

THE ATHEIST

Newsletter of the Atheist Community of Austin, a Nonprophet Organization
P.O. Box 3798, Austin, Texas 78764 • 512.371.2911 • www.atheist-community.org

April -May 2003 - Volume 7.4-5



ACA co-chair attends Atheist Alliance International convention

by Michelle Gadush

Wow! Talk about a “Dream Team”! Dawkins, Shermer, Randi, Newdow! What a line-up! All of these icons were featured speakers at the annual AAI convention, held Easter weekend in Tampa.

I was pleased to attend the convention as ACA’s representative on the AAI Board of Directors. While it wasn’t all fun (there was an enormous amount of Board business to deal with), I must admit that I wouldn’t have missed it for the world.

Interaction with these icons of atheist/skeptic culture was awesome. Dawkins arrived jet-lagged and exhausted on Thursday. However at his evening reception, he still managed to be gracious and approachable. On Friday, we all took a break from Board business and drove out to “Our Lady of Clearwater”. The “Lady” is a rainbow distortion on the tinting of the side of a bank building. It is obvious by examining the rest of the structure that the same effect occurs wherever water runs down the tinting on a regular basis. However, this particular “miracle” runs down an entire side of the bank. Once they point out that a tall palm tree used to stand there, it becomes obvious that the effect was caused by water running off the palm fronds. That fact did not stop the believers from buying the building, setting up a shrine and establishing a big gift shop inside. There, you can buy everything from virgin keychains to woven tapestries of the image!

The Associated Press was invited to join us at the bank and that is where we first met the “gurus”- Randi, Shermer and Newdow. Rounding out the headliners, Dawkins

came along, too. Stomping around in the bushes with Michael Shermer looking for something resembling a Buddha on the side of a suburban bank was worth all the Board work. I also had the opportunity to chat with Michael Newdow. He is obviously a brilliant man, both a medical doctor (Emergency Medicine) and a lawyer. Surprisingly, he is also very shy. We did have a nice conversation about Alzheimer’s Disease and his intention to take on the laws restricting one’s “right to die”. I also had fun with James Randi. He is not much taller than me. He is a lot of fun to be around and had friendly banter to share with everyone he met.

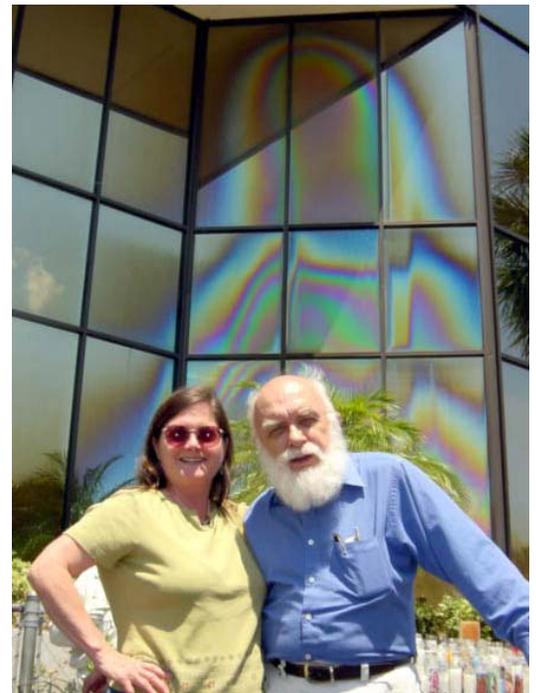
Back at the convention, the stars of the show continued to please the attendees.

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Above: Three atheist “gurus”: from left, Dr. Richard Dawkins, renowned evolutionary biologist; Dr. Michael Shermer, editor of *Skeptic* magazine; and Dr. James “The Amazing” Randi, magician and director of the James Randi Foundation.

Below: Michelle Gadush and James Randi in front of the “Our Lady of Clearwater” illusion.



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THE ATHEIST

A publication of the
Atheist Community of Austin.

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the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the
views of the Atheist Community of Austin.

ACA co-chair attends AAI convention

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Shermer spoke about the evolution of morals as a natural human condition. He said that it made as much sense to ask “why are we moral” as to ask “why are we hungry”. Dawkins read excerpts from his new book, The Devil’s Chaplain in lieu of his scheduled talk on science and religion. The organizers had unfortunately arranged for him to talk at 8 pm, which was the middle of the night in Brit time. He was obviously exhausted. Still, the readings were entertaining and welcomed. Dawkins also presented Randi with the first ever, Atheist of the Year, Dawkins Award. Randi was clearly touched and spent the rest of the evening entertaining us with his wit, magic and insight into how humans can be manipulated by “healers”, “mystics” etc. He wound up by sharing an emotional anecdote about his late friend, Carl Sagan. Newdow wowed us with original songs. He plays a mean harmonica and guitar. Watch out Don Barker! He had us rolling in the aisles with a song he wrote that includes excerpts of the hateful phone calls from his answering machine.

In between sessions, all the speakers made themselves available for conversation or autographs. In fact, they all seemed to be enjoying themselves. Dawkins seemed especially enthusiastic. Whether it was the warm Florida weather or the presence of so many atheists, he obviously was having a great time.

In the end, so did I.

Note: On May 24, Michelle discussed the convention as a guest on “The Non-Prophets” Internet radio show. The archive of this show will soon be available to download at <http://www.atheist-community.org/radio.htm>.

Lecture meeting news

On **Sunday, June 1, Don Baker** will speak about the implications of viewing Christianity as a meme. Don gave a fascinating lecture several months ago introducing the concept of memes.

Melinda Badgley will be giving our **Sunday, July 6** lecture. The title of her talk is “The Faith Based and Community Initiatives: Can They Meet Their Goals?” Melinda would like to prepare for some questions about her subject in advance. If you have any concerns or questions about Faith Based Programs, please email her at mab632001@yahoo.com

For lecture meeting time and location, see “Regularly Scheduled ACA Events” on page 3.

AAI’s “electric” convention

by Mynga Futrell

The Atheist Alliance annual conventions just get better and better. Never before has there been such a sterling lineup of speakers as came to Tampa for the 9th annual meeting, hosted by Atheists of Florida. One particular highlight was Richard Dawkins’ honoring of James Randi (“The Amazing Randi”) with an award for lifetime contributions to public understanding of science, followed by Randi’s own vivacious presentation.

Aided to a high degree by the advanced technology support offered by the host group, this year’s meeting seemed to me to generate an overall level of exuberance unmatched by prior yearly gatherings. It was a convention of high “electricity.” Many of the speakers not only listened attentively to others’ presentations but also mingled informally with attendees. This level of interaction added immensely to the exhilaration of those who had traveled to Tampa, since they could savor the camaraderie and the dynamism of exchanging ideas with people at the forefront of atheist activism and science.

Behind the scenes of the convention, the Alliance Board of Directors met long hours to make the most of its annual face-to-face opportunity to give direction to the organization. Dedicated directors from member societies as far away as Germany traveled to Tampa to participate in the business of the Alliance. Although 9 p.m. committee meetings were not out of the ordinary, a record was set for the earliest board meeting ever-6 a.m.!

Since the Alliance has grown rapidly, the Board pursued some organizational restructuring to improve overall efficiency, and it made several key decisions related to AAI’s mission. Steps were taken to better reflect a commitment to constructive atheist service worldwide, evident not only in the newly adopted Alliance tag line (AAI-A Positive Voice for Atheism), but also with the Board’s actions to address international concerns. For example, the Board is setting up an International Aid fund to assist positive atheist efforts in countries that confront issues of poverty and health (details to follow in a subsequent report). The Alliance also will contribute regularly to help sustain a stellar example of positive atheist service to humanity (the Atheist Centre of India).

The 2003 Atheist Alliance convention was (according to comments I heard over and over again) a reinvigorating experience for attendees, who will be returning to their locales with new ideas, energy and commitment. People are eager to attend again next year. Although the location remains unconfirmed, the date is a sure thing: “Easter weekend,” 2004-surely something to consider putting on your own calendar!

The Atheist Community of Austin is a member of Atheist Alliance, International., an organization of independent religion-free groups and individuals in the United States and around the world. AAI provides us with periodic articles for publication to our membership. To find out more about Atheist Alliance, Inc., visit www.atheistalliance.org.

“The Non-Prophets” back on the air

After a hiatus of several months, “The Non-Prophets” Internet radio show is back on the air. It now airs every other Saturday (most recently on May 24) from 2:00 - 3:30 PM at www.atheistnetwork.com and archives can be found at www.atheist-community.org/radio.htm in MP3 format.

The ACA advocates for discontinuation of opening prayers in Texas Legislature

Michelle Gadush wrote the following letter to Speaker of the Texas House of Representatives, Tom Craddick, on behalf of the ACA. The letter was written in response to the recent controversy within the legislature over the predominant use of Protestant Christian prayers to open legislative sessions. No response has been received to date.

March 14, 2003
 Speaker of the House Tom Craddick
 Room CAP 2W.13
 P.O. Box 2910
 Austin, TX 78768

Dear Speaker Craddick:

I am writing to you on behalf of the members of the Atheist Community of Austin. We were very interested to hear of your request that “the tone and content [of House prayers] be respectful of the diverse nature of the body, such that all members of the House, whatever their respective faith, may add their voice to the collective ‘amen’ that begins our day’s work”. We would like to propose an alternative solution to the dilemma brought to your attention by State Rep. Scott Hochberg.

As you are probably aware, the Founding Fathers let a motion to begin the sessions of the Continental Congress with a prayer die without a vote. They set a precedent that has unfortunately been ignored in government today. As you, yourself have noted, religion can be a divisive force in our society. Respect for the beliefs of all Americans is of paramount importance if they are to feel included in society and government.

Therefore, we ask that you consider an alternative to your suggestion to limit the content of prayers offered in the House. Please discontinue the practice of an oral prayer before sessions. The elimination of the pre-session prayer would be the most inclusive gesture that you could make as Speaker of the House. If you do not feel that you can make such a drastic change, establish a “moment of silence” so that everyone can truly follow his/her own conscience at the beginning of the workday. Show Texans that we are all valued as citizens of this great state.

Sincerely,
 Michelle Gadush
 Co-Chair, Atheist Community of Austin

ACA representatives to attend Gay Pride Festival

The ACA will have an outreach booth at Austin’s Gay Pride Festival on June 8. If you are interested in volunteering, please contact Michelle Gadush (mgadush@yahoo.com).

Regularly Scheduled ACA Events:

Sundays:

Bagel Shop Meetings take place every Sunday except the first Sunday of the month at 10:30 AM at the Hot Jumbo Bagelry (307 W. 5th Street).

Monthly Lecture Meetings take place the first Sunday of every month at 12:30 PM in the Mayor’s Room of the Austin History Center, which is located at 9th Street and Guadalupe. Watch your e-mail for announcements of pre- or post-lecture get-togethers at local restaurants.

“The Atheist Experience” Live Call-in TV Show: 4:30 - 6:00 PM, on Austin Access Channel 10.

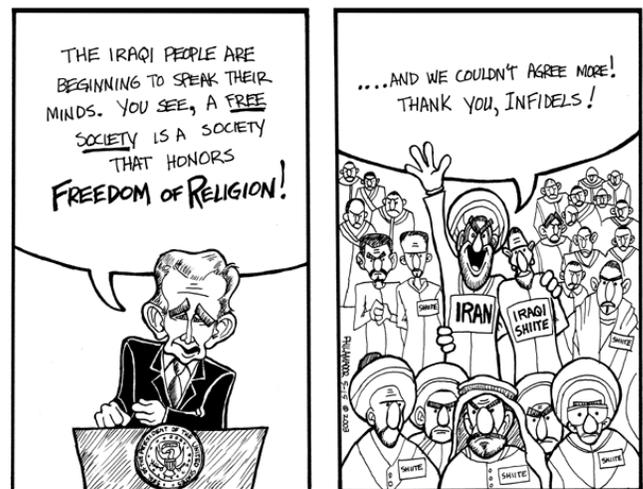
Mondays: **Godless Gamers** takes place at 7:00 PM at the home of Russell and Ginny Glasser. Contact Russell (rglasser@apollowebworks.com) for directions.

Tuesdays: **“The Atheist Experience”** is replayed from 4:30 - 6:00 PM on Austin Access Channel 10.

Thursdays: **Atheist Happy Hour** takes place at 7:30 PM at Antonio’s Tex-Mex restaurant near the intersection of IH 35 and US 183.

E-Mail Discussion/Announcement Lists: Lists include a general discussion list, an “ask an atheist” list, a gamers’ list, a social announcements list, and a singles’ list www.atheist-community.org/email.htm

Editorial Cartoon by Phil Amador



The Art of Recreational Debating: Your Friend, the Internet

With your guide, *Russell Glasser*
rglasser@apollowebworks.com

I know it's not fashionable to praise the Internet anymore. It's so late 1990's. Sorry, but I'm an old coot and a geek, and I want to tell you something. The Internet is *STILL* the greatest invention of our time, and it's your best friend ever if you're into debating. And don't you forget it.

The Internet is free speech carried to the extreme. Pretty much every idea worth paying attention to -- and, of course, a whole lot of ideas NOT worth paying attention to -- can be found just by typing a word or phrase into a search engine. Think about it. We now have the sum total of human knowledge contained in a single, giant, world-spanning card catalog. You can access anything that's ever been written instantly, as long as it isn't prevented by copyright.

You may not yet appreciate the full force of what we've got, so let me put it this way. Any claim that ultimately rests on a blatant lie can be exposed with very little effort. Not only that, there are millions of people out there, just like you, who read what's on the Internet and look for ways to expose lies too. These people have already done your work for you. Now *THAT* ought to impress you. The truth really is out there -- for every false claim, it's almost guaranteed that the flip side of the argument is already on the web, neatly packaged and ready to use.

Does that mean that everything you read on the net is true? Well of course not, don't be ridiculous! If you spend any amount of time surfing, it should be obvious that there is far more nonsense than valuable content, and this is more true than in most other forms of media. No surprise, since there are no standards of journalism, discriminating publishers, or peer review to serve as a "common sense" filter. Just learn to publish a web site or a "blog" and you can post any fool thing that comes into your head.

But all this means is that you are obligated to use an extra layer of critical thinking when you take information from the web. You need to sharpen your mind and learn how to separate information that is from a credible source and probably true, from blatant opinions that are probably not worth the bits they're stored in. And of course, that doesn't just mean that you should find opinions that you agree with and ignore opinions that you don't agree with. That would be unscientific and therefore, very bad form.

What the web provides is not a final answer, but a starting point. It often happens that you come across an argument that you think is probably wrong, but you don't know how to answer it because it's new to you. You've heard that there are two sides to every story; well that's definitely true, but chances

are the person you're arguing against isn't about to tell you where to find the counter-arguments. But if you know where to look on the Internet, you can usually find enough to give yourself a crash course education in any subject very quickly. Here are some of my suggestions for where to get ammunition.

I'll start with the obvious one: your ordinary search engine. I won't spend too much time justifying which one is best, but I use www.google.com. Google is not only well organized and fast, but it also has additional capabilities to search Usenet and recent news articles.

When you search for something on Google (or your search engine of choice), you just type in a few key words of what you're looking for. Searching is an art that you may need to practice. The more specific your search, the better. If you can type in several unusual words from a quotation, you will be more likely to find that particular quotation rather than a page that uses similar common words. Use quotations for strings of words that go together. For instance, searching for "when in the course of human events" with quotes will bring up many quotes of the Declaration of Independence every time, whereas if you omit the quotes, you might see a lot of useless pages and "near misses".

Usenet is the home of all newsgroups, a fancy word for the Internet's oldest "chat room". If you use groups.google.com, you will find an archive of everything written there since 1985. There are incredible amounts of space devoted to arguing about every topic imaginable, from alt.aardvark to sci.techniques.xtallography (whatever *THAT* means). Search for a phrase there, and instead of just one article, you will find entire threads discussing your topic that go on for weeks. Read the threads and follow their links, and you can find a lot of useful stuff. Finally, use news.google.com to search all the major news organizations for recent information.

For many topics, it can help if you search for information on specific sites. On Google, you can restrict your search to one site by beginning your search with, for example, "site:www.snopes.com". If you know what site usually has the best information, you can save a lot of time.

- ▶ Busting urban legends and other stories that get passed around the web without any proof: www.snopes.com, www.urbanlegends.com
- ▶ Information on evolution and creationism: www.talkorigins.org
- ▶ Skeptical angles on supernatural nonsense: www.skeptdic.com, www.randi.org
- ▶ Christian apologetics: www.infidels.org
- ▶ A source for old literature: Project Gutenberg, www.gutenberg.org

Use the Internet intelligently, but always be skeptical about what you find, even about skeptical sites. Next month, I'll apply what we've learned when I talk about the "argument from authority":

Holy Music Mania

by Arlo Pignotti

Maybe it is wrong for me to make fun of a genre of music that I have hardly given a chance. But with such poor and negative messages that come across in most Religious music, I think there are many Atheists who would agree that, as far as we're concerned, this kind of music is a pretty big waste of compression waves unless we are able to get a good laugh out of it.

In religious stores you can find all kinds of sophisticated religious instruments from Jesus fish shaped tambourines to... well... David's star shaped tambourines. Search through a selection of T-shirts that read "Jam for the Lamb!" and "I play for an audience of one" (which comes to show just how unpopular Christian music is no matter how hard they try). You can come across a pretty wide range of holy music these days from all denominations. Islamic Rap, Catholic Techno, you name it.

But the funniest of Christian music is "Heavenly Heavy Metal". Also known as "Holy Heavy Metal" or even "Christian Death Metal". Hear the objectively horrible hardcore sound of bands like "Santifica", "Cross Examination", "Metal Messiah", "Maximum Pentecost", "Sin Dizzy", "Faith Bomb", "Deuteronomiumin", "Leviticus", and even Catholic heavy metal bands such as "Altar Boys" and "Pergamon" (which must be some kind of Pokemon in Purgatory).

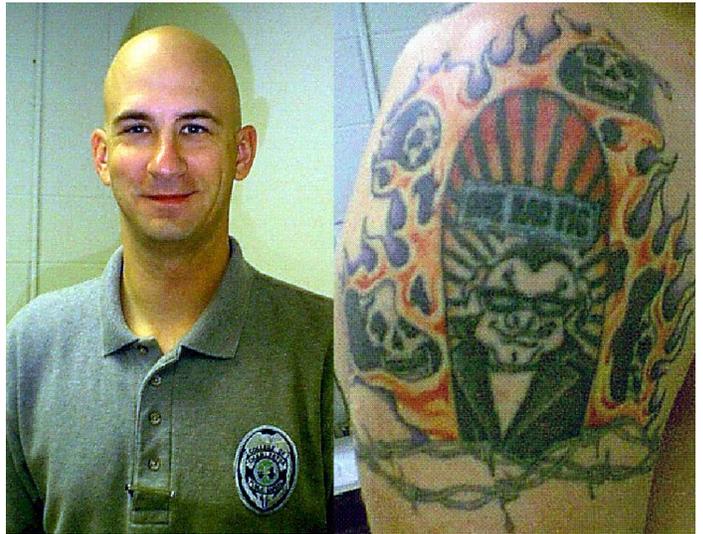
See the contorted logo of "Farfromburnin'". One third pentagram, one third David's star and one third cross!



Cringe at the legendary has-been style of Holy Soldier!



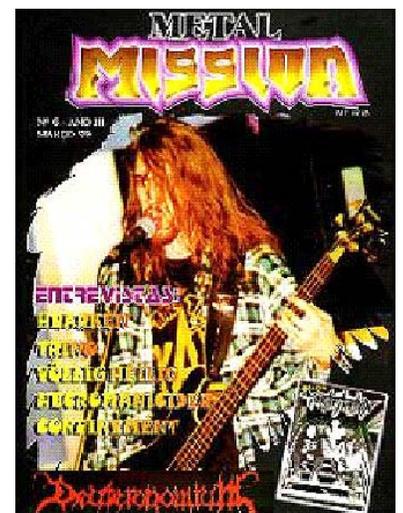
Feel the pain of "One Bad Pig" (composed of four bad musicians). David Clark, Ex-Co-Host of The Atheist Experience is stuck with one bad tattoo! David Clark grew up a Christian Fundamentalist who is now an Atheist church/state separation activist. David can always prove he was one devout believer with this mark, which is far worse than any mark of the beast...



This delightful tattoo of a punkish pig being engulfed in flames is the band's logo. The name of the lead screamer for One Bad Pig is Carey "Kosher" Womack. Their first album is titled "A Christian Banned", because churches tend to kick them out when they start playing. I am actually not joking. That really is why they gave the album that title, as explained on their official one bad web site. The album features the song "Go and Blow", which I am sure is just what the audience told them to do. Other songs by One Bad Pig are "Godarchy", "You're a Pagan", "See Me Sweat", "Thrash Against Sin", and the ever so hardcore rockin' title "Christmas Time". They even play traditional Christian classics too like the "Green Acres" theme on their live album.

You can catch up on what all the Christian Death Metal bands are doing in "Metal Mission" Magazine...

Equally ridiculous is "Christian Gangster Rap" groups like "God'z Original Gangstas" or "Spiritual Warfare". Those guys are way out



Holy Music Mania

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there. The same goes for what is called “HHH”, which stands for “Holy Hip Hop”.

Not only can you find spiritual music, but now there is even a New Age craze of spiritual sounds known as “Life Essence” that can be purchased on CD. The Life Essence CDs claims to feed your “subtle body” vitamins and even Ginseng using sound waves! There are also Feng Shui CDs that you can play to balance your Chi and/or Aura. What will they think of next?

My next step in collecting holy music paraphernalia shall be to see if I can get Christian musician Amy Grant to sign this shot of her giving the sign of Satan with her left hand...

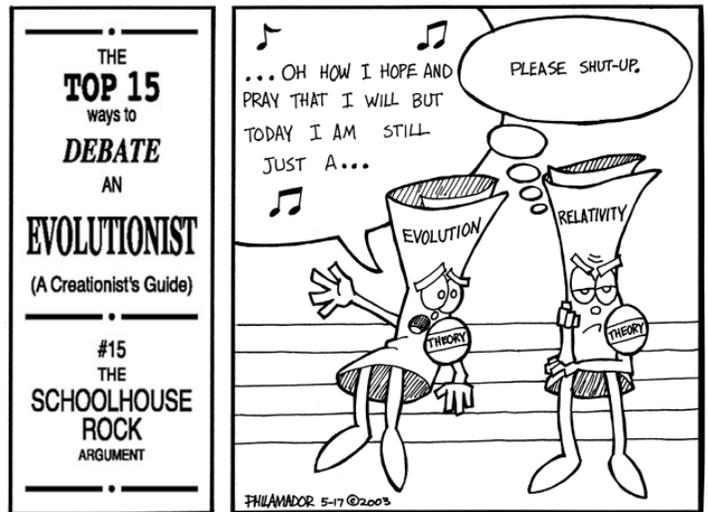
Until then, I’ll just keep on showing and telling the religious paraphernalia I have collected in the past couple of years for the enjoyment of Atheists, Agnostics and other Freethinkers. If anyone out there discovers wild and wacky religious music, gadgets, tracts or toys, please write to me at pine@texas.net.

Annual ACA board election results

ACA board elections took place on May 4, 2003. All offices and at-large board positions were up for election. **Michelle Gadush** was elected as co-chair for the third year in a row and **Jeff Jones** was also elected as co-chair. **Tim Burnett** will serve as treasurer, and **Mary McManamee** and **Ashley Perrien** were re-elected as secretary and archivist, respectively. In addition, the following eight at-large board members were elected: **Susan Brown, Allan Campbell, Jeff Dee, Jill Ford, Russell Glasser, Virginia Glasser, Don Lawrence, and Andi Roberts**.

Congratulations to the new ACA board members, and many thanks to the outgoing board members: **Vic Farrow** (outgoing co-chair), **Laura Sargent** (outgoing treasurer), **Manda** and **Don Rhoades**.

Cartoon by Phil Amador



The ACA Files:
Member Profile of the Month



Name: Allan Campbell
ACA Member Since: 2001
ACA Activities: New Board Member, Happy Hour, Movie Night Organizer.
Where From Originally: San Francisco, Moscow, Idaho and Washington D.C. "Home" is now Los Angeles, where his parents live.
Occupation: Graduate Student (Film Studies)
Hobbies/Interests: Movies, rock "oldies", and politics
Little-Known Facts: Allan's father was the first unabashed atheist that his mother had ever met (she is an agnostic, so it is a "mixed" marriage.)
 Allan has an Israeli uncle who smuggled Jews out of Nazi Germany in 1936-38.
 Allan got started in political activism while still an infant, riding a stroller in opposition to the Vietnam War.