



# Too Ghoul for School: tales of University hauntings and beyond



by *abcdmag*

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## Words by Juliana Callen.

Around Halloween, thrill-seekers may search for scares by braving a haunted house or even taking a stroll through a spooky cemetery. But for Cherie Breeden, the founder of the Virginia-based paranormal investigative team, Lunar Paranormal, the hunt for the paranormal is her everyday career.

“There’s a lot of history in Virginia — there’s a lot to offer,” Breeden said. “I don’t think that we could ever run out of places to investigate. Well, we’re lucky we live here.”

Breeden’s interest in the supernatural began when, at nine years old, she attended a field trip to Mount Vernon’s Woodlawn Plantation. Walking down the back staircase, Breeden had a strong suspicion that the location was haunted.

“I mean I was a child, I don’t know, I just felt it,” Breeden said. “And then several years later, I read in a book that a young girl is known to haunt the back staircase of Woodlawn Plantation. And that’s kind of what got me started.”

She said this openness to the supernatural would prove to be useful as her investigations continued.

“My primary benefit to the group is that I seem to be able to communicate really well when we do have activity during our investigation,” Breeden said. “They seem to like responding to me.”



The Lunar  
Paranormal  
team  
investigate  
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areas,  
looking for  
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l spirits.  
Photo  
courtesy  
Cherie  
Breden.

Another member of the team, Dennis Call, said he has a similar skill, in which spirits supposedly become more active in his presence. Danielle Walker helps with public outreach. Breden's husband, Chris, is also a member of the team and helps with filming and equipment. He is the most skeptical of the team, but Breden assures that this point of view is just as valuable.

"You've got to have both sides of the spectrum when it comes to your team," Breden said. "You have to have skeptics."

Prior to her investigations, Breden said she would notice paranormal activity while visiting friends that attended The University. During a trip to Edgar Allan Poe's dorm room, Number 13, on the West Range, she recalls seeing a shadow go through the room. On another occasion, Breden and friends said they felt a haunting energy while walking down the Lawn.

"Two of us had it at the same time, it felt like somebody pushed us — not hard enough to fall," Breden said.

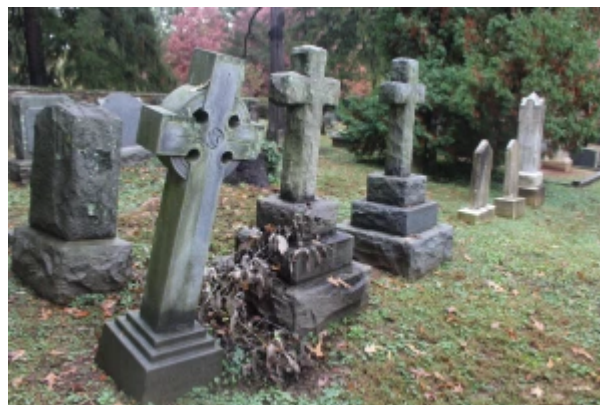
According to Breden, there are reasons as to why one spirit may be more likely to reveal itself or interact with the living. In her experience, discontented or passionate spirits are easier to contact, as well as spirits that passed suddenly or tragically. That is not to say, however, that she believes friendly ghosts refuse to make appearances in our world.



Cherie  
Breedon,  
pictured,  
has been  
interested  
in the  
paranorma  
l from a  
young age.  
Photo  
courtesy  
Cherie  
Breedon.

“I think some of them are in a good place, and they’re content that they come to communicate temporarily, and then they go back,” Breedon said.

Breedon and her friends are not the only students who claimed experiencing paranormal activity at the University. There have been multiple tales of people witnessing the appearance of strange figures and observing strange phenomena throughout Grounds.



University of  
Virginia

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Cemetery and  
Columbariu  
m has been a  
resting place  
since 1828.

Photo by  
Meagan  
O'Rourke.

In her book, "Haunted Charlottesville and Surrounding Counties", author Susan Schwartz explores these ghoulish encounters and presents a collection of ghost stories and haunting, ranging from vanishing figures in Pavilion X to inexplicable footsteps in the Alderman Library.

Although these supposed hauntings provided ample material for her book, she felt the supernatural from the antiquity of places in themselves.

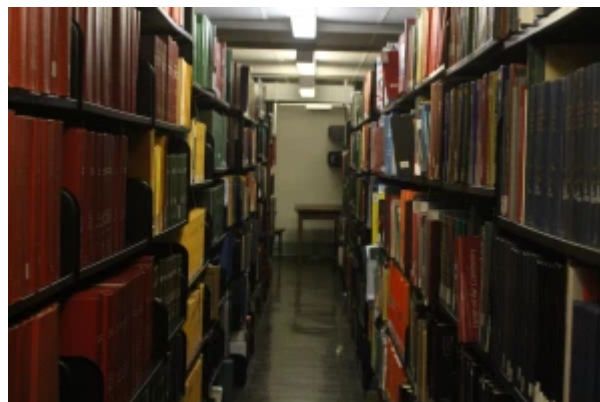
"I think that getting out and experiencing that history and walking where somebody else from the past walked it kind of gives it a surreal feeling," Schwartz said.

According to third-year College student Annie Parnell, the discussion of possible paranormal activity at the University comes up lightheartedly and adds an element of intrigue. She also feels, however, that these accounts of supernatural activity comes from the University's 200-year-old history.

"I've had people tell me the Lawn is haunted by ghosts of slaves and stuff like that," Parnell said. "And I think talking about potential hauntings of somewhere as historic, and also rooted in trauma, as our school is, is kind of a way to engage with that but not actually deconstruct it."

Parnell has been working at Alderman Library for almost a year now. Restocking the shelves in the stacks, floor 5M, Parnell stations a cart perpendicular to one of the shelves, when, all of a sudden, it begins to slide toward her.

"I don't know if it was just like the floor was off kilter or what, but it was very creepy," Parnell said. "I kept pushing it back and then it would just keep coming towards me, and I was like, 'Ah, nope, don't want that.' No thank you, ghost of Alderman. I think if anywhere at U.Va. is haunted, it's definitely Alderman Library. It's a terrifying building to be in alone."



Third-year  
College  
student  
Annie  
Parnell  
describes  
Alderman's  
5M floor as  
"terrifying."  
" Photo by  
Meagan  
O'Rourke.

Despite potential haunted library experience and her self-described spooky aesthetic, whether Parnell believes in ghosts is undecided.

And even professionals have their doubts. Schwartz described herself as part believer, and part skeptic, because she is still waiting for the final piece of corroborating evidence. She encourages others to find their own evidence, but believes the best strategy is to approach investigation with an open mind and focus more on the historical qualities

"I think you just have to have an open mind and patience to go out there and find what you're looking for," Schwartz said. "You may not find it the first time, you may not find it the second time, but get out there and at least spend that time wisely. Enjoy the location, the history. Interview the people. Say, 'Where does this stuff happen? What can I go find?'"

Also seeking to understand the paranormal realm, Graduate Arts and Sciences student, Daniel Wise, developed and taught a New Course in religious studies class last spring, the topic of which was paranormal belief in America. In the course, the students studied why people hold paranormal beliefs, what those beliefs look like and how the paranormal beliefs interact with science, religion and media. According to Wise, paranormal beliefs are not structurally different from religious beliefs, but instead tend to be supernatural and fall outside the purview of mainstream religion. Wise is writing his dissertation on ghost hunters in America, which includes additional research that categorizes as religious studies.

"I'm kind of looking at sort of what the spiritual landscape of America looks like post-institutional religion," Wise said. "Institutional religion is declining, especially among younger people, but it looks like paranormal belief is on the rise."

Wise has been on multiple ghost hunts firsthand, as his dissertation views ghost hunting through an ethnographic, sociological, historical and American studies lens. The common theme within ghost hunting is enchantment, which refers to the element of mystery and divinity associated with the paranormal. According to sociologist Christopher Bader, enchantment began fading in 20th century America. Mainly a western phenomenon, scholars debate whether ghost hunting is a form of re-enchantment or whether it is a method of maintaining enchantment.

Wise accompanied Lunar Paranormal during an investigation at the Exchange Hotel and Civil War Medical Museum in Gordonsville, Va. Although he had not witnessed any uncanny activity during the ghost hunt and considers himself to be agnostic about ghosts, he said the majority of the American population does believe in paranormal activity.

“I want to point out that believing in the paranormal is pretty much a normal thing for Americans,” Wise said. “You can’t really stereotype or generalize about paranormal believers because there are so many of them.”

As to why some people are more prone to paranormal experiences than others, Breeden offered an explanation.

“You know some people might hear spiritual stuff more, some people might see stuff, or feel it,” Breeden said. “But a lot of people just aren’t aware that that’s what they have going on yet. And so yeah I think it just depends on your upbringing and basically your surroundings and what you believe in.”



Daniel  
Wise  
ponders  
why some  
people are  
more likely  
to believe  
in the  
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others.  
Photo by  
Meagan  
O'Rourke.

In the Baylor Religion Survey of 2005, researchers found that there are factors that can predict whether someone is more likely to hold or not hold paranormal beliefs. The survey concluded that paranormal beliefs are most prevalent in eastern states. Females are more likely to believe in the paranormal than males and are twice as likely than males to believe in psychics, astrology and communication with the dead. The survey also concluded that the likelihood of reporting a paranormal experience decreases with age.

In March, Breeden, along with fellow investigator Donald Molnar, attended Wise's class at the University to give a presentation regarding ghost hunting and the paranormal.

Beginning with a basic introduction about Lunar Paranormal, they went on to discuss ghost hunting techniques and understanding paranormal investigations, including how they work and what types of spirits exist. It was when demonstrating the equipment, however, that Breeden began to notice supernatural activity within the classroom. Prior to the presentation, Breeden asked that any nearby spirits follow the team into the room.

Then, she gave students copper dowsing rods, which are thin, L-shaped rods. The students held the smaller part of the "L" in each of their hands and watched if the longer parts moved. If the long parts swung together forming an "X", Breeden said the rods showed signs of spirits. After seeing the rods move, the class also asked the supposed spirit questions about itself and requested it to even touch one of the student's arms with the rotating rod.

Using the dowsing rods and questioning the spirit, the class supposedly realized their paranormal visitor was an alumnus. The class seemingly discovered he was a male student, attended and graduated from the University between 1900 and 1950.

"For the students to experience and witness this first-hand seemed to impress them and cause more excitement than any of the other pieces of equipment," Breeden said. "It was surprising in this day and age of modern technology that the students considered the dowsing rods more validating."

If the presentation did change anyone's perspective regarding paranormal activity, Breeden assures that the presence of ghosts felt by Americans is not altogether unpleasant or fearful.

"And it's not a bad thing that there is spiritual activity going on in our world," Breeden said. "It's around us — everywhere."

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