

Atheist

An Atheist Wedding

—by Matt Dillahunt

On Saturday, January 12, 2008, I had the privilege of performing the wedding ceremony for two friends and ACA members. Shilling is an ACA board member and, among other roles, he's active with The Atheist Experience crew. Sandra is president of the UT campus group, The Atheist Longhorns. For this month's newsletter, I thought it might be nice to publish the speech I delivered at their wedding. Their wedding was a beautiful and nontraditional affair, held at the Alamo Draft-house Theater. One nontraditional aspect of their wedding, that isn't mentioned below, is the choice of a new surname. Instead of one spouse taking the name of the other, they chose an entirely new surname, together.

Good Morning.

I'm honored to have been asked to conduct this ceremony for two of my friends and, on behalf of Sandra and Shilling, I welcome all of you to this celebration. As family and friends, you have played a role in shaping their lives and it's fitting that, as their lives unite, we should unite in friendship and respect to share this important moment with them.

I've never been to a wedding in a theater, and I'm betting that I'm not alone. People get married in backyards, meeting halls, churches, and courthouses. I've seen people marry on the beach, at a drive through in Vegas and in a friend's living room. Some good friends of mine actually pulled off a surprise wedding by the pool, in the middle of a costume party.

Sandra and Shilling could have been married any number of places, but they specifically chose this theater. It's a place in which they're comfortable and a place in which they've shared a number



Images of an atheist wedding: (clockwise, from top left) Matt speaks at the ceremony; the Alamo Draft House marquee announcement; guests in attendance; the cake.

of enjoyable experiences. It seems fitting, then, that they should share one of the most memorable and enjoyable experiences of their lives in this place.

Marriage is an ancient tradition which has changed, as most things tend to do, as societies have merged and as people's understanding and values have changed. Ancient Sumerian and Babylonian laws describe the earliest marriage traditions on record, establishing a contract-based system where marriages were typically arranged

by the parents. In most cases, the father of the groom would provide the "bride price," or dowry, to the father of the bride, who would often hand this payment over to the bride, along with her dowry after the wedding, thus returning the bride-price to the groom. In other cases, brides were simply purchased in exchange for land or livestock.

While their contract system was very detailed and almost modern in its coverage of rights and

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About ACA

ACA provides opportunities for socializing and friendship, promotes atheistic viewpoints, encourages positive atheist culture, defends the First Amendment principle of state/church separation, opposes discrimination against atheists, provides outreach to atheists in the greater Austin area, and works with other organizations in pursuit of common goals.

ACA produces a live cable access TV show and Internet radio show, presents a monthly lecture series, maintains a library of Freethought books, protests in support of civil liberties, and participates in various community service activities.

ACA operates in an open and democratic manner to provide a community of like-minded people for social interaction and support.

ACA is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit educational corporation made up of volunteers. The membership is restricted to atheists, but does not discriminate on the basis of gender, race, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, or disability.

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Austin Atheist Newsletter

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Submission Deadlines

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Jan. _____	Dec. 1
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June _____	May 1
July _____	June 1
Aug. _____	July 1
Sept. _____	Aug. 1
Oct. _____	Sept. 1
Nov. _____	Oct. 1
Dec. _____	Nov. 1

Wedding

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responsibilities, women had no say in their future and there was no requirement that either consent to marriage.

Arranged marriages were also common in ancient Rome, though usually among the elite (the lower classes married by simple cohabitation), and these marriages were primarily arranged to establish political alliances. Interestingly, we begin to see a slight change in the process, around this time. While daughters didn't have any legal rights to object, we have evidence that some daughters had considerably more input into who they were going to marry, than others. Women began attaining power, behind the scenes.

Similar traditions of arranged marriages arose in other cultures and continue in some cultures to this day. Arranged marriages were common in Europe into the 12th century. But, in the early 13th century, Pope Innocent III declared that no marriage was valid—regardless of the exchange of property or contracts—without consent from the parties to be married.

After all, I can't take out a loan in your name, and I can't sign you up for hard labor to pay off my debts, yet these same scenarios were resolved by the joining of two families through an arranged marriage. Needless to say, this radical new concept of requiring consent dramatically changed the landscape of marriage. While romantic love had probably always existed, it was now an acceptable justification for marriage and, in the western world, it became the norm. This enlightened principle, that consent was the critical requirement for marriage, represented a new freedom.

And this freedom evolved.

Marriage has always been a partnership, but it hasn't always been an equitable one. We've slowly raised our consciousness level with regard to equality. We're still

plagued by telemarketers, but they no longer ask to speak to the "lady of the house" or the "man of the house." The traditional roles are no longer the presumptive default. We're free to define our roles in a way that best suits our needs and our desires, whether we assume traditional roles, or not.

The changes in marriage are the result of the ongoing struggle for true freedom. In the United States, 40 States had laws that prohibited interracial marriage, and the social prejudice which labeled these unions as "unnatural" or "immoral" ensured that it was uncommon in those states without these laws. After a number of legal battles, the United States Supreme Court eliminated these laws, nation-wide by declaring that:

- all Americans enjoy the freedom to marry,
- marriage is one of our vital personal rights, and
- the right to marry is essential to the orderly pursuit of happiness by a free people.

This dramatic change occurred in 1967 and many people in this room are old enough to remember it.

If someone else is making your decisions for you, you are, in some sense, a slave—and no one wants to be a slave. We want to be free. Free to make our own decisions, free to live the lives we choose, and free to be with the ones we love. The Supreme Court was correct. This nation was forged with the deepest respect for the enlightened principles of liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Few things make us happier than love. Regardless of your views about the source of love, the phenomenon is ubiquitous. The love of family, the love of friends, or the romantic love shared by a couple can provide some of the happiest feelings we're capable of experiencing: to care and be cared for, to appreciate and be appreciated, to respect and be respected, to love and be loved.

Why would we want to deny

any consenting couple the right to marry? Why should we inhibit another's happiness by arranging a marriage or denying a marriage because skin color differs or because gender doesn't? Limiting the freedom of others places our own freedom in peril and this is a lesson we should not have to repeatedly learn.

Love grows, but it cannot grow without honesty. It's been said that honesty is the best policy and I, for one, cannot conceive of any relationship that can truly grow in its absence. We tend to be cautious in the early stages of a relationship, and it's only when we're secure in our relationship that we risk bruised feelings for the sake of honesty. But, true friendship can only be strengthened by honesty, and while marriages can survive on love, they can thrive on honesty, cooperation, and mutual respect.

And so, we are here today to celebrate one of the most significant and touching demonstrations of freedom and the pursuit of happiness. Sandra and Shilling have exercised that freedom of choice by choosing each other. They've asked each of you to share in the celebration of their union because their relationships with each of you bring them happiness.

Today, we witness the blending of two lives.

I agree with what Pope Innocent said 800 years ago. No marriage is valid without consent. There is no authority beyond consent. We can establish laws that address the rights and responsibilities of married couples—but only the couple standing before you can truly sanction this marriage. They've chosen to do so, in the presence of family and friends, with an exchange of vows, an exchange of rings, and the lighting of a candle. ■

Inside the ACA: Every Year is Election Year

—By Don Baker

An important part of our country's great democratic experiment is our ability to elect new leaders every few years. The ability to choose a leader allows voters in our country to have an important say in our collective future. Many of the democratic ideals that help make our country great have been embodied in the constitution of the ACA. (Members can view the constitution in PDF format from the member log-in page on our Web site.) The ACA has elected officers and a board, all serving one-year terms. Members of the ACA serve as the voters in an election that occurs on the first Sunday in May. Our 2008 election will be held in the Austin History Center on Sunday, May 4, at 12:15 p.m., and the meeting will be in lieu of a lecture that month.

Every year in the ACA we fill the roles of officers and members of the board of directors. Officers serve in official capacities and act as official liaisons of the group. Two officers, the president and vice president are directly elected by the membership. The other two officers, secretary and treasurer, are elected by a vote of the board and later approved by a vote of the membership. All officers are considered part of the board. There are five at-large board seats, but the membership will vote for seven board members during the election, because two of those will go on to fill the offices of secretary and treasurer.

Regardless of title, all board members are proactive leaders and are expected to work hard in the best interests of the ACA. Having a large board means that the ACA should never want for good ideas or people to lead members in turning those ideas into reality. Ideally, the most sensible and proactive people in the ACA should find themselves serving on the board.

Once constituted, the board has leeway to match board members to various initiatives, so that the ACA is able to both preserve continuity and have sufficient resources to carry out important initiatives as they arise. Above and beyond being board members, officers have additional responsibilities. The president, among other responsibilities, acts as the official spokesperson for the group, runs board meetings, and keeps the group running smoothly. The vice president fills in for the president when necessary, and he/she has traditionally helped manage much of the day-to-day running of the ACA. The treasurer manages the finances, of course, but this

management also includes things like investments, property, and taxes. The secretary records and publishes meeting minutes and runs special meetings including the election meeting. The current ACA board roster is available on the ACA Web site <www.atheist-community.org/activism/board.php>, along with a picture of the board members. Officers and directors are also listed on page two of this newsletter.

While the election is still a few months away, it's not too early for members to think about whether they'd like to run for the board. It's also not too early to start encouraging serious members you know to

run for office. If you are interested in running, you can contact one or more current board members and find out more. Members are also welcome to attend board meetings. If you'd like to run, let our president or secretary know of your intent and you will be put on the slate. It's preferable to nominate yourself, so there is no confusion about intents. Be aware that you will need to have been a member in good standing for six months by the day of the election in order to be eligible. Regardless of whether you run, please participate in the election, and the ACA as a whole, to help make it a stronger and more vibrant organization. ■

ACA CALENDAR

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 2

• **2-3:30 p.m.:** *Non-Prophets Internet Radio Show* (See Web site for details)

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 3

• **12:15-1:45 p.m.:** *ACA Lecture Series (Austin History Center) Dr. Mark Loewe on "Results of the 2007 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)"*

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 3

• **3-4:30 p.m.:** *Atheist Experience (Channel 10)*

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 3

• **5 p.m.-?:** *Meet-up after The Atheist Experience (El Arroyo)*

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 7

• **7 p.m.-?:** *Happy Hour (Dog & Duck Pub)*

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 10

• **10-11 a.m.:** *Board Meeting (Romeo's (outside))*

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 10

• **11 a.m.-1 p.m.:** *Regular Sunday Meeting at Romeo's (Romeo's)*

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 10

• **3-4:30 p.m.:** *Atheist Experience (Channel 10)*

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 10

• **5 p.m.-?:** *Meet-up after The Atheist Experience (El Arroyo)*

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 14

• **7 p.m.-?:** *Happy Hour (Dog & Duck Pub)*

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 16

• **11 a.m.-12 p.m.:** *Adopt-a-street Clean Up (Jack-in-the-Box, Burnet Rd. & Anderson Ln.)*

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 16

• **2-3:30 p.m.:** *Non-Prophets Internet Radio Show (See Web site for details)*

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 17

• **11 a.m.-1 p.m.:** *Regular Sunday Meeting at Romeo's (Romeo's)*

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 17

• **3-4:30 p.m.:** *Atheist Experience (Channel 10)*

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 17

• **5 p.m.-?:** *Meet-up after The Atheist Experience (El Arroyo)*

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 21

• **7 p.m.-?:** *Happy Hour (Dog & Duck Pub)*

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 23

• **10 a.m.-?:** *Blood Drive (Blood & Tissue Center)*

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 24

• **11 a.m.-1 p.m.:** *Regular Sunday Meeting at Romeo's (Romeo's)*

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 24

• **3-4:30 p.m.:** *Atheist Experience (Channel 10)*

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 24

• **5 p.m.-?:** *Meet-up after The Atheist Experience (El Arroyo)*

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 28

• **7 p.m.-?:** *Happy Hour (Dog & Duck Pub)*

REGULAR LOCATIONS:

- **Austin History Center**, 9th and Guadalupe. Building opens at noon. Lectures are free and open to the public.
- **Blood and Tissue Center of Central Texas**, 4300 North Lamar Boulevard, 512.206.1266.
- **Dog & Duck Pub**, North of the Capitol, 406 W. 17th at Guadalupe, 512.479.0598. Informal gathering; food available.
- **El Arroyo**, 1624 W. 5th near Mopac (look for the blue bus)
- **Mike Swift's house**, log in to the ACA Web site for details.
- **Romeo's**, 1500 Barton Springs Rd. South of Town Lake.

Unless otherwise indicated, events are open to all atheist and atheist friendly people, regardless of ACA membership status. Check the calendar on the Web site <www.atheist-community.org/calendar> for last minute changes.



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ATHEIST EVE

CONCEPT BY DON BAKER — ILLUSTRATED BY TDESIGN ©2007

