

# Real ghost hunters

By Katherine Luck

## Local groups investigate things that go bump in the night

You're home alone. It's dark. Suddenly, the floorboards creak. You hear a low whisper. You sense someone ... or *something* right behind you. Your house is haunted. Who're you gonna call?

"It's kind of creepy when people hear noises they can't explain. People get scared, and that's not any way to live. We help them feel empowered. It's like when a person is robbed; it's the same thing with a haunting. They feel their space is violated. There's a healing process that needs to take place, and we help with that," said Donna Opsal.

Opsal is a ghost hunter. She and her group, the Washington State Ghost Society, investigate the homes of families troubled by pesky poltergeists, phantoms and paranormal phenomena.

"We listen. We don't consider them crazy. The first thing I say is, 'You're not crazy,'" said Opsal.

Opsal is part of a growing subculture in the Puget Sound region made up of earnest individuals who get their kicks investigating the supernatural.

"At the time when I started my group, there wasn't any ghost hunting outlet here," said Ross Allison, founder and president of Advanced Ghost Hunters of Seattle-Tacoma (A.G.H.O.S.T.). He started the group in 2000. Nine years later, he and A.G.H.O.S.T. members have conducted approximately 500 investigations of haunted sites around Washington.

"We've done quite a few private homes. Most of our investigations come from people requesting us. We average three to four investigations per month," said Allison. "Most of the time, people are just curious about what's going on in their home. They don't want to get rid of it necessarily. We don't advertise ourselves as ghostbusters ... [but] if the client wants to get rid of the ghost, we can help them."

"In the last 10 years, there has been this incredible explosion of interest, thanks to the Internet and cable TV," said Neil McNeill, founder of the Evergreen Paranormal Group and an instructor in paranormal investigation at Shoreline Community College.

McNeill has witnessed three distinct boom periods of interest in paranormal investigation, all of which are directly tied to film or television. The first occurred in the 1980s, when the movie *Ghostbusters* came out. Another came in the 1990s, when "The X-Files" hit the airwaves. Today, reality shows such as "Ghost Hunters" and "Paranormal State" have demonstrated to

viewers that they, too, can hunt for ghosts. However, according to McNeill and other local ghost hunters, a lot of what you see on TV isn't accurate.

"Generally, it's not that dramatic. It's more hard work. We spend time gathering the evidence in the field, then we spend hours interpreting the evidence," Opsal said.

Paranormal investigations typically follow a prescribed pattern. The ghost hunters interview the haunted homeowners and examine the house. If it seems like a ghost might indeed be present, the group launches a formal investigation, which can involve three to 20 ghost hunters, depending on the size of the property.

You won't find ghost hunters sporting *Ghostbusters*-style "Proton Packs," but there is plenty of equipment involved. The equipment, or "tech," ranges from the mundane, including digital cameras, video cameras, tape recorders, flashlights, pendulums and dousing rods; to exotic and expensive computer surveillance equipment, motion sensors, thermal imaging cameras, and the granddaddy of the ghost hunter's arsenal, the EMF meter.

"It's kind of like a stud finder. They find electromagnetic fields in the area. There's a thinking that spirits use that kind of energy," Opsal explained.

But for some ghost hunters, nothing beats their standard-issue five senses.

"I'm not a huge fan of tech. Generally, I teach my classes to be observant first and let the tech do its work second," said McNeill.

A bare-bones paranormal investigation includes a tech person in charge of the equipment, a general investigator taking notes, a psychic, and a team leader who coordinates the investigation and writes a report on the ghost hunters' findings.

"I'm a real empiricist. I need to see some evidence before I make a judgment. We do try hard to debunk," said Opsal. "There are lots of things that can cause strange noises that you should check before you jump to the paranormal. ... We try hard to find a really good explanation before we say it's a ghost."

Opsal explained that Washington State Ghost Society's priorities are to help people troubled by the paranormal first and



PHOTO BY KEVIN WRENN

Evergreen Paranormal Group founder Neil McNeil uses special equipment to investigate potential hauntings.

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foremost, and then to add to the body of knowledge about the supernatural.

“My biggest thing is I want people to be educated,” Allison agreed.

Though he appeared on “Ghost Hunters” when the TAPS group filmed an episode in Seattle, Allison, too, is ambivalent about such shows. He has found that only one out of every 10 investigations will yield any evidence of paranormal activity, though each episode is inevitably edited for maximum spirit activity, as well as an overall spookiness that isn’t always present in a real haunted house.

### Where the ghosts are

If you want to see a ghost this Halloween, you have to know how to find one.

For novices, Dark and Stormy Nights 1: Introduction to Paranormal Investigation at Shoreline Community College is a good start. The class, the first in a 22-hour course, covers field investigations and data gathering from a scientific point of view, ending with an actual investigation of a local haunted site.

“It sounds pretty heavy at the outset. We’re talking ESP, poltergeists, out of body experiences, near death experiences — all these things we call paranormal. But in actuality, it’s very interesting and fun,” said McNeill, who has been teaching the class for a year.

For those who have already bought an EMF meter off eBay (yes, they actually sell them), there are a number of famously haunted sites right in our own backyard. Not all of them welcome the curious, however.

“A lot of weekend ghost hunters like to go out to public graveyards, and there’s nothing wrong with that, but you want to get permission to be there, because the police *will* show up. Someone will call them,” McNeill advised.

Across the board, area ghost hunters’ favorite site is the Pioneer Square Underground, which offers a two-hour “haunted” tour to the public.

Still, just because a site is haunted, don’t expect to see a ghost.

“I’ve spent many, many nights in dilapidated old buildings that are the quintessential haunted houses, where you’d think something would happen, and nothing does,” said McNeill. “Unfortunately, ghosts don’t punch a time clock!”

But what if ghosts have taken up residence in your home, and you’d like to

*stop* seeing them?

“Research your area and find a group to investigate,” said Allison, cautioning, “No group should be charging for their services. It affects your credibility if you charge for investigations.”

“If they charge you, run. If [they] charge, there’s a supposition there’s a ghost, which takes away [their] objectivity,” Opsal agreed.

“The biggest thing that I tell people if they think they’re dealing with a spirit is, try and communicate. Sometimes, I realize, it’s a courage factor — it can be scary for people. Sometimes it’s our imagination that scares us the most. That’s one way to know if you’re dealing with something intelligent — does it respond to you?” said Allison. “A lot of times, they just want you to know that they’re there. They don’t want to scare you.”

Whether you’re a believer, a skeptic or on the fence about the existence of the supernatural, the ghost hunters are there to help if ... and when ... you need them.

“In my book, the paranormal is normal. It’s only perceived as something beyond our normal experience. But in my experience, it *is* the norm. We just happen to be able to tune into it at times. It’s not scary. I’m asked that a lot, ‘Does this work scare you?’ No, it fascinates me,” said McNeill. ■