

Low-tech, real-life crimefighters aim to be *Superheroes* in fascinating documentary

BY JOE LEYDON

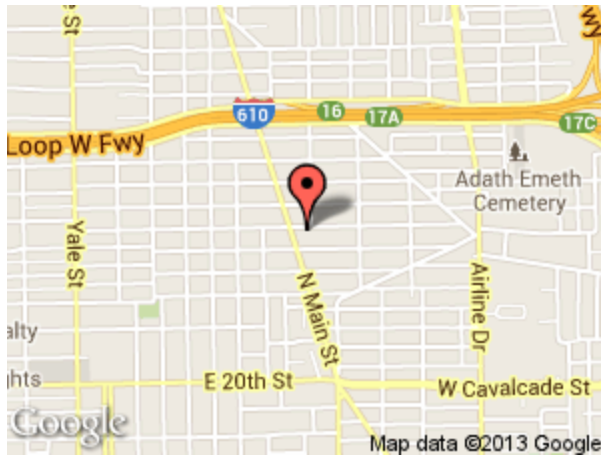
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They don't have the super powers of Spider-Man, or even the firepower of The Punisher. But that doesn't stop the real-life *Superheroes* of [Michael Barnett's](#) fascinating documentary – which has its H-Town premiere Friday and Saturday at [14 Pews](#) – from donning home-made costumes, strapping on gadget-stuffed utility belts and patrolling the meanest streets across America.

Among those doing derring-do:

- Mr. Xtreme, a San Diego security guard who moonlights as a crimefighter decked out in green helmet and dark goggles;
- Zimmer, a proudly uncloseted avenger who prowls Brooklyn in the hope of attracting gay-bashers for his allies to dispatch;
- Zetaman and Apocalypse Meow, a colorful married couple who dispense necessities to the homeless in downtown Portland, Ore.; and
- Mister Legend, who drives his beat-up van through the moonlit streets of Orlando and offers aid to the downtrodden when not grabbing beers from his well-stocked ice chest.

Why do they do it? Many of them – including Lucid, a member of Zimmer's backup team – simply believe the police and other professional law-enforcers are “completely unreliable.” But director Barnett, who spoke with CultureMap this week, thinks the motivations of these caped crusaders may be a bit more complex than that.

CultureMap: Were you surprised to find something that happened way back in 1964 – the infamous murder of [Kitty Genovese](#), who was stabbed while her neighbors

reportedly failed to intervene – motivated so many of the superheroes you interviewed?

Michael Barnett: Well, if you think about it, the case became bigger than the case. So, somewhere along the origin of this community [of superheroes], they began to rally around this case of Kitty Geonvese. And it became the defining case of modern apathy in America. They rallied around what the case meant as much as the specific case itself. Because apathy is their villain. So it's a unifying thread among the community at large.

With these guys, there is no rulebook, there is no manifesto. They go out and be whoever they want and try to help the community in any way they see fit. It's a real grassroots movement that may not galvanize, that may never get too organized, because the reason they do it is to make up their own rules.

CM: Were you ever worried while making *Superheroes* that one of these well-intentioned folks might get seriously hurt?

Barnett: Yeah, certainly. I mean, they'd do this anyway without the presence of a camera. But it's always a concern that you might be creating a moment that wouldn't exist if you weren't there with the camera. And that moment may turn tragic.

The interesting thing with these guys is, it's such a growing population that, inevitably, one of them *is* going to get hurt, whether there's someone there with a camera or not. So, hopefully, the people who get into this understand the risk they are taking by choosing to become part of this community and putting themselves in these situations.

But, yeah, occasionally, we did get into some pretty hairy situations. Because, basically, we were shooting in America's Skid Rows, across the country. Sometimes at 2 o'clock in the morning. It was unpredictable, to say the least.

CM: How did you find out about this amazing subculture?

Barnett: I just sort of stumbled across it on line. And, actually, I didn't think it was true at first. I thought I'd just found maybe a couple of people who were doing this. But then we started doing a little research, and we quickly discovered that all you had to do is Google "superhero" to come up with a [webpage](#) with names of people doing this all

over the country, along with news clips and magazine articles. I spent days perusing through it all, and ultimately became fascinated.

CM: How many of these guys do you think have been traumatized by some violence in their past?

Barnett: Actually, that's one of the few commonalities that I found within the community. I usually don't generalize, but I did find very quickly that most of these guys had some level of trauma or tragedy in their lives. And this is how that trauma or tragedy has manifested itself. They're doing this, and getting over that – and possibly over-compensating by going in the opposite direction, and trying to find light in the darkness, if you will.

CM: Maybe they view becoming a “superhero” – even one without super powers – as a way of regaining control of their lives?

Barnett: Possibly. We found some pretty dark souls out there. And to find them wanting to better themselves, to almost find therapy in doing this – it was fascinating.

CM: Were you ever tempted to tell any of these guys that, hey, maybe you're not really cut out for this sort of thing?

Barnett: Well, some of these guys that we worked with are untrained, while others are very trained. I'm certainly concerned. I wish they all had a real-life superhero school that they could all go to. So that they could at least know how to handle a situation. So that, rather than inflame it, they could defuse it. Because that takes training – that's not instinctive. If you don't have training, then your adrenaline kicks in. And when that happens – people tend to make situations worse. That's just human nature, you know?

CM: Just to make sure potential audiences understand – these guys aren't like the [Guardian Angels](#), right?

Barnett: They are and they aren't. You could say [the superhero community] is an evolution of the Guardian Angels. I mean, the Guardian Angels started out small, and grew to something like 500 chapters. And it's a really politicized movement now, with a lot of bureaucracy.

Some of these guys used to be part of the Guardian Angels, and they decided they wanted something with less bureaucracy, less rules. They wanted to be able to do it

their own eccentric way. The Guardian Angels have a uniform method, and a rulebook, and politics and presidents and leaders. With these guys, there is no rulebook, there is no manifesto. They go out and be whoever they want and try to help the community in any way they see fit. It's a real grassroots movement that may not galvanize, that may never get too organized, because the reason they do it is to make up their own rules.

CM: During filming, did you find yourself tempted to try some superheroics of your own?

Barnett: I have to say, I get asked that question a lot. And my answer always is: I'm a filmmaker. I want to tell stories. And I thought this was a fascinating story. It's changed my life in profound ways to see these people – often times with no resources – put everything on the line in order to help other people. So I think I learned a lot from these real-life superheroes. But I'm not going to join them anytime soon.

CM: OK, we've talked about the possible dangers facing superheroes. But turn the question around: Ever worry one of these guys might get too carried away with their derring-do?

Barnett: Well, [Phoenix Jones](#) was arrested just last week in Seattle for pepper-spraying people. He thought he was breaking up a fight, and he started pepper-spraying the crowd – and now he has assault charges against him. So, yeah, that's overstepping the line. Once again, it goes back to, there's no rulebook for these guys. They don't have a set of guidelines. So you're putting yourself in situations where you're acting instinctively.

And in the case of Phoenix Jones – it was probably not the right protocol. He pepper-sprayed some girls. That's not good. That's not a good result. That's not heroic. I hope the activities of a few superheroes won't undermine the whole cause.