

At Area Haunted Houses

Youths Make Things Go Bump in the Night

By Jena Janovy

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Jim Peterson just tried to "think like a lunatic." Chris Rowe said he especially enjoys scaring young children.

Crystal Wright giggled at the thought of spooking her friends. And Dusty Conrad said she just likes to have fun.

The four high school students from the Omaha area are just a few of the volunteers this Halloween season who stalk dark halls, lurk behind doors, swing axes or chain saws and gush blood — all in the name of ghoulish good fun at local haunted houses.

"It's just fun being in there and having people scream," said Peterson, 18, a junior at South High School who smeared his face with white, black and red makeup before taking his place in the torture chamber at the Omaha Community Playhouse-KOIL Vintage Stone Castle of Terror at 20th and Center Streets. Proceeds from the haunted castle go to the Community Playhouse volunteer program.

'Think Like Lunatic'

"It's kind of hard to explain," he said. "But to see the people coming through and having fun and knowing you're a part of it, that's just fun. I try and think like a lunatic. I try and get into the character because if you just stand there and be yourself, it doesn't work."

Peterson, son of Judy Peterson, said he joined the haunting crew because he is interested in theater, especially after performing in South High presentations of "Dracula" and "Anything Goes."

While in character and working in the house, Peterson said, the spooks are not allowed to touch passers-by.

"I usually just roam the halls and jump out at people and grab at them," he said. "I can't touch them, and that gets to be hard because you want to reach out and grab them when they look like they're on the verge of screaming, but you know you can't."

"So you just get in their face some more. If I know them, I start yelling their names. Other times, I'll just play off what they say. Like if they say something about my looks, I'll come back with something about them. I just try to make it sound like

I'm a lunatic.

"Some people you can tell are screaming just for the heck of it. Other people cry all the way through, and you can tell they're really scared. Sometimes you feel bad about them."

'Death Stalker'

Peterson and others said the best technique to physically transform yourself into a "death stalker" is to paste some cold cream on the face before smearing on white foundation makeup and applying red paint with a small brush or pin.

"It really gets the adrenalin going and gets you excited," Peterson said of pacing the mysteriously gloomy halls. "It's just fun. I love it."

Rowe said his friend, Jeff Sharp, a classmate at Council Bluffs Thomas Jefferson High School, encouraged him to join the cast at the Castle of Terror.

"All of my life I've gone doom," he said. "I've always gone to haunted houses. And I've gone to this one for a long time. This has been a favorite of mine, and I've wanted to work here."

"The fun part is scaring the little girls and other young people. Certain people get it a little more than others, but I like the little girls because they say funny stuff when they're scared."

Rowe, 14, a freshman at Thomas Jefferson and son of Mr. and Mrs. Clifford Rowe of Council Bluffs, said working in a haunted house is like acting — only better.

"You don't have to memorize lines. You can make them up on your own," he said. "You have that freedom."

"I've always liked the feeling of scaring people because you have control over people's feelings. There's a difference between a bad scare and a good scare. Once in a while, it's fun to get a good scare."

Brad Finkle, who runs the house, said his volunteers follow specific safety instructions and rules, such as not touching the people who walk through the house.

Mark Miller, president of Genesis V, which operates the Haunted Hotel California at 15th and California Streets, said his 35 volunteer spooks follow many of the same guidelines, such as no touching the customers, no smoking in the building, no



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Dressing up for a night of horror... Peterson applies theater makeup for work at the Castle of Terror. Rowe is in the background.

swearing and no talking between display rooms.

Ghost Town

One of Miller's creeps, 15-year-old Dusty Conrad, said that of all the rooms in the two-story building, including the blood room, witch room and insane asylum, she likes the ghost town most.

"It's easier to scare people there," she said, because she can hide behind props and shoot a gun — with blanks — to startle people.

Miss Conrad, 15, is a sophomore at Omaha North High School. Her parents are Mr. and Mrs. David Conrad. Crystal Wright seemed disap-

pointed Sunday night when Miller told her she was assigned to take tickets at the door.

She had wanted to be a "pusher" — someone who either leads or follows a group of 10 people through the 25-minute trail of fear — but she was too young.

Miss Wright, 16, a junior at Omaha North and daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Roger Wright, said she began working at the haunted house four years ago when Miller took over.

Before assuming her position at the ticket counter, Miss Wright said: "It's fun seeing your friends go away saying they weren't scared when you know they really were."