

HOME IS WHERE THE HORROR IS

Teens build their own haunted house in Sylvania Twp backyard

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At most haunted houses, you expect to hear blood-curdling screams and ghosts shouting, 'Boo!'

At Hell's Gate — the 2,000-square-foot homemade Halloween attraction in 16-year-old Nick Francis' backyard in Sylvania Township — you might get something even scarier, like the sound of a fire engine roaring down the block. At least that was the scene there last month after a haunted house test run resulted in huge clouds of artificial fog that made their way over to nearby Laskey Road.

'Oh geez! The firemen are here!' shouted one of the teens who helped build this monstrosity (a term lovingly applied by Nick's father, Jim).

Such are the hazards of constructing your own haunted house, especially if you want it to be the biggest and best home haunt in the country. It turns out there are more pitfalls than you might expect, enough to make you wonder if the whole proposition might be, well, cursed.

For one, there's the constant need for more power, especially when you have numerous fog machines and oodles of special lighting.

VIDEO

[Take a tour of Hell's Gate](#)

'We blew [fuses] 20 times today,' Nick said during the dress rehearsal. 'We can't turn on ourouselights anymore while this is on because it will blow circuit breakers.'

Then there's the issue of permits, which became a source of panic after a neighbor complained about the project to township authorities. Ultimately, a temporary zoning permit was granted with the stipulation that Hell's Gate be for the benefit of the neighborhood essentially and not increase traffic there. (As a result, it will not be open to the public.) A building permit was deemed unnecessary because plans did not include things like a foundation or plumbing, according to a township official.

None of this was able to discourage Nick or his cousin and co-owner, Max Simon, 14, of Strongsville, Ohio, who with their team of friends were determined to bring this demented dream to fruition. Nick, a junior at Toledo Technology Academy, has been organizing haunted houses since he was in first grade but none of them looked anything like this.

Hell's Gate features a giant, gruesome maze in the Francis family's backyard. Stationed throughout are realistic-looking body parts — many homemade from Styrofoam and a special goop made with joint compound — and a cast of creepy characters. The highly detailed rooms cover the traditional Halloween continuum, from bloody Big Top to butcher shop to insane asylum.

By the time Oct. 31 gets here, the rest of the area around the



Dylan Hanf, above, in the haunted house at the Sylvania Township home of Nick Francis, 16. Nick's cousin, Max Simon, 14, is co-owner. (THE BLADE/LISA DUTTON)



Nick Francis, left, helps Dylan Hanf and Cody Rutkowski work on Hell's Gate. (THE BLADE/LISA DUTTON)

house should be filled with enough walk-through fright zones and tombstones to push the entire attraction to 10,000 square feet.

Nick and Max hatched the plan this summer to do something huge and started working on it in July, with Max practically moving into the house as they worked nearly all day, every day. They and their friends did most of the construction and decorating by themselves and agree that the experience — this year and with past haunted house projects — has been incredible.

'I came here and I couldn't do anything,' Max said. 'I didn't know how to use any power tools.

'I've learned a lot,' agreed Nick's cousin, Matt Francis, 14, of Sylvania Township.

The group was so dedicated, it left some adults wondering what might really be going on. One helper, Dylan Hanf, 17, of Sylvania Township, said his mom saw him leave one day and asked, 'Do you have a girlfriend I don't know about?'



A scary character performs during a trial run at the house. (THE BLADE/LISA DUTTON)

The only drawback is that this kind of fright doesn't pay and it doesn't come cheap, either. Max's dad Tom Simon, a builder, estimated that the total cost could approach \$10,000. Expenses have been split between him, his brother, George Simon, of Sylvania Township, and Mr. Francis.

'To see the passion that Nick and Max and the other kids have had, it's actually inspiring in a lot of ways,' Tom Simon said. 'I think we feel that passion is worth the investment.'

And who knows, maybe someday the teens will be able to make some money with their skills and entrepreneurial spirit. Don't think it hasn't crossed their minds. While their immediate hopes are to win a \$25,000 contest by Fearnest.com for the best-decorated home in the country — online voting ends Oct. 27 — some of them also hope to go pro next year, starting a prop business and an off-site haunted house.

Even if they don't win, Cody Rutkowski, 16, of West Toledo, said he's confident he'll still be paid well for his assistance — in screams.

'I love to scare people,' he said.

Outsiders may not understand why Nick and his buddies put so much time and energy into a project like this. After all, it is a gruesome hobby. Still, the honor student and Life Scout said it's not as scary as some of the alternatives.

Remember, Nick said, 'I could be out doing all these bad things teenagers [do] these days.'

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