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Paranormal claims scrutinized

Skeptic group investigates things that go bump in the night

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TAMPA — For most people, ghosts, fortune tellers and men from outer space make good fodder for Halloween costumes, science fiction stories or horror movies.

But for a small group of professionals, it is a year-round endeavor to investigate these and other claims of paranormal activity from a skeptical point of view.

Enter the Tampa Bay Skeptics Society, founded in 1988 by Gary Posner, a 43-year-old Tampa doctor. Posner said he started out as a believer in the paranormal after watching a lot of television.

"Since kids are generally not taught critical thinking in school, it sounds pretty good when someone comes on TV arguing in favor of flying saucers and he has a Ph.D after his name," Posner said.

Posner said his interest led him to study such phenomena throughout high school and college,

but in medical school, he read something that changed his life.

"I read an article by Phillip Klass, senior editor at Aviation Week magazine, which talked about the difficulties of interstellar travel as an argument against the existence of UFOs," Posner said. "I wrote him and shortly afterward, we became colleagues."

Klass later went on to found Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, one of the first skeptics organizations in the nation. Posner said he founded the Tampa Bay Skeptics because no such organization existed in west central Florida.

Tampa Bay Skeptics' membership roll boasts a wide variety of professionals, including Jack Robinson, a University of South Florida astronomy professor; the Rev. W. Thomas Leckrone, an Episcopalian priest from Hudson; Paschal Strong, a USF psychology professor; Jerry Touchton, a high school physics teacher from Brandon; and James Randi, a professional magician known as the Amazing Randi.

Organizations such as Tampa Bay Skeptics fill an important need in today's world, Randi said.

"If a person has any belief in such things as astrology or faith healers or whatever, it will lead to a magical thought process where a person gives up all logical thinking," Randi said. "This can lead to madness."

While many people don't take such subjects seriously, belief in the paranormal can have drastic consequences to a person's health and well-being, Randi said. "Today...we have people giving all their money to some faith healer on TV to cure their kid of leukemia."

Posner said his organization avoids religious debates since religion is a matter of faith and can't be tested.

"Only when someone makes a religious claim that can be observed, like someone claiming that Jesus will come down to see him tonight or that God gave him the ability to move objects



The Rev. Christos Matos, a Greek Orthodox priest with St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Tarpon Springs, claims he tasted the salty tears that oozed from this painting of the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus at the Shrine of St. Michael in Tarpon Springs.

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JANE WINDSOR/Tribune photo

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Skeptics eye paranormal claims

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with his mind, do we get involved," Posner said.

One such incident Posner investigated in 1989 was a claim that a picture of the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus at the Shrine of St. Michael in Tarpon Springs continually wept. The Rev. Christos Matos, a Greek Orthodox priest with St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Tarpon Springs at the time, told The Tampa Tribune he tasted the salty tears oozing from the picture.

The case drew national headlines and Posner's attention.

"I checked it over the course of the week," Posner said. "No moisture appeared and there were no smudges where the water was

wiped away."

The case also caught the attention of the archdiocese, which ordered Matos not to use the tears for anointing purposes.

Although the church won't say whether it was related, Matos was later transferred to another church.

The skeptics society decided to take their act a step further. Now, they offer a standing \$1,000 reward to anyone who can prove a paranormal claim that will withstand a scientific examination.

So far, only one person, Largo psychic Joan Morin, has taken the challenge. She failed in 1989, Posner said.

Morin's test involved guessing which of 23 boxes had an object placed in it and which boxes were empty. The examination took place

at the Spiritual Center in Largo, where Morin is now a metaphysical minister. Members of the Spiritual Center and the Tampa Bay Skeptics observed the test.

The odds of correctly guessing all 23 boxes is approximately 8 million-to-1, Posner said. Morin correctly guessed 10 boxes, which is average, he said.

Morin, however, still has faith in her psychic abilities and wants another chance.

"Part of the reason I failed was that I was trying to prove a point and not doing anything beneficial to humanity," Morin said. "I would like to take another test where the results will be of benefit to humanity, like helping find a missing child."