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'Amityville Horror' redux; A new movie recalls murders that still haunt those affected

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Tracey Lynn is a 40-year-old mother from South Carolina who supports her two young sons with a job as a home health nurse. Most days, she squeezes in time to write the letters that connect her family's life in an Appalachian foothills town with that of her husband, a Long Island man doing time in an upstate New York prison.

She visits him in Stormville every month or so, sometimes with the children. But the couple mainly keeps in touch with letters and phone calls - "collect, that's the only way he can" - where he talks with the family and asks them about their day. He sends them money from an inheritance. "He's really a nice, sweet man," Tracey Lynn said. "My 5-year-old calls him Daddy."

That father figure is Ronald Joseph DeFeo Jr., now serving six life sentences for shooting his parents and four siblings in their beds with a rifle one November night in 1974 at the family home in Amityville.

Then, as now, Amityville was a tranquil waterfront community whose residents would, on the whole, much rather be left alone. But the murders at the house on Ocean Avenue and the haunting that the home's next inhabitants said they experienced there put the village on the map with a bloody splash.

Thirty-one years later, the ripples from that splash extend to Green Haven Correctional Facility, where the incarcerated DeFeo, now 53, continues to lobby for a new trial, and to Las Vegas, home now to George Lutz, who moved his family into the DeFeo house after the killings. Lutz claimed the place was haunted and launched a cult phenomenon that keeps obscure chat rooms humming and this month hatched yet another film version of "The Amityville Horror."

With a staying power in seemingly inverse proportion to its provability, the Amityville Horror grabs headlines and new acolytes with each appearance of a new book or television special. As a result, splash marks continue to stain the lives of the drama's original supporting players, including those who have remained on Long Island: the neighbors on Ocean Avenue and many present at DeFeo's trial.

"I think if it had just been the murders ... that would have been the end of it," said Peggy Giambra of Selden, one of the jurors who convicted DeFeo in 1975 after two days of deliberations. "But when the whole thing with the house came out, that's what did it."

Asked about those lingering effects, a woman at the home of the DeFeos' former housekeeper brusquely declined to comment, slamming the sash of the front window down after saying, "Don't you know this is a sore subject for our family?"

Drawing sometimes murky connections between the killings and the unquiet spirits that the Lutzes said shattered windows, smashed doors and even caused Lutz's wife, Kathy, to levitate, the book and the film of "The Amityville Horror" coupled a very real human tragedy with a riveting spectacle of hellish forces run amok.

To some observers at the time, the slaying of a family by its apparently unrepentant eldest son was a ghastly failure of the suburban dream expressed in the sign that hung outside the house: "High Hopes." Still, the DeFeo murders might slowly have faded into the annals of local criminal history were it not for the eerie tales

told by George and Kathy Lutz, newlyweds from Deer Park who moved into the house shortly after DeFeo's conviction.

A disembodied voice telling a priest who came to bless the house to "GET OUT!" A pig with red eyes demonically aglow and peering through the windows. Green slime dripping from the walls.

1977 bestseller

Covered at the time in the local press, the Lutzes' account was brought to a wider audience by Jay Anson's 1977 bestselling book, "The Amityville Horror," and a subsequent 1979 movie of the same name. Both projects piggybacked on the DeFeo murders, detailing dreams the Lutzes had of the home's previous inhabitants and noting a certain physical resemblance between Ronnie DeFeo and George Lutz, who both sported longish hair and full beards.

With Friday's opening of the R-rated remake, another generation of moviegoers gained entry to the DeFeo house. From the same producers who brought audiences the 2003 remake of "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre," "The Amityville Horror" remake attempts to capitalize on the older movie's success by retelling - and in some cases reinventing - the story for younger audiences with an appetite for movie mayhem.

"The American dream is to own a home and provide for your family," producer Brad Fuller said in a telephone interview from Los Angeles last month. "The Lutz story really is the American dream turned upside down and made horrible."

But in an apparent riff on "The Shining," the new version also fictionalizes George Lutz as a man driven by voices to try to kill his wife and family. "It was for the suspense," Fuller said. "In the book, they had talked about how George was behaving differently and becoming more violent toward the kids and the family....We just kind of amped it up."

George Lutz, the would-be murderer in question, takes a dim view of such amplification of his life. He said he and his former wife remained on excellent terms until her death last year, and that the filmmakers did not consult him. From what he knows, the remake does not accurately reflect the Lutzes' experiences.

"My feelings about it [the new film] vary from anger to sadness and contempt," Lutz, now 58, wrote in a recent e-mail interview with Newsday.

Lutz left Amityville behind in 1976. He moved with his family first to San Diego, then to Arizona, in hopes, he said, that distance would help them heal from their experience at the DeFeo house. He and Kathy divorced in 1988, and Lutz ended up in Las Vegas.

Since leaving Long Island, Lutz has spent a fair amount of time defending his claim of ownership to "The Amityville Horror." Involved in legal wrangling over story rights since the late 1970s, Lutz was sued in 2004 by MGM after his attorney questioned the film company's right to remake the movie. According to papers filed with the federal court in Las Vegas, MGM charges that it can do the remake under an agreement inherited from a movie company it acquired. The Lutzes and Anson had made the original deal - with an earlier filmmaker - in the late '70s. The lawsuit is pending.

"It goes on and on and on," he told listeners during an appearance last month on Ghostly Talk, a paranormal Internet talk show. "I have what are known as Amityville days, where I actually spend three, four, five days a week doing nothing but dealing with some of this stuff."

In addition to Internet radio interviews, Lutz has appeared at various paranormal-themed gatherings, and he maintains a Web site, AmityvilleHorror.com.

In message boards on Lutz's site and others, people with online handles such as DryWellToHell, dnddad324 and litlingod spar daily over Amityville minutiae.

Did Ronnie DeFeo act alone in the murders? Was he insane? Which psychic or paranormal experts have more credence, those who supported the Lutzes' haunting claim or those who called it a hoax? Will the remake be an improvement on the original movie? Can it be definitively proved the house was haunted?

Asked about the Amityville Horror's continued appeal to those with no concrete connection to the Ocean Avenue house, Lutz offered this explanation: "Some are merely curious, while others have had experiences of

their own and desperately want to talk with someone who will not think they're crazy. Some are looking for proof that there is existence beyond the physical. Some are fascinated with the murdered DeFeo family. Some are looking for a road map to a paranormal experience for themselves, and there are even some who come simply to heckle."

Neighbors leery of publicity

The house on Ocean Avenue bears another number now, and the distinctive jack-o-lantern windows that peered down have been replaced by ones with square frames. The gawkers who once flocked to the house have thinned to a trickle, though neighbors continue to misdirect those in search of what they call "the horror house." Residents did not greet warmly news of a new movie about the Amityville horror.

"This was a tragic event," said Babylon Councilwoman Ellen McVeety, who has lived in the neighborhood for 37 years. "And people are making money off of this, and other people are spending money to go see this movie, and it's all fabricated."

A woman who lives next door to the house refused to open her storm door to a reporter, slashing her hand across her chest as if to say, "enough."

The family that lives at the former DeFeo house also declined to be interviewed. In a form letter they send to the handful of curious people who write each year, the current residents called the Lutz story a hoax and said neither they nor any past inhabitants besides the Lutzes had experienced "anything the least bit out of the ordinary."

"Any continuing publicity about the house, even where it deals with the facts and not the myth, ultimately turns out to be counterproductive for us," the current owner wrote in an e-mail declining the interview. "People aren't interested in the truth, only in the ghost stories."

Chance for parole

In a way, convicted killer Ronnie DeFeo seems to share that view. According to his wife, DeFeo fears that his chances at a September parole hearing will be hurt by "The Amityville Horror" remake, which, like the original, opens with a bloody recreation of the night the DeFeos were murdered. "There are just so many negative things coming out, it's just going to trigger a lot more crap and thrust him back in the limelight," she said.

Just 23 at the time of the murders, DeFeo was known as a troubled, unstable young man who clashed with his father and dabbled in drugs and petty crime. But that's not the man Tracey Lynn DeFeo said she met when she accompanied a friend from Georgia on a trip to visit the friend's husband at Green Haven Correctional Facility.

The two hit it off after talking that day and began corresponding. Eventually, they made plans to wed, obtaining a marriage license on April 15, 2004, in Beekman, N.Y., according to town clerk Virginia Ward. The DeFeos, who are coming up on their first anniversary, married in a ceremony at the prison on April 28, Tracey Lynn DeFeo said.

"Ronnie, he's not what people make him out to be," his wife said last month. "He's not a monster, he's not the devil incarnate."

Although he confessed to the killings at the time, DeFeo has long claimed that his sister Dawn - who also was shot that night - had a hand in the murders. He has also disavowed the insanity defense mounted by his trial lawyer, William Weber.

Weber, who now practices law in Brooklyn, became involved with the Lutzes shortly after DeFeo's conviction and hosted a press conference with them at his Patchogue law office, where they recounted their tale of paranormal events at the house. Weber and the Lutzes later battled in court over how much he contributed to the story that became "The Amityville Horror." Weber now calls the "Horror" a hoax.

In the meantime, DeFeo went through a series of lawyers in a vain effort to clear his name. He sent one a letter of thanks and a gift from prison: a black velvet painting of a unicorn, which DeFeo said he painted, though it bears the signature of someone else.

Recently, DeFeo has been lobbying for a new trial using DNA evidence. He has detailed his argument on The-NightExposed.net, the Web site run by his wife.

Visitors to the site will find lithographs based on an image of the Amityville House ostensibly painted by Ronald DeFeo in 2003; the lithographs sell for \$125, plus shipping and handling. "Please only serious enquiries only."

Jurors recall trial

On a recent trip to the video store, Charles Vetter's granddaughter plucked a copy of "The Amityville Horror" off the shelf and studied it with interest.

"I told her a lot of that stuff wasn't true," said Vetter, 69, of Islip. "She asked, 'How do you know, Grandpa?' I told her I was on the jury."

It's been years since Vetter gave much thought to the events at Ocean Avenue. "It was a horrible thing at the time, but I tried not to work it over in my mind over the years," he said.

To him and fellow juror Peggy Giambra, 55, the real Amityville Horror was the shockingly intimate nature of the crime - a son pumping bullets into his own flesh and blood - not the paranormal allegations that followed. "I always tell people that's a bunch of garbage, the house was not haunted," she said.

She has no plans to see the new movie. But from time to time her thoughts still turn to Ronnie DeFeo, the man whose fate she helped decide so many years ago and without whom there would be no Amityville Horror. "Whenever I think of him," she said, "I still say a prayer for him, that he finds peace."