

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Well Over 2,000 Attend A-Z Academy's Annual Halloween Extravaganza

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ST. CROIX -- What started out as a haunted trail 15 years ago when the founders of A-Z Academy, then located in Five Corners, held the [private school's](#) first Halloween event, has turned into a must-attend extravaganza that sees thousands donning their best costumes to participate in a myriad of games and challenges, all soaked in the theme of Halloween.

From an illusionist to pony rides and even knocker balls. And this reporter's favorite: the haunted trail, which takes those brave enough into a dungeon-like setting infested with zombies that pop out when you're least expecting. The trail lasted nearly five minutes (a little longer than usual as there were rattled and teary-eyed children slowing the process).

The event has become the main Halloween affair on this island, and for good reason. According to the institution's Executive Director, Paula Heller, A-Z Academy gives over \$125,000 in financial aid and scholarships every year, and the Halloween occasion helps greatly in meeting the annual need. There's a lot of work involved in putting on the event, too, which spans 6 hours and takes months to organize. Yet, Ms. Heller said, the effort is worth every moment as it goes beyond simply fundraising; it also serves to foster the building of community.

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"I think it's a really great way to build community," Ms. Heller said. "I mean it's a lot of hard work to do something of this magnitude; it would be easier for the \$40,000 - \$50,000 that we're going to make, for me to go knock on four doors and get four, ten thousand dollar checks -- that would be ten times easier."

"But I don't know that fundraising has to always be about that. Sometimes fundraising could be about raising awareness about the work you're doing in the community," she added. Ms. Heller spoke about the volunteers who spend 7-8 hours every year -- from security deejays -- to help ensure the event's success.

And what a success it was.

This year officials prepared 1,500 tickets based on past data, according to Kishma Williams, development director at A-Z Academy. But soon enough they found themselves scrambling to find additional tickets as their count was off by well over five hundred, a sign that the Halloween affair -- which Ms. Heller says gets "bigger and better," every year -- had become a mainstay as one of the island's major yearly events.

The school, which has a diverse population of students, was founded in 1998 "to meet the socialization needs of a few home-schooled students," according to a description of the institution's website.

During the past decade, A-Z Academy went on to capture the public's interest as a high-quality educational alternative, and as a result, the school has grown steadily into a Middle States Association accredited Pre-K thru 12th grade program, according to the description.