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Haunted Habitats: A Night at the University of Puget Sound's Natural History Museum

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On Thursday, Oct. 23, herds of witches, zombies and superheroes piled into the narrow corridor of the Puget Sound Natural History Museum. This wasn't a prank, but the annual Night at the Museum event where students, kids and parents alike dressed up a week before Halloween and learned about the dead from the living. The event attracted over 400 people and continued the legacy of family-oriented educational experi-

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ences put on by the Museum. Tables lined the perimeter of the second-floor hallway, each with a different theme curated by the University's own student docents. The University of Puget Sound Natural History Museum is home to a significant collection of ecological specimens, donated by the community and prepared by students, and hosts many events throughout the year. But the Halloween season and the number of specimens exhibited make this its most popular. The event planning is a collaborative effort, with decisions about theme and table subjects crowdsourced from the docents.

Ellie Olpin ('24), Education Outreach Director at the Museum, explained the decision process: "We'll throw out some ideas for a theme. We usually like something spooky-related, and then everybody just kind of raises their hand. We throw up a bunch of ideas on the board, and then we kind of vote to pick our favorite." This year's theme was Haunted Habitats, so each table featured a different habitat. The tables had themes ranging from "Forest Fables" to "The Marsh of Mystery" and "Mountain Monsters," each staffed with docents ready to share their ecological knowledge and answer questions from curious visitors. A particularly popular table, "Nessie's Nature," featured freshwater macroinvertebrates collected by the docents and a microscope to examine them. This interactive exhibit allowed each visitor to play scientist while learning about bugs and the power of freshwater-filtering plants. Another crowded table offered learning about bioluminescent bacteria, allowing kids to write their names on a bacterial plate and have it developed to reveal their glowing signa-

ture. The atmosphere buzzed with excitement as children discovered the wonders of nature in an accessible, hands-on setting. For those with tougher stomachs, the event offered an in-depth look at what it takes to preserve a specimen. In a separate room, docents actively prepared specimens, carefully cutting open squirrels and birds and removing their insides to the fascination of those watching. Tunya Carissimo ('26), a docent of two years, described her favorite part of the event. "I would say the funnest part is honestly interacting with the kids because it's a big family-based event, and you get a lot of younger kids who just get really, really excited about things that, other times, students will come and get really grossed out by."

In terms of engagement, the event is attended primarily by community members, particularly elementary-aged children and their parents. Troy Hashagen, local community member, said, "It is amazing seeing UPS students give their talks and learn the depth of knowledge about their chosen exhibits." He continued, "My favorite part was connecting with the Tacoma community. Each time I bump into folks I know from around Tacoma, and get a chance to reconnect with them."

This sentiment is echoed by Beth Lamanna, who attended the event with her grandchildren. "This is my third time attending. I love the students' attention to the kids who visit their tables. They really make a huge effort to communicate good, solid, exciting science," she said. Although mostly attended by younger kids, some University of Puget Sound students were in attendance to support friends or simply out of interest, transforming the event into an opportunity for docents to showcase their knowledge to peers and recruit new members. "I want to become a docent at the museum myself now!" commented Sam Howard ('29), a first-time attendee to the event. Students can become docents in two ways: either by enrolling in the BIOL 205 class or by volunteering and being trained in the museum's history, how to give tours, how to talk with visitors, and how to prepare specimens for preservation.

"I hope that they will be able to see the value of museum collections," says Olpin, reflecting on the event's broader educational mission. "They'll get to learn some cool stuff about animals that they maybe had never learned about before or maybe had never seen before, and be able to, you know, get up close and personal with the specimens. And I just hope they'll be able to have a fun time and celebrate Halloween in a cool spooky fun day."



A student docent demonstrates fluorescent minerals to attendees. Photo credit: Jay Stafford // The Trail



Two costumed student docents pose behind the "Petifying Prehistoric" table. Photo credit: Jay Stafford // The Trail

An advertisement for Fondi Pizzeria. It features a cartoon grizzly bear wearing a blue apron and holding a pizza box. The text reads "EVEN GRIZZ WANTS A SLICE" in large, bold letters. Below the text is the Fondi Pizzeria logo, which includes the word "FONDI" in a stylized font and "PIZZERIA" above it. At the bottom, the website "WWW.FONDI.COM" is listed.