

# Tampa Bay Skeptics

## REPORT

VOLUME 4 NO. 1 SUMMER 1991

### TBS panel addresses local chapter of Society of Professional Journalists

A panel of TBS members, including consultant James Randi, addressed a gathering of about 50 area journalists on June 3 at the monthly meeting of the Tampa Bay chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists. The invitation was extended to TBS by Mel Martin, News Director of WTSP-TV Ch. 10 in St. Petersburg/Tampa, who, as a long-time subscriber to the *Skeptical Inquirer*, shares TBS's disappointment with the quality of media coverage of the paranormal.

Representing TBS at the meeting, which was held at the Ch. 10 studios, were (from right to left beginning with photo next column) founder and *TBS Report* editor Gary Posner, vice chairman Miles Hardy, chairman Terry Smiljanich, and the once again, as always, "Amazing" Randi, who had also appeared earlier in the day as guest on Ch. 10's *Murphy in the Morning* show. About a dozen TBS members were also present in the audience, participating in the lively give-and-take.

There was some difference of opinion among the reporters, and even among TBS panel members, as



Photos by Guss Wilder

to whether, for instance, the next "haunted house" claim should even be covered by the media. While Posner had "no problem" with covering such stories as long as the skeptical viewpoint is represented, Smiljanich noted that such reports are "a dime a dozen," and suggested that "there has to come a point where the media makes a judgement 'no more haunted house stories.'" Ch. 8 anchor Barbara Callahan remarked that "I think if we only got one call, we'd probably ignore it," but if another station were to cover such a claim, "then it becomes something that the other news outlets feel they must give some attention to." Added Callahan, getting a roar from the audience, "I think if we got the video we'd sure go with it."

Other topics discussed included UFOs, ESP, astrology, graphology, the "Weeping Icon," the "Shroud of Turin,"

exorcism, levitation, biorhythms, and the dichotomy between science and religion. When asked a multiple choice question by Mel Martin about the "intellectual qualifications" of reporters, there was consensus among the panel that reporters are "pretty bright," but that many too easily accept uncritically what is told to them.

Ch. 10 reporter Al Ruechel claimed to have witnessed,



while in Africa, numerous examples of levitation. He also claims to be personally aware of

many local successful faith-healings, including, as he later told Posner, such dramatic cures as a golfball-sized malignant tumor being present one day and gone the next. He promised to get back to Posner, and to arrange a "\$1,000 Challenge" case for TBS's review.

Other highlights included Randi's story of how he coached an artist friend of his to become "Carlos," a "trance channeler," who, in only two weeks time (with the unwitting assistance of the media which uncritically disseminated Randi's phony hype about "Carlos"), became a major draw in Australia, filling the Sydney Opera House. Randi explained how "one phone call from anybody in the media could have found out that the whole thing was a fake." He then told of a fellow (Bernie Langham?) who is able to look at classical LP recordings and non-psychically name the musical piece (by the appearance of the grooves). Randi also performed the "jumping toothpick" and the Uri Geller compass-moving effect (hint: magnet taped to knee), and Posner showed, to the crowd's delight, TV video of Randi performing "spoon-bending" and "psychic surgery."

#### Letter - Summer 1992:

Editor: I have enjoyed working with you over the last three years, and I hope you felt our [WTSP-TV 10's] coverage was fair. Now the public is going crazy over "JFK," and the misinformation from the media is truly astounding. Please feel free to contact me at my new station at any time. I appreciate the fine work that you do, and thank you again for the best SPJ [Society of Professional Journalists] program in many years (see our Summer '91 issue for details -G.P.).

Mel Martin, Station Manager  
WINK-TV, Fort Myers

(Formerly News Director, WTSP-TV, St. Pete./Tampa)

See additional color photographs on next page . . .





**Left to Right: Terry Smiljanich, James "The Amazing" Randi, Miles Hardy, Gary Posner**



**Standing far right: Ch. 10 News Director Mel Martin**