



HUMANIST PROFILE

Helen Kagin (1934 - 2010)

“No child will ever be turned away from Camp Quest for inability to pay.”

—Helen Kagin

Helen Kagin, MD, was born Helen McGregor Smith on January 31, 1934, in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada—a city whose name she never failed to pronounce correctly, with a long “l” (even though, as she said, “people would think I was saying something dirty”). She attended medical school at the University of Saskatchewan and also became an accomplished athlete: a figure skater, ice dancer, hockey player, softball player, swimmer, and a teacher of Olympic fencing.

Kagin was employed as an anesthesiologist at Christ Hospital in Cincinnati, Ohio, having first come there as an intern. She subsequently did her residence there and then stayed on until she retired. “You don’t want me to give a speech,” she was fond of saying. “At my old job I was always putting people to sleep!”

In 1984 Helen married attorney Edwin Kagin and the two lived in Union, Kentucky, just south of Cincinnati. Though always proud of her Canadian background, she took her Kentucky residence seriously; both she and her husband engaging in a level of public service that eventually led to their receiving commissions as Kentucky colonels by the governor of the state.

This sense of Kentucky citizenship came particularly to the fore when, in 1996, Answers in Genesis, a creationist organization led by Ken Ham, came to Boone County where the Kagins lived. There they attempted to build a museum of creationism on the main road into Big Bone Lick State Park, an important paleontological site. In response to this effort, which would require the rezoning of rural land to commercial purposes, and would mislead the public regarding a connection between the park and creationism, Helen Kagin

almost singlehandedly organized and led public opposition. First she went in disguise to the Big Bone Lick Baptist Church, successfully crashing a strategy planning session to gather information, then went door to door with a petition, securing over 1,000 signatures—overwhelmingly from ordinary Christians in the community. At year’s end the creationist effort was unanimously defeated by the county planning commission, which concluded that the requested rezoning was unacceptable, and by the Boone County Fiscal Court.

A similar effort would be defeated again in 1998 elsewhere in Boone County, but without the help of the Kagins. So it took a third try before Answers in Genesis got their Creation Museum in its present location in Petersburg, Kentucky. It opened in 2007 to a peaceful demonstration called the Rally for Reason, largely organized by Helen Kagin

Also in 1996, and also in Kentucky, Helen and Edwin co-founded Camp Quest, a summer camp for freethinking children that now operates camps from coast to coast and in the United Kingdom. Camp Quest immediately became one of the greatest passions of Helen’s life and she served as the camp administrator and doctor for the first decade of the Kentucky-Ohio camp. In honor of her years of service, Camp Quest Inc. established the Helen Kagin Memorial Camper-ship Fund to provide free or reduced registration fees at any Camp Quest cite for campers in financial need.

Helen and Edwin were named Atheists of the Year at the 2005 National Convention of American Atheists.

Helen Kagin died at Christ Hospital on February 17, 2010, after undergoing surgery for lung cancer in early January. She was seventy-six.

HUMANISM is a rational philosophy informed by science, inspired by art, and motivated by compassion. Affirming the dignity of each human being, it supports liberty and opportunity consonant with social and planetary responsibility. Free of theism and other supernatural beliefs, humanism thus derives the goals of life from human need and interest rather than from theological or ideological abstractions, and asserts that humanity must take responsibility for its own destiny.

