

The Jeff Hawkes column, below, appeared in the Lancaster *Intelligencer Journal/New Era* on Thursday, October 25, 2012

Good, scary fun, or fun at expense of mentally ill?

Exploiting misconceptions Innocent motives

The asylum-themed haunted house Jim and Gene Schopf operate in Mountville gets boffo reviews.

"Gruesomely good" was the verdict of Fangoria, a magazine for horror buffs. The York Daily Record rated it "shocking and freaky."

But not everyone is a fan. Some who advocate for people with mental illness say the Nightmare Asylum demeans the mentally ill, and for several years they've asked the Schopfs brothers to find another way to scare thrill-seekers.

A task force led by mental health specialist Becky Mohr has written letters to the editor, distributed fliers and lobbied the Schopfs' corporate sponsors. But the Schopfs aren't spooked, and the show goes on.

The criticism leaves Jim Schopf scratching his head. "It's all for fun," he told me. "We're not setting out to try to pick on a certain group of people. We're not trying to make light of mental illness in any way."

The Asylum is one of three attractions at Field of Screams, which started in 1993 as a scary hayride. Thousands plunk down \$13 to pass through the creepy four-story house. The website cautions patrons to expect a "chain saw-wielding lunatic" in a padded room and other portrayals of "the demented and the deranged."

The scenes are tropes Hollywood reworks every year, and when David Measel walked through the Asylum a couple of years ago, he didn't consider it offensive.

He went along with the popular conceit that people with a mental illness are suspect, capable of bizarre and violent acts.

But more recently Measel became director of Recovery Connections, an agency serving people with mental illness. He now sees the challenges and stigma people face as they rebound, and he fears that Field of Screams' exaggerations reinforce stereotypes.

Would the public find wildly farcical depictions of people with AIDS, cerebral palsy or mental retardation entertaining? Not likely. "But if it's people with mental illness, you can get away with it somehow," said Mary Steffy, the retired director of Lancaster's Mental Health America who first raised concerns about the Asylum several years ago.

Jim Laughman, director of the county's Mental Health/Mental Retardation office, shares Steffy's concern that the Asylum marginalizes a group that struggles for help and respect. "There's other things out there they can scare their fans with," he said.

The campaign's biggest success came when Millersville University withdrew its sponsorship. Millersville no longer allows the Schopfs, both of whom are Millersville graduates, to put the college's logo on their materials. Why? The advocates "made a good case," said Amy Dmitzak, assistant vice president of university advancement.

Jim Schopf maintains he's in the business of scaring people, not demeaning them. But unintended insults still wound, and an inability to see insensitivity doesn't excuse it.

People clearly harbor fears about mental illness. If they didn't, wouldn't most patrons exit the

Asylum feeling the experience was bogus because it mischaracterized who the mentally ill are? But they don't.

As over-the-top as the Asylum is, it works as entertainment because, at least on a subconscious level, mental illness makes people nervous. Patrons enter the Asylum ready to buy into a fantasy where the mentally ill are twisted and abhorrent.

The Asylum plays on an authentic, if unwarranted, fear.

Trying to dispel those misconceptions is the battle the advocates wage, and it's why the Asylum scares them.

jhawkes@lnpnews.com