

Real Life Superheroes... really?

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By [Jim Brasher](#)

What are you doing this weekend? Going to brunch? Mowing the lawn? Fighting crime? Hmm...which one of these things is not like the other?

Welcome to the confusing, often contradictory world of self-described Real Life Superheroes. (That's R.L.S.H for short). It's a loosely affiliated community of people who develop their own superhero persona, put on costume and try to prevent crime in their neighborhood. And all without super speed, invisibility or wings.

So are they vigilantes or volunteers? Commendable or ridiculous? Is what they're doing even legal? I decided to find out. Check out the video above for my night on patrol with "[Motor Mouth](#)." But first, a little more about the cast of characters, starting with...

THE MASKED MAN:

I'll admit, I had a few misgivings about meeting a masked stranger decked out in Kevlar and leather in a dark garage. But as you can see in the video, those fears dissipated the moment Motor Mouth started talking. (Turns out, he never really stops talking.) He's intense, driven, but also has a great sense of humor about the path he's chosen.

"You have to be a little eccentric," he said, "there's no question about it. You gotta be eccentric and you gotta have a little bravado about yourself."

We went on patrol in downtown [San Jose, California](#) with Motor Mouth, Anthem and Mutinous Angel. A typical night on patrol involves lots of walking and plenty of curious stares. But for Motor, his costume is a symbol, a visual reminder that someone in the night is paying attention.

"We're just like that average man in his mid-forties or fifties going ahead and patrolling his neighborhood in a neighborhood watch group, except we do it with a little bit more flair," he says. And, he insists, they're out there as a deterrent only.

"We don't want to get in the way of the police," he says, "we try to work with them to the best of our abilities, because we do not see ourselves as vigilantes, not in the slightest."

(A vigilante is someone who effects justice according to their own understand of right and wrong; someone who punishes an alleged criminal suspect outside the legal system. And that, as you may have guessed, is illegal.)

So Motor Mouth espouses a 'deterrence-only' philosophy. But the first rule of the R.L.S.H community is that there are no rules in the R.L.S.H community. (No formal ones anyway.) And not everyone subscribes to the same theories about what it means to prevent crime. So to get a wider view, we spoke to...

THE DIRECTOR:

Director [Michael Barnett](#) and producer Theodore James spent a year on the road, following close to forty Real Life Superheroes all over the country for an upcoming documentary called... Superheroes. They were kind enough to share some of their footage with us, and we met Barnett at Arclight Cinemas in Hollywood for an in-depth conversation about his experience.

“There’s not one thing the [RLSH](#) community focuses on,” he says, “they really do focus on everything, every aspect of the community, and how to make it better. And the thing that drives all of them, is people who do not care; that’s their mission, change the people who do not care to caring people.”

You can watch more of our interview with Barnett here. And stay tuned to this page for breaking news about when and where you can see the film.

THE LAW & THE GOOD NEIGHBORS:

We also spoke to Cindy Brandon, executive director of San Francisco SAFE (Safety Awareness For Everyone). SF SAFE is unique, a non-profit organization that works in partnership with the police to provide neighborhood watch program to the residents and businesses of San Francisco.

She stressed the importance of alerting the police to any suspicious activity. “If you see a crime in progress,” she says, “your first reaction should be to call 911.” Getting involved in trying to stop a crime is a risky proposition.

“If they do intervene they’re putting their own life in jeopardy. While I think each person can make that determination themselves when they witness something happening, we tell people not to get involved, but to go into a safe place and call the police right away.”

Actual law enforcement officials stress the same message. According to Lieutenant Andra Brown of the San Diego Police Department, real life superheroes, “don’t have the backup that we have, and trying to take a situation into their own hands could perhaps get out of hand for them, and it could actually create more work for the police officers.”

“Now we perhaps have another victim we have to deal with, we have someone who maybe has been represented to be part of law enforcement, or an authority if you will, and that can confuse other people out on the street. So yeah, there’s a lot of situations where they could impede what’s going on, or what a police officer needs to take care of.”

THE ARTIST:

Like many members of the real life superhero community, Motor Mouth got his inspiration from the pages of a [comic book](#). So we commissioned artist and performer [Kevin McShane](#) to create two original comic book panels for our piece, based on footage from our piece.

FINAL THOUGHTS:

Motor Mouth, Mr. Extreme, Mutinous Angel, Thanatos, [Dark Guardian](#), [Master Legend](#), Life, Crimson Fist, Zimmer, Saph, Ghost, Asylum, Red Voltage, Zetaman. Their reasons for putting on a costume are as colorful and varied as their names. While I learned pretty quickly that it’s next to impossible to generalize about the Real Life Superhero Community, many share a common nemesis: apathy.

According to Motor Mouth, fighting apathy means “trying to awaken the minds of the public to the little bit of more they can do in society, to make the world a better place.”

They certainly had an impact of director Michael Barnett. “In the end, I found something pretty profound. I found people with often times very little resources doing really, sort of small but beautiful things to make their communities better.”

What do you think? Watch the video and let me know.

Video: http://news.yahoo.com/s/yblog_weekend/20110401/ts_yblog_weekend/real-life-superheroes-really

Video featuring Michael Barnett: http://news.yahoo.com/s/yblog_weekend/20110401/ts_yblog_weekend/we-interview-michael-barnett