

Neighbors



Photograph by Sean Pennello

You Talking to Me? The big confrontation between the evil young witch Crystal (Cassie Eckenrode) and the good wizard.

'Ghoulsville' haunts Almaden neighborhood

By Anne Ward Ernst

Silicon Valley savvy crossed with techno-creepy wires and a spine-chilling passion for Allhallow's Eve has spawned a spooky web of frightening fun called "Ghoulsville."

Every Halloween for the past 10 years, two families of self-described "techno-weenies," armed with a bubbling cauldron of creativity, brew up a haunted house and graveyard fit for the tiniest of goblins.

"People drag babies through it," said techno-weenie Mark Schmal. "But they usually sleep through it."

Ghoulsville, designed to raise the hair of people of all ages, haunts the home of Ron and Patricia Higgin in Almaden Valley. Higgin says he gives up his garage for almost four months out of the year to transform it into a haunted house for the shows that typically begin the week before Halloween.

Ghoulsville began as, and continues to be, a creative outlet for Shawn Higgin, Ron and Patricia's son, and Ron and Patricia's son-in-law, Mark Schmal.

"I've been screwing around with Halloween most of my life," said Mark Schmal. "Same with my brother-in-law."

Basically, it's gotten out of hand."

Schmal said that when he started dating his wife, Rebecca, he and her brother, Shawn, discovered they both were bewitched by all things Halloween and enjoyed building things, and they both are technical wizards.

Combining to make up the family's not-so-evil forces, the family members each play an integral part in producing the show—everything from building and decorating the props, to the computer-controlled lighting, animatronics, pyrotechnics, pneumatically operating doors and ceiling, and—new to this year's production—a laser show.

"We have the most creative team that I've ever seen assembled in one place," said Higgin, who wrote the custom software that runs everything from an animatronic skeleton to a crawling and jumping spider.

The project allows the families to spend time together, they said, with everyone contributing with his or her own specialty.

Schmal's parents dug in and built a coffin and an 8-foot-tall ghoulish named Clyde, whose arms rise as he grows to 14 feet sprouting lights from his head. Patricia Higgin does all the wall mural painting.

Movement, such as Clyde's growth or a talking animatronic granny in a rocking chair, is driven by 12 computers in a control room set up on the front porch that Shawn handles.

"We probably have about a mile of cable, wiring and networking that goes to four or five distribution points," Higgin said.

Schmal writes and directs the show, which is re-themed every two years. This year's story is about a little girl whose magical powers are no good for her and her parents are having a difficult time controlling her. He is the only member of the team with any theatrical background, which he says he gained when he was younger.

Ghastly hours are put in by the core team, they said, and the families rely on about 15 to 20 friends, whom they fondly call "victims," to help construct and perform the show.

The show draws between 200 to 400 people each night, many who come from the Almaden Valley area where the haunted Higgin house is located.

"We've put about 2,000 people through," Higgin said of the show's cumulative total.

The families, who see no financial gain from the show, which is free to the public, put it on every year because it is a hobby and they just plain like it.

"We really enjoy seeing the people," Higgin said. "The kids are worth it. Their eyes are just as big as saucers."

Though the family accepts donations, the amount collected has never come close to covering their production, material and maintenance costs.

This year, due to high demand from little ghosts, goblins and their parents, the show will continue one day after Halloween.

"We will be open on Nov. 1 for the first time," Higgin said. "So the kids can still trick-or-treat (on Halloween) and come see the show (the next night.)"

Ghoulsville will be open Friday, Oct. 31, and Saturday, Nov. 1, from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. It is located at 856 Hampswood in San Jose. For directions or more information, visit <http://www.ghoulsville.com>.

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