

Aurora's Haunted Forest marks 20 years of thrills and chills

Aurora's Haunted Forest is set to be spookier than ever as organizers mark the award-winning event's 20th anniversary.

The Town's annual haunt will take place Saturday, October 25, from 6 to 9 p.m. at Sheppard's Bush, and wristbands, which serve as your ticket, are on sale now at the Aurora Family Leisure Complex, Aurora Town Hall, Aurora Town Square, the Joint Operations Centre, and the SARC.

Recognized as one of the Top 100 Festivals and Events in Ontario, the evening offers plenty of family fun and chills to be had and, to mark its milestone anniversary, an enhanced Haunted Cabin experience brought together by long-time event volunteers, the Knuth Family.

"It is hard to believe it's the 20th anniversary of Aurora's Haunted Forest," says Shelley Ware, Special Events Coordinator for the Town of Aurora. "Twenty years ago, this was such a unique event and now, happily, it's in most communities and it's really taken off.

"We're 20-years-old this year and with that comes an expanded Haunted Cabin as we're transitioning the Pavilion into an expanded trail and cabin to make the 20th anniversary special, and that expansion can completely be credited to Greg and Louise Knuth. Anything they touch turns to gold."

Looking back at the last two decades, Ware says that while some Town Events take a season or two to find their audience and really take off, this was not the case for Haunted Forest, which was immediately embraced by the community.

"In our first year, our benchmark would have been 200 people, but it was past 2,000 when we stopped counting," she says. "Right out of the gate, it was massive and now we don't see additional growth because we've had to cap it - we have a maximum capacity of 4,000 people and there has never been a question of it being sold out. I think we've really refined our craft over the years and we've been able to forge some really amazing relationships, such as with Marquee Theatrical Productions, [the Town's] Youth Engagement Committee, and, of course, the Knuth family."

"Literally hundreds of volunteers" come together to make the Haunted Forest a reality each year, she adds, and the actors from Marquee add extra character to the event, whether they're bringing family-friendly characters to life on the trail for young ones and those more of the faint of heart, while older actors are on the scarier trail bringing characters from some of your favourite spooky movies to life.

"I've lost count of the number of stories of youth who have signed up for Haunted Forest, continued for a few years, and ended up going to school for TV production, film makeup and cosmetology," says Ware. "They've taken that experience and evolved it into a career, and that's really rewarding."

Also rewarding is bringing new people to Sheppard's Bush, which the volunteers put hundreds of hours into for a complete transformation.

The creation of displays begins months in advance but, on the day of, the fleet of municipal staff and volunteers descend on the Forest at 8 a.m. to begin the process. Everything has to be ready by 5.30 p.m. to welcome visitors and, by midnight, "it's like we were never there," she says.

"It's a hard, hard event and last year my step count was 42,000 in just one day, but it has brought together so much closeness with other Town divisions, all for that experience, all to make it available for the community. From a community perspective, seeing those little tiny trick-or-treaters all dressed up in their cute costumes - in the first year it was just the kids dressed up, but now I don't know who dresses up more, the kids or the parents and grandparents taking them. I think we're also providing that outlet for an adult

to sneak in an additional opportunity to dress up and to actually feel the spirit of Hallowe'en. I find seeing a whole family all dressed up together, seeing the planning that went into choosing their themes and their costumes, and to come out that night ? it's really, really special to see the cumulation of their efforts when they come out.?

For more information about Haunted Forest 2025, including what to expect, how to get your wristbands, and additional spooky Hallowe'en activities set to take over the Aurora Family Leisure Complex on the same evening, visit aurora.ca/hauntedforest.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter