

Superheroes in Real Life

Inspired by comic books, ordinary citizens are putting on masks to fight crime

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Details:

There's more fun with Real Life Superheroes at the following links:

- Visit our [SLIDESHOW GALLERY](#) to see many of the Reals in this story.
- Read [EXPANDED WEB CONTENT](#) for this story, which features video and links.
- Cruise the [REAL LIFE SUPERHERO MAP](#) via Google Maps.

Geist's breath fogs the winter air as he surveys the frozen Minneapolis skyline, searching for signs of trouble. His long duster flaps in the breeze as his eyes flick behind reflective sunglasses; a wide-brim hat and green iridescent mask shroud his identity from those who might wish him harm.

Should a villain attack, the Emerald Enforcer carries a small arsenal to defend himself: smoke grenades, pepper spray, a slingshot, and a pair of six-inch fighting sticks tucked into sturdy leather boots. Leather guards protect Geist's arms; his signature weapon, an Argentinean cattle-snare called bolos, hangs from a belt-holster.

A mission awaits and time is of the essence, so Geist eases his solid frame, honed from martial arts training, into his trusty patrol vehicle—a salt-covered beige sedan. Unfamiliar with the transportation tangle of downtown, he pulls

a MapQuest printout from his pocket, discovering his goal is but a short cruise down Washington Avenue.

Soon Geist faces his first obstacle: parking on the left side of a one-way street. "Usually one of my superpowers is parallel parking," he chuckles as he eases his car into the spot, emerging victorious with a foot and a half between curb and tire. He feeds a gauntleted fistful of quarters into the parking meter, and then pops the trunk on the Geismobile to retrieve his precious cargo. On the street, he encounters businesspeople on lunch break—some stare openly; others don't even notice his garish attire. "It's easier in winter," Geist says with a laugh. "Winter in Minnesota, everybody's dressed weird."

Finally, his destination is in sight: People Serving People, a local homeless shelter. Geist strides boldly into the lobby—a cramped, noisy room where kids and adults mill about chatting—and heaves his stuffed paper bags onto the counter. "I have some groceries to donate," he tells Dean, the blond-bearded security guard on duty, whose placid expression suggests superheroes pop in on a regular basis. "And I have an hour on the meter if there's anything I can do to help out."

Wendy Darst, the volunteer coordinator, looks taken aback but gladly puts the superhero to work. Soon the Jade Justice finds himself hip-deep in a supply closet, piling books into a red Radio Flyer wagon. He wheels it back to the lobby, entreating the children to select a text. But the kids seem more interested in peppering him with questions. "So are you a cowboy or something?" one boy asks.

Geist kneels down to reply with a camera-ready grin, "Maybe a super-secret, space-cowboy detective!"

Another kid, awed by the uniform, just stares silently. "Hi," Geist says with a smile, holding out his hand in greeting. "I'm a real-life superhero."

The kid grabs Geist's leather-clad mitt and grins back. "I'm four!"

Such is the life of Minnesota's only superhero—a man in his mid-40s who sold off his comic book collection to fund a dream borne of those very pages. Unlike his fictional inspirations, he hasn't yet found any villains to apprehend in Rochester, a sleepy city of 95,000 about 80 miles south of Minneapolis. But that doesn't mean he's wasting his time, he says. "When you put on this costume and you do something for someone, it's like, 'Wow, I am being a hero,' and that is a great feeling."

BY MOST OBSERVERS' RECKONING, between 150 and 200 real-life superheroes, or "Reals" as some call themselves, operate in the United States, with another 50 or so donning the cowl internationally. These crusaders range in age from 15 to 50 and patrol cities from Indianapolis to Cambridgeshire, England. They create heroic identities with names like Black Arrow, Green Scorpion, and Mr. Silent, and wear bright Superman spandex or black ninja suits. Almost all share two traits in common: a love of comic books and a desire to improve their communities.

It's rare to find more than a few superheroes operating in the same area, so as with all hobbies, a community has sprung up online. In February, a burly, black-and-green-clad New Jersey-based Real named Tothian started Heroes Network, a website he says functions "like the UN for the real-life superhero community."

The foremost designer of real-life superhero costumes lives in New Brighton, Minnesota. His given name is Michael Brinatte, but he pro wrestles under the name Jack T. Ripper. At 6'2", with bulldog shoulders, he looks more likely to suplex you than shake your hand. It's hard to imagine him behind a sewing machine, carefully splicing together bits of shiny spandex, but when the 39-year-old father of three needed to give his wrestling persona a visual boost, that's just where he found himself, drawing on his only formal tailoring education: seventh-grade home economics. He discovered he had a talent for it, and before long was sewing uniforms and masks for fellow wrestlers, learning techniques to make his work durable enough to withstand the rigors of hand-to-hand combat.

After he posted photos of his masks on the internet, he met his first real-life superhero: Entomo the Insect Man, a crimefighter and "masked detective" based in Naples, Italy. Entomo wanted Brinatte to make him a mask to incorporate into his black-and-olive uniform. A lifelong comic fan, Brinatte took the assignment seriously, and it showed in the stitching. When Entomo showed off his new mask to the community of Reals, Brinatte started getting more orders: a green-and-black bodysuit for Hardwire, a blue-and-white Z-emblazoned uniform for Zetaman. Eventually, Brinatte started a website, www.hero-gear.net, to formalize his business, and now spends 10 to 15 hours each week making superhero uniforms. "They have a good heart and believe in what they're doing, and they're a lot of fun to talk to," Brinatte says.

His super friends are starting to get publicity. Last October, an organization called Superheroes Anonymous issued an invitation to any and all real-life superheroes: Come to Times Square to meet other Reals face-to-face and discuss the future of the movement. The community roiled with discussion of the invitation—*was it a trap by an as-yet-unknown real-life super villain?* In the end, only a dozen Reals attended, but the gathering attracted the notice of the *New York Times* and the BBC, which gave the budding league of justice worldwide ink.

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SO YOU'VE DECIDED to become a real-life superhero. Like Wolverine, you've chosen a secret identity and a uniform. But unlike the X-Man, you don't have retractable claws or a mutant healing factor. How do you make up the difference?

Most Reals use a combination of martial arts and weaponry. The Eye is a 49-year-old crimebuster from Mountain View, California, who wears a Green Hornet-inspired fedora and trench coat. Though he focuses mainly on detective work and crime-tip reporting, he prepares himself for hand-to-hand combat by studying kung fu and wielding an arsenal of light-based weapons designed to dazzle enemies.

"In movies, a ninja will have some powder or smoke to throw at you to distract," he explains. "That's essentially what I'm trying to do."

All superheroes have origins, and The Eye is no exception. He grew up tinkering with electronic gadgetry, first with his dad, then in the employ of a Silicon Valley company (he's reluctant to say which one). The Eye considers himself "on-duty" at all times, so when a co-worker started pimping fake Rolex watches to others in his office, the Paragon of Perception sprang into action. He went into work early, snuck into the watch-monger's office to locate the stash of counterfeit merchandise, and then dropped a dime to Crimestoppers. Ultimately, police wouldn't prosecute unless The Eye revealed his secret identity—a concession he was unwilling to make—but he nonetheless chalks it up as a victory. "We stopped him from doing this," The Eye says. "He knows someone's watching."

For sheer investment in gadgetry, none top Superhero, an ex-Navy powerlifter from Clearwater, Florida. His patrol vehicle is a burgundy 1975 Corvette Stingray with a souped-up 425-horsepower engine. He wears a flight helmet installed with a police scanner and video camera, and carries an extendable Cobra tactical baton, a flash gun, sonic grenades, and a canister of bear mace. Topping off the one-man armory is an Arma 100 stun cannon, a 37mm nitrogen-powered projectile device. His ammo of choice? Sandwiches. "Nothing stops them in their tracks like peanut butter and jelly," he explains in a video demonstration posted online.

Once you've honed your body and strapped on your utility belt, it's time to decide how to focus your heroic efforts. Within the community of Reals, there's a buffet of choices. Some choose mundane tasks—The Cleanser strolls around picking up trash, while Direction Man helps lost tourists find where they're going. Most Reals also lend their personages to charities, donating to food banks or organizing clothing drives.

Other Reals scoff at the idea of being a glorified Salvation Army bell-ringer and instead go looking for action. "I fight evil," says Tothian, the New Jersey crimefighter who founded Heroes Network. "I don't think picking up garbage is superheroic."

Master Legend, a chrome-suited 41-year-old from Winter Park, Florida, patrols the streets looking for crimes in progress, and claims his efforts have paid off. "I've dumped garbage cans over crackheads' heads, I slam their heads against the wall, whatever it takes," the Silver Slugger says with bravado. "They try to hit me first, and then it's time for Steel Toe City."

IN 1986, ALAN MOORE RELEASED his magnum opus, *Watchmen*, a 12-issue comic series whose conceit was built on a simple premise: What would it be like if superheroes existed in real life? Besides helping to usher in a new age of "mature" graphic novels, the series foreshadowed some of the complications facing real-life superheroes today.

For instance: How to balance crime fighting with family life? Zetaman, a goateed, black-and-blue-clad Real hailing from Portland, Oregon, got married seven years ago, but only recently started his career as a costumed crusader. He says his wife's reaction to his new hobby was lukewarm—she made him promise not to go out at night, and told him to focus on charity work instead of fisticuffs. "She thinks it's a phase," he says with a laugh.

The media can be even less charitable, as Captain Jackson, a gray-and-yellow-suited hero from Michigan, discovered in October 2005. That's when a headline appeared in the *Jackson Citizen Patriot* that could've been penned by J. Jonah Jameson himself: "Crime Fighter Busted for Drunk Driving." The article unmasked Captain Jackson as Thomas Frankini, a 49-year-old factory worker who'd been arrested for driving with a blood-alcohol level of 0.135 percent. The story was picked up by the *Detroit Free Press* and Fox News. Frankini was devastated. "My patrol days are over, I'm afraid," he said.

Unlike in the comics, real-life Commissioner Gordons rarely express gratitude for superheroes' help. One evening when Master Legend was on patrol, he heard a woman scream and ran to investigate. But when he located the damsel in distress, she thought he was attacking her and called the cops. "They wanted to know if I was some kind of insane man, a 41-year-old man running around in a costume," he recounts. "Apparently, they had never heard of me."

Bernard, a sharp-featured, 33-year-old police detective from suburban Philadelphia who asked that his last name be withheld, has become something of a rabbi to the online community of Reals. When he first stumbled upon the phenomenon, he thought, "These people are nuts." But as he learned more, he saw how the costumed do-gooders could make a difference. "They're definitely committed, and their heart is in the right place."

Most Reals are harmless enough, but Bernard worries about the bloodlust displayed by a small segment of the community. A recent thread on Heroes Network debated whether it was appropriate for a Real to carry a shotgun in his patrol vehicle. These aggressive Reals don't realize how difficult it is to apprehend criminals in the real world, Bernard says. "It's not like drug dealers stand around with quarter ounces of cocaine, throwing them in the air and saying 'Here's drugs for sale,'" he says. "Let's imagine that one of them does come across a drug dealer, gives them a roundhouse kick to the head, and finds a whole bag of pot in his pocket. Nobody's going to celebrate that. If anything, now you're going to have a huge fiasco. Let's face it—the world is complicated. You don't solve anything by punching somebody."

Rumor has it that a Real named Nostrum recently lost an eye in the line of duty, and some wonder if it will take a fatality to jolt the community out of its four-color fantasy. Wall Creeper, a 19-year-old who fights crime in Colorado, even seems to welcome the possibility. "To die doing something so noble would be the best thing to happen," he says.

JIM WAYNE KEPT HIS EYE OUT in his hometown of Phoenix, Arizona—and the bald 40-year-old didn't like what he saw. "Somewhere along the line we've stopped caring about each other and started caring about ourselves," he says.

Two years ago, Wayne saw a commercial for *Who Wants to Be a Superhero?*—a reality show in which costumed contestants compete for the honor of starring in their own comic book—and something inside him clicked.

"Ever since I was a kid, if you asked any of my friends or family who they knew that should be a superhero, they'd probably say me," he says.

Wayne dreamed up Citizen Prime, a persona patterned after his favorite comic book character, Captain America. "He, even more than Superman or Batman, epitomizes what a hero is: someone who stands up for their principles and goes out there to help people," Wayne says. To bring his alter ego to life, Wayne spent \$4,000 on custom-made armor—everything from a shiny chest plate to a bright yellow cape and a sloping steel helmet. "I made a commitment to make this and wear it and create this presence and see where that takes me," he says.

Initially, it didn't take him far. "There's a reason why police are always coming *after* crimes," he says. "It's one of those fictions in comics when superheroes are walking down the street and hear a scream. I found out real quickly that patrolling for patrolling's sake seems like a lost effort."

That realization sparked a change in how he thought about his role. "I think even though there's some fun to be had in the kick-ass aspect of comics, it's fiction and fantasy and we know it," he says. "As you translate those icons over to the real world, you have to face truths, such as violence begets violence."

So Prime hung up the bulletproof vest and tactical baton and began volunteering for charity work. He teamed with Kids Defense, an organization aimed at protecting kids from internet predators, and allied with the Banner Desert Hospital pediatrics wing, offering to personally pick up toys from anyone who wanted to donate to the holiday drive. "I want to get people out there to create a presence in the community," he says. "You make a presence of good in the community and the darker elements retreat."

Recently, he started his own nonprofit called the League of Citizen Heroes. The organization, as he envisions it, will draw on an army of volunteers—both masked and unmasked—to contribute to the greater good. "That's the level of

sophistication that I think the movement's moving towards," he says, "We don't have to just be patrolling the dark streets."

Superhero, one of the first recruits to the League, shares Wayne's dream, but is less philosophical when it comes to why, when all is said and done, he decided to put on a costume.

"I horse-shitted myself into thinking I was being a symbol for people and all that," Superhero says. "But then I just faced the truth and admitted I do it 'cause it's hella fun."