

# Ethical society meets at Botanical Gardens

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Jackie Simms overheard her 5-year-old daughter tell a group of friends that she was “nothing” as they discussed religious backgrounds, prompting her to join the Ethical Society of St. Louis in 1978.

“I did want my daughter to have values and be surrounded by people who lived ethical lives,” Simms said.

She decided she needed to involve her family in a community-like atmosphere that supported her own personal values as a human being, so she enrolled her daughter in Sunday school class with the ethical society.

“We consider ourselves a non-theistic, humanist religion,” Simms said. “We come together to pursue ethical issues, and work together to try to make a more humane society.”

In 1990, Simms and her husband moved to Asheville after a job transfer.

“When we moved here, the Ethical Society was what I missed most,” Simms said.

To fill that void, Simms teamed up with the retired leader of the New York Society for Ethical Culture, founded in 1876, to create the Ethical Society of Asheville in 2001.

“He had retired here in a vacation cabin for a few years and he and I started the group. We had a meeting at his home, contacted people we thought would be interested and people we heard had moved here and had belonged to other ethical societies wherever they lived before,” Simms said.

Simms’ co-founder left Asheville in 2002, leaving her as the major sustainer. She is now the president of the board of trustees and an Ethical Culture officiant, which means she is licensed to officiate weddings and other ceremonies marking major life change.

For the first couple of years, the ESA was without a central meeting location, and the members took turns holding meetings in their homes.

Then, one of the group’s members, who was also a member of the Botanical Gardens, suggested they hold their monthly meetings at the Gardens, making it the current location for the group’s meetings.

“We decided we wanted a central location, and we wanted to start letting other people know that we existed too. We thought if we had a central location, we would draw more members,” Simms said. “We love the Botanical Gardens. It’s a delightful location. We outgrew the library after a year or so. We meet in the larger meeting room now and we’re be-

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Ethical Society of Asheville member and 2001 co-founder

moaning the fact that we may be getting too large for that space and we may need to start looking for someplace else.”

The ESA currently has 22 members and their meetings, which take place at 2 p.m. on the third Sunday of each month, usually attract anywhere from 20 to 45 people, according to Simms.

“Two of our members live in Savannah, Ga. They don’t get here often, but they wanted to maintain a connection,” Simms said. “Anybody could come. We’re always looking for new members. We are particularly interested in having some younger people join the Ethical Society.”

Simms said that the ESA believes in deed above creed. They treasure what people do above any creed, and offer a community to people who are not comfortable in traditional, organized religions.

“It’s a place for people who don’t believe, to come together and try to make a positive impact on the world,” Simms said. “Many of our members are atheist or agnostic, skeptics, free thinkers, some may be deists, we don’t know, we don’t care. That’s not what’s important. What’s important to us is what you do and how you act and how you treat each other and how you treat this natural world that we are a part of, which is one of the reasons why we love to be at the Botanical Gardens. It reminds us of the natural beauty.”

UNC Asheville biology and psychology student Ethan Wohl became involved with the ESA after he visited their Web site. A friend, who is associated with WNC Atheists, encouraged him to go to a meeting.

“I could easily see myself doing this for the rest of my life,” Wohl said. “Belonging to a community has been shown to be beneficial to one’s happiness and non-theistic ethical alternatives are, at times, a rare commodity. I find belonging to a community of people trying to live as ethically as they can is important.”

Each month the group chooses a different topic to discuss. The next topic is “Mental Illness in the United States: Am I My Brother/Sister’s Keeper?”

James Pitts, who recently retired from

UNCA and is the current president of the National Alliance on Mental Illness in North Carolina, will give the presentation.

In an effort to give back to the community, the ESA has initiated a “BUYCOTT for a Living Wage,” to thank and support businesses certified as living wage employers by Just Economics of WNC. A living wage is the amount a worker must earn to afford his or her basic necessities, without public or private assistance.

The group prints “BUYCOTT thank-you” notes for members to carry with them. When they go to a living wage business they hand the cashier or waiter a thank-you note, explaining that one reason for choosing their business is that they pay a living wage.

Wohl supports the group’s project to help support businesses in Asheville that pay a living wage as opposed to the unlivable minimum wage.

The Ethical Society of Asheville is also working to develop a project to help A HOPE, an Asheville homeless day center that provides homeless persons with a mailing address, a place to receive phone messages and a place to shower and store their belongings.

“I think what they are doing to help better the community is great,” UNCA sophomore Steven Lees said.

Wohl also became involved with the ESA because he wanted to give back to the community and felt that this was the best option available.

“Since I don’t believe my morals are supernaturally derived, I thought it would be more appropriate to join a community that agreed,” Wohl said. “I like that the society provides a much needed humanistic community and alternative for non-theists. The lectures are interesting and they’re a group that focuses on dedicated action as well. I think Asheville had been progressive in many respects, and I’m not surprised that this community has flourished here.”

*The next Ethical Society of Asheville meeting will take place April 18 at 2 p.m. at the Botanical Gardens’ meeting center located on UNC Asheville’s campus.*

## Campus Events

**Change the World Day**

Quad  
Wednesday,  
11:30 -2:30 p.m.

**Visualizing Your Future: Meditation, journaling, reflection**

Mountain Suites  
Wednesday,  
4 and 5 p.m.

**Open Mic Night**

Grotto  
Wednesday,  
8 -11 p.m.

**Yoga and Intention: Aligning your potential**

Mountain Suites  
Thursday,  
4 and 5 p.m.

**Walking the Labyrinth: A meditative approach to find focus**

Beside Ramsey Library  
Friday,  
11-2 p.m.

For more campus activities, visit:  
[www.unca.edu/barker](http://www.unca.edu/barker)