

A Zoom Baby Attends ICSAA 2024

**INTERNATIONAL
CONFERENCE OF
SECULAR AA**

**SEPTEMBER 20 - 22, 2024
ORLANDO, FLORIDA**



By Alcohol Free Margarita

I had really high expectations for this event for several years, and my expectations were nowhere near high enough! Leading up to the event, I had the rewarding privilege of working with the folks from the OMAGOD ICSAA Host City Committee, as a member and the secretary of the Board of Secular AA. Let me tell you. Be glad people like Tony F and Alison P use their powers for good not for evil. They are capable of amazing things! Participants at the conference only saw the tip of that iceberg. And what an amazing weekend we had in Orlando!

I was looking forward to meeting so many of my heroes like authors of the secular literature that has enhanced my life, speakers I'd seen only online, and especially all the folks I've grown to love from their honest, vulnerable shares and for the compassion they've shown me from their little 2D boxes in my Zoom screen.

There they were in 3D and living color. Even before arriving in Orlando, I had the huge pleasure of flying with my Hubbie and love of my life, Will.I.Am, and Beth Aich, author of *We Are Not All Egomaniacs*. Then to find Dr. Judy Hollis, author of *From Bagels to Buddha, Fat is a Family Affair*, others, and renowned for much more that was truly exciting. We were ever so grateful for Rady who'd driven from Cleveland delivering us and many others throughout the weekend to the hotel where more hugs, heroes, and hugs from heroes awaited. At dinner, I remember thinking, "Don't pinch me! If this is just a dream, I don't want to wake up." There I was sitting amongst the amazing Penny, Mary C, Joe C, Dr. Allen Berger, Zanner, my beloved Will.I.Am and tables full of more of my heroes nearby, knowing many loved ones were yet to arrive in Orlando. I slept less than 3 hours that night; too fucking excited.

Friday morning, I loaded up on ICSAA Orlando 2024 merch. Will.I.Am, chair of Secular AA and Tony, cochair of the ICSAA Orlando Host Committee expressed warm welcomes and gratitude for everyone there. Then I had the huge honor of presenting Zanner from Beyond Belief Toronto in the first session of the conference. With their story, they shredded my heart, stitched it back together, and filled it with hope and inspiration for all our abilities to recover from trauma and addiction. The recording of Zanner's session has already been posted on our website, <https://secularaa.buzzsprout.com/1536487/episodes/15810118-icsaa-2024-zanner-w-from-sobriety-torecovery>. Luckily many more recordings are coming soon as there were always multiple sessions offered concurrently throughout the weekend. I will have to catch the recordings of *Atheism as Affirmations in Sobriety* by John H. and *How to Start a Secular Meeting in the Bible Belt* by Glenn G as they shared the time slot with Zanner's, *The Next Step: From Sobriety to Recovery*. Check back here for those <https://www.aasecular.org/recordings>.

I also had the huge honor of introducing Allen Berger PhD in his session titled *Emotional Sobriety and Healthy Relationships: Creating Room for People Rather than Expectations and Rules*. He spoke about emotional sobriety foremost as maturing, a process many of us stunted in the throes of active addiction. However maturing toward self-sufficiency doesn't mean not asking for help. As I understood Allen, it means understanding what we need, a challenge in and of itself for many of us, and learning how to communicate that in our relationships. Resonate? "I alone can do this, but I cannot do this alone." Access Allen Berger's books and schedule of ongoing talks and more at his website, <https://abphd.com/>. He and Joe C. even posted a 30-minute session I have yet to listen to titled, *He Doth Protest Too Much (Missive from ICSAA)!* from the conference in their podcast, *Emotional Sobriety: The Next Step in Recovery*, accessible where you listen to podcasts. I also look forward to listening to the recordings of sessions held concurrently to Allen's like Kurt R's, *Our (Troublesome?) Relationship to AA Literature, Experience and Strategies for the Future* as well as the *Beyond Belief Sobriety Podcast Reunion Panel* with Mary C, Angela, and John S as they're released to Secular AA's podcast site, <https://www.aasecular.org/recordings>.

Joe C. was the Keynote speaker Friday evening sharing on what best helps people with mental health challenges and addiction to thrive. He discussed the scientifically studied conceptual framework, *C.H.I.M.E.: Connection, Hope, Identity, Meaning, and Empowerment*. I saw Joe present on this topic a year ago, July 2023, at the Langley, BC Roundup, One Big Tent, and it was awesome, but his presentation has become even more fascinating, polished, and informative.

Friday afternoon's sessions were followed by fellowship and chocolate chip cookies! Smiling faces can be seen from then and throughout the weekend posted on ICSAA Orlando 2024's private Facebook group, <https://www.facebook.com/share/g/sXEiXqXp3SZnK1Zi/>.

Nell and Joseph, I forgive you. Friday evening, I joined one of the yoga/Pilates sessions they led. But, for the rest of the weekend, was I ever sore from my healthy lifestyle choice! But, yes, Nell and Joseph, I forgive you. Still, I was too excited and only got about 4 hours sleep Friday night.

Tired but happy, I attended sessions all day Saturday. Wow. What another joy it was to introduce and hear the LGBTQIA+ panel on *Identity, Not an Outside Issue* first thing Saturday morning with Stephanie F, Tracy C, and Chad C giving leads. To those three and the participants who spoke after, thank you for your loving, compassionate, inspiring and brave shares and insights. Thank you, Sri from Boston! Meanwhile and unsurprisingly, I heard great feedback from folks who attended the concurrent session presented by Glenn Rader on *Cognitive Distortions* and am eager for that recording to be available as well. His book, *Modern 12 Steps*, was the first book on secular 12 Step recovery I came across as a newbie the summer of 2021. Thankfully, he and his partner stayed for the whole conference and Will.I.Am and I were able to chat with them about recovery and much more. Being able to thank and hang in person with authors and presenters was an unanticipated benefit that kept happening throughout the ICSAA Orlando weekend.

It happened with Beth Aich, too, author of *We're Not All Egomaniacs: Adapting the 12 Steps for People with Low Self-Esteem* who led the next session I attended. I've thanked her before because I came across her book when I was struggling with Step 4 just a few months into recovery. You know that 'My Part' column in the 4th Step? Her insight about victims of abuse not being to blame for their abuse was a dramatic turning point in my recovery. It now feels like common sense, but I needed to hear it and am ever grateful to Beth. There wasn't a dry eye in the crowd when Beth finished her presentation. Together she had us recite the following aloud using our own names, "I, Margarita, take you, Margarita, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to have and to hold, to love and to cherish, until death do us part." Try it! Imagine the power of doing that together in a room full of people.

At the conference, we suffered the wonderful problem of too many great options scheduled at once and I must listen to the recordings of the concurrently offered sessions of *The Young Faces of AA: Stories of Early Entry and Ongoing Recovery* led by Stephanie F from New Zealand and *Who Is Hank Parkhurst?* led by Geri B when they are posted at <https://www.aasecular.org/recordings> as well.

One of the greatest gifts of the many given me by sobriety is meeting Penny on zoom and finally in person this weekend. Penny from Virginia, the keynote speaker at lunch Saturday shared on the remarkable experiences her 56 ½ years of sobriety made possible; nonbeliever all her life and sober in AA since 1968 because she led her life guided by choosing not just the next right thing, but always the loving thing to do.

Feeling like an awkward kid in front of her superhero, I met Dr. Jamie Marich who, while wearing her 'Sober is Sexy' T-shirt, presented on the intertwined topics of trauma, dissociation, addiction, and trauma-informed and adapted 12 Step recovery. I already own and have benefitted from reading and discussing her book, *Trauma and the 12 Steps (An Inclusive Guide to Enhancing Recovery)*. So, I had to pick up a few more, *Process Not Perfection: Expressive Arts Solutions for Trauma Recovery* for the artist in me, and *Dissociation Made Simple*. I want the e-version of her book, *Trauma and the 12 Steps: Daily Meditations and Reflections* to add to mine and my husband's morning readings of Joe C's *Beyond Belief, Agnostic Daily Musings for a 12 Step Life*

and Ryan Holiday's *The Daily Stoic*. (Bob K, if you're reading this, we're patiently awaiting your own soon to be published daily musings to add to our morning reflections, too.)

I am looking forward to hearing the recordings of the other sessions offered in that time slot of *The Art of Living Sober: A Panel on Stoicism and Meditation in Recovery* led by Lily A as well as the *Friends of Secular AA Panel ~ OA, NA, ACA, CoDA, AlAnon* posting soon at <https://www.aasecular.org/recordings>.

Following Jamie, I attended Tracy C of Westside Agnostics Cleveland's presentation titled *Double Winners*, followed by Michelle's presentation titled, *Black, Female, Atheist & Sober – Seeking Wholeness: Finding “The” Shoes That Fit*. I am grateful for the space granted in secular AA meetings to recognize the importance of mental health factors or belonging to other recovery fellowships or society's marginalized groups as integral to our recovery, not as outside issues, and we can improve at providing safe space. I look forward to hearing recordings of the sessions offered concurrently, *Secular Voices at International Women's Conferences* led by Jen B; *Afternoon with the Atheist* Panel led by John C; as well as *Limitless Expansion through Practice of THESE Steps, a Lifelong Adventure* led by the beloved Ever Grateful JEB; *Legislative Remedies to Prevent State-Coerced Participation in Orthodox Twelve-Step Programs* led by Eric C; and *Slogans in AA* led by Max and Mikey J of OMAGOD.

Saturday night, many of us danced our sober asses off and were entertained by Robin from Secular Sobriety Tulsa's cover of *Drops of Jupiter* by Train.

Sunday morning brought Dr. Trysh Travis, author of, in Bob K's words, the “FANTABULOUS” book *The Language of the Heart: A Cultural History of the Recovery Movement from Alcoholics Anonymous to Oprah Winfrey* (2009). The recording of her presentation, *AA in the Age of Polarization*, is already available on our podcast <https://secularaa.buzzsprout.com/1536487> and recordings of the concurrent sessions of *Relationships in Recovery: Platonic and Romantic* led by Stephanie F and Chad C as well as Kurt R's *Working Under Cover (or Exposed!)* will soon be added.

Surprisingly, I thoroughly enjoyed Dr. Noeréna A of Westside Agnostics Cleveland's presentation on grief. She inspired and filled the audience with tools and hope with her refreshingly upbeat presentation on *Twelve Stepping through Loss, Change and Grief While Protecting Recovery*, a valuable must-listen recording for all of us in recovery given experiencing loss is inevitable. Access her recording here <https://secularaa.buzzsprout.com/1536487/episodes/15815818-icsaa-2024-loss-change-and-grief-the-12-steps>. I'm eager to hear recordings of concurrently offered sessions of *Healing Our Relationships in Al-Anon* led by Tracy, Alex, and Marilyn as well as the *Long Timers Panel* led by Mary C.

The last panel I attended was not recorded, but no fear, one of the speakers, BD Zack, has already offered to speak at the next conference. He and Owen shared their *Experience, Strength and Hope* and truly filled me with hope, inspiration and joy of knowing people like these two are out there in this world.

The closing. Where are my words to describe the closing?! Chills reliving the memory of, after gratitude was expressed, the concluding exchange made between the newest and most veteran of us in recovery, Marcela and Penny. The crowd sobbed in unison with the love, joy, and hope personified in that pairing.

Check back at this link for more recordings as they are released: <https://www.aasecular.org/recordings>. Session recordings will be wonderful, but you can't experience the comfort and joy of being right there in kinship. ICSAA Orlando 2024 was a 'lovefest', to steal a word from Penny, like no other conference before because so many of us already knew and loved each other thanks to Zoom. Now I have even stronger connections and many beautiful new ones as well. Of course, not every loved one in our recovery networks could make it and we lamented that and truly missed them.

Join us Sunday, October 6 at 2 pm ET, Zoom ID: 864 4075 003 and Passcode: 121212 for the Biennial General Membership meeting for opportunities to get involved with Secular AA in the planning of the next in person conference 2026, our secular presence in Vancouver 2025, our virtual conference 2025, monthly zoom Global Speaker Meetings, and more. Several cities initially expressed interest in hosting, but only groups in Phoenix, AZ have followed through. Join in the exciting opportunity of participating in the planning of ICSAA Phoenix 2026!

Margarita has been alcohol-free since June 20, 2021, after learning religion-free AA existed on zoom. She gratefully joined the Board of Secular AA serving as secretary as of 2022 while also participating in organizing monthly Global Speaker Tour events in addition to International Conferences of Secular AA throughout 2023 and 2024 with no plans of stopping.
