

Colorado Secular Organizations

A Study of Selected Successful Local Groups and How They Do It

by

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This is a continuation of the series *The Roots of Building a Secular Community*

Part 9 – Denver Sunday Assembly



It all started back in early 2013. My wife Margaret, along with our good friend Chris and I were brainstorming ideas for doing a show on Sundays that would be not the church, so we came up with the name “Church of the Nones”, and began writing godless heathen comedy, based on the total absurdity of religion and the comedy that it provides. The idea was to create a show that would be part commentary, with guest speakers on secular subjects, part live music, part atheist video shorts, and part heathen comedy skits. It would be a fast paced multimedia event. I had briefly heard about a new atheist organization called Sunday Assembly from England, but it sounded a little too “churchy”.

Then, in September of 2013, I read an article about the Sunday Assembly, started earlier that year by two atheist comedians, Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans. It was based on the idea that all of us are born and then we die, so why not celebrate everything in-between. Their motto is “Live Better, Help Often, Wonder More”. They put on free family-friendly shows in London that are celebrations of life, with commentaries, stories, poetry and live music with audience participation. They even took some of their show ideas from churches, which stole ideas from show business. The assemblies are lively and upbeat, with a very positive message. They started becoming so popular that Sanderson and Pippa decided it was time to help others in cities around the world to start their own Sunday Assemblies.



Sunday Assembly draws large crowds in major cities

Well, secular groups in major cities heard about the Sunday Assembly and wanted to start their own assemblies, so Sanderson and Pippa chose some selected cities in the US and the world, and started working with the secular groups in those cities, and established guidelines for how an assembly should be conducted. Denver was not one of the first cities chosen, mainly because no one in the Denver area had yet applied to start a Sunday Assembly.

Sanderson and Pippa developed a format for Sunday Assemblies to include a mix of commentary and live music, along with audience participation and even a sing-along. A guest speaker talks about some important topic, such as science, reason, social injustice or atheist lifestyles. Someone else reads poetry or tells a personal story. Religion bashing is not allowed. Religion is simply not brought up. After the show, pastries and refreshments are served along with conversations. Assemblies are funded completely by donations.

When I heard that there were Sunday Assemblies starting up in Los Angeles and San Diego with their official first shows in November of 2013, and that Sanderson and Pippa were going to be there to help launch them, Margaret and I decided to plan a family vacation to California around those dates, so we could witness the very first ever assemblies on the West Coast and learn as much as we could. It was really great, and we even got to meet Sanderson and Pippa, and hung out with them. They were very impressed that we came all the way from Colorado just to see the assembly, and that we were interested in starting a Sunday Assembly in Denver.

When returning home, we began the process of filling out the application forms and started the long process of becoming an official Sunday Assembly. At that time, I was still the President of the Boulder Atheists, so I started collaborating with Dave Fangrow, the President of the Secular Hub in Denver, along with other folks at the Hub, who were also interested in starting a Sunday Assembly in Denver. In our correspondence with the Sunday Assembly in England, they sent us the email addresses of persons in the Denver area who had inquired about it. We totally

embraced the idea that this was a community thing and that everyone who wants to be involved, should be. Dave and I started emailing all of the names we had been given in an effort to reach out to other secular folks in the area who were also interested in this. A few people responded, such as Nick Carpenter, Nancy Graham, Sean Cummings and Alyssa Christiansen.

In the Spring of 2014, due to other business and time commitments, I had to drop out of the Sunday Assembly planning. Dave from the Hub is part of a rock band called Pale Blue, made up of Hub members. So, Dave and Pale Blue, along with Nick and the others carried on with creating the Denver Sunday Assembly. Nick eventually became the Director. I was very happy and impressed that they created a really great Assembly, now fully launched and accredited.



The Launch of Denver Sunday Assembly at the Broomfield Grange on September 28th, 2014

The first performance of the Denver Sunday Assembly occurred at the Colorado Secular Conference in August, although the official launch occurred the next month on Sunday, September 28th, 2014, at the Broomfield Crescent Grange. After a few months, the assembly moved to Swallow Hill Music in South Denver, where they stayed for nearly two years. The shows became very popular.



Pale Blue at Denver Sunday Assembly, Swallow Hill Music



Denver Sunday Assembly at Swallow Hill Music

By early 2016, the organization started to succumb to the same problem that afflicts many organizations - volunteer burnout. The group stopped doing assemblies and the momentum was interrupted. While on hiatus, it gave the group time to re-think and reorganize. In the meantime, they continued to receive interest from the public. By late 2016, Stephanie Latta along with Nick and Dave began discussing plans to bring Sunday Assembly back to Denver. Chauncey Williams, current President of The Secular Hub, introduced Andrew Forlines, an aspiring local comedian, to the group. Dave Fangrow and the rock band Pale Blue continued to practice songs, old and new. Andrew suggested using the Crossroads Denver Theatre and used his ties with the entertainment community to help book the first guest, Animal Planet's Dr. Kevin Fitzgerald.

The re-launch occurred on February 19th, 2017 at Denver Crossroads Theatre near Downtown. It was a great show and had a big audience. Denver Sunday Assembly was off and running again. The shows are held once a month on the third Sunday, and start promptly at noon.

I love going every month to a free celebration of life at the Denver Sunday Assembly, and can't wait to see where it goes from here. I never even imagined that I would ever be singing along to the music of Pale Blue, listen to the Assembly Choir, hear a great speaker, listen to stories or poetry, and participate with the audience, all in a one hour show. Bring the family and check it out. They even provide activities for kids, with refreshments and conversations afterwards.



Hemant Mehta at Denver Sunday Assembly, Swallow Hill Music

For more information, check out [Meetup.com/Sunday-Assembly-Denver/](https://www.meetup.com/Sunday-Assembly-Denver/). See you there!