



An assortment of frightening figures are displayed outside Lou-Anne Mailloux's Gesto Spook House. Mailloux and 57 volunteers are putting the final touches on the annual Halloween exhibit, which will be opened to the public Oct. 27-29.

Gesto's frightening tradition

BY DANIEL SCHWAB

There's a to-do list hanging in the entrance of Lou-Anne Mailloux's barn in Gesto that reads, "find an old freezer," and "hang knives."

The barn's ceiling is covered in leafy branches and the walls are smeared with what looks like blood.

In about a week, no one under 10 years old will be allowed to enter.

Mailloux and 57 volunteers, mostly family, friends and members of the local fire service, are spending much of their free time putting the final gruesome touches onto the 3rd annual Gesto Spook House.

Last year, about 1,700 people made their way through the exhibit. Some were even brave enough to go through a second time.

"It's always been, I hate to say it but, the best one around," Mailloux said.

Planning for this year's Spook House began the first week of September.

"We all sat around a campfire and did some brainstorming," Mailloux said. "The ideas just came out. Every night now we work on it and every weekend all day long."

The history of the spook house dates back to the 1980s, when a group of teens living down the street from Mailloux decorated their small basement in a Halloween theme.

A few years later, as its popularity among the neighbours began to grow, the exhibit was moved into a two-car garage.

When organizers sought an even larger space, Mailloux's father Jerry was asked if his barn was available.

Mailloux and her family were then hooked, and the family's Halloween tradition began.

It continued into the 90s, but the family took a ten-year hiatus after Jerry's death.

But after a slew of requests from neighbours and friends to resurrect the spook house, Mailloux reopened its doors again in 2003.

Now, patrons looking for a scare gladly wait about an hour to get in, said Debbie Bridgen, one of the volunteers.

"It's always been very realistic and scary," she said.

One of the tools the spook house organizers use

to improve on it every year is the comment box.

After exiting the barn, patrons are encouraged to write down what they thought of the exhibit.

Some of the comments Mailloux saved from last year's box include: "Worth the wait," "you're sick," and "I was so scared I wanted to leave."

Since the beginning, the price of admission has always been two canned goods.

Last year, the Essex Food Bank and St. Vincent de Paul in McGregor were a little overwhelmed with the donation of 3000-plus cans, Bridgen said.

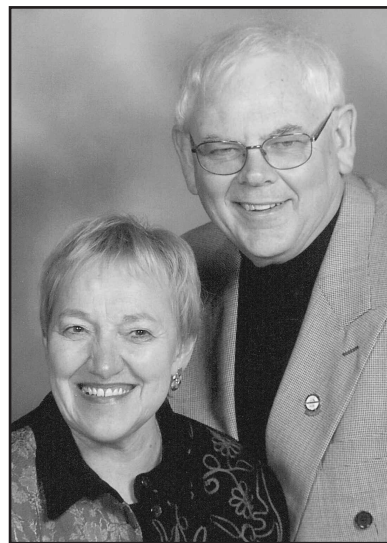
The canned goods are split evenly between the two charities.

For Bridgen, it's one of the best things about being involved with the spook house.

"It's very satisfying to see all the canned goods at the end," she said.

"And to see people out enjoying themselves," Mailloux added. "It's a cheap night out."

This year's Gesto Spook House is taking place Oct. 27-29 from 7 p.m. to 11 p.m. at 2644 Gesto Road.



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