

# Haunting your house



Ralph Barrera photos AMERICAN STATESMAN

Tony Sansevero loves Halloween so much that he creates a haunted house in his Austin front yard for the holiday. He collects scary things year-round.

Sansevero, a commercial artist, says his decorations have brought help from neighbors and created memories for some trick-or-treaters who have been coming to his house for years.



DALE ROE  
GO-TO GUY

Scare the ghouls and goblins on your street with tips from a neighborhood frightmaster

**M**y street is pretty much dead on Halloween. And not dead in the good way — crawling with zombies, vampires, mummies and the like. No, my suburban street is dead as in few lighted porch lights and a decided dearth of trick-or-treaters.

Yet, just four blocks away, a veritable monster mash takes place on Halloween night. A mad scientist operates a body-sized table saw in the middle of a maze of clear plastic sheeting, fog rolling past the children who must navigate the makeshift hallways to find a treat dropped into their bags as they exit. On the corner, a stoic, monstrous sentry stands guard with a reaper's scythe, barely moving.

You just know there's a real person in there but, like the nightmare version of a Buckingham Palace guard, he (or she — it?) refuses to react.

Black lights are everywhere. Tombstones and animatronic severed limbs litter yards. Neighbors clump together near porches, sharing beverages, laughing and waving.

I relocated to my Round Rock home from Chicago many years ago one September. Had I waited just one more month, I might have looked for a house in the neighborhood four blocks away. Instead, I am relegated to trying to get some Halloween spirit going on my block.

I drape cobwebs across our entryway and sometimes replace the porch bulb with a black light. A few years ago I made tombstones out of sheets of Styrofoam and black spray paint — they dot our front (and grave) yard. I string orange and purple lights through the trees and place blinking eyes in the bushes. And I stick a speaker in a bedroom window and blast spooky sound effects into the wind.

It's a humble effort to attract trick-or-treaters, nothing on the scale of the fantastic neighborhood haunt designed by Austin



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commercial artist Tony Sansevero.

### A dream to haunt

Each Halloween for the past decade, Sansevero has fashioned a haunted house on his driveway at 302 E. Skyview Road, stretching from the curb to his art studio's door. That studio, in which he is working on beautiful pencil sketches of fairies, is a horror-lover's nightmarish dream as well. The spicy aroma of pumpkin fills the air, emanating from the candles he burns year-round.

"I like the feel of autumn," Sansevero says. "I like the spirit of it, and this kind of gets me in the mood."

The shelves lining the studio's walls are filled floor to ceiling with hundreds of movie monster figures. He's had some of them since he was 5 or 6 years old, when he first developed a love of the genre. His drawings of Frankenstein, Dracula and The Invisible Man cover the ceiling.

"I'm into it now because it connects me to my childhood," he explains.

"I look at them and I remember myself and, you know, my parents just thinking I was strange."

Sansevero has dreamed of having his own haunted house since he was a child but never acted upon it until he graduated from college and moved into a three-story house in Boston with his new wife (best friends occupied the other two floors).

"We had a beautiful, winding staircase that went up three stories," he recalls. The friends pitched in and created a haunted hallway with cobwebs and whatever wild decorations they could find. The bug (I'm guessing it was a grotesque spider) bit.



Tony Sansevero's annual neighborhood haunted house.

So, each Halloween, an extra house appears on Skyview Road with a fantastically cartoonish, skewed Victorian facade that leads trick-or-treaters into a sensory overload world of strobe lights, black lights and fog machines. Things buzz, flicker and go bump in the night. His "scarers" — area teen volunteers — jump out from behind secret doors. Spooky sound effects are pumped through a stereo

system (Sansevero still has the first LP of scary sounds he bought as a child). The house is free and fun for all ages, he says. His scarers are alerted when younger children come through and temper their hauntings appropriately. "You don't need to be terrified to enjoy Halloween," he says. Young children appreciate the lights, colors and the spectacle. The effort has fostered a spirit of community in the

neighborhood. The carpenter who lives next door comes over each year to help him put the house together, while other neighbors have developed a fun-house mirror version of spring's bluebonnet pictures, photographing their children at the end of Sansevero's driveway each year. One now 6-year-old was first photographed inside her mother's pregnant tummy, which was painted as a pumpkin.

Every three years or so the artist admits to exhaustion and second thoughts. "But then there's that one kid — their eyes just glow and you know that they will never forget that for the rest of their life," he says.

And, like recurring nightmares, Sansevero can't keep them away. Teens who visited as youngsters have returned to be "scarers." As young adults, those same kids come back now to help him make the house.

### How to haunt

Sansevero knows that everyone doesn't have the time, inclination or resources to design their own haunted house. But he shares the following tips for Halloween freaks wanting to liven up their doorsteps for trick-or-treaters:

#### Alert neighbors and friends.

Sansevero belongs to an online neighborhood group, where he reminds the community about his haunted house. He constructed a giant coffin out of a moving crate one neighbor donated. He showed me an oversized glow-in-the-dark skull another had found in the garbage and given to him. A third neighbor, an actor, just gave him a bag of plastic limbs. This is a good way to decorate without paying — wait for it — an arm and a leg.

**Shop at dollar stores.** You can find great stuff there, but you have to arrive early because, Sansevero says, it's the first place many people look.

**Be patient.** Large retailers and pharmacies will often drop prices each week leading up to Halloween. If you can hold out, you can save big.

**Shop for next year.** Christmas decorations aren't the only holiday items that go on clearance sale the day after

the celebration. "It can be frustrating to buy stuff and have to wait a year to use it, but you get it dirt cheap," he says. Shop as early the next morning as possible or, better yet, late Halloween night. "The next morning, they're going to be putting out their Thanksgiving — or Christmas — stuff."

**Motion-sensed decorations are your friends.** Things that wiggle or scream or lurch automatically when trick-or-treaters walk by are convenient ways to scare trick-or-treaters without a lot of help.

**Set the mood.** Fog machines, strobe lights and black lights and give your doorstep an otherworldly feel, Sansevero says, especially if your decorations are coated in fluorescent paint. "The most useful color is the yellow," Sansevero says. "It has the most intensity." He sprays many of his decorations with it because, under a black light, "it really brings them to life." He says the paint can melt soft, rubbery plastics (such as the kind frequently used for masks) though, so he doesn't spray those. And he recommends shopping early, because stores can run out of it.

**Do-it-yourself.** When you build your own props such as scarecrows, you're saving money but you're also doing a project with your family and creating traditions.

**Keep it simple.** Sansevero's got some elaborate tricks leading up to his treats, but his best scare is decidedly low-tech: He watches through his closed door's peephole and, just as the children reach for the doorbell, he bangs loudly on the door from the inside.

"It scares them to death. Whack on a door, that's it. It's all you need."