



Rational Inquiry

Dare
to
think

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NEWSLETTER

AUTUMN, 2005

The San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry is dedicated to the encouragement of rational thought in all areas of human affairs. Composed of citizens from every walk of life, and with a variety of technical, scientific, legal, and humanistic backgrounds, the association strives to encourage rational discourse in the life of San Diego. For more information, see page seven.



A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SAN DIEGO SKEPTICS

Ed: The late Ernie Ennissee was Executive Director of the former SAN DIEGO SKEPTICS and later a Vice President of the San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry. This is a reprint of the article published first in "Rational Inquiry," Vol. 1, Issue 1 (April/June, 1996)

By Ernie Ennissee

Our Goals

The goals of the San Diego Skeptics were spelled out in the first issue of our newsletter, SANity. Among them were to: "identify and maintain a network of skeptics in the greater San Diego area to responsibly examine and challenge paranormal claims, generate public debates, lectures, demonstrations, media events and competent scientific evaluations of paranormal claims, provide a source of accurate information for the local and national media on paranormal claims."

How It Started

In the early eighties, I ran across a book by Carl Sagan entitled Broca's Brain, a collection of essays on various subjects with the emphasis on science. The section titled "The Paradoxers" contained explanations and answers to questions that had been troubling me for years. Sagan deftly debunks much of the pseudo science that was rampant at the time: astrology, ancient astronauts, UFOs, the Bermuda triangle, psychic spoon benders, etc. I was delighted! As a child of the sixties, I was puzzled by these things but had only rarely come across an explanation as to why, for example, astrology seemed to work. By what possible mechanism could the position of the planets at the moment of one's birth affect

personality? Here was an antidote to what ailed me. At the end of the chapter, Sagan lists further sources of critical evaluations of apparent supernatural phenomena. The list included The Skeptical Inquirer, the journal of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP). I was hooked. I spent the next few nights in the library at UCSD devouring back issues. (Ed. note: The UCSD Library, regrettably canceled its subscription to the Skeptical Inquirer in 1987; it is now being resumed.)

By the mid eighties, many local groups had been formed including the Bay Area Skeptics in northern California and the newest group called the Southern

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It's Election Time Again!

Nominations for officers will be made at the October 23rd meeting, with the opportunity for

additional nominations from the floor just before the elections at the meeting on November 27th.

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California Skeptics in Los Angeles. I attended a convention in the bay area hoping to find others with idea of starting a local group in San Diego. It was at the convention that I first met James “The Amazing” Randi. I asked Randi why someone hadn’t started a group in San Diego. Without hesitation, Randi said, “Because you haven’t started one yet. Get busy.” I started corresponding with CSICOP and the Southern California Skeptics in Los Angeles. Kendrick Fraiser, editor of *The Skeptical Inquirer*, put me in touch with Elie Shneour, director of Biosystems Research Institute in La Jolla and one of the early scientific consultants for CSICOP. He had already invested several years laying the ground work for a local group and was looking for someone in the area to help get the project off the ground. We hit it off famously and thus was born the SAN DIEGO SKEPTICS. Our goals were spelled out in the first issue of our newsletter, SANity. Among them were to “identify and maintain a network of skeptics in the greater San Diego area to responsibly examine and challenge paranormal claims; generate public debates, lectures, demonstrations, media events and competent scientific evaluations of paranormal claims; provide a source of accurate information for the local and national media on paranormal claims.”

Our Triumphs

Our first public event was Randi’s lecture “Science, Magic, and the Paranormal” at UCSD’s Peterson hall on March 8, 1986; it

was an unqualified success. The formation of the SAN DIEGO SKEPTICS coincided with Randi’s investigation of faith healers. Only the week before, he and Paul Kurtz had determined the radio frequency that a certain evangelist was using to get the “word from God” concerning the medical condition of those who came to his “miracle healing services.” The faith healer used an ultra miniature receiver deep in his ear to receive information from a surreptitious transmitter backstage. For several hours before the services began, his wife and several aides walked among the crowd interviewing people and writing detailed information about them on 3 by 5 cards. During the service, he would “miraculously” call out some sufferer’s name and proceed to accurately describe exactly the sufferer’s illness, the doctor’s name, and even the address! To the faithful, this was absolute proof that this man had direct communication with the Almighty and that if any one could help them with their disease it was him. The purpose of this con was, of course, to separate these folks from their money. What the faith healer didn’t know was that Randi, disguised in a hideous fright wig and Jerry Lewis buck teeth, was in the audience with a briefcase containing the scanner and tape recorder we had purchased in La Jolla the day after his lecture at UCSD. Randi was listening to and recording the secret radio transmissions.

Several months later, during the “Tonight Show” with Johnny Carson, Randi played a portion of the healing service. Then the same clip was played with the addition of

the intercepted audio track. Thus the country learned of the cruel deceptions of this so-called man of God. For the next few days, we happily watched the faith healer try unsuccessfully to come up with an explanation. He failed and, a few months later, declared bankruptcy.

With the success of this event, the local media started contacting us and inviting Elie and myself to appear on various news and talk shows. One of our favorite gigs was Stacey Taylor’s radio talk show then on KSDO. He is a very bright guy with an acerbic wit that occasionally goes over the head of some hapless caller who doesn’t yet “get it.” We had a regular segment on the Friday before our scheduled monthly lectures and fielded calls from everyone from true believers to bitter cynics. The idea was to publicize the lecture hoping to get more of the general public to attend but much of the time we ended up preaching to the choir.

Our Disappointment

Although we were having some success, our sister group in Los Angeles, the Southern California Skeptics, was truly a shining star in the galaxy of local groups. This group was getting national attention with such events as the fire walking demonstration at CalTech later shown on the Tonight Show. Their regular lectures were drawing several hundred people every month. A decision was made to pool our resources and so the SAN DIEGO SKEPTICS merged with the Southern California Skeptics.

Elie Shneour went on to become

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Membership Application

I would like to join the San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry. Enclosed is my annual membership fee of \$20 (\$12 for students, seniors, and disabled people, \$6 if younger than 18.)

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip+4: _____

Special interests: _____

Expertise: _____

Mail to: San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry Phone: _____
P.O. Box 623
La Jolla, CA 92038-0623 Email: _____

For more information contact Keith Taylor at 619-421-5844, or check our website at www.sdari.org

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the President of the Southern California Skeptics and I was designated the San Diego Coordinator. Unlike SCS, which had Baxter Lecture hall at CalTech, our group to the south was never able to provide a regular meeting place so that people could find us. Without this, attendance at the lectures dwindled and financial support dried up. Even with personal donations from Elie and myself and a small group of dedicated volunteers, we just couldn't sustain the program. For a short time Elie was able to continue the CalTech lecture series, but it too ran out of steam. SCS went out of business and with it went our struggle against the forces of irrationality.

The Future

But now comes the San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry. The quality of people attending the first meetings gives me renewed hope that the noble

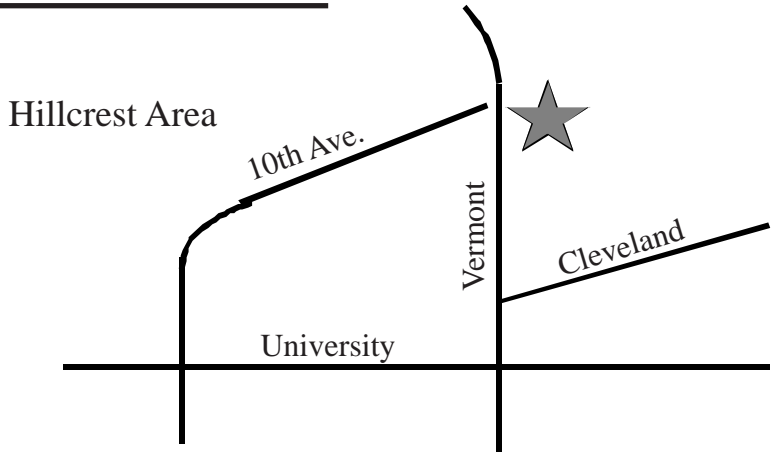
battle against the new (dark) age will begin again. Experience is a very valuable resource. I hope that the things that I learned in my past efforts will be of help in our new organization. For example, many people of diverse talents must be involved in running the organization. Not only does this insure that the organization will be lively, it prevents exhausting the good will of participants through overwork.



Lecture Schedule and Meeting Location

Public lectures are held at 7 p.m. on the fourth Sunday of the month (except December.) The location of the meetings is the Joyce Beers Community center, at the intersection of Vermont and 10th Ave. in the Hillcrest area, near Ralphs and Trader Joe's markets (in Uptown District shopping Center.)

The lectures are free, but a donation of \$5 is suggested.



The San Diego Association for Rational
Inquiry
P.O. Box 623
La Jolla, CA 92038-0623



We are on the Web!

www.sdari.org

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Up-coming events:

In the **Joyce Beers Community Center** (see p. 3 for directions):

Sunday October 23, 2005

6 p.m. Pre-meeting social hour

7 p.m. Lief Fearn; Topic: "Reform by Testing and Coercion is Politics, not Education"

Sunday November 27, 2005

6 p.m. Pre-meeting social hour

7 p.m. Elie Shneour; Topic: "Scientists in the Modern Credulous World"

Sunday January 22, 2005,

6 p.m. Pre-meeting social hour

7 p.m. Gary Peterson; Topic: "Is there Other Life in the Solar System?"