

Haunts turn to eeriness to entertain

Halloween | The Davis Graveyard aims for atmosphere rather than blood and guts

By **LAURA GUNDERSON**
THE OREGONIAN

For years, the haunt industry has hummed on the proceeds of attractions that spook, startle and sicken.

But to grow, say industry insiders, new hauntings must turn down a less-traveled — cue up the wolf howls and mysterious rustlings in the bush — and somewhat lonely path.

"Scare is king. We're competing with movies and amusement park rides and their level of detail is huge," said Leonard Pickel, editor of Haunted Attraction magazine.

"Those you can't frighten," he said, "you must entertain."

Such a theme runs through the Davis Graveyard in Milwaukie, where visitors giggle at humorous headstones and high-tech touches after an initial gasp at the massive mechanical spider or the ghostly apparition that walks down the front stairs and then disappears — mostly.

From year to year over the past decade, Jeff and Chris Davis have carved headstones from foam, cast cement skulls and designed haunted buildings for their corner lot at Southeast 43rd Avenue and Johnson Creek Boulevard. He's a computer programmer and former stagehand. She's a marketing whiz who's always loved Halloween.

"We're not into blood and gore," said Jeff Davis, who builds the cemetery's attractions in a garage hidden behind his year-old haunted cathedral facade. "We're more into eerie."

Several trips to European cemeteries, national haunting conferences and years' worth of jotted-down notes shaped the graveyard, which earned second place in this year's yard haunt category of the Haunt X international awards. The Davises want you to stare and look at every carefully crafted, chilling detail — not to run screaming.

The biggest complaints from the industry's core customer age 13 to 30 is that attractions aren't scary or long enough, said Pickel of the trade magazine. Haunters push limits on what's legal and safe, but some people won't scare, Pickel said.



Photos by MOTOYA NAKAMURA/THE OREGONIAN

Jeff Davis built the gravedigger, who comes to life in his front yard in Milwaukie on weekends, from a collection of body parts sold on a haunt hawkers Web site. "I still come out of my house sometimes and think someone's in the front yard," he said with a laugh.



Jeff Davis and his wife, Chris, have been turning their corner lot into a graveyard every Halloween since moving to Oregon a decade ago. They got their start in California, where they helped a group of friends create a neighborhood haunted house.

"To make the jump to the suspension of disbelief, you must make it look more realistic," he said. "Make them feel that they really are in a Victorian house or an alien spaceship."

Many of the nation's scariest haunts have picked up on that, he said, but a good dose of intrigue in new venues large and small could increase interest and, in turn, sales of everything from tickets to synthetic blood.

The Davises believe in the move toward more artful hauntings and teach others in a local network of fear mongers — a group called Frightfest Northwest — how to build spooky sets, breath digital life into apparitions and set skeletal hands

into motion under cracked-open coffins. The pair plan to publish a book soon on how to plan, build and electrify yard haunts.

Frightfest members Tim and Tina Reuwsaat are using projection effects learned from the Davises this year in their Medford haunt, Darkwing Manor & Morguetorium Museum. There, the Baron and Baroness Reuwsaat, vampires who fled persecution in Romania, provide a haven for other vampires and restless souls.

"You never know who you're going to run into out there," said Tina Reuwsaat of her two-acre antiques-filled yard haunt that includes a tour of her vintage Halloween collection, and

If you go

What: The Davis Graveyard
Where: 8703 S.E. 43rd Ave., Milwaukie

When: The graveyard is illuminated weeknights through Halloween, yet its spooky special effects come to life only on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights.

Cost: Free. Donations accepted for the Milwaukie High School dance team, which will perform Halloween night.

Info: www.DavisGraveyard.com or davisishouse-news.blogspot.com

Humorous headstones: Barry D. Alive; Rick R. Mortis; Justin Pieces; Ron D. Vous — He met with death; Hold my beer and watch this (his last words)

mourning and funerary museum.

"As haunts start to compete more with each other, they're trying to kick up their eye candy a notch," she said. "You need different types of scares for different things."

"Some people are afraid of spiders, some are afraid of clowns and some are afraid of snakes," she said. "That way you get everyone at least once."

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