

Seriously Spooky:

How to turn a holiday into a hobby... and then into a business

■ The haunting never stops with an Ardenwald couple who are turning a Halloween passion into a spook-tacular business with a book and a web site

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What do you do if you have too many monks?

If you are Ardenwald residents Chris and Jeff Davis, you build a church in the front yard for them.

Of course, the church has a skull, and is made with a Styrofoam masonry technique; the monks are "mudmen," and the front yard is littered with coffins, a giant spider and tombstones. Lots and lots of tombstones.

Welcome to Halloween at SE 43rd and Johnson Creek Boulevard.

But if you missed the Davis Graveyard display this past All Hallows Eve, not to worry, it will be back next year, you can go online any time and look at images of the graveyard, and, if the Davises have their way, there will soon be a book detailing how they do everything.

"When we bought this house [in 1989] we thought it had a cemetery look to it. We'd decorated for Halloween before with friends in California, so when we came up here we were dying to do this," said Chris Davis.

The pair first began seriously decorating their home in Milwaukie in 1997, and every year they have added more,



shadows, but we want to encourage the imagination to run wild.

"We create a mood and let people use their minds. We don't buy fake chainsaws and hire actors."

"We are family friendly — you can do a really neat display without scaring people," Chris Davis added.

"We also want to stress to people that it's affordable. You can start out small and buy supplies — you can spend the same amount of money that you'd spend at the store [buying pre-made decorations]," Jeff Davis noted.

The Davises estimate that around 1,500 visitors came to eyeball the display on Halloween night.

Comments on their cards expressed awe and delight with the display, the couple said.

"We stand at the gate and hand out candy," Jeff Davis explained, adding that the gates are locked and no one is permitted on the actual grounds.

He likens the display to a set in a theater.

"You don't let people on stage, so you don't deal with the set being messed up. It's also like Christmas lights — you can drive by and look at it," he said.

The pair noted that they learned a few lessons this year.

"With all the media hype, we needed traffic control — there was a bottleneck of cars on Johnson Creek," Jeff Davis said, while his wife added that some of the props needed to be moved.

The two said they are exhausted, but looking forward to putting their book proposal together. They will also be submitting a videotape of their yard

"We spent this last year going through the whole process of creating a brand, a name [Davis Graveyard] and a logo," he added.

The book is entitled "Haunt Your Yard for Halloween: 12 Unbelievably Simple Projects For Your Yard Haunt," and it will feature photos of the Davis Graveyard props, and step-by-step explanations how to create them.

It turns out that there is a "whole industry of yard haunters," Chris Davis noted, and they gather at conventions.

Also, after doing research, the couple discovered that the Halloween-decoration industry is heating up.

"It's the second largest decorated holiday," Jeff Davis noted.

When people come to visit the "yard haunt" at Davis Graveyard, many of them ask where the props came from.

"We tell them we can explain how to make these things with ease," Chris Davis said, while her husband added, "We tell them you can produce better decorations than you could buy."

There are instructions to make some of the items available on the Internet, the Davises noted, but, Jeff Davis, said, "It's all over the place and it is inconsistent."

The pair decided they could do better by producing a book, and came up with a marketing strategy — they could sell the book at places like Home Depot, and they could teach seminars on yard haunting at yard and garden shows in Portland and maybe even Seattle.

"We also think, business-wise, that we'd like to show people how to make these things, rather than make and sell them. It's easier to write a book and do



seminars," Jeff Davis said.

The couple noted that they would be interested in making props for restaurants and night clubs, but said that their work would be too expensive for the average homeowner. And they want to encourage people to make their own props, and develop their own style.

The book has chapters on design and layout, lighting and sound and, of course, those "12 Unbelievably Simple Projects," including animated ghosts, tombstones, grim reapers, memorials, rotted skeletons, cages, scarecrows, coffins, animated spiders, wrought iron fencing, stone pillars and mausoleums.

The monks and the grim reaper are "mudmen," and are constructed from "four parts drywall mud and one part paint," Chris Davis explained, adding that when you dip burlap in the mud it dries and becomes stiff.

The resulting creatures can withstand some rain, but they are big and harder to move when wet, she noted.

"We started with tombstones, and once we made one, we discovered it is not a bother to do another 20 — they look so good," she added.

The Davises also admit to being meticulous about what they do — they start with a sketch and a floor plan, then they give visitors cards asking for comments, and finally they videotape the display every year and critique it.

"You need to understand space and how to work with it, and you need to be consistent with a theme. You have to do the design and layout first," Chris Davis said.

Her husband added, "In the industry some people enjoy scaring people, but that is not what we do. Ours is more subtle — there are scary things in the

ground is covered," Chris Davis said.

Her husband added, "You get more creative output with Halloween. There is more drama and flair, plus we are the pioneers in elaborate Halloween displays."

fast facts

Jeff and Chris Davis provide a neighborhood Halloween "diorama" or a stage set for people to look at, in their yard at SE 43rd and Johnson Creek Boulevard.

The display is on view the last two weekends in October, and is taken down the weekend after Halloween.

They do not charge admission and they do not let people walk through the display.

"It's enjoyable for the community and safer — there are no fire issues, and no sharp edges," Jeff Davis said.

The display features tombstones with witty sayings like "It's only a flesh wound" and "Your name here."

There are skeletons in cages, a grim reaper, a giant pumpkin, half-opened coffins, spider webs, a church complete with a parade of monks, and an elaborate mausoleum.

The display is lighted at night for a spooky atmospheric look.

The Davises are writing a how-to book to inspire and instruct people.

Check out the Davis Graveyard website at: www.davisgraveyard.com

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