

# INSIDE -THE- ASYLUM

Students embrace unique opportunity and volunteer to be monsters on the weekends.

BY EMILY HUMBLE  
STAFF REPORTER

Two hours from now, senior Alyssa O'Brien's neatly combed dark hair will be matted, the makeup she wears will be masked in blood, and the color of her eyes will change from hazel to an offputting mix of yellow and red. She'll wander the asylum halls, possibly hiding under the bed, listening intently for approaching footsteps. The bloodstains on the floor of that room, at least most of them, are because of her.

But that comes later. Right now, she's sitting in the grass outside the The Haunt, lounging with friends, waiting to be called for costumes, each of them taking turns stealing from junior Logan James' dinner. Behind them a tall man with a thick beard strolls by, wearing a bloody pig mask and gore streaked apron.

"Once I was scaring this 13-year-old boy so hard that he punched me in the face twice," said O'Brien, a volunteer at Kingwood Asylum. "If the adrenaline's going, you don't even really feel it... It's kind of fun."

The Kingwood Asylum and Hallowed Grounds, also known as The Haunt by insiders, is by day an unassuming beige warehouse and a weathered fence off of Northpark Drive. By night, the doors are opened, and one of the highest rated haunted houses in Houston begins welcoming Kingwood residents inside.

Shayne Torrans, one of four owners of the Kingwood Asylum, sits in the foyer next to the "ghost-bust" - the name given to the bust that comes alive and delivers the rules to customers before they enter the attraction. An actor pokes his head in the door to ask him if the role they're assigned tonight is vocal or silent, and men wearing tool belts and headlamps hustle through the room to another destination, on their way to make quick fixes before opening.



From the faces hidden in the walls of the doctor's office, to the clown dolls which turn their heads on their own accord, Kingwood Asylum has made sure not to overlook the small details. This year, Kingwood's haunted house has expanded to three times the size it has been in the past. "We love it, and we are so dedicated to opening to the public... we lose sleep over it," said junior Abbigayle Shwebach, who volunteers there. Most volunteers don't get home until around 1 a.m.



***"During season, when we're running, we get people who will have little 'accidents' when they are walking through... There's a sick level of accomplishment... You feel like you've done your job."***

- junior Logan James,  
a volunteer at Kingwood Asylum

\*\*\*\*\*

The Haunt has changed tremendously since it was founded at Torrans' home back in 2008.

As a kid, Torrans was inspired by the "home haunt" that was put on in the house behind where Torrans'

best friend lived.

"(That homowner) really outdid himself... The year the movie E.T. came out, he actually built a full blown animatronic, that looked just like E.T. It was the most incredible thing," he said.

After a Halloween housewarming party in 2007, those wonders from his childhood must have come back to him. Torrans and some friends put together a dry-ice fog machine, bought cheap masks from a Halloween store, and set up on the front lawn, just for fun.

"The fog was rolling through the yard and off the curb and into the street, and grown kids would just stand on the edge of the street and they'd be like, 'Oh, hell, no! I'm not going up there,'" Torrans said. "We just had a ball doing it."

The year after that, they set up the Spook House, a simple, under 10-minute experience created in their garage and front and back lawns. They received about 250 trick-or-treaters the first year and 500 the next. By 2010, they attracted 1,600 visitors, which resulted in a longer than two-hour line. With pressure from both neighbors and the Homeowners Association,



they were faced with the decision to either quit or go professional.

Five years later, Kingwood Asylum now attracts about 4,000 scare-seekers yearly and has amassed about 100 volunteers working on the project.

\*\*\*\*

At this point in the evening, a mix of deep house music blasts through The Haunt, and the bass shakes the walls. It's a tradition that while the actors are getting ready before The Haunt opens, someone will put their music on the speakers that will later play the ambient background noise that set the mood of the attraction when customers are walking through. Volunteers chat and occasionally dance as they wait in line to be doused in synthetic blood.

The student volunteers who work at The Haunt don't get paid to be monsters late into the ungodly hours of the night, but something drives them to come back for more long, five-hour shifts, screaming, crawling, growling and cackling until midnight.

"This is my second family, this is my second home," said junior Abbigayle Schwebach, who volunteers at the Asylum.

Demonstrating the point, she's holding the 2-year-old daughter of one of the owners out by the ticket booth. Holding the child, she describes her favorite role to play: Samara, the central horror from the movie *The Ring*. Though she hasn't had the chance to play her this year, Samara was her primary one last year.

"The moment I put on the dress, I become Samara," she said. "I get all those feeling like, somebody wanted you dead, and now you want them dead."

To O'Brien, the power lies in the backstory.

"I create an entire awesome backstory for my character, even if I'm just like, a shrub," she said.

James, who also volunteers at the Asylum, relies much more on putting himself "in the place." Recently, he played the dental patient, a character which wears scrubs and has teeth for eyes.

"You take in what your room is like, your area, and you imagine yourself if this were a real place," he said.

But The Haunt teaches much more than just acting skill, as that alone is not enough to create the scare Kingwood Asylum hopes to provide.

"We teach the art of illusion," Torrains said. "We teach scenic design, set design, lighting, sound, acting, teamwork."

What Kingwood Asylum is known best for in the industry is set design, the rooms and places created within the walls of The Haunt. Some former volunteers, using what they learned from helping with the build, have gotten jobs in the set design departments of Disney World, Universal Studios and Six Flags.

This detailing ensures the power of the asylum's format, a method known as "immersion" in the haunt

business. Rather than going past a scary room in a separate hallway, a tactic often employed by other haunts, Kingwood Asylum puts the customer in the actual environment.

This year the indoor asylum has opened, in addition to the Hallowed Grounds, the outdoor portion that had been the primary attraction for the past three years. The Haunt also added two more owners over the past year, Shane and Ryan Glasgow, who ran a home haunt of their own before joining with Kingwood Asylum. This merger resulted in The Haunt growing to three times the size it had been in past years.

The expansion is also the reason ticket prices increased and now cost \$30.

"We're barely covering the cost it takes in order to grow it," says Torrains.

Platinum silicone masks, the movie quality masks that Kingwood Asylum mainly uses, cost an average of \$1,000 per mask; and one or two fall casualty to accidental ripping every year.

At about 7 p.m., the main lights in The Haunt flicker on and off three times. Ryan Glasgow does one final walkthrough of the course, making sure all of the crew members are in their places. The lights finally settle on off, and the first group of "normal" people enter the world of the asylum.

"By the time you get into that first or second room," Torrains said. "You forget you're in a metal building."

\*\*\*\*

Helping each other into masks and costumes, doing each other's makeup, working on the build, and acting roles that live way outside social norms foster strong bonds between the volunteers.

"I've learned that you can be who you are and people will accept you," says Schwebach.

The Haunt will welcome anyone of any age who wants to volunteer. People from the age of 8 up into their retirement years come out to help in all aspects of operation.

The Haunt will still be open through the first weekend of November, and as the volunteers sat talking the other night, there was no shortage of people they believed still needed to visit.

"If you want to be scared, come to the Kingwood Asylum," O'Brien said.

James then interrupted his friend.

"If you don't get out and run much, come to the Kingwood Asylum," he said, as they all laughed.

If those categories left anyone out, O'Brien had just two more suggestions.

"If you need to validate your existence, come to the Kingwood Asylum," she said. "If you sometimes feel like you're crazy, come to the Kingwood Asylum."

# Carving out fun

Sculpting students paired with other classmates from around the school to carve pumpkins on Oct. 22.



Junior Emily Callens helps freshman Dustin Holloway carve a lightning bolt into the side of his pumpkin. Other students carved faces and one even carved the Texans logo onto his pumpkin. Photo by Sarah Martell.



Sophomore Gerardo De Le Garza and sophomore Veronica Rodriguez work together to carve a spooky cat on Rodriguez's pumpkin. Photo by Sarah Martell.



Senior Tommy Fazzino and sophomore Frank Martinez carve a smiling face into a pumpkin during sculpting teacher Marcia Papp's fourth period sculpture class. Photo by Sarah Martell.



**"Everyone should experience [Kingwood Asylum] at least once... It really helps you find yourself, honestly. It allows you to know what you're capable of."**

- senior Alyssa O'Brien, who volunteers at Kingwood Asylum