

BY KATIE A. VOSS

“This area is filled with activity,” says Michaelynn Cece. We’re standing in the main room of a third floor apartment on Taylor Street. The 1870s, boarded-up building stands empty while renovations are being done. “There are five different hospitals and a morgue right here, right now. Kitty corner from us was a tuberculosis sanitarium. There’s been a lot of mob killings over here. So you always have something around here. Always,” Cece says.

Eight of us are about to receive a crash course in ghost hunting. Cece tells us about some of the strange things that happened here, like the handprint that mysteriously appeared on the wooden door in the back stairwell, spooking the work crews. The neon lights and street lamps shining in the windows create an eerie, orange ambience. An old chandelier hangs above a bureau, a bed and an old weightlifting set. Paint cracks and peels from the walls. We are all wondering, hoping, *wishing* something will happen here tonight.

Cece is co-owner of Chicago Ghost Investigations, which specializes in checking out claims about peculiar occurrences and answering questions about the paranormal and supernatural. For \$55, customers can accompany the investigators on ghostbusting tours of known haunts and even use ghost-detecting gadgets.

Cece wouldn’t strike you as a real life ghost-buster—and not because she lacks a proton pack. She just looks too...normal. Tonight her brown hair is piled into a messy bun. She says she comes from a long line of family members endowed with psychic and telepathic abilities, adding that most of the homes she’s lived in were haunted. Even now, the condominium she shares with her husband has a lot of activity, she says.


Cece is helping my personal quest to experience something that will confirm my belief in ghosts. My mother says I lived in a haunted house when I was an infant. I don’t recall that time, but I relish my mother’s accounts of lights mysteriously turning on and off and slippers moving from floor to floor. Many years later, after my grandfather passed away, odd things began to happen. The contents of cabinets jumbled themselves; doors opened and slammed on their own. My mother, grandmother and aunt all witnessed these unusual occurrences, but I never did.

Never. Talk about disappointment. I have spent my life hoping to be one of those “friends of friends” whose story gives you goose bumps when you hear it at a party. I began to wonder if I wasn’t capable of experiencing the paranormal.

Believers vs. skeptics

“Anyone can experience the paranormal,” Cece says. “It’s just that skeptics refuse to believe anything. A skeptic will look at a picture that has orbs

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS



When you go looking for ghosts, you never know what you'll find

and they'll say, 'Oh that's just a speck of dust.' That's not a speck of dust. I've seen specks of dust and I've seen orbs and that's an orb. They'll just say it's something else so they won't have to admit the truth."

Dr. Michael Shermer, executive director of the Skeptics Society, counters that ghosts are in the heads of the believers—nothing more than a blend of sleep disorders and cultural constructs. "It's in part driven by human need for transcendence and belief in a nonmaterial world where other beings exist," he says.

Shermer uses scientific evidence to debunk claims of the paranormal and seeks to promote critical thinking about unexplained phenomena. "It seems to be true for all cultures everywhere; people make gods and goddesses, poltergeists, guardian angels," he says. "People do have weird experiences, particularly at night, and then the culture tells them how to reconstruct them."

Unfortunately for Shermer, proponents of the paranormal have a larger following. According to a Gallup Poll conducted in September 2006 for researchers at Baylor University, about 75 percent of Americans hold some form of belief in the paranormal: extrasensory perception, ghosts, telepathy, clairvoyance, astrology, communicating with the dead, witches, reincarnation or channeling. Our little group of eight is definitely among them.

"What kind of ghosts do you think are here," one of the women asks.

"I know who the ghosts are," Cece replies confidently.

"So are they, like, people who have died here, or what?" the woman asks.

Cece shrugs. "Some of them, but not all." She explains that there's a vortex in the next room—a place where the energy of ghosts is concentrated. "By communicating with them, you're inviting them, so you create a higher electromagnetic field, which attracts them."

She pulls out some electromagnetic field detectors from her bags. "We're all electric," she says as she passes them out. She has four kinds of detectors. Some shriek when they detect an electric field; others make a static-like noise. Some light up; others register the voltage on a scale.

"We all have our own energy source, within and around. What goes around is called your aura," she says. "What's inside is electric—your heart is electric, your brain is electric." Even after death, Cece says, that energy remains. "So that's why we use these detectors. If there's that electricity there, it will pick it up."

She distributes thermometers and directs us to look for cold spots and hotspots. "Any ten-degree jump below or above the room's normal temperature is going to be something to notice," she says. "If you're just going along the room and—boom!—there's a big difference in the general temperature, you're picking something up."

Tools of the trade

These aren't the only tools of the trade. Lake County Paranormal Investigators, based in Zion, Ill. offers free investigations of purported haunted places. Lead investigators Chris Pumala and Stacy Grieshaber use digital cameras and tape recorders in addition to detectors and thermometers.

Grieshaber shows me a picture of one of their teammates surrounded by ectoplasm—a transparent, bright pink cloud that spreads across the entire photo. It looks like the picture was an unexpected victim of a highlighter explosion. There's also a perfectly round, white, glowing circle in the top left corner of the picture—an orb. It looks like a tiny, hovering moon.

Orbs are most easily described as glowing balls of light that are invisible to the naked eye but detected on photographs and by video cameras. They are sometimes believed to be a more evolved form of spirit.

"That picture was taken with a digital camera," Pumala tells me. "Now, if it was film, I'd realize that that could be a chemical reaction, but digital doesn't do things like that. And of course, there's an orb in there as well. We don't get too excited about capturing orbs, but when we ended up capturing that ectoplasm stuff, that was pretty exciting."

"Why don't you get excited about capturing orbs?" I ask.

"Everyone captures orbs," Grieshaber, waving his hand dismissively. Pumala and Grieshaber aren't alone in their attitude toward orbs. According to www.ghoststudy.com, 50 to 90 percent of orbs are actually dust specks or results of humidity, rain, bright sunlight or other weather conditions.

LCPI specializes in picking up Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP), or unexpected voices in recording media. They are considered a form of after-death communication. Pumala pops a tape into one of the recorders and presses play. I listen to a squeal that sounds suspiciously like a creaky door swinging open, and some barely audible voices. Then I hear Grieshaber's clear, strong voice asking, "Do you mind the question?" A weak voice responds; it sounds like it is gasping and speaking simultaneously and the words come at an odd pace. I ask Pumala to play it back. This time I catch the first four words: "Do you mind the—"

I turn to the grinning faces of Pumala and Grieshaber. "Is he just repeating you?"

"That's what it sounds like," Pumala says. "It sounded like that to us at first, but listen closely." He hits rewind and plays it again.

And then I hear it. The strange, muffled voice asking, "Do you mind the children?"

My face wrinkles in baffled curiosity. "What does that mean?"

"Well, this was done at our friend Marty's house because there was always just tons of activity there," Grieshaber says. "The place used to be a summer home and he told us that it always felt like

there were little kids running around when he was sleeping." Grieshaber had been asking lots of questions. "After awhile I always ask about minding the question, because that's a normal thing to ask, you know? Do you mind the questions? Do you want me to stop bothering you? And so I said, 'Do you mind the question?' I didn't hear it then, but I heard it played back later."

James Randi chalks up EVP to highly sensitive equipment and overactive imaginations. "Lots of people make assumptions based on EVP," he says. "You can pick up mobile phones, police calls, taxi cab conversations, ham radios on any given frequency—there are dozens of signals. These are amateurs using equipment that is over tuned. They blame things that are quite normal, quite natural in the environment. Any little draft. 'Oh there must be a spirit here!' No, that's a draft. They look at little things as highly significant."

The James Randi Educational Foundation supplies information to the media, students, teachers, authors and reporters about the true nature of the paranormal, pseudoscientific and the supernatural. Or, as he puts it, "Information that should have been thrown out in the Dark Ages but is, unfortunately, still around." The foundation offers a \$1 million prize to anyone who can show, under proper observing conditions, evidence of any paranormal, supernatural or occult power or event. To date, the prize goes unclaimed.

The LCPI investigators say they approach each investigation with a skeptical eye and avoid jumping to conclusions. "When we investigate we'll go and we'll look around beforehand," says Pumala. "We'll check out the vents, we'll check out for loose windows for rattling noises, cracks in the walls, any sort of structural damages or anomalies. We really rule out anything that we can find first."

"Even though Chris and I have seen ghosts, we're still not sure," Grieshaber adds. "To this day, we're still skeptics. Basically, until I shake the hand of somebody who is dead, I'm not going to be for sure."

In fact, a lot of LCPI's investigations turn up nothing. "Some investigations can get pretty tedious," Grieshaber says. "A person will tell you about all this activity and say, 'Oh, I heard this, I heard that, stuff is moving around, plates are getting smashed and my wife is afraid to go into the bathroom!' And you do the investigation and there's nothing."

Pumala suspects that entities sometimes won't make themselves known to strangers. "In some cases it's so depressing to the people because they're like, 'Well, I know this place is haunted,'" he says.

Dousing for spirits

Back on Taylor Street, Cece presents us with the most low-tech apparatus of the night: the dousing rod. These simple, L-shaped copper rods date back to Roman times, when they were used to locate water, oil and buried treasure. Cece tells us they're

perfect for picking up all energy forms, including the energy form of spirits.

With her arms close to her sides and bent at a 90-degree angle, Cece holds the rods and says, "If there are any spirits here who would like to talk to me, please cross the rods." The rods swing into action and cross. Several members of our group gasp and murmur. Cece bows her head slightly, half closes her eyes and continues to ask questions, softly, calmly. They are all yes or no questions, and the entity is told to cross or uncross the rods dependent on the answer. In any case, movement signifies a yes, while no movement means a clear no.

The conversation is short. Cece thanks the entity for talking with her and asks, "May I please release you? If so, please uncross the rods." The rods uncross. Cece drops her arms to her sides and grins. "Now it's your turn."

I look for the best spot to test out the rods. I'm slightly nervous about communicating with these entities. What if they don't like me? What if no one talks to me? I tell myself that if that's the case, maybe I just don't have Cece's ability to contact the dead.

And yet my attempts at the divination rods prove fruitful. I briefly "talk" to a 40-year-old man who died of natural causes upstairs in the back stairwell. In one of the bedrooms, I meet a woman from the 1800s who also died of natural causes. Her first name began with the letter P. She was born in America and grew up in the area, was unhappily married and had at least five children. During each conversation, a spot on my right cheek gets hot. It's a small spot, less than an inch in diameter, and while it's not unbearable, it creates a burning sensation. Cece tells me such effects are common. Many people experience warm or cold spots on their bodies. In very intense communications, she says, they even may become nauseated.

One of the women, Denean, swears she felt a ghost brush past her. She felt a very cold whoosh of air and then her hands began to tingle. "You know how it feels when you're testing Christmas lights and you get that tiny shock?" she asks. "That's how it felt. That was just too weird. Too weird." She shakes her head. For the rest of the night, she declines communicating with the dead.

After my two successes, I am ready to head out to the back stairwell again. Bianca, another member of our group, and I walk toward the door with the handprint that scared away the most recent work crew. The handprint is there, ominous as ever. "It's a lot colder down here," Bianca observes.

"We're by the door," I point out.

Bianca nods. "That's true." But her EMF detector is shrieking. "I think we've got something down here," she says and motions for me to use the rods.

I position myself, draw in a deep breath and ask, "Is there anyone that would like to speak with me? Please cross the rods." The rods catapult into motion, swing rapidly like a crazed pendulum and

overlap each other.

"Whoa," Bianca breathes. "Whoever it is really wants to talk."

Through our queries, we discover that it is a woman. She died of natural causes when she was about 40, was single, had no kids and seemed unhappy.

"Ask her if she's done anything she regrets," Bianca urges me.

I do and tell her to uncross the rods. The rods uncross. Bianca nudges me. "Did she commit a crime? Ask her if she committed a crime." I shake my head fiercely. It's one thing to be communicating with spiritual entities. It's another altogether to be discussing their criminal pasts with them. "I don't know if I want to know that," I squeak. I admit that I only feel comfortable talking to ghosts like Casper. Bianca nudges me again. "Come on. Do it."

"Did you commit any crimes? If so, please cross the rods." The rods remain uncrossed and I breathe a sigh of relief. "Did you hurt someone that you love? Is that what you regret? If so, please cross the rods." The rods cross. "Are you here to make amends? Please uncross the rods." The rods uncross. I ask more questions, but the rods move slowly. Our ghost seems to be winding down. "May I please release you?" I ask. "If so, please uncross the rods." The rods uncross and our conversation is over.

"It's called ideomotor response," Shermer says of the divination rods' movement. "It's the same thing that explains the Ouija board. You're moving it very subtly and you're not even consciously aware of it."

Randi agrees, noting that it is usually impossible to convince dowsing rod users, or "dowers," of the true reason behind the rods' activities because the ideomotor effect is such a powerful psychological phenomenon. "The dowser is unknowingly moving the device of choice, exerting a small shaking, tilt or pressure to it, enough to disturb its state of balance," Randi writes in the foundation's newsletter, Swift.

The limits of science

Okay, so maybe I unconsciously made up conversations with three different ghosts. Maybe that burning sensation on my right cheek was psychosomatic. But that doesn't necessarily mean that ghosts weren't there. Maybe, as Pumala and Grieshaber assert, they just weren't willing to reveal themselves to eight strangers.

As if to substantiate that very notion, I captured two orbs while haphazardly snapping pictures. Bianca caught them, too. Two perfect spheres appear in the far right corner of the room in one of her photos, and a few feet further left in one of mine, which I snapped a moment later. A couple frames later, they're floating near the chandelier, which is where another one of Bianca's photos

finds them. Bianca and I ooh and ahh over our digital cameras like two teeny boppers delighting at our snapshots of a pop icon's concert, and promise to email copies to each other. I know Pumala and Grieshaber and the folks at LCPI wouldn't be impressed, but for a novice ghosthunter like me, it was exciting.

Shermer and Randi confidently refute the ideas of orbs and talking to the dead. But what about those weird instances of *déjà vu* or a premonition-filled dream that ends up coming true? Sure, there are plenty of kooks out there with odd stories and a lot of bored teenagers making up tall tales about haunted forests, but there also have been plenty of perfectly normal people with stories of misplaced objects, sliding chairs, slamming doors and that inexplicable, hair-raising, goose bump-prickling, don't-know-what-it-is-exactly-but-I'm-creeped-out-and-freaked-out feeling.

"We can't explain everything with science," says Shermer. "There's always a residue of the unexplained. But it's okay to say, 'I don't know.' There's the normal and the natural and the things that we haven't explained yet."

My question is, why does everything—explainable or not—have to belong to the physical world?

And that's why Grieshaber says every skeptic should go on an investigation. "You're at a site investigating and doing your thing and something happens that makes your hair kinda stand up on end, or you just get this weird feeling and you can't explain it. And you have to own it up to something besides the physical world. You just have to."

A case of the willies

We're sitting in the main room of the house on Taylor Street recounting our conversations with the entities. There are not enough chairs and I am sitting on the floor in the corner of the room. Cece is reminiscing about the time she and her husband stayed at a haunted bed and breakfast in Galena when I hear it: a soft tapping. It stops for a second. And then tap...tap...tap. Pause. Tap...tap...tap. It sounds like it's coming from the floor right behind me.

I tell myself to remain calm and scan the room. No one is bouncing or jiggling their feet. Everyone is sitting perfectly still. Tap...tap...tap. Then what is that? I'm getting that inexplicable, hair-raising, goose bump-prickling, don't-know-what-it-is-exactly-but-I'm-creeped-out-and-freaked-out feeling.

And then it stops.

Out of all the events that night, from communicating with spiritual entities to capturing orbs on my digital camera, I got the most willies from a mysterious tapping at my back. And it's just those types of peculiar, hair-raising, goose bump-prickling creepy experiences that can't be explained that confirm my belief in ghosts. It's not exactly "friend of a friend" party story material, but it happened to me all the same, and that's all I needed.

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