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## Homes filled with Halloween Spirit

10/31/02 **Dani Altieri Marinucci**  
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On Halloween, it's only appropriate to visit Greater Cleveland sites that pay the deepest homage to this day of scary sights.

Let's start with a Parma Heights home owned by a man nicknamed Mr. Halloween.

How dedicated to the holiday is he?

He has a jack-o'-lantern tattoo on his left leg.

His car's license plate reads "FRIGHT."

His pumpkin socks are never stored away.

And when his kids were younger, his wife pleaded with him to "tone it down - your own kids won't come to our door for trick-or-treat."

Chris Riddle's passion for Halloween extends to year-round decor in his home. He has a 200-piece antique Halloween collection dating from the early 1900s through the 1960s displayed in his family room, his folk-art Halloween collection is in the living room, and his overnight guests share a bedroom with his Nightmare Before Christmas collection.

"There are few days in the year when you or your house can be extraordinary and get away with it," said Riddle. "Just driving around, you see there are a lot of us Halloween freaks out there."

Indeed, he is not alone. According to the National Retail Federation, Halloween is second only to Christmas as a home-decorating holiday. Last year, the holiday generated \$6.9 billion in sales, with decorating products making up \$750 million of that number.

Riddle is unique in that he has found a way to center his career on the October holiday. He's the trend spotter for American Greetings, translating consumer trends into the company's Halloween products.

But Westlake homeowner Susie Meehan also has found a way to pursue her love of Halloween year-round.

"Oh my gosh, I shop for Halloween stuff all year-round," she said. "I buy my candles in February."

Meehan also hits Gale's Garden Centers and Plantcrafters - both known for elaborate Halloween merchandise and displays - after Halloween for indoor and outdoor decorations.

Meehan's decor emphasizes this love and shows how her family and friends help feed the spooky habit. Candles are everywhere in Meehan's living room, kitchen and powder room. Votive lanterns bounce jack-o'-lantern and bat shadows across the walls; candy corn and pumpkin pillars line the mantel. Her favorite is a monogrammed Lillian Vernon haunted house. Heat generated by a candle turns a whirly bird top rotating the house so all the spooky rooms can be enjoyed.

Garlands laden with pumpkins, skeletons and black cats hang from large picture windows. Purple, orange and green twinkling lights encircle columns. And as Meehan's kitchen clock strikes 6 p.m., a witch cackles.

Flying across the miles to Medina County, to a home on the appropriately named Sleepy Hollow Road, reveals the spooky decor of Jennine Bonus. She lists Christmas as her favorite holiday but gives Halloween her undivided decorating attention.

"I put an 8-foot Christmas tree up now and decorate it with black and orange lights," she said, as if this was the most natural thing in the world to do.

Bonus hangs ugly Halloween masks, black birds and bats from the fir tree's branches. Bouncy spiders swing from webs, and ghosts fly this way and that. She even exchanges her wineglasses for goblets.

"It drives my husband nuts, but the house gets a good cleaning each time I decorate," she said. "He likes that. And we always host at least one Sunday football party. This can't all be just for me."

### **Yard haunters**

Halloween decor is not just for the interior. There is a frightening subculture lurking in your neighborhood. They call themselves yard haunters. You know the place. Your kids beg to drive by "that scary house" over and over again.

What began eight years ago as a haunted basement party at Halloween for Judy Fleming's family, friends and four sons has grown into an elaborate ghoulish endeavor that extends from the basement into the living room and spills out into the yard, driveway and garage.

"My eldest, Brett, is the most into it," said Fleming, who lives in Parma. "He loves the creative aspect of it. When I was looking at this house to buy four years ago, the first thing they all said was, This is a great Halloween house!" "

Last year, they dug a real grave in the back yard, and Brett assembled about 25 actors including many of his college friends to spook their guests.

Fleming put a hold on this year's celebration, much to her family and friends dismay.

"I need so much help from Brett to pull it off, and this year his schoolwork kept him from lending a hand," she said.

"I keep telling the boys and everyone else who asks, Don't worry. We'll be back next year bigger and better.' "

Yard haunter Joe Barto is focusing on this year.

"I think Halloween 365," said Barto.

This is the third year Barto assembled a graveyard with mausoleum, caskets, columns and live actors. A haunted mansion facade with lights and stained-glass windows covers his garage, where inside a maze leads to a haunted library, dining room and attic in his Brook Park yard.

"I'm just obsessed with Halloween, it is the most awesome time of year," said Barto, who attends Halloween collector shows and yard-haunting seminars during the off-season.

Barto collects donations from thrill-seeking visitors for charity (this year's recipient is Providence House). He takes this holiday so to heart that he planned his 1998 marriage to wife Kimberly around it.

"We were married on Halloween. The wedding party was all in black, and guests were encouraged to come to the reception in costume. We took our pictures in Lake View Cemetery, had a haunted house wedding cake and gargoyles on the tables," he said.

The romance aside, there's nothing like a good scare.

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