

“Youth Go’s Indoor Haunted House Closing, Outdoor Haunted Trail Walk to Continue and Expand”

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Youth Go’s Haunted House started 37 years ago as the idea of a youth participant and was first located in an empty house in Neenah. After many years and various locations, it moved to Neenah’s Old City Garage and has been there for the past 19 years. This spooky idea transformed itself from a small fundraiser for Youth Go into a full-blown project with three different events that spanned the month of October: “The Hallows,” “Children’s Day at the Haunted House,” and “Youth Go’s Haunted House.” Youth Go loved being able to offer this fundraiser while providing the community with haunted events, offering a multitude of volunteer opportunities, giving a creative outlet for many young people, and being a staple haunted attraction in the Valley while raising an average of \$21,000 per year from 2010 through 2019. In 2020, all of Youth Go’s Haunted House events had to pause due to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent challenges.

“After much thought, consideration, and discussion, the Youth Go Board of Directors has voted to end the indoor Haunted House fundraiser after 34 active seasons,” said Board President, Trevor Rabbach. “There were many factors that contributed to this decision and it was not an easy one to make, as this project has significantly impacted the lives of many youth, staff, and volunteers over the years.”

“We have had a great relationship with the City of Neenah since making the Old City Garage our long-term home for Youth Go’s Haunted House back in 2005 and we are grateful for the partnership over the years,” said Executive Director, Kelly Hicks. “We have appreciated the flexibility and cooperation to allow us to use the space and create our structure inside of the building. But like anything else in life, all good things can come to an end. During our yearly inspection with the Neenah-Menasha Fire Department in 2021, there were a number of updates that they requested be completed before opening our Haunted House back up to the public. These updates would have required both time and resources that we simply don’t have at this time. In addition, in September this year Gerry Kaiser, the Director of Public Works for the City of Neenah, reached out after they had noticed the inactivity of our Haunted events over the last two and a half years. Gerry shared that the City could make use of the space and that they were interested in exploring the possibility of ending the lease pending the future of the Haunted House event. Obviously, these factors were a catalyst to drive us to start these difficult conversations. And we believe that making this change and working to vacate the Old City Garage is in the best interest of both Youth Go and the City of Neenah.”

Some of the key decision-making factors included:

1. The decline of volunteer numbers. Since the development of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are fewer people willing and able to volunteer. Each Children’s Day at the Haunted House event requires a minimum of 70 volunteers.
2. The availability of staff time. Youth Go staff members run a number of year-round programs within the center and in the schools, which allow for fewer hours in the day to be dedicated to the building, design and construction that is needed each year to set up and run the Haunted House.

3. The health and safety of the youth and staff. A year and a half after the pandemic hit, it still doesn't feel like a responsible choice to put all of our staff members and so many youth in a building where parts of the experience take place in small, confined spaces.

"Many individuals have made significant contributions over the years and Youth Go will be eternally grateful for everything they did for the organization and the project," said Kelly Hicks, Executive Director. Among those individuals are a handful of volunteers, who brought the event to life and helped to sustain it through the years, that we would like to recognize: Tony Toon, Aaron and Amy Johnson, Jamie and Pam Brownson, Neal Gadzinski, Mark and Jean Pritzl, Craig and Julie Hendrickson, Scott "Sarge" Wolf, Jeff Solomon, Glenn Brill, Timothy Chappa, and the heart and soul of the project - Willie Sabel and Mark Ellis.

The closure of the indoor Haunted House events enables Youth Go to focus solely on its expanded community outdoor haunted trail walk in October called "The Hallows," at Memorial Park in Neenah. This event raised \$13,800 in 2022. "One positive thing that came out of the pandemic reset was our ability to reimagine and expand the outdoor trail walk which has generated an overwhelmingly positive response from the community since reopening," said Timothy Chappa, Youth Go's Program Supervisor. "Our haunted trail walk has been two weekends since 2021, and we look forward to providing this entertaining 4-night community event in October for many years to come."

Youth Go is a drop-in center for young people in grades 5-12 and we are located at 213 Nicolet Boulevard in Neenah. We were founded in 1969 by youth and supportive adults looking for a safe gathering place. Our agency is committed to making a lasting and positive difference in the lives of youth. Youth Go provides the youth of this community with a place where they can belong. We offer those youth who may normally be overlooked or who might "fall through the cracks" with a second home. Youth Go celebrates the value of all youth and sees potential in each child that we come in contact with. Through our Recreation, Education, and Support and Wellness Programs we strive to provide them with the support, encouragement, and guidance that they might need. We do our best to provide a wide variety of programming so that any youth who walks through our door will be engaged by an activity, club or program. Whether it is helping a teen with their homework, expanding a child's horizons, offering a listening ear to a youth struggling with a personal problem, or giving someone a safe place to have fun, the staff members at Youth Go do all they can to make a difference each and every day.