

Humanists alive and well, meeting in R.B.

Group espouses ethical philosophy based on naturalism

BY LINDA DeNICOLA
Staff Writer

The Red Bank Humanists consider themselves a voice of reason in an age of sectarianism, partisanism, or just plain schism.

According to Ron Steelman, president of the Red Bank Humanists, humanists are free thinkers who like to test things.

Steelman told the congregation at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Monmouth County in Lincroft earlier this month that there are many kinds of humanists — some are religious, some are libertarian, a few are Marxists and some are secular.

The Red Bank group consider themselves secular humanists, he said.

Steelman explained that there are many definitions of humanism. One definition that appeals to him is that it is an ethical philosophy based upon naturalism, as opposed to spiritualism.

Another definition is that humanists are humans who are in love with life.

The Humanist Manifesto III, a successor to the Humanist Manifesto of 1933, states that humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity.

It goes on to say the humanists are guided by reason, inspired by compassion and informed by experience.

The Red Bank Humanists hold a forum every month at the Red Bank Charter School on Oakland Street in Red Bank. According to Steelman, members come from all over the area, not just Red Bank.

Each month they discuss various topics while sitting in an egalitarian circle. Last Sunday the topics were: "Irrelevant Ethical Questions" and "Destiny Is a Dirty Word."

"We have no dogma or deities," Steelman said, adding that humans can give meaning and value to their lives by using thought.

But, he added, they do not just rely on scientific thought.

"We are engaged by the arts, no less

by the sciences," he said.

Steelman and Eric Seldner founded the group 20 months ago. They incorporated as a nonprofit, put together a board and a one-year plan, and arranged for the group to meet in a coffeehouse at the Red Bank Galleria. They moved to the Charter School when the coffeehouse morphed into a restaurant.

Steelman explained that he started on his quest of "developing his human character" more than 25 years ago.

"I grew up in the Presbyterian Church in Ohio as a choir brat. I loved it as a child, but found out that my parents, who were in the church for 50 years, were really there for the music. They loved sacred, classical music, like Bach, Beethoven, Mozart."

He said he and his wife purchased land up in the Sierra Mountains of California, east of Bakersfield, and would go out at night and look at the stars in amazement and awe.

"I never found anything comparable in religion."

He said in recent years he has heard people in public life saying you cannot be a moral person unless you're religious.

"I wanted to prove them wrong. I've know hundreds of people who are fine, moral people and they aren't religious."

He joined a humanist group in Los Angeles, which eventually led to his meeting with Seldner at a picnic for the N.J. Humanist Network in Schooley Mountain Park.

"At the first meeting in Red Bank, 30 people came. A lot of people realized that they were humanists after reading our material."

Art Weiner, a member of the group, has been on the board since the beginning. He said he has been a humanist all of his life.

Impishly referring to the fact that some humanists are Marxists, he said he is the "Groucho Marxist type."

"I have been an agnostic and an atheist, and also a nonjoiner. It's nice to have a group of people where you can say what you like without ducking."

He added, "Humanists meetings are fun."

He said he has been looking back at some of the topics covered over the past months. They can be found on the Web

(Continued from previous page)

site www.redbankhumanists.org. "We didn't come up with any conclusions, but we had a lot of laughs."

Seldner said that when he and Steelman met at a Red Bank Humanists picnic, "I was looking for a place to meet people who were looking for open, honest discussion, where people can exchange ideas and develop friendships."

He said he grew up with no religious background and thanks his parents almost every day for the space they gave him.

"My wife grew up in Chinatown, in a community that was totally devoid of religion. She doesn't give it a second thought, but I was exposed to it through the culture."

Ivan Steinberg is an economist and treasurer of the group. He said he grew up in Orthodox Judaism, but even as a child questioned things. He said the first woman he fell in love with was a Catholic. She broke up with him because, she said, he was going to hell, and she was going to heaven and couldn't date him any longer.

"As I went further in my education, the questions escalated. I found that the only way to deal with the questions was from a rational point of view."

The humanists believe that a caring community creates a humane world and that is what they teach their children, said Steelman. They favor personal growth over dogma, and try to help their children develop wholesome guidelines for ethical living. They put deed before creed.

Steelman said he has a 4-year-old son and is making himself ready to answer his young son's questions when he starts asking them.

"I'm filling a folder," he said.

Seldner is the father of two young children and was looking to create a community and space for them when he joined the Red Bank Humanists.

"I feel that I need to expose them to what the world has to offer, but not inculcate them to the world's 'isms.'"

Steelman told the members of the UUC that Unitarian Universalists and humanists are alike in that they affirm the worth, the dignity and the uniqueness of every human being.

For more information, call Steelman at (732) 939-6507.

(Continued on next page)