

# This City

## PROFILE

### True Disbeliever

In the never-ending quest for truth, Ottawa Skeptics president Jonathan Abrams challenges the conventional wisdom on climate change — and zombies and sea monkeys too

BY DAVID MCDONALD

I REALLY DIDN'T THINK anyone would show up. It was, after all, a Sunday afternoon on a holiday weekend. Yet here they were, 20 people — predominantly white males of cerebral mien and dubious muscle tone — gathered in a windowless classroom at Carleton University for the monthly meeting of Ottawa Skeptics. I am among the true believers, keepers of the flame, who hold that scientific rigour and rational argument have the power to uncloud men's minds.

The group's founder and self-declared president, Jonathan Abrams, a 26-year-old Barrhaven computer engineer, presides. Abrams introduces a presentation by artificial-intelligence developer Lee Graham on his work in the field of "evolutionary computing and 3DVCE [three-dimensional virtual creature evolution]." It's pretty brainy stuff, but apart from an implicit endorsement of the principles of evolution, it doesn't seem to have much connection with the core concerns of Ottawa Skeptics.

"Basically, skepticism is the promotion of science and critical thinking," Abrams explains afterwards. "We all agree that science works, that it's the best method for determining objective truth. So our members tend to be people who are technically savvy, who are science nerds. But I don't want to limit



it in that way. Everyone can take part."

Abrams started the group in November 2007 to challenge the myriad manifestations of pseudoscience, hocus-pocus, mumbo-jumbo, hoodoo, voodoo, and barnyard-variety quackery that, miraculously, continue to thrive in a world that runs increasingly on cold, hard cyber logic. Acupuncture, angels, astrology, bigfeet, cold fusion, crop circles, feng shui, ghosts, intelligent design, perpetual-motion machines, UFOs — all and more are subjected to the logical litmus of one of contemporary skepticism's patron saints, the late American astronomer Carl Sagan: "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence."

"Why people believe in these things is hard to say," Abrams says. "I guess a lot of it is wishful thinking. It's nice that homeopathy or chiropractic or visiting a psychic makes you feel better, but you

have to ask yourself, if these things are so effective, then why is it that when you study them in a controlled setting, they come up flat? That's why it's important to follow the scientific evidence, or we're just wasting our money and putting ourselves at risk."

Sounds like an eminently reasonable pursuit. But for those of us whose science careers consist of little more than dissecting the odd frog or causing a minor explosion in the chem lab, making sense of it all can be a daunting task.

"I have a lot of sympathy for people," Abrams says. "Sometimes the evidence is really hard to understand. And often it's hard to know who to trust. A lot of people are skeptical of institutions like government and big pharma and the like — and with good reason." That's where Ottawa Skeptics comes in. In addition to hosting monthly get-togethers, the group maintains a spiffy website

(ottawaskeptics.org) where you can, among other things, listen to *Reality Check*, a weekly podcast that takes on serious topics like climate change and alternative medicine, not-so-serious subjects like zombies and sea monkeys, and nuggets of popular wisdom such as the commonly held belief that nerds need glasses more than other people.

The group also indulges in a bit of what Abrams calls “skeptical outreach.” Recently, for instance, he and a fellow Skeptic, Barry Green, examined claims made by a local promoter for something called an Electro-Magnetic Balancer, which, among other things, asserts that it can eliminate stress, reduce snoring, and make water molecules grow. Each of these small miracles is purportedly accomplished by harmonizing “natural and man-made electromagnetic energies.”

The magical device turned out to be a PVC canister containing a mixture of calcium carbonate, kelp, and clay. But what really caught the attention of Abrams and Green was that two allegedly cash-strapped Ottawa schools had purchased a number of the gadgets — they’re listed on the Internet at \$160US apiece — to improve concentration and attentiveness among students.

“We contacted the school board,” Abrams says. “We said the public shouldn’t be wasting money on things like this. The board hemmed and hawed for a couple of months, then confirmed the devices had been removed. We saw that as a victory and sent out our first ever press release about it.”

And when American “spiritual teacher and psychic” Sylvia Browne, who claims to have her own hotline to the

dead, appeared at the National Arts Centre in April (tickets \$59-\$155), some Skeptics showed up to pass out pamphlets explaining how she and her ilk perform their tricks. “We printed up about 300 of them, and they were gone in about 20 minutes,” says Abrams. “People were snapping them up, even coming back to ask for more. That was a lot of fun.”

Any converts? “We really don’t expect to change people’s minds on the spot,” Abrams says. “In the worst case, we’re just making some kind of statement. Best case, we’re maybe planting a few seeds, maybe increasing the general level of skepticism slightly.”

But isn’t skepticism itself just another belief system, a secular religion of sorts — albeit one based on pooping on other people’s parties? “I can confidently say no to that,” Abrams counters. “For us, nothing is set in stone. We don’t have a book. We don’t have a dogma. Our position isn’t based on a desired result. It’s based on a method of determining the truth that’s proved itself very reliable.

“Bigfoot believers, on the other hand, believe — not because the evidence says so, but because they want it to be true. For us, the evidence simply isn’t there. And acknowledging that, I think, is a much more intellectually honest position to hold.”

One last thing we have to ask. “What sign are you?”

Abrams, a closet Gemini — they’re renowned as seekers of knowledge — laughs. “You know what’s funny?” he asks. “I know my sign, but I have no idea what my blood type is. Now, wouldn’t that be more useful to know?”

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