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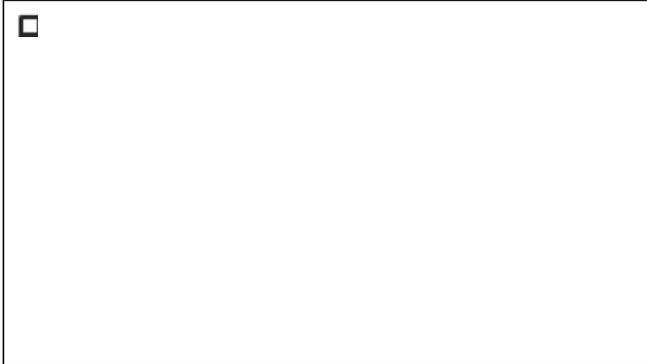
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Media Relations

UNH Class Investigates Things That Go Bump In The Night

June 1, 2010



[UNH Prof. Mark Henn discusses his class "Psychology, Critical Thinking and the Scientific Method—Exploring Paranormal Belief" from UNH News.](#)

ghost of Dead Man's Curve. And then more classmates experienced sightings. By the time Henn's younger brother graduated from high school a few years later, spending the night at the cemetery to record sightings of the ghost had become a rite of passage.

What Henn experienced as a teenager demonstrates how people can come to believe something that does not exist. This summer, UNH students will study this psychological event in Henn's class, "Scientific Perspectives on Belief in the Paranormal Phenomena."

"Inventing a ghost is one thing. Having others see it is another thing. In this class, we will look at how to approach belief in something, especially when we want to believe it. In these instances, the easiest person to fool is yourself," Henn says.

"I chose paranormal belief for the subject of this class because it is, on its face, so unbelievable and yet upwards of 80 percent of people in the United States do believe in some version of the paranormal. If we can see why we would believe in something like that, it's a lot easier for us to understand why we believe in other things," he says.

Henn's course will examine open-mindedness and skepticism, with the benefit of the psychological perspective and the use of the scientific method. In the class, students will learn about the long history of the interaction between psychology and the supernatural, definitions of science and commonalities among sciences, methodology and experimental controls, and how to have an open mind and be skeptical.

Students will look at various toolkits used for critical examination, such as Carl Sagan's Baloney Detection Kit. Using these toolkits and a deeper understanding of why people hold on to extraordinary beliefs, students will evaluate various conspiracy theories and the belief in the paranormal.

Finally, students will learn how the field of psychology has contributed to the study of belief by investigating reconstructive and recovered memories, sensation and perception, physiological psychology, social cognition, and the contributions of personality, developmental psychology, and behaviorism.

"We are designed psychologically to see patterns to help us live and survive. Sometimes we see patterns where there aren't any, and that's what gets us in trouble," Henn says.

DURHAM, N.H. – When Mark Henn was in high school, he and one of his pals decided that a particularly foggy patch of swamp land on a particularly curvy road near a particularly creepy cemetery was the perfect place to invent a ghost. On one particularly dark night later, the story of the ghost of Dead Man's Curve was born.

As Henn, who teaches psychology at the University of New Hampshire, and his friend recounted their frightening tale to classmates, an interesting thing happened. Although there had never been reports of ghost sightings there before, some of their friends started reporting that they, too, had seen the



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"There are people who have irrational beliefs that are not backed up by evidence. We have parents who are not vaccinating their children based on an irrational belief and as a result, they are putting their children's health at risk," he says.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling more than 12,200 undergraduate and 2,200 graduate students.

VIDEO

Prof. Mark Henn discusses why we sometimes see patterns in life.

<http://vimeo.com/11742363>

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