

When selling a house, what about the ghosts?

By [Billy Cox](#) Published: Sunday, October 31, 2010 Printed on page A1



STAFF PHOTO / CRAIG LITTEN

David West, right, and David Chestnut sit in the former bedroom of Chestnut's mother, who is British and is now in a nursing home. They were told by a Tampa ghostbuster team that this is the room where the ghost likes to hide.

Every month or so, David West and his partner, David Chestnut, would get a glimpse through a window of their old St. Petersburg bungalow of a man outside wearing a '50s-era fedora, but he would immediately vanish. They learned that a deceased Mr. Smith once owned the place and assumed the apparition was him.

They would also get an occasional glimpse of a small furtive shape suggestive of an animal skirting through the hallway. They could not determine whether it was a cat or a dog, so they labeled it "ghostpet."

When West and Chestnut sold the bungalow last year to move into a new home they built in Parrish, the two did not mention the sightings to the new owners.

"It never came up," Chestnut said.

Their situation is not as unusual as you might think. While Halloween is best known for a spike in candy and costume sales, it is also the time of year when the National Association of Realtors gets inquiries about what homeowners are supposed to tell prospective buyers about paranormal activity.

NAR spokesman Walter Molony knows the numbers by heart: Forty-five states and the District of Columbia have varying degrees of "stigmatized property" laws requiring owners to reveal not-so-obvious information about a home's history. Maybe it sheltered a Mafia don, a crackhouse, a bordello, or some other combination with the potential to scare off a buyer.

But only five states oblige owners to tell buyers about criminal activity, and just two require sellers to share murder/suicide information. Florida is not one of those, which means you could move into the scene of a chainsaw massacre and never know.

A single state -- Minnesota -- has laws alluding to ghosts. "But they don't have to disclose it," Molony says. "The rules pertaining to psychological stigmas, which is what paranormal activity falls under, are as clear as mud."

Every creak and bump

A legally established haunting -- *Stambovsky v. Ackley* -- hit the textbooks in 1989, when the New York Supreme Court tackled the infamous "Amityville Horror" case in Nyack, N.Y.

A buyer who missed out on the hoopla surrounding the movie and book put \$30,000 down on the place, only to back out after learning of its history. The court ruled that seller Helen Ackley should have informed Jeffrey Stambovsky because Ackley had promoted the place as haunted for years.

Some paranormal researchers, like Tampa-area psychic Nanette Fenton, say property owners can use ghosts and nondisclosure laws to boost profits.

Fenton has spent the last couple of years attempting to document a haunted residence in Safety Harbor, where she claims poltergeist activity is so intense that residents have been attacked and injured. Having plopped down a damage deposit along with the first and last month's rent, unsuspecting tenants have vacated early and forfeited everything.

Fenton's efforts to engage state legislators by framing nondisclosure laws as "a safety issue" go largely ignored.

Realtor Karen West, co-founder of a paranormal research group known as The Spirits of St. Petersburg, has sold three homes with ghost histories. Her investigations have convinced her that stigmatized-property laws should be more transparent.

"After seeing what havoc and emotional, physical and financial damage can be inflicted on unsuspecting occupants," she writes in an e-mail, "my view has changed to a firm 'absolutely!'"

Her desire to amend Florida rules has support from an unlikely source -- Gary Posner, who thinks ghost stories are bunk and is president of the Tampa Bay Skeptics. "If a buyer finds out from a neighbor after he's moved in that there were rumors the place was haunted, he could actually start to believe it," says Posner. "Every little creak and bump becomes a ghost, and he could wind up dumping the place for no reason and lose thousands of dollars."

But Spirits director/co-founder Brandy Stark says attempting to develop a legal definition of a haunting is a losing proposition. "There is no hard-core standard for methodology in this field," she says. "And what would happen then? Do you have to start calling in teams of people to decide whether a place is haunted or not haunted?"

A good haunting

Stark, a religious studies professor at St. Petersburg College, has investigated more than 400 buildings for hauntings in the past 14 years. Her multidisciplinary approach spans everything from geek tech -- computerized electromagnetic field meters and infrared recording devices -- to more subjective resources like intuitive mediums.

Recently, Stark's eight-member team responded to a call for help from Parrish, to investigate West and Chestnut's Parrish home.

Located in a neighborhood so new and rural that coyote howls carry across the nearby prairies at night, the place is ready for Halloween with a skeleton on the mailbox and a witch flag above the garage. Otherwise, it looks as normal as its neighboring homes.

But apparently it is not.

"On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being minimal and 10 being extreme, like someone got pushed, the activity in their place is a 5 or 6, a good to moderate haunting," Stark said.

The incident that triggered the phone call occurred when West, strolling down the corridor, saw a man peering at him from behind a parlor wall. The figure turned away with a flourish and appeared to vanish behind a cape.

At first, it struck West as a Batman sort of cape. "But the more I thought about it," West says, "the more it reminded me of the gear a lot of soldiers wore during the Civil War."

Parrish, of course, has a number of Confederates buried in Oak Hill cemetery. The Spirits psychics also picked up on the vibrational remnants of a violent altercation in the prairie that begins at the end of the street. But the revelation that most impressed Chestnut were unsolicited details the visitors provided about a friend who died in 1989.

"We sort of thought it was Danny all along, but they verified it for us," says Chestnut. "It was an emotional moment."

When asked if they wanted to get rid of the spirits, West and Chestnut declined, since no harm had been done. In fact, based on their experience in St. Petersburg -- where they learned to co-exist with Mr. Smith and ghostpet -- the two argue that accommodations can be made.

"I figure they have as much right to be here as we do," West says with a chuckle.

Copyright © 2010 HeraldTribune.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.