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October 9-13, 2017

Eldora's Haunted Hospital is ready for another season of scares



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Mid-America
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October is here, which means it's time for things to get spooky in the Hawkeye State.

Throughout the month Iowa businesses, volunteer groups, and hobbyists will be hosting a wide range of Halloween themed events across the state. From kid friendly hay rides and corn mazes to creepy outdoor trails, zombie hunts, and, of course, haunted houses.

Among the most popular of these attractions is the Eldora Rotary Haunted Hospital. Set up in the unused east wing of the former Eldora Community Hospital, the local rotary club has turned their annual Halloween fundraiser into a major holiday event.

Opening up this year on Friday the 13th, the Haunted Hospital will give weekend visitors from now until Halloween a chance to tour the building and experience the elaborate sets designed to give them a fright.

"We just want to scare the day-lights out of people," said Marc Anderson, a member of the Eldora Rotary club that has helped spearhead the Haunted Hospital event for the last six years.

Coming up with new scenarios each year to keep things fresh, Anderson and the rest of the rotary have become adept at designing frightening experiences. As visitors walk through the maze of dark hallways, they'll encounter animatronic monsters, motion triggered screams, and live interactions as volunteers lie in wait to jump out when least expected.

"The best scare is the distracted scare," said Anderson. "Your focus is over here and it comes from over there. We want to keep them on their toes."

Of course while the goal is to make people scared, there is a balance to be kept between scaring somebody and disturbing them. While the Haunted Hospital may have dark rooms with ghouls and ghosts, the rotary club avoids more grounded horrors, such as suicide imagery, that might hit too close to home for visitors looking for a fun time.

"We try to keep it all fictional and fun," said Anderson.

The event is set up to be adaptable for different age groups. For the first hour of the night, younger children can go through the hospital with flashlights, which not only gives the kids a bit of control over what they see, but signals the volunteers to take a lighter approach when jumping out for a scare.

The Haunted Hospital is also designed to be handicap accessible. Wheelchair bound visitors may have to bypass some of the claustrophobically narrow paths, but the rotary has built their attraction to make sure anybody can get a scary experience.

The Eldora Haunted Hospital will only be open for three weekends in October, but the work involved in preparing the event



Marc Anderson and Bernie the Skeleton are ready for another year of scares at the Eldora Haunted Hospital, opening on Friday the 13th.

begins much earlier in the year. Planning usually begins as early as July, with the rotary coming up with a theme for the event and plotting out which attractions will be changed or replaced.

Construction begins in August as volunteers work to build the winding maze of horrors. Temporary walls are set up and taken down as they wire motion sensors, strobe lights, and hidden cameras throughout the building. By September, Anderson says he and others are practically living at the hospital, setting up all the horrific details before their big October opening.

Fortunately, the rotary club has plenty of help. Other community groups like the Lions Club and Masons along with area high school students and parents all join together to volunteer their time. At least a hundred volunteers are involved in setting up the attraction, and it takes about 35 people each night to run it.

"There's people from all over the community that volunteer to help," said Anderson.

"The community effort pays off. Profits from the event have been used to buy new robes for the high school choir and a handicap accessible ramp for the school's football bleachers. Regular donations are also made to local fire and rescue services.

Their work has also been recognized among their peers in the Haunted House community. For two years running, the Eldora Haunted Hospital's positive reviews have earned it recognition as the Top Overall Attraction by IowaHauntedHouses.com, an online resource that compiles information about Halloween attractions across the state.

It's a humbling honor for the rotary, who have come a long way from simple dark rooms and masks.

"For us to be recognized as top attraction, we were very grateful for that," said Anderson.

In recent years the Haunted Hospital has drawn scare enthusiasts from across the state, and sometimes beyond the border. With so many visitors it can take up to two hours to get through the line, the rotary keeps actors outside to entertain the crowd with a sort of pre-show before they go inside for the full experience.

As the crowds grow, the Eldora rotary is happy to continue their efforts to stay on the map as one of Iowa's most popular Halloween attractions.

"Our long term goal is to continue to do this as long as the people of Iowa appreciate it," said Anderson. "We're just going to continue to get a little bit bigger and a little bit better every year."

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