

Who Ya Gonna Call?

UNH “Ghostbusters” Take Student Research to Other Worlds

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Marja Ruderman, president of the UNH Paranormal Club, turned her childhood obsession with ghosts into a popular student organization on campus

While the student-actors who haunted Jessie Doe Residence Hall were busy scaring the daylights of their classmates (for a good cause) this week, another group of UNH students were pursuing a far quieter form of otherworldly immersion. In the dimly lit reading room of the Newington Public Library, a dozen members of the UNH Paranormal Club softly addressed questions to whatever entity might inhabit the premises. Their attention was riveted on a flashlight they had placed in the corner.

“Is there somebody here?” asked sophomore Steven Sulfaro, a political science major from Nashua and club member.

The flashlight slowly went from dim to bright.

“Are you a woman?” followed Sulfaro. The light gradually dimmed. Over the course of several hours, they grilled the unseen presence, hoping the flashlight would provide more answers to their questions. And then, at midnight, they came to campus, excited by what they had witnessed.

“I have always been interested in the paranormal, becoming obsessed with ghost shows on television and checking out the local haunts in my hometown,” says Marja Ruderman, who grew up in the Berkshires of western Massachusetts, and is the club’s founding president. “I was surprised to find out there was no club dedicated to ghost hunting at UNH, so I decided to start one up.”

Halloween is a big time for the club, which originated in 2011 as a place for students to gather and talk about experiences they may have had with the paranormal, or just to share a general interest in the subject. What started with a handful of Ruderman’s friends grew to more than 30 active members who have earned a reputation on campus as, well, ghostbusters.



MARJA RUDERMAN LOADS MICROPHONES, CAMERAS, AND OTHER EQUIPMENT INTO THE WAGON EN ROUTE TO AN INVESTIGATION.

Ruderman, a speech language pathology major, prefers the word “spirit” to “ghost” but is willing to be flexible about the matter as long as the respect is there. But about that reputation? “Now, whenever people experience anything unexplained, I get a call to bring my club to come check it out,” Ruderman says.

During a typical year, the club will do around six such investigations. Members use state-of-the-art equipment that includes electromagnetic field radiation detectors, used to sweep an area for lingering radiation that might cause unexplained headaches and emotions; digital recorders that can record spirit voices or EVPs (electronic voice phenomena); a SP-7 Spirit Box that scans across radio stations at high frequencies and generates white noise that people claim is an outlet for spirits to communicate; and, of course, cameras and video cameras to capture any visual evidence.

“We train members on how to properly use this equipment, and bring it along on investigations and see what we can capture,” offers Sulfaro.



CLUB MEMBERS MEET TO REVIEW EVIDENCE OF PARANORMAL ACTIVITY. "OUR APPROACH IS TO TRY TO FIND EVERY POSSIBLE WAY TO DISPROVE THE EVIDENCE," SAYS ONE MEMBER.

The University boasts several famously haunted locales. Smith Hall, built in 1908 as the first residence hall for female students, is haunted by a female apparition that roams the creaking wood-floored halls, appearing and disappearing around the building's many corners. In truth, anybody who has visited the venerable frame – now home to Admissions and the Counseling Center – knows that even a ghost (or an undergraduate) might very well become disoriented and doomed to restless roaming there.

Another campus investigation figuring memorably in the club's lore occurred at none other than Thompson Hall. The club had been requested, by a person or persons unknown, to look into a report of "empty elevators going up and down by themselves." Chris Fleming, of the television show *Ghost Hunters* fame, came to campus as a "guest investigator" and announced that his research had picked up a "religious vibe" within the iconic pile, but had uncovered no ghost.

The club returned to Thompson Hall soon after and split into groups of four, their usual modus operandi for large buildings such as this. One member, Anna Glasberg, found herself alone in a basement room and asked whether the building had ever housed nuns. The answer "yes" was audible to Glasberg and may still be heard on a tape the club keeps in its archives.

Professor of Psychology Victor Benassi notes that claims about the existence of alleged paranormal phenomena date back far into recorded history. "Beliefs in ghosts, ESP,

psycho-kinesis, astrology, psychic healing, biorhythms, UFOS and extraterrestrial visitors, and near death experiences are just a few examples,” avers Benassi.

“People are going to believe what they are going to believe.”

Not exactly a ringing endorsement from the social scientist who once taught a popular Inquiry Seminar scrutinizing paranormal phenomenon and who has produced critical scholarship on the topic as well.

Club members respect such skepticism – up to a point. Says Sulfaro, “Our approach is to try to find every possible way to disprove the evidence. If we can’t disprove it, it’s most likely an entity.”

As for Benassi, who used to have an office in Thompson Hall and is now in Conant, colleagues have noted that he prefers to use the stairway over the elevators of late. “It’s healthier,” he reasons.

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