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N.J. group says it has a chance of a ghost

By Kristen A. Graham
INQUIRER SUBURBAN STAFF

Spirits follow Hildred Robinette. Her friends will tell you that right up front.

She says she has had 37 past lives. One ended with the sinking of the Titanic. Another finished with her giving birth on a covered wagon. Naturally, she's a key member of New Jersey Ghost Research, a new paranormal-investigation group based in Turnersville, Gloucester County. Using still and video photography and cassette recordings, the group conducts free investigations to determine whether spirits inhabit a location. And members do not take kindly to being called Ghostbusters. "We're in the business of collecting data using science and explaining why things occur," said Michael Dieser, who founded the group in March. "We deal in the understanding of ghost phenomena. We look for answers." In recent years, several paranormal-research groups have cropped up in New Jersey, in Pennsylvania, and elsewhere across the country. Black Horse Paranormal Research, a Delaware County group, for instance, has a mission of documentation and observation similar to New Jersey Ghost Research's. "Our goal," the Pennsylvania group's Web site states, "is not to destroy or hunt down, it is to document and observe." To that end, seven of New Jersey Ghost Research's nine members - including Robinette and another medium - embarked on an investigation on a Friday night last month. A steady rain got in the way of the original plan: Meet at headquarters, strap on gear, and head to a cemetery. So they loaded cars with digital cameras, thermometers, night-vision scopes and tape recorders and left for their training site in Gloucester City, Camden County.

The rowhouse on Mercer Street, the house in which Dieser grew up, is hot with spirits, members say. Evidence of the paranormal comes mostly in the form of pictures and video footage that show orbs of white light invisible to the naked eye. Bright or dull, Dieser said, the orbs cannot be explained by variations in temperature, electromagnetic fields or light refraction. New Jersey Ghost Research participants are careful to call themselves investigators, carry business cards, and follow procedures to the letter. "This is the most professionally operated and democratically overseen paranormal-research organization in this great nation," Dieser wrote in the group's handbook, a voluminous document that includes articles of association, prayers, and even a medical-leave policy. Dressed entirely in black, with military-short hair and combat boots, Dieser unfolded a tripod from a canvas bag and talked about his father's death, an event that spurred his paranormal curiosity. He became gruff when the subject turned to his day job, which is in law enforcement. "Let's just say I'm a federal agent," he said. "I can't say more."

Glen Sparks, a professor of communications at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind., who studies the media's effects on paranormal beliefs, is convinced that the work of groups like

Dieser's stands on shaky ground. A surge in the number of television shows featuring "real ghost stories" and embellished with special effects has added to an already large portion of the population that believes in ghosts, Sparks said. "People recognize that while science has given us tremendous advantages, there's still an awful lot that we don't know," he said. "People grasp these beliefs as a way of comforting themselves, as a way of connecting themselves to the unknown." Though many paranormal groups insist they have data to back up their assertions, Sparks said such proof was often weak. "If your evidence is a blip on a video screen, that's not very compelling. Anyone who watches a video long enough is going to see something," he said. "That falls far below the standards set for scientific evidence." The criticism is nothing new to Dieser, who said his group welcomed skeptics. "Hey, as of right now, we can't prove orbs are spirits," he said. But fellow ghost-hunter Kevin Croft of Waterford, Camden County, who videotapes nearly every investigation, chimed in, "For all we know, they could be another species." Denise Flanagan of Mantua, Gloucester County, is an educational assistant and a lifelong aficionado of all things ghostly. But she is not entirely comfortable with the position she finds herself in when she talks about her weekend hobby. "I'm a closet paranormal researcher," said Flanagan, 48, fiddling with a flashlight. "Here, it's like kindred spirits, but there are some things you just don't talk about with other people." She and the other members are mystified by what might happen after they gather enough data to prove that ghosts exist. "I don't know what comes next," Flanagan said. "That's what we're out until 4 in the morning talking about." New Jersey Ghost Research is self-funded and thus far limited by its lack of sophisticated equipment. The group is seeking members and donations, Dieser said. Members readily admit that data are not the only reasons they participate so faithfully. "This is so exciting," said Robinette, of Pitman, Gloucester County, who is 62 and has been involved in paranormal research since 1955. "It gives you something to do on a Friday night, and that's great." She stopped suddenly when Pamela Dieser, Michael's wife, put up a hand. "Shhh. Listen. Hear somebody walking above us?" Except for the steady drumbeat of rain pelting the roof, the room was quiet - until a peal of laughter burst forth from Courtney Boulton, at 17 the group's youngest member. "My friend," she said into the musty darkness, "would be wetting his pants right about now."

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