

October 28, 2005

Moving Orbs of Light? Who Ya Gonna Call?

By [RALPH BLUMENTHAL](#)

CYPRESS, Tex. - The night brings ghastly specters, lawns aglow with hanging skeletons, giant spiders, leering goblins.

But the darkened house of Harry and Lesli Zamora on a dead-end lane here in a suburb northwest of Houston is devoid of the seasonal kitsch enveloping suburbia.

Halloween holds no terrors for them, they say. Things are scary enough as they are.

"It's real to us, it's not make-believe," said Mr. Zamora, 45, a patrol lieutenant and veteran motorcycle officer with the Houston Police Department.

Since buying the modest beige brick house on Skyway Street in 2003 in an estate sale a year after the former owner died there, the Zamoras say, they have been tormented by mysterious presences, ghostly visions including a fluffy white dog, disembodied touches, moving orbs of light, a door that locks itself, and appliances, lights and water faucets that turn themselves on.

"He's searched the house so many times with his weapon drawn," said Mrs. Zamora, 30, a Web designer.

But the Zamoras are not just your average family in a haunted house. When spirits knock, they know who they are going to call: a ghostbusters squad of veteran Houston police officers who have rallied around Mr. Zamora as the Phenomena Police. They have turned their off-duty exploits investigating the unnatural world into a pilot for a television series directed by David Carren, a professional producer and screenwriter.

With one episode shot, they are waiting for a buyer. They acknowledge that their Hollywood venture is not likely to enhance their credibility, but they shrug it off. "We're not trying to convince anybody," said Mike Bedner, a patrol officer of 22 years and member of the Phenomena Police.

He and other officers say they have experienced weird things in the Zamora house. Videos and photographs of their explorations there and elsewhere posted on their Web site, www.phenomenapolice.com, show unexplained moving lights and what appears to be a skeletal apparition.

Photographs taken at various times in and around the meticulous home show a multiplicity of orbs - translucent circles with lacy interior patterns or fingerprintlike concentric swirls - a phenomenon that skeptics and even the Fujifilm Web site say is readily explainable as normally invisible dust particles illuminated by camera flashes and magnified by close proximity to the lens.

But the Zamoras cite anomalies in some images that they say defy easy dismissal. One orb with a distinctive chip in its perimeter keeps appearing in the photos.

One of the strangest episodes, they say, occurred early this year when Mrs. Zamora was on the telephone with Leslie Henderson, a police bicycle patrol instructor and member of the Phenomena Police. Suddenly, both recounted, Mrs. Zamora shouted that she saw a small white dog with a pink collar streak through the apartment.

"But Lesli," Officer Henderson said she protested, "you don't have a dog."

"I know!" Mrs. Zamora wailed.

The dead owner, she said later, seemed to have had a dog - the house was full of white dog hair when they moved in.

The Zamoras now have a dog of their own, but it avoids certain areas of the house and a section of the back yard where police cadaver dogs have detected human remains, perhaps from an old cemetery that may go back to the property's plantation origins.

David J. Schneider, a professor of psychology and director of the cognitive science program at Rice University in Houston, who studies how people form their beliefs accompanied a reporter and photographer to the Zamoras' house recently. He said he could not readily explain some of the photo images he viewed and stories he heard. "It's a mystery to me," he said. "Clearly there's something going on, but I don't know what it is."

He said he regarded the couple as "honest people and very sincere" and not out to perpetrate a hoax.

But Joe Nickell, a prominent ghost debunker and senior research fellow of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, said he had "been in more haunted houses than Casper" and did not need to hear the details to know that nothing supernatural was going on at the Zamora home.

"Science has never authenticated a single ghost," Mr. Nickell said, deploring what he portrayed as entertainment-driven efforts to titillate the gullible and calling police officers "no more scientific than other people."

"Once an idea that a place is haunted takes hold with susceptible people, things are no longer accidental," he said. "You no longer lose your car keys - the ghost moved them."

Americans do not seem to need much convincing. In a Gallup poll in June, about a third of Americans said they believed in ghosts and even more said they believed that houses could be haunted. About half said they did not believe in ghosts or haunted houses, and the rest said they were not sure. More young people than old said they believed in ghosts, and more liberals than conservatives.

The Zamoras said the house, which they bought for \$121,000, spooked them from the beginning. They came back from dinner one night and found all the lights on, Mr. Zamora said. A light over the shower in an upstairs bathroom repeatedly switched on while they were in bed. They got sudden chills and heard footsteps.

Mrs. Zamora said she had felt hands brushing her. She said she once glanced into the bathroom to see her husband stepping out of the shower - and a grim-faced, black-clad figure behind him. She fainted.

Their children from previous marriages were too terrorized to sleep alone on their weekend visits, Mr. Zamora said. Some told of seeing a woman in a white Victorian dress. Once, Mrs. Zamora said, "the kids came down screaming they saw a lady with yellow eyes and huge breasts."

When they asked the children to point to any spirits in the room and took a digital photo, orbs appeared where they pointed, the Zamoras said, displaying the pictures. The children, they said, now walk around the house carrying Bibles for protection and blare Christian music on the CD player.

The couple themselves put up a large cross in the back yard.

The Zamoras also called in a Houston ghost hunter, Cathi Bunn, who videotaped the house with an infrared camera, confirming what she called "an interactive haunting" by spirits that could respond to commands. A video clip posted on the Phenomena Police Web site shows her crew walking down a hall following a moving light and Ms. Bunn, as she later explained it, "urging the entities to follow my investigators - and they did."

They consulted a minister who consecrated the house with holy oil, and a feng shui specialist who gave them a Buddhist figurine for a living room corner. But each took issue with the other's ministrations and nothing changed.

The Zamoras called in a spiritualist, Bonnie Vent, from San Diego, who spent a night sleeping in the children's room. She described the house in a recent interview as "a boiling pot of water with the lid on" and said she detected "quite a few spirits standing around me" including one she called Miguel. She said he had died in a knife fight with his girlfriend and might have been the figure Mrs. Zamora saw in the bathroom. The orb with the missing chip, she theorized, may represent Miguel and a missing stage in his spiritual transformation.

Mr. Zamora had also begun confiding in some fellow police officers.

"He would come to work and tell me what was happening, and I would raise my eyebrows like, 'You're crazy,' " said Bruce Raschke, a patrol sergeant with 32 years in the department.

That was until he came to the house and saw a moving shadow flit across his path. "I told them what had just happened and they said, 'Yeah, things like that happen,' " said Sergeant Raschke, now a member of the Phenomena Police.

A reporter for The New York Times who spent several hours in the house experienced nothing amiss, except perhaps for a brief chill and photos by the Zamoras that showed orbs all around him. No orbs showed up on a Times photographer's digital camera.

A photo of the Zamoras at home published by The Houston Chronicle in May on a Friday the 13th appeared to show the blurred image of a scowling face in the bathroom wall. An examination of the wall recently showed nothing there.

So why don't they just sell the house and leave? Mrs. Zamora said she would like to, but Mr. Zamora said, "I'm prayed up, I'm a Christian." He said he was no longer afraid.

And then, there is the pending television pilot.