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**'This year it's about bringing back New York from the dead. Whether it's New York after Sandy or the Village after darkness.'**

JEANNE FLEMING, director of the Village Halloween Parade in Manhattan.

## Greenwich Village Zombies Rise From a Grave of Debt

By SARA BECK

BARRYTOWN, N.Y. — When the upper barn door creaked open, bones crashed, teeth clacked and a moth-eaten bridal veil floated to the ground.

"They seem so fragile," a voice called from the shadows.

"Don't worry!" another yelled. "They've been bashed around for decades!"

Suddenly, thrust into the autumn afternoon, were a foot, a leg, and then a gangly torso. The Day of the Dead skeletons were resurrected and the puppet-raising had begun.

Every weekend in October, 30 to 50 volunteers descend upon Rokeby, the Hudson Valley farm that is home to Jeanne Fleming, the artistic and producing director of the Village Halloween Parade in Manhattan, as well as several of her puppeteers.

But this year a bigger force than ever was necessary.

The parade's theme this year — it is being billed as the 40th anniversary, although the parade began in 1974 and was not held last year — is revival, and it refers not just to the restoration of the attic-dusty puppets. Last year's event in Greenwich Village was first postponed and then canceled in the wake of Hurricane Sandy.

Much of the parade's tiny budget was wiped out, too. Ms. Fleming had already paid

her part-time staff of 10 as well as the puppet designers, musicians, performers and set builders who create floats and animate the annual theme. And with no cancellation insurance, she was also on the hook for already rented necessities like portable toilets and walkie-talkies. All said, she owed more than \$50,000, and that was before paying herself for a year's work.

"This year it's about bringing back New York from the dead," Ms. Fleming explained. "Whether it's New York after Sandy or the Village after darkness. And we're also bringing back the old puppets."

To do that, she had to think beyond her usual fund-raising methods: seeking grants, selling T-shirts and securing commercial sponsorships. Instead, she created a Kickstarter campaign under the heading "Bring Halloween Back to New York City" and eventually raised \$56,000 from more than 900 people, making up for leftover debts and new expenses, like that cancellation insurance, which will account for a third of her annual budget.

"Now we know hurricanes might happen in October," Ms. Fleming said dryly.

Beyond cash, however, people offered time. An online sign-up called for a variety of volunteers: to build puppets, perform with them or control crowds. This year, Ms. Flem-

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Preparations at Rokeby Farm, the Dutchess County headquarters of the Village Halloween Parade. Volunteers, top, rehearsed "Tick Tock," a themed section of the parade. Skeletons, above, were taken out of the storage barn. In debt after last year's parade was canceled, organizers held an online fund-raising drive.





Day of the Dead skeletons awaited their resurrection from storage in a barn at Rokeby Farm in Barrytown.

## Greenwich Village Ghouls Rise From a Grave of Debt

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ing was flooded with interest.

"We never turn away warm bodies," she said, citing the few hundred marshals who will direct performers and serve as liaisons with the police force, among other assignments. "But you never know who will actually show up on the night of Halloween."

This year, nearly 200 volunteers were needed to help build, restore and operate the puppets. And some were turned away by Alex Kahn and Sophia Michahelles, Rokeby tenants and codirectors of the puppet troupe Superior Concept Monsters who not only animate the perennial favorites from year to year, but also lead the procession with a theme-related performance.

"We open our home and feed people each weekend in October," said Ms. Michahelles, adding that 30 people remained on waiting lists because only so many volunteers could be given tasks at a time. "They come from two hours or more away and we value their time. We want the days to be pleasant and running smoothly."

On a recent afternoon at the Rokeby milkhouse, where Mr. Kahn and Ms. Michahelles have lived and worked since 2007, 38 volunteers were hunched over like emergency medics, some attending to penguin wounds, others restoring snakeskin, and most gluing papier-mâché to dragon heads.

"This year we're going through what a lot of people have gone through as they rebuild their coastlines," Mr. Kahn, 46, explained. "There's been this struggle to get back to where we were. But do we rebuild everything the way it was or is this an opportunity to make it better?"

The puppet-raising was born in 1998, when Mr. Kahn, a Hudson Valley resident with a master's in fine arts from the San Francisco Art Institute, and Ms. Michahelles, an art history major from McGill, were creating *Metamorphosis*, a large-scale performance for the parade's 25th year.

"We worked all summer, putting in long hours, but we were nowhere near our goal," said Ms. Michahelles, 38, who described the painstaking process of sewing skins onto caterpillars.

After they called for help, 30 people arrived, and the caterpillars were crawling by the end of the day.

"It was like watching stop-motion animation!" said Ms. Michahelles, who spent childhood summers at Rokeby and marched in the parade as a teenager.

Many long-term participants began as volunteers: Basil Twist, the puppeteer who designed the spider in residence at the Jefferson Market Library; Mr. Kahn; and even Ms. Fleming herself, who had recently graduated from Bard College as a medieval

studies major when the puppet-designer Ralph Lee started the parade in 1974. Ms. Fleming called herself a celebration artist, staging site-specific pageants based on mythological and spiritual themes.

"Halloween was this gift I gave to myself after a busy season," she said. "It was one thing I didn't have to create; I could just jump in!"

By 1985, however, the parade had grown, the police were more concerned about safety and Mr. Lee turned the parade over to Ms. Fleming. "How could I not accept?" she said. "This was too important for the soul of the city."

Since then, her farmhouse has served as parade headquarters, with her kitchen table as command central. Covered with col-



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A final dress rehearsal of the parade at Rokeby Farm. The Village parade is watched by about two million people each year.

umns of color-coded sticky notes, it depicts the parade's complicated organization of marching bands, dance troupes and floats. With two weeks to go, 20,000 participants were accounted for, but Ms. Fleming expected 30,000 more. These costumed revelers, she said, are the heart of the parade, which is watched by about

two million spectators each year.

Last Saturday night, a crescent moon hung over the Hudson River as volunteers squeezed into their puppet gear for a dress rehearsal of *Tick Tock*, a tribute to lost time that Mr. Kahn created as part of the parade.

Finally the puppets began to move, awkwardly at first. Four-

teen-foot rabbits became tangled in low-hanging branches, white umbrellas refused to open, and someone tripped on a parked tractor. Soon, however, the Rokeby path became Avenue of the Americas, and the mansion's veranda was the Greenwich Village sidewalk. Community members who attend the dress rehearsal

every year cheered as flying alarm clocks, harried rabbits and spinning watches marched to Pink Floyd's "Time."

"It looks so wonderful in the dark," Ms. Fleming whispered as she watched the hourglasses glow and time tick by. "I think I finally feel relieved, like this parade will actually happen again."