In a recent Randi.org blog post , D.J. Grothe kindly named me as one of the “workhorses of skepticism”. He explained that these are individuals who “do scientific paranormal investigations of claims.” D.J. also calls out some other investigators, such as Blake Smith of Monster Talk, Sharon Hill of Doubtful News, CSI’s legendary Joe Nickell and the JREF’s very own Jamy Ian Swiss. In his post D.J. adds:

The work of these folks is not at all trivial, and indeed is very important service in the public interest. People are harmed when they believe paranormal and pseudoscientific nonsense, and the work of skepticism, as sort of intellectual consumer protection informed by science and critical thinking and motivated by a kind of humanism or regard for others’ well-being, aims to help people from being hurt by their undue belief.

Before it seems like I’m blowing my own horn, I actually want to give a shout out to a few fellow investigators who are unsung, and share their case about a frightened family and a not-so “haunted” house.

Last weekend I accompanied Bryan Bonner, Matthew Baxter and Stu Hayes to a follow-up meeting at a private residence where they had previously conducted an overnight investigation. In the family the parents are both in law enforcement. They have two young daughters, one who is in high school, while the older girl graduated recently. The house stands on a large property just outside of Boulder, CO, at the foothills of the Flatirons. When we arrived, the family was clearly anxious to speak with us, and they had a long list of questions and concerns.

Some of the phenomena they reported includes: the sound of heavy footsteps like “cowboy boots” walking up and down the hall, and the sound of someone running up behind them when they were outside in the dark. Doorknobs rattled like someone was trying to get into the house, or into bedrooms. The two girls frequently saw “shadow people” in the kitchen and in their bedrooms. These figures would occasionally appear to sit down on their beds. In several areas of the house they reported hearing disembodied voices that seemed to be holding conversations. There had been some strange instances of apparent vandalism on the property. Outside lights had been shattered, knobs to water faucets had disappeared, and their mailbox had been shot, seemingly at close range. Objects around the house gave the appearance of moving by themselves, including a wobbling lampshade and swinging photo frames. They also reported that one of their toilets flushes by itself.

As skeptics, it's easy for us to brush off these claims as mundane and natural. However, for those living in a state of suggestibility and fear, who are "educated" by reality TV, these everyday events become supernatural. To make matters worse, a friend who claimed to be a medium once visited the house and announced immediately that the place was haunted. According to the family, the woman didn't even know about the phenomena, thereby confirming their fears. The occurrences are causing serious psychological problems for the entire family. In particular, the youngest daughter is extremely distraught by the events. She is unable to sleep without the lights and TV on, and she suffers terrifying nightmares. She is very scared of the house, especially spending time alone at night, which is common because the rest of the family work evening shifts. During a visit one of her school friends had also told her that there were "ghosts living under the stairs who wanted to kill her".

Bryan, Baxter and Stu treated each one of these concerns systematically by providing possible natural explanations for each event. For example, the girl's sleep disturbances have the hallmarks of sleep paralysis, while the footsteps outside could be coyotes which are appearing with greater frequency as their territory is being encroached upon by local housing developments. Bryan was able to recreate the lampshade repositioning itself by stepping on a "sweet spot" on the floorboards. These possibilities were explained in great detail, and with remarkable patience and kindness. I was further impressed by the parents and their ready acceptance of these natural explanations, as many people prefer the paranormal ones. In fact, the mother had arrived at some of these explanations herself, and simply needed confirmation.

We stayed at the house for a total of three hours for this follow-up, which was in addition to the investigation itself, and phone and email support. This dedication wasn't for a TV show, or to promote a podcast, book or blog. This grassroots work is truly in the trenches of skepticism. It is behind the scenes activism that has a real and practical effect, but goes largely unnoticed by our community. To me, this typifies the selfless motivation highlighted by D.J., when he spoke about the "humanism or regard for others' well-being" that aims to "help people from being hurt by their undue belief". That's not to say there isn't a reward for doing this work, as the next day the team received the following email from the girls' mother.

Bryan and Baxter,

Thank you so very much for coming out with your team on Sunday. After you left that evening XXX said she felt much better about the house, she stated she wasn't afraid of it anymore. I can't thank you enough for your explanations and the peace you've brought my daughters. XXX actually seems to be in a brighter mood as a result of your visit. My gratitude and appreciation know no bounds.

The greatest compliment came just before we left when the mother said, “You know, since you were last here we’ve all stopped watching *Ghost Hunters*!”.

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