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Calhaunts: If You Build It They Will SCREAM!

By Chris DeVaux

Arriving at what surely must be the Southern California home of Tom Henke and Monica DiFranco, I got out of my car and approached the front door. Yes, judging from the black-clad ghoul floating above the entryway on a March morning, this must be the right place. What's going on? It's another gathering of CalHauntS!

The concept began early in 2004 with the formation of a ladies-only group called The Southern California Ladies' Haunting Society; an organization of women interested in pursuing Halloween related projects at monthly meetings. By the second and third of these meetings, it became apparent that something was missing. The members were passionate about Halloween and haunting, but it was decided that a larger pool of knowledge, particularly in the areas of electronics and mechanical engineering, would be helpful for some of the projects envisioned for the future. Group co-founders Deveron Shudic (Lady Kit) and Myranda Marsh (The Castle Witch) got together and decided it would help to go coed. To do this the group needed a new name. Debbie Valenta (Jersey She-Devil) a third founder of the group suggested the slightly altered: The California Haunting Society or CalHauntS for short, and the name stuck like monster mud to burlap.

Gatherings of haunters are nothing new, but what is unique about CalHauntS is that the gatherings occur every month, and every meeting (except November's video review and social) is a workshop...a "make 'n' take" workshop where members build something themselves and take it home with them that evening. Each of the projects are items that the members can use in their own haunts or yard displays. A volunteer instructor rounds up materials before the meeting, issues print-outs as needed and leads the session instructing the group step by step. Some members learn new skills and the rest have the opportunity to do a little mentoring to others in the group.

Another unique aspect of CalHauntS is its lack of formal structure. There is no president, no secretary, no treasurer and, in fact, no treasury. Workshops are pay-as-you-go in every way. Food and drink are brought potluck by members, the materials for the day's project are purchased by the instructor(s) and sold to members at cost, and donated items are given out through a drawing as door prizes, not raffled off as a fund raiser. This complete lack of communal funds, it turns out, eliminates most of the politics that might be found in other club structures. Virtually the only decisions that need to be made are where to meet next, what cool prop or tool to build and who's going to show how it's done! To be sure, every group needs a few movers and shakers, and CalHauntS' three founders serve this purpose well.

A typical gathering starts with members filtering in around the appointed time, dropping off their potluck offerings, filling out nametags and door prize slips and getting caught up with friends. When it seems like all are assembled, one or more of the founders will address the group, reminding them of upcoming projects for the next month or two and soliciting ideas for the future. Projects, supply sources and volunteer instructors are as apt to come together via CalHauntS' Yahoo message board, where members hang out the rest of the month, as they are at the meetings. Then door prizes are given away, the instructor for the day is introduced and the project gets under way. In the summer of 2004, Myranda came up with an additional activity that she dubbed "speed demos", where members may take five or ten minutes to show a prop they have made and explain something about how it was done. Members are also encouraged to bring photos from their haunts and their favorite props even if they don't choose to do a demo. These "show-and-tell" items can and do become subjects for future workshops.

The make 'n' takes usually take from four to six hours, with members from as far south as San Diego and as far north as Santa Barbara attending, but most participants live within an hour's drive. Thirty or so haunters has proven to be about the maximum number that can be taught effectively in the average private home, so if attendance rises, a multi-purpose room or other larger venue would need to be pursued. So far this has not been necessary.

To date, projects have included: web spinners, web shooters, home-brew foam cutters, talking skulls, corpsification, gravestones and proper applications and wiring for LEDs. The talking skulls were built over two sessions; one to solder the components in place and test each board, the other to modify the skulls, mount the servos and linkages and test the jaw movements with a sample voice recording. Upcoming workshops include flying crank ghost mechanisms and armatures for automated movement, with a long list of potential projects for the months beyond.

In February of this year, CalHauntS volunteered to host the Meat 'n' Greet the night before the DeathFest Haunters' Convention owned by Wil Schock (to be renamed Haunt-X for 2006) in Santa Maria, CA. This exposure spread the word amongst the participants there about all the fun the group is having, and has led to the recent formation of a similar workshop group in Northern California that calls itself CalHauntS Nor Cal. Its first workshop, wardrobe distressing, took place this past April. Following the model of the original, CalHauntS Nor Cal consists of three founders: Sherri Morgan, Sandy Kimball ("Furby") and Eric C. with about thirty members having signed on less than a week after the group's inception. It really isn't practical for folks to drive many hours for an afternoon project, so in a state the size of California, the logical solution was to have more than one group!

As this day drew to a close, and I bid farewell to our hosts, Monica and Tom, I took with me my very own lighting circuitry project taught by our instructor Dave Hogan ("Grim Dave"), and some newly acquired knowledge of Basic Stamp microprocessor programming courtesy of member Terry Simmons ("Scary Terry") and his son Kyle Simmons. A small group of die-hards were reluctant to leave, excitedly discussing the following month's workshop and, as it happens, the one year anniversary of CalHauntS.

For more information, please write to: admin@calhaunts.com or check out the organizations' websites at www.calhaunts.com for the original Southern California group, and the Northern California group.

Chris DeVaux is co-creator of The Ranch House Mortuary, a home haunt in Santa Barbara, California. He can be reached at coachman73@aol.com