

HALLOWEEN FUN

Creeping people out is the haunted mission

BY DANA GEORGE
Special to the Record-Eagle

Remember how much fun you had the first time you visited a haunted house? There's much to be said for bundling up in cozy fall clothing, piling into a car with friends and family and spending the entire ride to the haunted house anticipating how scary it might be.

For Joe Ritchie of Kalkaska, that thrill never wore off. But rather than attend haunted houses, Ritchie gets a kick out of creating them.

"We started as a youth group about 13 years ago," said Ritchie, 29. "Just a bunch of kids getting together who shared a special interest."

That "special interest" was creating the creepiest possible haunted house for their friends to visit.

"I always liked scary movies, and always had a knack for scaring people," Ritchie said.

Today Ritchie and his business partner, Alan Hughes, have channeled that passion for haunted Halloweens into a business called Evernight Entertainment. Though they've been up and running for several years, the business isn't making much money yet. Still, they're having the time of their lives.

"It's so much fun, just seeing these grown ups walk in, all brave, putting on this nice front for their kids. By the end they're pushing the kids ahead of them," he said.

Ritchie and Hughes travel each March to the Transworld Exhibit in Chicago, where they see the latest products available for haunted houses. With their creative juices flowing, the two men begin planning their event months in advance.

Each has a full-time job —

Ritchie at Turtle Creek Casino and Hughes at Gaylord Ford. But they're committed to building a professional reputation as haunted house hosts.

"First and foremost, the reason we do these haunted houses is because they're just a load of fun," said Alan Hughes, 26. "It's safe, clean fun and allows us to bring our love of Halloween to other people."

Hughes said that he and his partner want to bring the fun back to the holiday they enjoyed so much as children.

"We don't use a lot of gore or anything sacrilegious in our haunted house," said Hughes.

"We don't want to upset anyone.

"Obviously, there are quite a few religious people who would be extremely offended and we're not out to offend or upset anyone. That kind of thing would completely go against our goals."

So be prepared to be spooked — but not grossed out — in one of Evernight Entertainment's haunted houses. Set in the mythical "Dreadmore Manor," the mansion takes guests through a series of unusual sights: black lit rooms that hide anyone who might be lurking there; a museum of various creatures Mr. Dreadmore has collected from around the world, including the resident werewolf; an in-house morgue; and a maze that appears to shift as guests stroll through.

This Halloween will mark the first that Evernight Entertainment has been unable to secure a Traverse City location for their haunted house.

"We'll be in Gaylord this year, in a building we rented from Halloween USA," said Ritchie, adding that while the pair is excited by the prospect of the new location, they're a bit sad to



Record-Eagle/Jim Bovin

Drew Donegan prepares a witch for a haunted fire station that will open in Kalkaska starting Oct. 30.

be located so far away from their Traverse City audience.

"We have fans who show up every year and certain rooms that they have to have every year," Ritchie said.

Ideally, said Ritchie, it takes around 25 actors to make a haunted house come to life.

One group that has no trouble finding actors for their haunted house is the Emergency Service Explorers Program, Station 6, in Kalkaska.

"The Explorers program is for youth 14 to 21. They learn about fire rescue, emergency medical service, and working with law enforcement," said Drew Donegan, a volunteer firefighter, owner of Northern Michigan

Digital Marketing and one of the group's sponsors.

As kids, Donegan and his friends created their own haunted houses in their basements. As an Explorer sponsor, he's able to keep that interest alive while teaching his group some important skills.

"It's a great thing for the Explorers to do," said Donegan, 33. "It gives them leadership skills and allows them to get out in the community and get things done."

The Explorers meet every Tuesday night and have been working on ideas for their haunted station — held at the fire house in Kalkaska — for weeks already. While they don't

expect to make a profit, they do get something back for all their efforts, said Donegan.

"It's something we do more for the community, and it's just so much fun for us."

The Explorers' haunted house at the Kalkaska fire station is scheduled for Thursday, Oct. 30, from 7 to 10 p.m., Friday, Oct. 31, from 7 p.m. to midnight and Saturday, Nov. 1, from 7-10 p.m.

The Gaylord Haunted House will be open across from K-mart Oct. 24, 25 and 26, Oct. 30 and 31 and Nov. 1 and 2. The time is the same each night: 7 p.m. - midnight. The cost is \$8 for adults, \$6 for 12 and under. For other details, visit the Web site, www.evernighthaunt.com.

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