

Paranormal picnic welcomes those with an otherworld curiosity

by [Indy.com Staff](#) The Indianapolis Star Posted: **Aug 07, 2008** in [Things to do](#)



Todd Phelps can tell a good ghost story. Once, while investigating the basement of a supposedly haunted old mansion in Ohio, he spotted a moving shadow. When he trained his flashlight on the shadow, it darted off into another room, so he kept following it. When he caught up to the shadow, it was gone.

(Cue "X-Files" music here.)

"That one left a pretty big impression," Phelps said.

Phelps claims to have had a few ghostly encounters, thanks to his work as an investigator and founder of Indiana Scientific Paranormal Investigators, or Indiana SPI. The group is one of several in the Hoosier state that hunts the haunts, looking for things that go bump in the night.

They'll gather Saturday at Indianapolis' Hannah House, 3801 Madison Ave., for the third annual Paranormal Meet & Greet Picnic, where the public can get acquainted with their work, and where the investigators themselves can network and share stories. Some 200 to 300 people are expected, said Danielle Garrison, co-founder of the Lafayette-based Crossroads Paranormal, one of the sponsoring groups.

America's paranormal community has grown dramatically in the past few years, thanks in part to shows like the Sci Fi channel's "Ghost Hunters." Indiana has its own versions, who use electromagnetic energy-measuring instruments, and audio and video equipment, to capture purported messages from another world. But don't be so quick to write these folks off as Casper-loving crazies. Investigators say their first goal is to find logical explanations for the bumps and shrieks. Banging in the walls turns out to be a loose furnace pipe. Sounds of distress can be caused by an animal in the attic.

"I'm one of the skeptics on our show, so I annoy a lot of people," said Ben Teague, a show host for the Internet-based EERIE Radio, broadcast from a studio in his Southside home. "I try to bring people down to earth."

Still, the investigators have some stories that can make your spine tingle. Indy Ghost Hunters, a group founded by Bob Newkirk and his family in 1996, posts investigation recordings on its Web site, www.indyghosthunters.com. The group has quite a collection of electronic voice phenomenon (EVP) clips, things they couldn't hear at the time that turned up on their recording afterward.

For instance, they were in an old cemetery when their digital camera lost power. Later, they listened to their audio recording and heard a voice whisper, "Shoot the camera" just before the camera lost power.

Paranormal investigators are all volunteers, with day jobs to pay the bills and gas money/equipment for the investigations. An EMF (electromagnetic field) meter can cost up to \$200. But when they're called, they're happy to investigate a homeowner's concerns. First, they'll do some research to find out the history of the property. Were there any tragic deaths? Any other story that might point to a haunting?

They'll ask the homeowner to keep a log of suspicious events. If they can't rule out an obvious cause, they might spend some time there with their equipment. EMF meters measure the electromagnetic field, an energy source thought to be associated with spirit activity. Recording devices may catch sounds. Most investigators rely on fairly sophisticated equipment, but they say even the old tape recorders can be used by the amateur spirit sleuth.



Indy Ghost Hunter Bob Newkirk, visiting Hannah House, shows how he uses the K-2 EMF device to seek signs of ghosts. (Frank Espich / The Star)



Carrying ghost-detection equipment, Bob Newkirk and daughter Stacy Newkirk, 20, head for the back entrance of Hannah House. (Frank Espich / The Star)



Stacy Newkirk and her dad, Bob Newkirk, review recordings - made on an earlier ghost-busting visit to Hannah House - of what they believe are strange voices. (Frank Espich / The Star)

No one really knows what they're after. Are these dead people who haven't crossed? Figments of an active imagination? Tricks played by the Earth's natural energy force? The investigators aren't making any claims, although they all have their theories.

"If we can't explain something, we would label it as paranormal. That doesn't mean it's a ghost. It doesn't mean it's demons or monsters. It just means it's not explainable," Garrison said.

Still, there are skeptics who say it's all a sham -- that the man behind the curtain is trying to pull a fast one. Phelps isn't interested in arguing.

"You're never going to prove it to somebody who doesn't believe in it," Phelps said. "What it really takes is to be out on an investigation, multiple investigations. Really, a person has to experience it to believe it."



Indy Ghost Hunters Stacy and Bob Newkirk check out a secret doorway inside Hannah House. (Frank Espich / The Star)

Family spends time in the usual haunts

Ghost hunting is all in the family for Bob Newkirk and 20-year-old daughter Stacy. Newkirk and his wife, Sandy, used to plan family vacations around haunted sites, and in 1996 they formed a family team, the Indy Ghost Hunters. Now the group is about 14 strong.

"I've always been that kid that wanted to stay up and watch any creepy movie or ghost story that was on," Bob said.

Here, dad and daughter talk about their paranormal play dates:

Question: How did you get interested in ghost hunting?

Bob: I really started to get an interest when my mom passed away when I was 15. I just always had that question of, "Is there something else out there?"

Have you communicated with ghosts?

Stacy: Possibly. During an investigation at the Hannah House, my dad and a few other investigators were in the attic and they were not getting anything to happen, so they decided to bring up the "guinea pigs," Annette (Perez, an Indy Ghost Hunters volunteer case manager) and me.

I knew the story of the attic -- a little boy was tortured and then burned up there -- but I didn't really think anything about it. They told us just to sit down and to start asking questions. Throughout our questions, I had a flashlight and I was telling the little boy to come over and look at it and maybe push it around on the floor.

Annette began to pick up readings but didn't tell me, because the closer she brought the EMF (electromagnetic field) detector to me, the higher the readings got. All of a sudden the EMF went off (the red light started to blink) and I felt the touch of a finger go from the top of my head and down to my neck.

I got up screaming and running.

It's a funny story we all talk about now, but at that moment it wasn't.

What do people say when you tell them of your ghost-hunting activities?

Bob: They usually give you a look that says, "What did you just say?" More often than not, when we actually get to talk to people, they usually have some kind of unusual activity they want to tell us about.

Have you ever been scared?

Bob: We were at Gettysburg and we had gone out to the battlefield after dark. We stopped the car, rolled down the windows and just sat and listened. It wasn't too long before we heard what sounded like moaning. My daughter started to cry, and my wife and son said, "Let's get out of here." I didn't disagree, and we didn't waste any time!

Ghostly glossary

Do you know the differences among ghosts, poltergeists and apparitions? The folks with Indy Ghost Hunters helped us put together this list of common terms you might hear if you hang out with the ghost-hunting crowd: **Ghost:** The spirit of a deceased person or animal, a disembodied soul.

Apparition: A supernatural appearance of a deceased person -- a ghost you can see. An apparition is a ghost, but a ghost is not necessarily an apparition.

Poltergeist: A ghost that makes noise and creates disorder. (Think moving furniture and flying objects.) Poltergeist is German for "noisy or troublesome ghost." Often associated with adolescent females.

Nonhuman or inhuman spirit: An entity that is not believed to have ever lived on Earth in human form. Could also be referred to as angels, devils or demons.

Haunting: Paranormal activity that occurs frequently in a building or area over a period of time.

Residual haunting: A haunting that seems to occur over and over, with no human interaction. You might see a recurrence of a tragedy occur annually on the anniversary of the tragedy, for instance.

Electronic voice phenomena (EVP): An event in which ethereal, human-sounding voices are heard on a recording or other electronic media.

EMF Meter: A meter for measuring electromagnetic fields. Electromagnetic fields occur naturally, but also can be associated with computer monitors, cell phones, televisions or other electronic devices. Spirits are believed to be able to interrupt or even create their own electromagnetic fields. A spike in EMF activity could represent spirit activity and may point investigators to areas worth investigating.

Touched: Physical contact from a ghost, spirit or other paranormal entity. It could be a tug or a touch, or it could be scratches, burns or shoves. However, according to the Indy Ghost Hunters, "serious physical injury is very rare."

They also offered a list of phrases you might hear if you tag along and see an apparition. These range from, "Dude, run!" to comments not suitable for a family newspaper.

Paranormal Meet and Greet

Event details: Open to anyone interested in learning more about the paranormal, noon to 4 p.m. Saturday, Hannah House, 3801 Madison Ave. Admission is free; bring your own picnic lunch and refreshments.

Background: Two years ago, Danielle Garrison and Kris Baker decided to host a picnic for paranormal groups. The two women, co-founders of the Lafayette-based Crossroads Paranormal, were concerned that Indiana's many groups were becoming territorial and suspicious of each other.

"Our goal was to break down these barriers," Garrison said.

Hannah's haunted history: The historic home was once a stop on the Underground Railroad. Legend goes that a group of slaves were hidden in Alexander Hannah's basement when an overturned lantern caused a fire. The slaves perished, and people have since reported seeing and hearing paranormal activity at the site.

More info: Crossroads Paranormal, www.crossroadsparanormal.com; Indiana Scientific Paranormal Investigators, www.indianaspi.com; EERIE Radio, www.eerieradio.com; Indy Ghost Hunters: www.indyghosthunters.com

- By Lori Darvas / Star correspondent