

New Orleans Secular Humanist Association

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New Orleans, LA 70122
www.nosha.info
(a 501c3 corporation)

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NATIONAL AFFILIATIONS

Council for Secular Humanism
American Humanist
Association
Atheist Alliance International
American Atheists, Inc.

MEETINGS

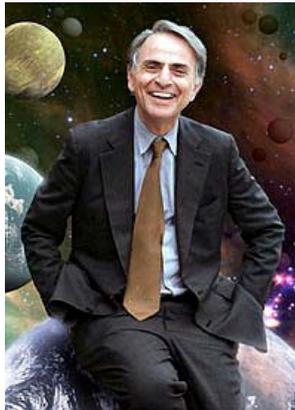
3rd Saturday of month, 2:00 pm
Dominion Learning Center
Audubon Park Zoo

N.O. COX CABLE TV

CH 76 "Humanist Perspective"
Fri. 8:30am; 8:30 pm
CH 99 "Atheist Viewpoint"
Tues. 10:30am; 10:30 pm

NOSHA CELEBRATES CARL SAGAN DAY

November 9, 2010 would have been the late astronomer Carl Sagan's 76th birthday. Carl Sagan was a Professor of Astronomy and Space Science and Director of the Laboratory for Planetary Studies at Cornell University. He was also the author of several books, including *The Dragons of Eden* and *Demon-Haunted World*. But he was perhaps best known for the 1980 PBS television series, "Cosmos," which garnered him both an Emmy and a Peabody award.



Following the lead of the Center for Inquiry, and along with other skeptics groups and university science departments around the country, NOSHA celebrated Carl Sagan Day at our November meeting. Several members brought special readings by Sagan to share with everyone, and others selected Sagan quotes to read aloud. Then we all enjoyed viewing Episode 8 of the 13-part Cosmos series, the episode entitled "Travels in Space and Time," where we learned we are all made of "stardust."

One of the readings was taken from a 1994 talk Dr. Sagan gave at Cornell as he described a photo taken looking back at earth as the Voyager space craft left the solar system in 1990. Following is his description of the "Pale Blue Dot" in the photograph:

"We succeeded in taking that picture [from deep space], and, if you look at it, you see a dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever lived, lived out their lives. The aggregate of all our joys and sufferings, thousands of confident religions, ideologies and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilizations, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every hopeful child, every mother and father, every inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every superstar, every supreme leader, every saint and sinner in the history of our species, lived there on a mote of dust, suspended in a sunbeam.

The earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that in glory and in triumph they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of the dot on scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner of the dot. How frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds. Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity -- in all this vastness -- there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves. It is up to us. It's been said that astronomy is a humbling, and I might add, a character-building experience. To my mind, there is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly and compassionately with one another and to preserve and cherish that pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known."

DID SHE FIND OUT ABOUT THE NEXT 30 YEARS FOR SECULAR HUMANISM?

Charlotte Klasson heads to LA

In October 2010, I attended my first ever major non-believers conference, “**Setting the Agenda: Secular Humanism’s Next 30 Years,**” which was sponsored as a subscribers’ conference for the magazine, *Free Inquiry*. Since I’ve been a subscriber for at least 15 years, this seemed like a good fit for me. I was eager because there was a remarkable list of secular celebrities on the program and it was touted as a definitive event.

To give you one humorous glimpse into the conference, Mark Oppenheimer with *The New York Times* observed, “The largely white and male crowd—imagine a Star Trek convention, but older...” My main goal here is to report every unique moment from my trip.

Depending on who you ask, it was a complete “sell-out” with anywhere from 325 to 370 people at the Millennium Biltmore Hotel in attendance. It seemed that since the CFI (Center for Inquiry) had to schedule this conference back in Fall 2008, at the beginning of the recession, they were forced to organize for a smaller number rather than risk not having enough people to fill the next level of hotel space. I think they could have easily had 100 or even 200 more attendees, but the economy dictated a more prudent choice back then. Amazingly enough, I found a friendly face in the crowd, **Douglas King**, a NOSHA member who resides in Baton Rouge and who attended our banquet featuring **Ellen Johnson** in August. The weekend was looking up!

The first plenary I attended on Friday was appropriately called “The First 30 Years” and boasted some of the heavier hitters in the secular movement: **James “The Amazing” Randi**, whose book *Flim-Flam* is regarded as a skeptical classic; **Tom Flynn**, current editor of *Free Inquiry*; **Ed Buckner**, past president of American Atheists; and **Paul Kurtz**, founder of *Free Inquiry*, the Council for Secular Humanism and CFI.

Randi was predictably charming and entertaining with his story of appearing on “The Johnny Carson Show” to debunk the faith healing preacher, Peter Popoff, back in the 1980’s. Randi’s technical investigation revealed that “...God is a woman and she sounds remarkably like Popoff’s wife, Elizabeth!” He told us that later that he got a delightful note from someone watching that night who said “I’m so glad that you exposed Rev. Popoff. Now I’m giving all of my money to Rev. So and So.” He found that very sweet and offered this thought to the audience that “...we are part of the remedy for ignorance. No one wants to come forward to say how stupid they are!” I discovered first hand how very spry and delightful Randi is when he chatted with me while I was buying books prior to this

panel starting, *before* it hit me just exactly who this old man was. My luck.

However, sweetness gave way to more acerbic matters when the case was made by Kurtz that atheists are “bad” if they don’t support humanism out right. Clearly, there was a mentality of “us vs. them” being sown by the adherents for both points of view that continued throughout the weekend. Kurtz related an “untapped sentiment in society” back in 1980 that precipitated his pursuit and creation of CFI; there is something more that “*mere* atheism simply cannot address.” An example of the division at the national level was Flynn’s explanation of his push for promoting National Blasphemy Day, a move that Kurtz adamantly opposed, but nonetheless couldn’t prevent. A few resolute atheists challenged Kurtz that they are no less moral or good than a person who self identifies as a secularist.

In fact, one woman felt that Kurtz was not taking the “cultural wars” as seriously as he should that some of us must wage in parts of the country (where it is not as conciliatory for non-believers). His most memorable statement to me was his describing why he feels so strongly: “It is not enough to destroy, we must provide alternatives.” I happen to agree with this even as I feel we must not shrink from confrontations when they are necessary. *The New York Times* probably hit upon the best explanation of this divisiveness: “The disagreement was not, then, between atheism and humanism. It was about making the atheist/humanist case in America. A central question was, “How publicly scornful of religion should we be?””

The next major panel was “Science and Religion: Confrontation or Accommodation?” which was by far the most lively in forcing the issue of how differently each perspective views the conflicts of science and religion in society. Science writer **Chris Mooney** (and the son of former NOSHA board member, **Sally Mooney**) admitted that his viewpoint falls more in line with accommodating the potential allies of non-believers, moderate or liberal Christians, and he bases his choice on the latest research into the attitudes of belief. Christians “are rejecting science because of a perceived conflict with moral values.” Like Kurtz, who believes that “the core of humanism is ethics and values” that are relevant to our lives, Mooney argued that “atheists should be mindful of this perception.”

Since believers resist science and the teaching of evolution in public schools because they fear that it will lead to a rejection of morals, this is a huge piece of evidence that cannot be totally dismissed out of hand. He suggests that atheists “should reassure Christians that their faith is compatible with modern science.” As conciliatory as Mooney was (considering that he has been taken to task this past year by the second speaker),

noted biologist and well-known combative blogger, **P.Z. Myers**, wasn't pulling any punches and is a "confrontationalist" with a capital "C."

I found it especially refreshing to hear someone suggest that anger is a valid emotion when dealing with the way religion attempts to thwart scientific and social progress in our modern society and one that he feels shouldn't be denigrated by our more passive supporters. Myers understands why "the new atheists are fed up with fighting the symptoms and want to take on the disease—religion." Truth is the new atheist's real value, he said.

Eugenie Scott, also a panelist and the executive director of the National Center for Science Education, was a disappointment for me simply because she seemed like she had so little to offer on this topic when her professional position should obviously demand otherwise. Clearly, she didn't want to take a side and by that, I assumed, she is a deliberate "accommodationist." That was a bit of surprise and left me concerned that she is in charge of the very organization that is so often fighting for science education in our schools. How can someone with such a decidedly unmotivated stance defend science against more aggressive and louder opponents? As likeable as she is, she didn't care to express her opinion either for or against anything Mooney and Myers proposed. And isn't that why she was invited to this conference? Strange.

Victor Stenger, celebrated professor of particle physics and distinguished author whose latest book, *The New Atheism*, brought him as a speaker to NOSHA in October 2009, provided more support for people voicing their atheism instead of "sucking up" to Christians, Muslims, Jews and Hindus "and any others who claim they have some scared right to decide what kind of society the rest of us must live in—what a human being can do with her own body."

He feels encouraged that younger generations are less likely to be accommodationists because they are moving away from organized religion and that the United States is on its way to joining the developed world in rejecting religion's control over our progress. He supports the idea that in order to see change in our society, it takes both approaches ultimately. "If you look at the history of every great social movement, you will see both components. There are people who work within the system to make changes. They often succeed, but usually at a snail's pace—too slow to satisfy the millions who are impatient to have their inherent rights recognized by the power structure." This outlook must be how confrontationists get their wings.

Friday evening culminated in a gala banquet where **Richard Dawkins**, author of numerous books—perhaps most well known is *The God Delusion* which has sold over two million copies in English and has been

published in more than 30 other languages, was presented with the *Robert Craggs Prize* and over \$45,000 to his foundation. Dawkins, who was present for the day's sessions, spoke briefly and pointedly to the need for non-believers to be insistent that we reject efforts to coddle religion and made it clear that he didn't share the same opinions as his esteemed dinner companions, Kurtz and Mooney, who flanked him at the head table. He was respectful, but it was clear to me he was "bitch slapping" everyone who fell more in line with the accommodationists' arguments from earlier that day.

On the Saturday panel for "What can philosophy, ethics, aesthetics and the sciences contribute to our pursuit of the good life in this life?" author **Jennifer Michael Hecht** offered an interesting observation that there are two kinds of atheists: "...those who attack the silly stuff and those who attack the subtle beliefs" of Christians and others. This may be the source for the concern over how stridently we promote non-belief. **Ron Lindsay**, who is the president and CEO of CFI, spoke about the perception of humanist ethics and that the method by which we approach deciding many issues has a lot to do with content. People want to make decisions where moral certainty is not always possible, such as the right-to-die for the terminally ill. He gave a nice presentation about the Oregon law and what it means for current efforts. **Rev. Barry Lynn** with Americans United, delivered a rip-roaring speech on a panel about the separation of church and state and made me truly sad for anyone who had to follow his presentation.

The highlight of Saturday evening (maybe the entire weekend) was the debate between **Sam Harris**, author of *New York Times* bestsellers, *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation* and **Robert Wright**, who has been named one of the "Top 100 Global Thinkers" by *Foreign Policy* magazine and is also a *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Evolution of God*. They were to speak on the subject of where "secular humanists stand today and tomorrow on questions of religion and belief," but instead Wright baited Harris about his obvious disdain and public derision of Islam and we never made it back to the topic at hand. It didn't help that Harris' entourage of body guards put the throngs of attendees through a security detail (because he's received death threats from both Christians and Muslims), which only hyped the paranoia of the evening!

Wright started off by stating that what bothered him most about the "new atheism" is the claim of being *new*. He's also concerned that the new atheists think that religion is a major problem, and that the tendency to over emphasize religion means that "we take our eye off

the ball.” I was never sure what the ball actually was to which he was referring.

What provoked Harris was Wright’s comment that new atheists are adding to the anti-Islamic sentiment in the United States. Once Islam was on the table, they never quite gave any time to the original topic, which was very disappointing. I made a note of one fascinating question he posed to Wright: “What would it be like if Dawkins came out as a Muslim?” It is easy to assume that Dawkins declaring he is *any* religion would cause a colossal stir simply because it would invalidate everything he stands for. So, Harris is concerned that we’ll wake up in a world “where the only people we can trust are our *own* religious people.” So for him, that is why what people believe matters; beliefs are the “engines of our behaviors” and that is why he is steadfast that Islam as a religion should be scrutinized.

There wasn’t enough time to even scratch the surface of the neuroscience surrounding morality, nor am I completely convinced that Harris does that well at presenting this in person yet. Even though I did and do enjoy listening to him in general. He is one of the “rock stars” for non-believers, after all. (He does have a new book out titled *The Moral Landscape* where he explores neuroscience in much greater detail). Nevertheless, he makes the compelling and evolutionarily sound proposal that “morality is a product of neuroscience” and that our pursuit of happiness, and that which is good for society, depends on brain chemistry. I do agree with that personally. I just wish he could have talked more about *our* people and what brain science can tell us about how we can make progress as a movement. That was the “send off” I had hoped for with this conference and, unfortunately, we have many rather large egos to stroke we search for the answers.

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A NEO-HUMANIST STATEMENT

On March 2, 2010, Dr. Paul Kurtz, formerly the executive director of the Council for Secular Humanism, launched a new manifesto, of sorts. In his words: “I recently drafted, with the help of many secular humanists and scientists, a ‘Neo-Humanist Statement of Secular Principles and Values.’ At latest count some one hundred distinguished public intellectuals worldwide have endorsed it.”

Since it is too long to publish here, we are taking Dr. Kurtz’s lead and running a brief excerpt of its contents. For more information, a complete version, and to read a list of signers, you may go to www.paulkurtz.net.

Preamble:

Our planetary community is facing serious problems that can only be solved by cooperative global action. Fresh

thinking is required. Humanity needs to reconstruct human values in the light of scientific knowledge. We introduce the term *Neo-Humanism* to present a daring new approach.

The Next Step Forward:

There are various forms of religious and nonreligious beliefs in the world. On one end of the spectrum are traditional religious beliefs; on the other “the new atheism.” Not enough attention is paid to humanism as an alternative. This statement advocates nonreligious secular Neo-Humanism.

Sixteen Recommendations:

Neo-Humanists:

1. Aspire to be more inclusive by appealing to both nonreligious and religious humanists and to religious believers who share common goals;
2. Are critical of theism;
3. Are best defined by what they are for, not what they are against;
4. Wish to use critical thinking, evidence, and reason to evaluate claims to knowledge;
5. Apply similar considerations to ethics and values;
6. Are committed to a key set of values: happiness, creative actualization, reason in harmony with emotion, quality, and excellence;
7. Emphasize moral growth (particularly for children), empathy, and responsibility;
8. Advocate the right to privacy;
9. Support the democratic way of life, tolerance, and fairness;
10. Recognize the importance of personal morality, goodwill, and a positive attitude toward life;
11. Accept responsibility for the well-being of society, guaranteeing various rights, including those of women, racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities; and supporting education, health care, gainful employment, and other social benefits;
12. Support a green economy;
13. advocate population restraint, environmental protection, and the protection of other species;
14. Recognize the need for Neo-humanists to engage actively in politics;
15. Take progressive positions on the economy; and
16. Hold that humanity needs to move beyond egocentric individualism and chauvinistic nationalism to develop transnational planetary institutions to cope with global problems—such efforts include a strengthened World Court, an eventual world parliament, and a planetary environmental monitoring agency that would set standards for controlling global warming and ecology.

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PUBLISHED LETTERS

The following letter by **Harry Greenberger** appeared in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* on Sept. 30, 2010:

Re: “*Religious roots run deep in city,*” *Your Opinions,* Sept. 26.

Were it not known that Earl Higgins is a serious Catholic, his letter might be read as a humorous response to the recent New Orleans billboard “Imagine no religion.”

However, an even more serious writer might have “imagined” a world with no killings and wars between conflicting religions; one without self-proclaimed spokespersons for the Almighty telling others how God wants them to behave (with dreadful consequences for disobedience).

He might have imagined a world in which its peoples dedicate themselves to living full, rewarding lives, with no malice toward others living differently and no fear of an eternally tortured afterlife; and one in which our First Amendment guarantee of freedom of and from religion would no longer be a basis of constant violation and litigation.

Echoing Mr. Higgins’ final paragraph: “New Orleans without religion: Does it sound like an interesting and fun place?”

The following letter by **Tim Ruppert** was published in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* on October 10, 2010:

RE: “*Most Americans flunk basic religion,*” *Page 1,* Oct. 3.

The Times-Picayune’s coverage of the Pew Research center report glossed over the major finding:

If you have a question about religion, the best person in America to ask is an atheist or agnostic.

Bruce Nolan’s coverage leaves one with the impression that non-believers were merely among the highest-scoring in the test of general religious traditions and beliefs. In fact, atheists and agnostics came out on top, scoring above everyone else including Catholics, Protestants, Mormons and Jews.

On questions specifically about the Bible and Christianity, atheists and agnostics ranked third, behind only Mormons and white evangelical Christians. Non-believers knew more about Christianity and the Bible than Christians of every other stripe and flavor.

I am not surprised.

Atheists and agnostics are often well-educated people. They are open to inquiry and learning beyond the religion of their childhoods.

My experience has been that religious believers typically wall themselves off from information and from

learning about other religions and any topics they deem threatening to their belief systems.

The Pew study confirms this. They found an inverse relationship between educational level and religious belief.

So the headline, “most Americans flunk basic religion,” might more appropriately have been, “atheists have correct answers to religious questions.”

The following letter by **Barbara Forrest** appeared in the *Baton Rouge Advocate* on December 3, 2010:

Darrell White’s Nov. 27 letter, “Ex-judge opposes biology texts,” criticizing evolution in biology textbooks that were approved by two state committees, contains a false premise.

He argues that “scientific criticisms” of evolution should be included in the textbooks, but his argument works only if genuinely scientific criticisms exist.

White’s argument fails because all evidence since publication of “on the Origin of Species” confirms Darwin’s theory of evolution. There is no evidence undermining evolution. The science has withstood every attempt to discredit it for 151 years. Creationists such as White have no evidence.

Contending that “scientific criticisms of Darwin’s views would clearly be admissible in a court of law,” White asserts that an attorney withholding such evidence could be “guilty of unethical conduct.” How, he wonders, can “such facts” be withheld from students?

White knows better than this. If anyone is guilty of withholding evidence, it is White.

He knows about the Pennsylvania “Dover trial,” *Kitzmiller et al v. Dover Area School District* (2005), in which his friends at the Discovery Institute were given six weeks to present their “Scientific criticisms” of evolution. DI is the creationist think tank with which White and the Louisiana Family Forum partnered in 2008 to promote the sham “Louisiana Science Education Act.” Why didn’t White mention this case?

I was an expert witness for the plaintiffs in the Dover trial, in which DI also had two “expert” witnesses. It was supposed to have five, but three of them bailed out before they were deposed, rather than take advantage of this golden opportunity to present their “scientific criticisms” of evolution in federal court.

Judge John E. Jones III gave the remaining witnesses all the time they needed to present evidence. DI’s witnesses were exposed under cross-examination as the creationists they are, having produced no evidence against evolution. Nor have they produced evidence for “intelligent design” creationism, which two of White’s associates wrote in their public comment forms should be included in the textbooks.

Yet White and the LFF worked with these DI losers to write and promote the LSEA, which Gov. Bobby Jindal signed in 2008. White calls for Jindal to “speak out on the biology textbook issue due to be considered by BESE at its December meetings.”

I wholeheartedly agree. The governor should explain why—with his Ivy League biology degree from Brown University – he signed a creationist law that he knew would threaten the science education of his constituents’ children. Will he explain? Only time will tell.

Readers can find the truth about the LFF’s attack on public school science education at the Louisiana Coalition for Science website at <http://lasciencecoalition.org>. Then they should ask BESE to approve the textbooks.

(Editor’s Note: On December 9, the BESE board did, in fact, approve the biology textbooks by a vote of 8-2 in spite of the LFF’s lobbying attempts..)

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INCREASING OUR MEMBERSHIP

In late November, a mailing went out to everyone on our mailing list who had not already paid 2011 dues. So, if you received one of these membership brochures, you had not paid dues as of November 30. The response has been terrific with more than 50 people paying their dues, some of whom had never paid dues before.

In our brochure, we explained that due to increasing costs of meeting space rental, as well as printing and mailing costs, we would no longer provide a paper newsletter to anyone who had not paid dues, although non-dues payers with an e-mail address would certainly receive one electronically.

If you pay dues and have an e-mail address, but would still like a paper newsletter mailed to you, you need to let us know. There is a space on the membership form to let us know that.

So, this is the last paper newsletter that will go out to the entire mailing list, unless we know you prefer electronic only. Beginning with the Winter 2011 edition, only dues-paying members who request a paper letter or who do not have an e-mail account, will receive one.

We would also like to recognize those members who have made contributions. As of this printing, **Martyrs** include **Charlotte Upadhyay, Raoult Ratard, Paulette Hurdlik, Frank Tournier,** and **Mark Meunier**. Our two **Patron Saints**, to date, are **Michael Malec** and **Betty Alessandra**. And we have one **Archangel, Georges Maillot**. Thanks to all of you, NOSHA can continue to bring in special speakers and sponsor special events.

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MY LAST NEWSLETTER

Connie Gordon

After eight and one-half years and 34 newsletters, I am finally burned out. I just don’t think I can do one more. This is my last. But don’t despair! Someone else has agreed to take up the reins. NOSHA board member and secretary, Charlotte Klasson, has agreed to take on the task. The Winter 2011 *NOSHA News* will be her first.

Please let Charlotte know when you have a letter published anywhere. If you have an article relevant to secularism or humanism, please submit it. If you have read any relevant books or articles, please review them for the newsletter.

Thank you for the many compliments I have received over my duration as editor. It has been an honor and a privilege to have kept you apprised of NOSHA activities and interests for these last few years, and I will continue to serve as a board member and treasurer, so I’m not going anywhere.

I know Charlotte will do a great job, so please give her your support as you have supported me.

* * * * *

IN REMEMBRANCE

On December 6, 1980, the composer of the world’s greatest humanist hymn was taken from us by a crazed assassin. We remember that composer here with the words of his great work, “Imagine.”

Imagine there’s no heaven,
It’s easy if you try,
No hell below us,
Above us only sky.
Imagine all the people
Living for today . . .

Imagine there’s no countries.
It isn’t hard to do.
Nothing to kill or die for;
No religion, too.
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace . . .

Imagine no possessions.
I wonder if you can.
No need for greed or hunger;
A brotherhood of man.
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world . . .

You may say I’m a dreamer,
but I’m not the only one.
I hope some day you’ll join us,
And the world will live as one.

-- John Lennon
1940 - 1980

The New Orleans Secular Humanist Association (NOSHA) was formed to provide an opportunity for like-minded people to meet and exchange ideas and to promote awareness of secular humanist viewpoints in the community. We are committed to the application of reason and science to the understanding of the universe and to the solving of human problems. We reject efforts to explain the world in supernatural terms and to look outside nature for salvation. We strive to make the public aware of the importance of the separation of church and state, to oppose the teaching of creationism and other religious doctrines in the public schools, and to provide a voice of reason when superstition is presented in the media. We believe in enjoying life here and now, and in cultivating moral excellence. We believe in the fullest realization of the best and noblest we are capable of as human beings.

To support **NEW ORLEANS SECULAR HUMANIST ASSOCIATION**, clip and complete the following:

Name(s): _____

Address: _____

Phone and/or e-mail: _____

I request a mailed newsletter.

\$20 Annual Dues (household) \$100 Martyr \$250 Patron Saint \$500 Archangel Other amount

Make checks payable to “NOSHA” and mail to Connie Gordon, 2509 Giuffrias Ave., Apt. 603, Metairie, LA 70001.

Contributions in excess of basic dues are tax deductible. You can also pay online via www.nosha.info using PayPal.

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