etc. implying that America has historically been a Christian nation and should politically, legally, and morally follow Christian teaching. Our Board of Directors decided that a more accurate statement of these founding fathers in an ad that we would place would be an appropriate response. Some of our members protested on the grounds that HUSBAY is a social organization only and that we were conducting warfare against religion. It is true that we have functioned primarily as a social organization and will probably always do so. However, a look at the Purposes and Tenets stated in our bylaws makes it clear that we are enjoined "To advocate, defend, and practice the principles of democracy, free speech, civil rights, and the separation of church and state". When our ad came out (paid for entirely by member donations), and members could see that it was primarily historical with quotations from founding fathers, much of the opposition faded away. (To see the ad, go to our Home page and select "Our Tribune Ad" on the right navigation panel.)

On January 25, 2014 a newspaper story about us appeared in the Herald-Tribune. It was a fairly good account with only a few minor errors except for one that gave our dues as 30 dollars per month instead of per year.

Looking to our accomplishments, perhaps the major one has been that of facilitating many acquaintances and friendships for people who wish to know others whose thinking goes beyond the mainstream. And perhaps the lectures and special interest groups have stimulated and enlightened us while the lunches have provided discussion and fellowship. Our present membership of 120 and the many activities we support was not even on the horizon for us when we started in 1999. We have also allied ourselves with regional and national humanist groups in order to strengthen our voice with respect to humanist values such as separation of church and state. On a local level we have contributed to the Food Shelf and under the leadership of Darwin Soder have adopted Potter Park for periodic clean-ups. Our agenda has become increasingly complex and ambitious but has been handled skillfully by our board of directors and especially the officers. I think we are well situated to continue our success