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FAYETTE COUNTY HAUNT CELEBRATING 10TH ANNIVERSARY

Uniontown, PA – It started out as a family Halloween party. Now, it’s one of Fayette County’s most well-known scares, and it’s celebrating a big milestone.

Co-owner Suzie Flesik said Crawford School of Terror in Connellsville, which marks its 10th anniversary this year, came about because of a conversation with one of her brothers.

“This goes back to my brother Johnny,” she said. “I am the youngest of 10. Johnny and I were 15 years apart, but we were very close. We would have Halloween parties every year together.”

The former Suzie Molinaro said her family’s Halloween tradition was a long-standing one.

“For 25 years, we would have the Molinaro Halloween party,” she said, noting the parties stopped around 2015. “When my husband (haunt co-owner Troy Flesik), and I got together in 1998, that’s when we started adding more to the Halloween party.”

Suzie said her husband is good at mechanical tasks, while her brother Johnny excelled in working with electrical props. Once Troy got on board and the party expanded, Suzie said her brother encouraged them to build a haunted house.

“Johnny would tell us, ‘People say to me all the time that you should charge for this party.’ I was like, ‘No. I’m not going to charge for a party,’” Suzie said, noting the party included a bonfire and a haunted walk, as well as plenty of food. “That’s when Johnny started saying, ‘Maybe we should have a haunted house. Wouldn’t that be fun to do?’”

The Flesiks agreed, so the three began to look for a suitable building. After looking at several houses, Johnny found that the old Crawford School was for sale and excitedly contacted his sister.

The Flesiks bought the 21,000 square foot property in 2008 and began the daunting task of figuring out how to turn the huge space into a haunted house. Suzie said the couple’s children were young at the time, so the focus turned to raising their family. Meanwhile, the Flesiks rented out the Crawford School building to several small businesses, including Suzie’s own nail salon.

“For eight years, we basically tried to figure out what we were doing,” she said. “I said to my husband in 2014, ‘Are we doing this or not?’ We started actually working on the storyline (for the haunted house) and working on the building in 2014, with plans to open in 2015.”

Then, Suzie's oldest brother, Henry Molinaro Jr., passed away unexpectedly.

"That kind of shook my entire family. When you lose somebody abruptly like that, you kind of re-evaluate everything in your life," she said.

Suzie prioritized her children and made the decision she wanted to be home with them. So, Troy took the money the couple had earmarked for the Crawford School haunted house and put it into renovating the Flesiks' garage so that Suzie could move her nail business to their home. The haunted house's opening was pushed back to 2016.

When it opened, it did so on a shoestring.

"It was just me, Troy and my kids," Suzie said. "They acted in the haunt. They were 15, 11 and 9. We had volunteer actors; we didn't pay anybody because I didn't know if I could."

At that time, the haunted house was limited to a single floor of the building. On opening night, the Armstrong television show *Challenge Accepted*, filmed its first episode there.

"The hosts were two girls who would do different challenges," Suzie explained. "The first episode was going through Crawford School of Terror. Having a camera crew – I thought it was the coolest thing ever. I've had people for years and years say, 'I saw you on TV.'"

Opening night drew about 60 people, Suzie said, but it revealed a few kinks to be worked out at the haunt.

"We didn't understand how to build scenes. There's a way to build scenes to get people to walk through," she said. "It's so funny to look back and see how far we've come."

The final scene, a Christmas-themed room, didn't go over well. So that same night, the Flesiks threw out all of the Christmas decorations and began re-imagining the room.

"We went to Spirit Halloween," Suzie said, explaining they painted the walls black and added some glow-in-the-dark touches and some clowns. "I swore we wouldn't do clowns."

But the new scene was ready for the next night, and the only evidence of the ill-fated Christmas room is a YouTube video of the *Challenge Accepted* episode.

Johnny passed away in 2021, but the Flesiks continued building on and improving the haunted house that was his idea.

These days, the Flesiks have learned a great deal, and Crawford School of Terror has grown a great deal. The haunt now features what the owners call Three Floors of Fright in the old school building, including the basement area. One change was to make the basement accessible from inside.

"You actually had to go outside, around the front of the building, and then go to the basement," Suzie said.

The couple also switched up the route, which is now the opposite of the way it was when the haunted house began. “We pulled it off. People liked it.”

Suzie said there is something “magical” about the energy around this year’s haunt in particular.

“We have more actors this year than we’ve ever had, ever. I thought it was a fluke at first, because we usually struggle,” she said. “I’m making up spots for people to be in. There’s magic in the air this year.”

There are about three dozen actors this year, up from last year’s “full house” of 25.

Crawford School of Terror is open Fridays and Saturdays in late September through October, with this year’s final haunt taking place on Nov. 1. There is a DJ on certain Fridays, and three of the Saturdays are themed. Oct. 11 was Free T-Shirt Night, with the first 100 guests receiving a 10th anniversary shirt.

Oct. 18 is an homage to 1980s horror, with characters from classic movies like The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, Friday the 13th and Halloween. The first 100 to the ticket booth will receive a free gift.

Oct. 25 is Jeep Night, with the first 100 people to the ticket booth receiving a Halloween duck. There will be a Jeep decorating contest with a prize. “Traditionally, it’s the busiest night,” Suzie said.

Crawford School of Terror is also open on Halloween for Lights Out. “We turn all the lights out. You get one light, a glowstick, for your group to go through,” Suzie said.

The final night will be Over 18 Night. Guests must sign a waiver to take part in the “adult fun.” “It’s humor, and it can be gross,” Suzie said. “It’s not an extreme haunt at all.” However, she said the actors are permitted to touch – but not harm – guests on Over 18 Night.

In addition to the haunt itself, Crawford School of Terror also offers food trucks and a midway with games, a merchandise store and a tarot reader on select nights. There is a bonfire on cold nights, and the Last Ride coffin simulator.

“You get in, the lid closes, and it feels like you’re getting buried alive,” Suzie said.

Coffee at Crawford, the coffee shop that is housed on the first floor of the building year-round, will not be open during the haunted house. However, Scoops at Crawford will be open to serve ice cream, milkshakes and sundaes, along with lattes, hot chocolate and hot apple cider.

Crawford School of Terror is located at 125 N. Seventh St., Connellsville. For tickets, or to learn more, visit www.crawford.school or follow “Crawford School of Terror” on Facebook and Instagram.

To learn more about Fayette County, visit www.fayettecountypa.org.

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