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Group wishes Darwin a happy 200th birthday

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So the other day I meet with a guy to talk about Charles Darwin and social conservatives and the never-ending ruckus over the origins of man. And we're having a cup of coffee, getting acquainted, and I come to find out the guy once played Jerry Seinfeld's cousin Artie, Artie Levine.

"No way," I say.

Then he proceeds to tell me he used to do a children's show in Columbus, Ohio. He was Ron the Mailman on "Friendly Junction." Whoa! He also appeared in one episode of "Alf," an odd little TV show from the late '80s. He was even in a kick-boxing movie, "Out for Blood," starring Don "The Dragon" Wilson.

I am blown away, needless to say. Here I was, all set to interview some stuffy intellectual, and there I am having coffee with Jerry's cousin Artie.

"To this day I still get a small residual check every quarter," says Ron Steelman. "I get to take my wife out for a nice dinner."

Steelman, 62, now lives in Aberdeen. He runs a consulting firm, marketing and communications. Also he is the president of Red Bank Humanists.

The local humanists, currently 66 strong, never forget Charles Darwin's birthday. This year the great man would have turned 200. To acknowledge this, the humanists are holding a special celebration Sunday at the Red Bank charter school. The guest speaker will be Dr. Alan Mann, a Princeton professor. His topic: "The Scars of Human Evolution," our less-than-perfect evolution from four legs to two. The public is welcome, free of charge.

Darwin Day comes at an opportune time this year, it turns out. As the battle over biology textbooks rages down in Texas, social conservatives are once again dead set on exposing the theory of evolution as just that, a theory.

"Just a theory?" huffs Steelman. "Darwin's theory has been backed up by 150 years of scientific due diligence."

Did we learn nothing from the sad episode with Galileo? The poor man proved that the sun, not the Earth, was the center of what we now know as the solar system, and he was promptly branded a heretic in 17th-century Rome. All because it said in the Bible that "the sun rises and sets and returns to its place."

Get real, says Steelman. How could anyone continue to argue that our planet is only 6,000 years old in the face of so much evidence to the contrary? How about the paintings on the walls of the caves in France? They're 17,000 years old.

Science won the latest skirmish last week in Texas, by a slim margin. The board of education there took the controversial "strengths and weaknesses" language out of the state's science standards. The Dallas Morning News declared this "a major defeat for social conservatives."

While science may have won the battle, it hasn't yet won the war. The woods are still thick with the forces of creationism or intelligent design or whatever they're calling it these days, eight full years into the 21st century.

If that kind of thinking isn't enough to make you wonder about our species, I don't know what is.

Steelman didn't always feel so strongly about these matters. "I was asleep for many years," he says. He grew up a Presbyterian in Columbus, Ohio, after all. It took the election of George W. Bush to wake him up.

"I didn't come to this until I was 54," he says. "I was watching television one day and there were these three senators standing on the steps of the Capitol building saying you cannot be a moral person unless you are religious. I went straight upstairs and Googled 'secular humanism' and I must have been on the computer for two weeks.

"I was outraged. I joined the Council for Secular Humanism, the American Humanist Association. I joined the Freedom from Religion Foundation, the Americans United for the Separation of Church and State and the ACLU."

Now he's the president of Red Bank Humanists, and he talks about living in "post-theological" times — "my little joke" — and he insists he can tolerate those who still question Darwin's findings. "Like mosquitoes," he says.

The man doesn't take himself too seriously. What do you expect? This is Ron the Mailman. He once shared a scene with Don "The Dragon" Wilson. Hey, we're talking about Jerry's cousin Artie here, Artie Levine.

He's serious about this, though: "Darwin wrote that 'It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent . . . It is the one that is the most adaptable to change.' I think we can all see that happening around us in our lives every day."

Well, some of us can anyway.

Additional Facts

AT A GLANCE

This year's Darwin Day celebration will be presented by Red Bank Humanists at 10:30 a.m. Sunday at Red Bank charter school, 58 Oakland St. For more information, call (732) 939-6507 or visit www.redbankhumanists.org.
