

Super friends

Move over, Clark Kent. All over New England, mild-mannered citizens are suiting up and doing their part to play the hero.

By TEA KRULOS | December 11, 2009

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STREET JUSTICE: Real-life superheroes are now so numerous throughout the country that they have a national organization, Superheroes Anonymous. New England regional heroes include, second from left, Basilisk, Civitron, Beau Shay Monde, and Recluse. Rapper Tem Blessed (far left) has collaborated with Civitron.

THWAK! I swing with my right fist, trying to connect with my opponent's face. In a smooth motion, he deflects my punch with his forearm, which is protected with a black and metallic-plastic arm gauntlet. I swing with my left fist, and am again knocked away effortlessly. I can see my reflection in his sunglasses, framed in white. He smiles and smooths out his red and white spandex shirt — adorned with a letter "C," a flame shooting out of the top — and then crouches into a fighting stance.

"Oh, no," I think. "I'm about to get my ass kicked by a Lycra-wearing superhero."

This non-caped crusader goes by the name of Civitron, and lucky for me, our combat is *not* a battle royale to the death. Rather, we are sparring at Rebelo's Kenpo Karate, in New Bedford, where Civitron has trained under sensei Joseph "Kenpo Joe" Rebelo on and off for more than 10 years. We aren't alone.

Twelve other "real-life superheroes," striking and grappling, are crowded into the dojo for a martial-arts workshop led by Rebelo (who, despite his superhero-sounding last name, is not a member of this tribe). The heroes have flown in — by plane — from all over the country to take part in a three-day conference called "Superheroes Anonymous," which is akin to a modern-day Justice League confab. They are wearing a multi-hued rainbow of spandex costumes, but there is also an emphasis on "real." These aren't the chiseled matinee-idol muscle men and women of the comics pages — more like the people with whom you ride the bus. Yes, some are athletic and tall, but some are short with

pot bellies. It's doubtful these heroes will put the fear of God into real-life hoodlums, let alone the Penguin or Dr. Octopus.

"We come in all shapes, sizes, backgrounds, and beliefs," says Civitron. (In the tradition of protecting a superhero's alter ego, these heroes agreed to speak with the *Phoenix* as long as we could assure them their secret identities would be safe.) There is Nyx, a curvy New Jersey woman, dressed in gray leotards with a red dust mask covering her lower face. She is sparring against Zimmer, who has just arrived from Austin. Zimmer, short and wiry, wears a spandex shirt, the binary code for the letter "Z" streaming down one side. Zetaman traveled from Portland, Oregon, with a suitcase full of bulky blue plastic armor (superheroes of other eras never had to get their costumes through airport security). Scavenger has on a black mask and corset; black plastic streamers hang from her arms. Her main focus, superhero-wise, is picking up litter in Waterbury, Connecticut, where she has traveled from with her friend, the mountainous Runebringer. He is wrapped in a large gray coat with runic characters decorating his chest.

A lifelong superhero fan, Rebelo, 48, is clearly relishing his surreal position as instructor to a class whose students look as if they had stepped out of a stack of his comic books. As he yells out instructions, his colorful combatants block and counter strike, a Roy Lichtenstein-like comic panel of goggles, masks, combat boots, homemade utility belts, and capes come to life.

After training for a few days in the superhero arts, these mortals will return home and watch over their cities — maybe in a neighborhood near you.

Superheroes in real life

The real-life superhero (RLSH) scene is, believe it or not, a growing movement of people who adopt a superhero persona of their own creation, then perform small-scale heroic deeds, such as donating to charities or watching their streets for criminal behavior. Some can acquit themselves admirably in the fighting arena, whereas others make do by carrying pepper spray and Tasers, but most stress that their best weapon is a cell phone to call the police.

If the image of mere mortals walking the streets in homemade costumes is strange, consider that our vicarious culture has increasingly catered to our fantasy lives. We're assuming the lives of rock stars, soldiers, and athletes in video games, and immersing ourselves completely in characters created in *World of Warcraft*, *Second Life*, and other online role-playing games. We watch artificial realities on TV, and read celebrity blogs on MySpace and Twitter.

Combine this with the grand American tradition of the superhero comic book, which took its first BAM! and POW! steps into the pop-culture pantheon more than 70 years ago. In the last several years, the *Spider-Man*, *X-Men*, and *Batman* franchises, among others, have smashed box-office records like the Hulk on a rampage. Add to that hit TV shows like *Heroes* and the popularity of graphic novels, and it's easy to see the yearning of your everyday Clark Kent to be something, well, more *super*.

The spreading of the RLSH philosophy has been as simple as a click of the mouse. Internet chat rooms and YouTube videos connected new superheroes from city to city. Inevitably, regionalized teams formed and events like Superheroes Anonymous were set up so that like-minded heroes could meet, mask to mask.

First-time filmmakers Ben Goldman and Chaim Lazaros founded the annual conference three years ago, to capture heroes uniting to work together in New York City, with additional footage shot the next year in New Orleans. (Their documentary is currently in post-production.) Civitron volunteered to host this year's conference in the "Secret City" of New Bedford. (Not exactly the Fortress of Solitude, but it will do in a pinch.)

Originally a premise to get quirky, compelling footage, Superheroes Anonymous has evolved. Besides the annual conference, it has recently been rethought of as a nonprofit organization, with chapters in New Bedford; New York; Raleigh, North Carolina; and Portland, Oregon.

"We've already met with lawyers to go over nonprofit paperwork," says Civitron. "The funny thing is, they were really disappointed that they wouldn't be representing crazy people who thought they had super powers."

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OWL'S WELL New Bedford's Civitron (right) has some potent super genes — his six-year-old son is also a superhero: Mad Owl.

New England heroes

"New England has a long history of people looking for justice, and I think it's been passed down generation to generation," says Civitron, who was born in Boston and moved to New Bedford in sixth grade. He says the history, and even the East Coast's Gotham City-like architecture, makes New England a great place to hang a superhero shingle.

Perhaps that's why the region is damn near *overrun* with superheroes.

Recluse also calls New Bedford home. Clad in a studded rubber mask and a shirt with the white outline of a spider, he is a mysterious and elusive figure, true to his name. He does, however, agree to speak briefly with the *Phoenix*.

"When I first started," recalls Recluse, "I was doing patrols in one of [New Bedford's] worst neighborhoods, the South End. A lot of drug dealers, a lot of gangs, and I got injured doing that. . . . I thought it was like the comic books, apparently. I don't know what I was thinking. I tried to stop three people from breaking into a house and I got thrown off the porch and landed on my shoulder, so I learned a lesson there."

Since then, he says, he has taken a more careful approach, hitting the streets as a dynamic duo with a trained martial artist who calls himself Bushido (Japanese for "way of the warrior," and the name of the moral code the samurai lived by). While combing the streets for crime, he wears street clothes — and a ballistics vest.

Recluse, too, has been donning plainclothes of late, "trying to observe and report more," he says. "I knew Bushido way before I ever donned my Recluse mask; he saw what I was doing and he wanted to do it as well. We patrol from a vehicle with a video camera and only get involved if it's an immediate danger to someone or someone's property."

Basilisk, inspired by Batman, cruises around the Taunton area. You'll recognize him as the guy wearing a trench coat, goggles, a hood, and gloves. He met Civitron online, and the two now meet regularly to get coffee and discuss life, or to go look for wrongs to right.

Basilisk says he views himself as "a servant of the people. I take this goal very seriously," he says. "Basically I want to be myself and I want to make a difference."

If any bad dudes venture farther north, specifically in the Lewiston and Auburn area of Maine, they'll be entering Slapjack's turf. Slapjack says he first adopted his persona for the online role-playing game *City of Heroes*. But after hearing about other real-life superheroes, he decided it was time for his character to move from the virtual world to the real streets to watch for crime and help with charity work.

His look is inspired by the classic comic-noir hero The Shadow. They both wear a fedora and trench coat, and Slapjack has a mask with a spade and a diamond over the eyes. He sometimes carries metal-framed playing cards that can be tossed like throwing knives.

"Slapjack is the complete opposite of who I am," he says, reflecting on his costumed persona. "I'm a really happy-go-lucky type of guy. I am very social and open, and Slapjack is like the darker personality. He is more secretive, more opinionated, he's let his mind go and it really is like a Clark Kent/Superman or Bruce Wayne/Batman type of thing."

There are numerous other heroes in the region. Among them: The Beetle of Portland, Maine, who couldn't be reached for comment; someone calling themselves "Samaritan" from Providence, who recently contacted Civitron, and said he had been walking his beat for the last couple years, unaware of the larger RLSH movement; and the retired Ms. Kismet of New Bedford, whose MySpace page notes that "I carry a backpack, which hold[s] a great number of useful superhero things, like . . . alcohol-based hand sanitizer (it does the trick without promoting bacteria resistance)."

Instrument of the people

Civitron's heroic name comes from the Roman *civi* (of the people) and the Greek suffix *tron* (instrument), and describes how he sees himself. He is of Puerto Rican and Italian decent, with the build of a runner and someone who takes his martial-arts training seriously.

"Something I say all the time is that I'm not really Civitron alone," he tells me later by phone, as he watches over his neighborhood. "Civitron is a creation of everybody in my life who helped me get to this point."

This eclectic hero-forming collective includes Civitron's mom, whom he credits with teaching him to be a strong person, but not a "tough guy." "He's always wanted to save the world," she says.

Civitron's partner, Jennifer, is also supportive of him. Their six-year-old son has even adopted his own superhero persona, Mad Owl, complete with a brown-and-gold owl costume.

But other than the father and son having secret identities, the three actually seem like a pretty normal family. Jennifer goes to school for biology. Civitron — who has a very warm, Zen-like personality, almost constantly smiling — has worked as a counselor, and currently is involved with a day program for autistic patients.

Whereas many comic-book superheroes are reviled in their communities, Civitron has legions of fans. They include the former RLSH Green Sage, a friend from New Bedford who has retired his own hero costume but still supports Civitron's efforts, and Tem Blessed, a positive-message rapper from Providence who has collaborated with Civitron on a food drive. The two plan to work on projects together in the future.

Civitron says his first meeting with his sensei, Rebelo, was in a comic-book store. Rebelo is proud of Civitron and his colleagues.

"His actions make others aware that they can act heroically, too," says Rebelo. "Helping a food pantry, picking up litter, distributing food and clothes to the poor — these are actions that so many people have given up on. You hear so much about not being a snitch, about not getting involved. There's a famous quote from Charles Barkley, 'I'm not a

role model.' Civitron is saying the *opposite* of all that — that he *is* a role model. He wants to be involved and do something positive."

Don't expect the New Bedford Police Department to build a bat-signal anytime soon, though.

"We prefer to be the only costumed crime fighters out there," says Lieutenant Jeffrey Silva, a police spokesman. He says the department is aware of real-life superheroes, but they have yet to cross paths with them.

"Although they might be well-intentioned, we don't endorse citizen patrols, because we don't know the level of training," says Silva. Even so, he concedes that any help to police is welcome.

"Anytime someone wants to get involved and help police, we see it as a good thing, so long as they don't work without police participation. We prefer people to be the eyes and ears of the police."

But what about the strange costumes?

"Well, fortunately, we're not the fashion police," states Silva.

So what is the payoff for dressing as a superhero and running through dark and dangerous alleyways in the moonlight? Slapjack says that the realization that he is trying to do something positive is his reward.

"Knowing that you are going out there and being proactive and helping makes you feel good about accomplishing something," says Slapjack. "My father always said, 'No matter how bad your life, no matter how hard, there is always someone a lot worse off than you are.' I always took that to heart, and use that as motivation to be better and do good."

"I just see myself as someone trying to make things better," agrees Recluse, "and I hope that people see me as that." As for Civitron, he says being a father is a reason he wants to make the world a better place.

"I'll be satisfied in the end if I'm just perceived as doing my part," he says, "contributing to society and making my community better. I like being real and living my truth."

For more information, visit the Web sites superheroesanonymous.com and reallifesuperheroes.org. Tea Krulos is a freelance writer from Milwaukee. He can be reached at teakrulos@gmail.com.