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PROFILES 2023

Passing down the paranormal: WKU retiree collecting university's ghost stories

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Mar 26, 2023



Dr. Tamela Smith, retired WKU faculty member and “full-time paranormal researcher” writing a history book on WKU’s ghost stories, sits at her work desk at her home on Crystal Court in Bowling Green, Ky., on Friday, Feb. 17, 2023. (Grace Ramey/grace.ramey@bgdailynews.com)

Elevators running by themselves. Voices heard from vacant classrooms. Shadowy figures seen out of the corner of the eye. All hallmarks of classic university ghost stories.

Western Kentucky University has its fair share of spooky tales, and one longtime Hilltopper has made it her mission to document and preserve the Hill's paranormal history.

Since her retirement from the university, Dr. Tamela Smith has been working as a full-time paranormal researcher, conducting over 80 interviews with folks sharing their own ghostly encounters at WKU to compile a history book on the subject.

“It's not about if ghosts are real, it's about capturing the stories, seeing the patterns and hearing the similarities,” Smith said. “I've documented stories from the early '60s up through 2020, 2021. It's an oral history that's going around, but no one has really pulled those together and written that down and captured that.”

Smith worked at WKU for 25 years prior to her retirement and was made well aware of the campus' ghostly stories during her time on the Hill.

“I had heard ghost stories when I first came to school as a freshman, and then as a police officer working the midnight shift, I would hear stories from students,” Smith said. “I had a couple of experiences myself during that time, noises from an empty room, a door knob moving by itself.”

She said she has always had a fascination with the paranormal – “I don't know if that's because of reading Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys or watching Scooby-Doo” – and likes the mysterious nature of people's encounters.

“I like the mystery, that’s one reason why I went into law enforcement, being able to investigate and research things and to solve them if you can,” Smith said.

Smith is only interviewing people with firsthand experiences. She is the one reaching out to sources, not the other way around.

“Very few people reached out to me,” she said. “I’m having to go out and find them.”

She has come across numerous people who have more than one story to share and said she feels honored so many folks have divulged their experiences.

“These aren’t paranormal groups out coming looking for things, these are people – faculty, staff, students, visitors – who are going about their day, and suddenly they hear something outside their office, a voice answers when they ask a question, and no one’s there,” she said.

Besides serving as a collection of ghost stories, the book has led Smith to research the history of the Hill before it was home to WKU.

“It’s about the land itself, what happened on the Hill long before it was WKU or Western State Normal School or any of those things,” she said. “You can’t tell a ghost story without telling the history of a place.”

Smith said places like Potter and Gordon Wilson halls have their own dedicated chapters.

“I’ve got stories from like 25 buildings, but some of them only have one or two stories,” Smith said. “Potter Hall, it’s got a lot of people reporting things and a lot of patterns there.”

A major pattern has to do with campus elevators moving on their own.

Smith has spoken to a Barnes Campbell hall director about an elevator moving by itself, an occurrence she said has been reported in the 70s, 80s and in 2020 by people “who didn’t know about the prior stories.”

“We’ve torn down houses that were reported to be haunted and built new buildings over them, so that again goes back to ‘it’s not the building itself’, ” Smith said.

Smith also documented a late-night experience campus police officers had with an elevator.

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“(The officers) hear voices talking in an elevator, but they don’t respond to the dispatch. They think somebody’s trapped in the elevator, the officer presses the button and says ‘I’m here’, the doors open and the officer doesn’t hear the voices anymore and he says the elevator is empty,” Smith said.

Smith said that story interested her because officers are “trained observers” and wouldn’t report what they didn’t experience.

Another story regards a theater student in the 70’s spotting a glowing apparition in the mirror when taking off his makeup after everyone had gone home.

“He sees a man standing behind him in the mirror, turns around and there’s nobody there,” Smith said.

She said only a handful of the stories include a sighting of a full ghostly figure.

“Very few people actually see a ghost or full apparition. I think maybe eight people have actually said they saw a person,” Smith said.

Some reported hauntings, such as the story of a man falling to his death through the Van Meter Hall roof and leaving his ghost behind to wander the building, have led Smith to the no less fascinating truth behind the legends.

“There was a student from the Bowling Green Business University, in 1918, on the roof looking for an airplane and he fell through the skylight,” Smith said. “Technically he died in the hospital, but he was fatally injured there.”

The reason students were on the roof in the first place? They weren't just looking for any plane. The first airplane to ever fly into Warren County was on its way in for an air show.

“They've never seen an airplane before and tragically it cost him his life,” Smith said.

Smith has received a number of reports from McLean Hall, a dorm perhaps best known for the story of Mattie McLean, the friendly spirit who is reported to comfort stressed-out students.

“I've had people say it wasn't haunted until students in the '80's started using a ouija board trying to contact her,” Smith said.

Smith shared a story from the early 2000's when a young man living in McLean Hall reported that his shampoo bottle shot off the shelf.

Smith laughed and said her pet theory for that report is Mattie was “used to being in an all-female residence hall” and wasn't sure how to react once it became co-ed.

Smith said part of the reason she is collecting these stories is to let people on the Hill know they aren't the only ones to witness unexplained behavior.

“A lot of people feel better knowing that they are not alone,” Smith said. “They have this experience and they don't understand it, and it makes them a little uneasy.”

Smith said the stories are “part of who we are” and make up a unique slice of WKU's history.

“I hope people enjoy reading the stories and seeing what's going on, and some of them are so unique I think people will find them very interesting as well,” Smith said.

She said she'd “love to have it finished up” by summer.

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