

2002 High School Student Responses to Two Atheist Speakers

In March 2002, August Berkshire, then president of Minnesota Atheists, and Rebecca Nelson, then events coordinator for the University of Minnesota Atheists & Humanists (UMAH) [now called Campus Atheists, Skeptics, and Humanists (CASH)], spoke to a World Religions class of 35 students at a high school in Minnesota.

Several days before they arrived, August Berkshire asked the teacher to pass out information folders he had prepared that included his booklet "A Student's Guide to Atheism," pamphlets, and news articles. [These items are no longer used in August's presentations.] That way, when August and Rebecca arrived, the students were informed about atheism and, after brief opening remarks, the rest of the time was spent answering questions.

Below are response letters received from the students, written a day after the visit.

August & Rebecca,

I thought your presentation was very interesting. I didn't know a lot about atheism before you came and now I feel much more informed. Although I do not believe in evolution and many of your beliefs (or lack of), I deeply respect you for not lashing out at anyone and remaining calm even when the questions were difficult. I also thought the yellow folders helped a lot. They were well put together.

I felt that you both did a good job of explaining what atheism is. You backed up your ideas with your reasons and conclusions which is also good. But, what I really liked about the presentation was your tolerance for other religions and your saying that atheism isn't for everyone. You didn't try to change anyone's personal beliefs and that was good. You did a good job of answering questions and had a nice laid-back feel that made you seem approachable and open to questions.

August & Rebecca,

First, I'd like to thank you for you time you spent discussing atheism with our World Religions class. I liked how you presented your views, and your responses to questions were friendly and thought-provoking. I am still a Christian, and don't feel that atheism would ever be right for me. I knew that "converting" was not an intention you had, and that is why the class discussion was comfortable and not threatening. The packet that was given out before you arrived was very descriptive and interesting. Leaving most of the time for questioning was appropriate. Thank you again for opening my eyes to another way of thinking/believing.

I thank you both for coming. I did learn a lot and learned about what atheism really is. I also thought that the way you presented was really effective. It was much easier to stay interested, rather than an hour long lecture. Also, your packet was very informative.

August & Rebecca,

You presented yourselves very well on Tuesday. I didn't feel as if you were trying to convert us, but more inform us. I would like to thank you for presenting yourselves in this manner. Thank you for taking time out of your schedule to come and address our class on the topic of atheism. I found the presentation to be very informative, and you both seemed prepared for the questions asked. Thank you.

Open discussion was nice and allowed other people to voice their opinions and be involved. The packet was also very informative and made things to the point. There isn't much improvement that I would see necessary. The speech was wonderful compared to other speakers that I've seen.

August & Rebecca,

Thank you for speaking to our class. I appreciate you taking your time to enlighten others about something you feel very strongly about. I also appreciate you talking about atheism with an open mind, and not a forceful or superior tone. And that you mention that you are not devout to atheism is important for us to know I think. That you are ready and willing to learn more about where things started and what not. Reading the packet, I was a little saddened because I am a Christian, and I know I felt that way because it all sounded logical but I still felt differently. I struggled for answers of why my God would allow those diseases and stuff. I am still faithful the He is a loving God and I am aware that the Earth is a constant battle of good and evil. That's what I believe and I'm sure you've heard everything, but I'll still pray for you because you are so full of passion for what you believe. And you're bold. That's great. Thanks so much for coming to our class — it was so interesting and it gave me a firmer belief in what I've always believed.

I enjoyed hearing both of you speak. I found your packets very interesting and thought-provoking. I appreciated the discussion because it helped me with my religious issues. Thank you both very much.

I think that the discussion went well. Thank you for being so open with us when you told us about your beliefs. It helped me a lot to understand what atheism is really about instead of just reading our textbook and not getting to hear some personal views. The only thing that could have made it better would be if we had more time to ask you some more questions.

August & Rebecca,

Thank you for taking time out of your day to come and talk to our class. It was very interesting to hear about your beliefs. I now have a better understanding of atheism. Thanks again!

August & Rebecca,

Thank you for coming to speak to us last Tuesday. You guys did a good job answering everyone's questions. I don't agree with your beliefs, but I want to thank you for respecting that. So, yea, that's all I have for you, so thanks again. The presentation was great.

Thank you for your time. You both were very informative. I do feel that you backpedaled a lot of your answers and tried to change things around. The information you gave was interesting but you need to know that when asking questions about religion you don't listen with your head, you listen with your heart. I think you analyze life too much. Good luck in life! I wish you both a great and happy life.

August & Rebecca,

I enjoyed your presentation. The folders you brought for were very insightful and beneficial to understanding atheism. The research done was very logical. You actually got me to question my beliefs without pushing yours on me. I know I probably could have discussed atheism with you two for hours because it is such a curiosity to me. Although I still remain a Christian, I will always have a little agnostic thought in my head mainly because of your case. Thank you again for coming and expanding my religious (lack of it) knowledge.

August & Rebecca,

Thanks for taking your time to come out and inform our class of your beliefs and what you stand for. I was a little unsure what atheism was all about and now I have a better understanding. A lot of what you said I didn't agree with, but that's your choice. I can't change your mind, but I can pray that you will change your ways and find your way to God. I did have something for you to think about: Have you heard that a few years ago some scientists found what they believe is Noah's ark in the desert? It was buried under the ground and the other half was sticking out where there once was water. The exact dimensions are the same as in the Bible — down to each room. Something for facts.

August Berkshire...

Good job presenting even though you are probably used to getting up in front of a bunch of people who their whole life have "known" there is a god and telling them there isn't takes a lot of courage. I think the open mind you had was a very good thing. I'm willing to bet it wasn't your intent but [one student] is a Christian who is supposed to love everyone and be nice and [another student] is an agnostic who according to a lot of Christians are supposed to be next to Lucifer as far as evil goes. When the Christians are yelling at you that you're gonna burn and you are just telling them to go in peace it makes you look much bigger.

Dear August & Rebecca,

I must say I was very impressed with the way the conversations went when the both of you took time to come and speak to our class. I can't say that I agree with you, but I must thank you for coming to speak to us anyway. It was very educational and I enjoyed the fact that you were both very open to our questions and did not take offense at anything. I have been very curious about atheism in the past and your information and ideas have opened up a lot of internal thinking to me. I always enjoy people who can make me examine my own beliefs critically. Thank you again.

Thank you for taking the time to come and speak to us. I found that the presentation was interesting, but felt as if some things were lacking. I saw the "religion" or lack thereof as not as sound as it was stated within the packet of information. At times it seemed that both of you were almost skeptical of your beliefs, as are any other person in today's society. Even though I hold different views on life, I still found the information useful and it gave me insight to my own beliefs Thank you once again.

The thing that I realized is that the arguments that August and Rebecca put forth can be argued just as good from a Christian viewpoint. When they were talking about certain things like the

fact that fossils of dinosaurs have never been found as coming from the same time as humans. A Christian would most likely say that this is because of the fact that God realized dinosaurs were basically a bad idea. He sent the comet and wiped them out. This is said to have happened between certain verses in Genesis. Then He made man. That's just an example of how it can be seen both ways and I think that when evidence for evolution is found, and people try and back up evolution, I see it just as simple to back up that same evidence with creationism. I appreciate you two coming to our class. You must be brave. The reason you don't believe in God — I think — is the fact that you (August) were pretty young when you became an atheist. You haven't had a personal experience, a falling to your knees moment. I will try and e-mail you of some supernatural occurrences. P.S. Your list of reasons not to believe in a loving god is merely a list to strengthen your faith.

I thought that you were going to be more strict but you weren't, which I think is cool in discussions. I didn't know much about atheism till today and I learned a lot. I don't think I want to be an atheist though because it seems to be based on a lot of science and proof stuff and science is discovering new things every day so who knows. I think it's fun to have a little hope or stuff to believe in that might not really exist, just for the fun of believing, and maybe ghosts are just other creatures on the Earth for some purpose, but I don't think humans can control them in any way. Thanks for sharing your thoughts, August and Rebecca.