

The program cover for her memorial, produced by friend Sally Chizek



Catherine Fahringer promoted freethought at every opportunity. Here she is at one of many rallies in San Antonio.

Cat's banner welcoming the '92 FFRF convention to San Antonio. That's FFRF's Anne & Annie Laurie Gaylor next to Catherine.



Catherine produced the award-winning TV show, "Freethought Forum," from 1987-2002. She is with guest and friend Ed Liggett.

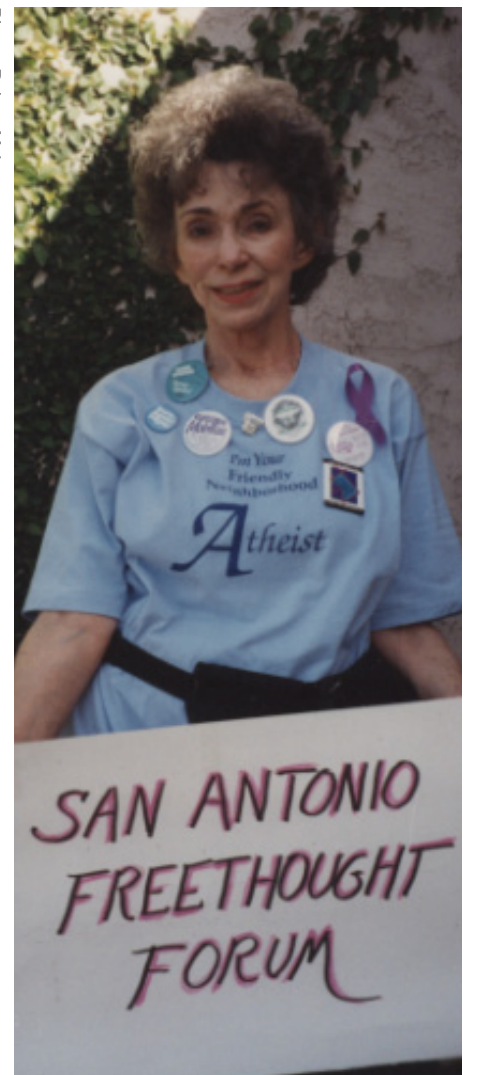


Cat mugging her dismay over ubiquitous religious graffiti.



This photo ran on the front of the San Antonio Express-News Sunday Magazine, March 26, 1991, to accompany the cover story about her by Craig Phelon, "Portrait of an Atheist." That article is reprinted in FFRF's anthology, *Women Without Superstition*.

Photo: Robert McLeroy



Catherine wore her educational FFRF T-shirts everywhere, including to protest voting in a Catholic Church!

20 Years of Freethought Activism

Catherine gifted Jefferson's famed "wall of separation" quotation, via framed calligraphy, to the City of San Antonio. That's then-Mayor Celso Martinez, Cat, Jane Olm and Al Scharf. Catherine not only got the city to issue a Freethought Week proclamation, but persuaded Texas Govs. Jane W. Richards and George W. Bush to issue "Freethought Week" letters!



With FFRFers and friends Ruth Lett and Sally Chizek, wearing "The Great Atheist Invasion" shirts commemorating a 1999 monument to freethought history in Comfort, Texas.

Catherine's Sweet Determination

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

Catherine Fahringer (1922-2008), Foundation activist, officer and San Antonio FFRF chapter founder, was passionate about promoting freethought and halting the religious domination of government. Radiating warmth and determination, she stirred things up in Catholic-dominated San Antonio for 20 years, founding a 13-year cable TV show, Freethought Forum, and monitoring local media and government.

A state/church supersleuth, she investigated, exposed and protested many Establishment Clause violations in San Antonio: city funds going to a Catholic youth group, the Mayor's prayer breakfasts, a hideous praying-hands public artwork, manger scenes on military grounds, and the use of churches as polling places: "Those of you who vote in churches without protest are aiding the enemies of democracy," she warned.

In countless masterful letters of protest, she employed humor, pith, plain-spokenness, indignation and charm. Catherine once got letters published in the same week in both *TIME* and on "60 Minutes"! Catherine knew you could catch more flies with honey, but she also recognized the purifying value of vinegar.

Appearing with Dan Barker on a 1990 "Sally Jessy Raphael" show before a very hostile audience, Catherine kept her composure, making a memorable comment about not believing in "the big spook in the sky." She debunked the "no atheists in foxholes" myth by recounting how she was threatened with murder by a break-in intruder with a gun in San Antonio, yet never appealed to a supernatural deity.

Long before the Foundation's billboard campaign, Catherine hit upon a "banner idea"—placing a Freedom From Religion Foundation banner over a major intersection to protest 27 Catholic banners on city lampposts. That activism resulted in journalist Craig Phelon's exceptional "Portrait of an Atheist" cover story in the San Antonio Express-News Magazine in 1991, the cover of which is framed at Freethought Hall.

Among the quotable quotes in that article was Catherine's revelation, after previewing *The Golden Book of Bible Stories*, that she couldn't read this book to her children: "I'm nicer than God!"

"We would be 1,500 years ahead if it hadn't been for the church dragging science back by its coattails and burning our best minds at the stake."

Catherine's 1993 coup was the placement in City Hall of a beautifully framed plaque quoting Thomas Jefferson and honoring the separation of church and state. She managed to get both Govs. *George W. Bush* and *Ann Richards* to issue "Freethought Week" proclamations. Now that's an activist!

When the Gulf War was launched, Catherine wrote a moving tribute to peace for Freethought Today. She described how her military father was killed on a prison ship during World

War II by "friendly fire,"—after surviving the Bataan Death March and three years in a Japanese prison camp. "Fighting for peace is oxymoronic," Catherine wrote. "We need to plan for peace, and live for peace and teach peace."

She was a lung cancer survivor, losing one lung and part of another in 1992, the year we were scheduled to have FFRF's convention in San Antonio. Posting a letter against the "Virgin Mary-itis" striking San Antonio was the last thing she attended to before her major surgery. Despite her illness, she arranged to erect a "Welcome Freedom From Religion Foundation" banner where you couldn't miss it. I have long said I don't believe in God, but I do believe in the power of Catherine!

Her father's death was one of several tragedies to befall Catherine. She spoke to me only fleetingly of the loss of her beloved daughter, Devon, who died in her 20s trying to rescue an animal on a highway.

Catherine made friends for freethought wherever she went, and had so much to share. We were so lucky she shared herself with us—her intelligence, her drive to keep religion from ruining America, her friendship.

One of her last pieces for Freethought Today decried the Christianization of obituaries, the wretched euphemisms that even secular folk often unwittingly pick up, such as "passing on." Catherine phoned me the evening she received her pancreatic cancer diagnosis last October, and did not mince words: "I'm going to die."

While she was an atheist in a foxhole, fully accepting of her mortality, she did so long to have time to put her affairs in order. Tragically, this was denied her. The intense, unnecessary suffering Catherine went through until her death on Dec. 13 should be a wake up call: we must embrace compassionate death with dignity. Hospice care works for some; it didn't for Catherine.

Catherine especially wanted her books to go to the Foundation, and she died knowing that had happened, thanks to Sally Chizek and Joe LaBonte. The Foundation received 18 boxes of Catherine's wonderful library, the library of a thinker, including an intact collection of Ingersoll.

In writing of one of her many state/church adventures for our newspaper, Catherine ended with this encouragement: "If we hang in with sweet determination, we will probably end up as a respectable segment of society. And wouldn't that be lovely?"

Catherine's sweet determination, her desire to "bond with people who are emotional about ideas," her sense of fun, made a huge difference to our freethought movement.

Catherine was forward-thinking and knew how important it is to nurture the next generation of freethinkers. The Foundation is creating the Catherine Fahringer Memorial Youth Activist Award of \$1,000, to be bestowed annually upon a worthy young activist who hangs in there with sweet determination.

Annie Laurie Gaylor is co-president, with Dan Barker, of the Foundation.



Pretty baby



Teenaged Catherine (left)



With her children, Steve & Devon



Catherine lived abroad during much of her youth and early marriage



A glamorous shot



Freethought activist