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Inside the Occult

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Inside the OCCULT

Local wiccans clear up their beliefs

BY NIK HEFTMAN  DESIGN NAILAH FITZGERALD  PHOTO ISAAC BIEHL

There were nine participants total. The group members were diverse in both age and experience. The room was large, and several small candles were placed in two corners of the room, providing light for the ceremony. Participants were immediately overwhelmed by sweet smells of cinnamon, pickled spices and pumpkins upon entrance of the room. Eleven chairs were set in a circle around an altar, on which pumpkins, herbs, a cornucopia and other relics of the passing fall were placed.

One by one, the members were greeted and purified of all negativity with the use of incense. A burning, sweet smelling incense candle was waved around the members. This process is also known as smudging. They were then anointed with oil. The oil was rubbed on their foreheads by another member. Once the cleansing was completed, it was time to cast circle and start the ritual.

The ritual lasted for about two hours, and it consisted of prayer to the respective deities, meditation, the honoring of their fallen ancestors or loved ones through offerings of herbs and a lot of chanting and dancing. The atmosphere was very much alive that night.

Wicca, commonly known as witchcraft, is a pagan religion with inspirations that can be traced back centuries before the onset of Christianity. It is a nature-based religion, for Wiccans see the earth and its elements as sacred. The religion strives to put their beliefs of the sacredness of nature out as an alternative to the destructive nature of the world. Wicca does not have a set doctrine, but Wiccans generally do not believe in punishment after death. Many wiccans share a belief in karma and reincarnation in a sense that the actions done by one in this life will affect one’s next life.

“The religion as it stands today is pretty much a modern blend of ancient inspiration, modern psychology and unverified personal gnosis,” says Liz, a practicing Wiccan and founder of a local pagan group named Persephone’s Children. Liz was introduced to Wicca in the mid ’90s as a teenager. Despite resistance from a strictly religious family, Liz found her niche in Wicca. “The minute I latched onto [Wicca], it changed my life,” she says.

Persephone’s Children is based out of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Ames. The group was named after the Greek Goddess of the Underworld. According to Greek mythology, Persephone is also the Goddess of crops and summertime, and every six months she returns from the underworld. For the ancient Greeks, Persephone’s return explained the shift from winter to summer.

The group of around eight people meets on the third Friday of each month, and they provide a comfortable atmosphere for pagans to socialize and learn from each other, as well as practice their rituals. “We just welcome everyone,” says Liz, “If you’re willing to dance with us we will dance with you.” Not everyone in Persephone’s children is Wiccan. The group has members of several spiritual paths and backgrounds, for paganism itself is an umbrella term that encompasses practitioners with many
different spiritual doctrines. “These paths that you will find at a gathering such as Persephone’s Children are about learning the lessons that come to you in life,” says Seth, a local pagan who has been a member of Persephone’s children for six months. “It’s about growth, personal growth, and also contributing to the community so that those around you can grow.”

Seth, 21, first interacted with the occult at age 9 when a friend of his brought a tarot deck of cards to school. Seth, like Liz, was also brought up in a strictly religious household. This sort of backstory was common amongst the members of Persephone’s Children. Most of them were raised in Christian households and did not feel a spiritual connection to the religion.

Rituals are also a defining trait of Persephone’s Children. October 16 marked the third Friday of October, which is the day that Persephone’s Children celebrated Samhain, one of the eight holidays observed by pagans throughout the year. “Samhain is a time to honor our ancestors and those who have gone before us,” says Liz. Samhain means “summer’s end,” and it is often regarded as “Witch’s New Year.” It is celebrated around the final day of the fall equinox and start of the Winter solstice.

Magic also played a vital role in the execution of the ritual. “We do all the steps of a full ritual with a spell or magical working at the center,” says Liz, “we consider spells and ritual to be equivalent to prayers and church services; they are done for the same reasons, such as holidays, life passages and asking for something.”

Magic is not in the form of levitation or sparkling wands that many have become so accustomed to seeing in the media. “[Magic] can be an attitude,” says Clyde, a local and long time practicing Wiccan. “Like when you realize the magic and beauty around you, it’s a sort of acknowledgement.” The universally accepted definition of magic was written by famous mystic Dion Fortune— “[Magic is] the art of changing consciousness at will.” In simpler terms, magic can be defined as projecting your will toward an act.

Wicca may not be the number one religious practice in America in terms of numbers, but it is certainly one of the most misunderstood religions on planet. Several members of Persephone’s Children asked to keep their identities concealed, for many of their family members do not know that they are pagans, even after years of practice. Many Wiccans are not open about their religion at all, for the threat of losing their jobs, and even their children, is imminent. “Most people may think that [Wicca] is some sort of satanism,” says Clyde, “We’re the furthest thing from satanism that you could imagine because we don’t believe in Satan.”

Liz, along with other members of her group, feel that Wicca is viewed negatively due to its portrayal in the media. Millions of people are brought up into religions that denounce the practices of Wicca. Developing an understanding between themselves and the public has proven to be a real challenge for Wiccans, but members of Persephone’s Children believe that living positive lives will help debunk the negative image that has been cast upon the religion. “We’re perfectly ordinary people just like [everyone else],” says Liz, “What we want to give to you is our support in your own healing, and our support in whatever your spiritual path may be.”

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