

Globe West

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Suburban skulduggery

Through sickness, health, and divorce, haunting must go on

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On a meandering residential street in the Newton village of Waban sits the house. Bushes shield the front yard, and a dark path leads to the door. Even without the jack-o'-lanterns glaring from diamond-paned windows, the house looks haunted.

"It really was the house that made us do it," explains Pam Memishian, owner of what many neighbors know as "the Halloween house."

Memishian, a lawyer, points to the castle-like flagstone foyer: "We put a carved pumpkin there, so you can see it as you open the door, and that's where the bat drops down on everyone's head, and there" — she points to a bush outside the massive front door — "is where the witch lights up."

The Memishians have decorated their house every Halloween since 1980. On that night and that night only, their windows glow red. A blacklight dragon's head lurks in the dim light. Heart-stopping thunder and lightning effects blast through the yard, and kids gather at the hedges daring themselves to go in.

"We do it through everything," Pam Memishian insists. Through accidents (she was on crutches last year), through the years Meera, her son, went away to college. And yes, even through her separation and divorce 16 years ago. "When we separated, I said I would," says her ex-husband Jack Memishian, an engineer.

"The underplinnings are electronic because that's what I do. I'm a techno-geek," he says. "When we started, we had cutout bats and a blacklight, and that was it. Now it's two days of hard labor to set up and another tearing it down. It just got out of hand.

"But," he admits, "I would miss it. I like enter-

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GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/JUSTINE ELLE

Residents of this Newton home are just waiting to scare the wits out of daring trick-or-treaters for the 24th year in a row.

House haunts city every year

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taining people. That's what it's about. It's show biz. It's the only occasion I get to be theatrical — the seamy underside of nerd."

"Dad's a bit of a technoid," agrees Meem, himself a software engineer. "The sound and trickery are all custom-engineered. Like the kicking leg in the pile of leaves — it's built on a windshield wiper motor."

The Memishians set up and dismantle on Halloween night, so everything appears and disappears like magic. They tell stories of neighborhood kids who stare at the house the next day asking each other if it really happened. Or kids who come back to prove to themselves that the Memishians are really normal folks 364 days of the year.

Each Memishian has their post: Pam's the candy lady; Meem terrorizes kids in the yard; and Jack works the lights and four-channel sound system and

schmoozes with visitors. And volunteers help. There are costumed ghouls to spook up the yard; ghost guy, who operates a tulle-draped skeleton that floats from an upstairs window down through the yard; and someone to rubber-stamp hands.

"We had to stop people from coming twice for candy," says Meem. "There are scams of course. People switch costumes, or they put shaving cream over the stamp so we can't see it." (His mom gives out full-sized candy bars, always has. No snack-sized treats here.)

"When the night's all over," Pam Memishian says, happily, "you feel like you've been through a live theater performance."

The Memishians do indeed exhibit many symptoms of theater folk: a "show-must-go-on" passion; a terror of disasters like blown fuses or not enough candy; anticipation of the audience — How many will come? (usually 400) Will rain keep them away?



GLOBE PHOTO/JUSTINE ELLENBY

Every Halloween since 1980, through separations and divorce, the Memishians have decorated their house for neighbors.

(no); and the camaraderie of cast members eating together after the show, sharing reviews from folks in the street.

After 24 years of giving the neighborhood's best Halloween yard show, they have no plans to stop. Says Meem, "This is generational now. People come by who came here as kids and bring their own kids to see it."

"I can't imagine not doing it"

his mom adds. "Why would we stop? It became a thing of its own. This house is tailored to the mystical. And it's one thing we all have in common."

Meem agrees. "This is like our last remaining family tradition. Birthdays and Christmases are difficult to schedule, but Halloween — we all know we're going to do that."