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The Villages® DAILY SUN

SUNDAY
OCTOBER 27,
2019

THE NEWSPAPER OF FLORIDA'S FRIENDLIEST HOMETOWN

NATIONAL NEWS

CALIFORNIA WILDFIRES BECOMING MORE INTENSE

At least 50,000 are asked to evacuate, power shut off to 2.35 million.

In what's being forecast as an historic wind event, some gusts this weekend might reach 75 mph, the National Weather Service said, prompting the fire's behavior to become more unpredictable. Evacuations in Sonoma County would be the most in the county in more than 25 years, according to the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office.



The Associated Press

Also

National News: Recent federal data says the number of children in the U.S. foster care system has dropped for the first time since 2012. **A18**

World News: Russia harshly criticizes the U.S. decision to send armored vehicles, combat troops to protect Syrian oil fields. **A17**

A DAILY SUN SPECIAL REPORT

Florida Lands Starring Role

COMIC-CONVENTION EVENTS NOW ATTRACT HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS TO STATE



Left photo: Tiffany Robinson, left, of Orlando, cosplaying as Rey, takes a selfie with her daughter Zoey Robinson, cosplaying as Elsa, at MegaCon. Right photo: Brook Aubertin, right, of Davenport, cosplays as Moze and Devin Adams, cosplays as FL4K from Borderlands 3, at MetroCon.



Left photo: Isaiiah Allen, left, of Port Mayaca, Katherine Dye, center, of Bradenton, Carly Anderson, right, of Sarasota, and Caleb Allen, center, of Port Mayaca, cosplay as Spider-Man and Spider-Woman, at MetroCon. Center photo: Emma Rubini, of Orlando, cosplays as tank girl at MegaCon. Right photo: Don Sellers, of Ocala, dressed as Superman, drinks a root beer at the Ocala Comic Con.

Photos by Hannah Ridings | Daily Sun



By KRISTEN FIORE | Daily Sun Senior Writer

If you peered into the Orange County Convention Center on the weekend of May 18, you would've found it crawling with superheroes, villains, Disney, anime and video game characters, as well as the occasional Bob Ross or Pillsbury Doughboy. They played games like human chess, lined up for celebrity meet-and-greets, sat in on panels about Florida independent filmmaking, attended discussions about steampunk literature and browsed through stacks of comic books and graphic novels, tables filled with plush toys of all sizes and racks lined with graphic T-shirts. This was a place where talking to strangers was considered normal and even recommended. "Nice joker cosplay," a girl dressed in a Luigi costume said brightly to a man with green hair and a painted face. "Thanks," he called back. A few decades ago, a scene of this scope — the hundreds of vendors and events explored by thousands of fans in a three-story convention center — was non-existent, but

Please See **CONVENTION, A8**

40

Conventions

There have been 40 comic book and character conventions held in Florida this year, such as Orlando's MegaCon. The Orlando event boasted an attendance of more than 100,000 people in May, organizers said.

ALSO INSIDE:

Scenes from Florida's conventions, **A6**

"Conventions are like home to me." **A10**

Villagers take part in fandoms too, **A11**

Meet four cosplayers and find out what it means for them, **A12**

Artists find a business boom in comic and character conventions, **A15**



Faces in the News
Christopher Wray

FBI Director will seek 'way forward' on body cams.

Global Snapshot, **A2**

COMMUNITY & CONNECTIONS

Sunday Extras Inside

Grab a cup of coffee, find a comfortable seat and dive into this edition of expanded, comprehensive local coverage.



PARADE MAGAZINE

Arnold tells it like it is.



SPORTS SPOTLIGHT

A national roundup of all your favorite teams. Plus news from Golf Central. **Section B**



VILLAGES IN DEPTH

Individuals shine in sports like triathlons, running, and track and field. **Section C**



PHOTOS FROM YOUR NEIGHBORS

Snapshots of friends and family having fun and marking milestones nearby. **Section D**



NEW DESTINATIONS

Travel far and wide with Villagers and others as they explore the world. **Section E**



ADDITIONAL SECTIONS

On TV this week, Morning Show. Plus six pages of color comics.



Neighborhood Roundup

Catch the fun from a recreation center near you. **D2**

Plus: Adopt a pet from an area shelter. **C12**

Plus: Musings from local poets. **D7**



from the front page

A DAILY SUN SPECIAL REPORT

CONVENTION

Continued from A1

due to the boom of internet fan groups that blast into real-life interactions like Orlando's MegaCon event in May, comic-book conventions are on the rise, especially in Florida.

"Nerd mecca is Orlando, with Disney, Universal and the other attractions," said Andrew Selepak, a lecturer in the telecommunications department of the College of Journalism and Communications at the University of Florida. "It would not be surprising if the state as a whole is a hotbed for it. Part of the reason Comic-Con is so popular in San Diego is its proximity to Hollywood and LA with the production studios. In Florida, you've got people who want to enjoy the theme parks and attractions."

And recent developments of attractions like Universal Orlando's The Wizarding World of Harry Potter and Disney's Hollywood Studios' Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge are only making the market stronger.

There were more than 40 comic book and character conventions held in Florida this year, such as Orlando's MegaCon, which boasted an attendance of more than 100,000 people in May, according to a press release. And Tampa's MetroCon welcomed more than 11,000 fans in July, according to the MetroCon official website.

And there are many smaller-scale events like Ocala Comic Con, which had an attendance of about 2,500 in July, according to Donald Gualandri, the owner of the convention.

From May to July, The Villages Daily Sun was present at multiple conventions in Florida to explore this area of growing entertainment and delve into the elements of culture, community and cosplay of which it is made.



Hannah Ridings | Daily Sun
Autumn Basnett, dressed as Loki, attends Ocala Comic Con.

the combination of the characters, the stories and the fantasy element. Back then, it was state-of-the-art entertainment."

As he got older, his love for comic books only grew. In fact, he wanted to make comic-book animation his career.

One way he was able to network was by attending conventions.

Although fan culture got moving in the '60s with comics like "Godzilla" and "The Fantastic Four," fan meet-ups and conventions were produced on a much smaller scale from the '60s to late '90s.

"They were more like a club," Biasi said. "You could meet other fans, and possibly some other

artists and writers."

Even the conventions with larger attendance still felt intimate, Biasi added.

"You could sit down with the writers and the artists," he said. "It was a way to make contacts."

This was ultimately how Biasi was able to become an assistant and work under several artists until he was doing his own work — work on comics like Superman and Wolverine.

By the early 2000s, conventions were becoming corporately owned with a corporate mentality.

Fan Expo HQ, which owns MegaCon Orlando, is now one of the largest entertainment convention groups in North

America, according to Mega-Con's official website.

The group, which started as Fan Expo Canada, formed as its own convention in 1995 with the Canadian National Comic Book Expo, and by 2005, it had added anime, science fiction, horror and gaming expos to its convention, increasing attendance by almost 39,000 in 10 years, according to Fan Expo HQ's official website.

Similarly, Tampa's Metrocon had its first convention in 2003 and has been growing steadily ever since.

"They decided in order to get the numbers, it was the celebrities who were going to draw in the big crowds," Biasi said.

Along with this change, came a shift of focus. Conventions became less about the comic books and more about meeting celebrities and dressing in cosplay.

"Years ago, the merchandise and TV shows were kind of a promotion for the comic books," Biasi said. "Today, it's the opposite. Now the comic books are more of a promotion for the TV and film industry."

But Biasi isn't bitter about this. He's still a fan and still attends conventions when he can.

While big and largely funded convention companies projected

the convention scene into something bigger, today's growth in numbers of convention attendees can largely be attributed to the popularity of social media, according to Selepak.

Look at it this way, explained Selepak: If you were a fan of a TV show or a novel series 25 years ago, there weren't a lot of ways to find extra content about that topic, and there were even fewer ways to find other fans to talk about it with.

"Twenty five years ago, it was so out in left field to be super into comics, anime and fandoms, but with the internet surge, rise of the age of social media, YouTube and technology, the mainstream brought about its ability to be more accepting of what used to be niche and out in left field," said Natalie Faulhaber, cosplay coordinator at MetroCon. "It also caused the demand for a place to share one's enthusiasm."

Online, fans from something as mainstream as Marvel to as niche as the video game "Freddy Fazbear's Pizzeria Simulator" can find other fans to connect with, and these fandom communities are built on social media platforms, according to Selepak.

And people naturally have the desire to take online communities offline, Selepak said.

"Today we are much more likely to go home, lock the door and then interact online," Selepak said. "We still have desire for in-person, offline interaction, but we build these communities surrounding our interests online. That's the driving force for finding out about more things to be interested in and finding other people who are interested and then having interactions with those people."

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The Big Bang

But first, let's delve into how comic book and character conventions got their start.

Steve Biasi, of the Village of Silver Lake, was an early convention attendee.

Biasi grew up spending every nickel and dime he had on comic books.

"That was my major form of entertainment when I was a kid," Biasi said. "They not only taught me how to read, but how to read better than most of the kids in my class. Plus there was

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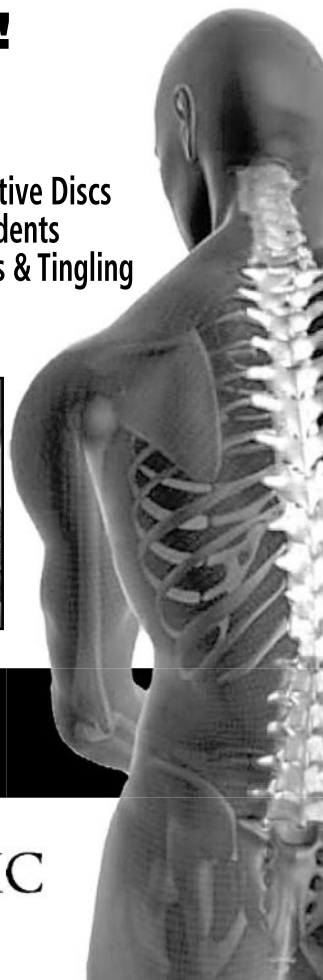
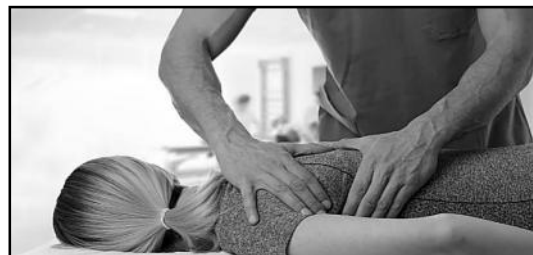
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from the front page

A DAILY SUN SPECIAL REPORT

Continued from Previous Page

And conventions are a way to do that.

Cultural Influence

Keith Mayerson, a professor of art at the University of Southern California Roski School of Art and Design, said conventions have become a wellspring of community that has absolutely grown over time, and the material of comic books has become grounded in popular culture.

"With the ubiquity of comics' influence in cultural entertainments, it's no longer a secret 'nerd' obsession, and with social media being able to connect fans and build a community online, it's gratifying for folks to be able to come to a brick-and-mortar convention center and communicate in a real time in a real space," Mayerson said.

Comics as a medium are being accepted again, Mayerson added, and now they aren't just for kids.

In fact, some of the graphic novels of today promote messages and lessons.

Mayerson mentioned a former student, Nate Powell, who earned a National Book Award, along with Congressman John Lewis and writer Andrew Aydin for their "March" graphic-novel trilogy, a series about Lewis' experience marching with Martin Luther King Jr. for civil rights.

"He himself was inspired by a comic to join Dr. King and wanted to give back to culture," Mayerson said. "Now schools are reading his books."

Similarly is Art Spiegelman's graphic novel "Maus," which is used to teach younger generations about the Holocaust.

Another of Mayerson's former students, Molly Ostertag, has published graphic novels like "Strong Female Protagonist" and "The Witch Boy," which uplift women and challenge gender norms.

Community Building

In addition to serving as a cultural educator, comic books, conventions and other fan groups bring people together.

When Faulhaber was in high school, she was a bit of an outcast.

"I remember being the black sheep of my whole school," she said. "I was the odd kid out. I loved to draw cartoons, and I loved dressing up and being silly. I loved to sing, dance and just be a bit of a clown. I loved to sew and sculpt. It took years of being a 'strange and awkward' person before really connecting to the outside world in college, where my awkward talents began to be appreciated."

It also helps that nerd culture has gone mainstream, due to the explosion of the internet and influences of TV shows like "The Big Bang Theory" and "Rick and Morty," Selepak explained. "We've gone from 'Revenge of the Nerds' to Bill Gates being the richest person in the world," Selepak said.

At conventions, these communities can not only come together, but celebrate each other.

Conventions like MegaCon are packed with activities like geek speed-dating, cosplay meet-ups and Harry Potter sorting-hat



Hannah Ridings | Daily Sun
Stephanie Adamides, left, and Eddy Cooper, both of Parrish, take a break during MetroCon in Tampa.

ceremonies that are meant to create new friendships.

Ben Badger, director of community engagement at MetroCon, said he has made some of his best friends at conventions.

"At MetroCon, I can literally strike up a long and meaningful conversation with anyone," Badger said. "And I mean that literally. It's amazing how a convention atmosphere will open people up."

As MegaCon attendee Makana Clark, of West Palm Beach, noted, there's no judgment.

Clark attended MegaCon dressed as Ursula from "The Little Mermaid." Ursula is Clark's favorite Disney villain because "she has the most sass."

"I love the community here," Clark added. "Everyone can dress up and look ridiculous, and it doesn't really matter. Everyone can be who they want to be without other people judging them, and I love that."

A group of friends who do reenactments at the Sarasota Medieval Fair attended MetroCon dressed in different Spiderman costumes and also said they attend conventions because of the positive atmosphere.

"It's a bunch of like-minded people getting along," said Carly Anderson, of Sarasota. "You don't have to worry about anything. You just compliment each other's costumes. It's great seeing what other people can do with the materials that they have."

"It's a safe space where you can be yourself," added Isaiah Allen, of Myakka City.

The Wonderful World of Cosplay

This feeling of a safe space allows convention attendees to go all out and dress up as their favorite characters.

A growing element of the convention scene is cosplay, in which fans dress up and sometimes even embody different characters that they like.

"It can take some of the most shy people I've ever met and turn them into the most outgoing, crazy outspoken person on the planet," said Faulhaber, who creates convention mascots, organizes photo shoots, contests and more as MetroCon's cosplay coordinator. "Cosplay isn't just a dress or an outfit you put on. It's

are accepted.

"For some of us, it's a way to step outside of our shells and perhaps be a bit more outgoing or brave," Badger said. "Cosplay is an amazing experience that I suggest everyone try out at least once if they are going to attend a convention. The best part is, you can't do it wrong."

For a cosplayer, every day can be like Halloween.

"I personally have been an elementary teacher for years, and a mother and a wife," Faulhaber said. "But as a cosplayer, I can be anyone I could ever want to be. I don't even have to be human, if I should choose. The only limit is one's own imagination."

Cosplaying is empowering for many of the fans who do it.

Sixteen-year-old Harris King, of Walker, Louisiana, attended Ocala Comic Con in a series of hand-drawn Mii masks, which displayed different emotions.

"I'm not really social, but I feel more social when I'm dressed up, because my costume is a conversation piece," he said.

Lysette Basham, a preschool teacher from Largo, spent two months making her cosplay of Astrid from "How to Train Your Dragon," for MetroCon. She sewed individual flowers to a

faux-fur cape and even inserted wiring that allowed her head piece to light up.

"It makes me feel happy because I get to express myself," she said. "I've always been really shy, so it's a way to let my creativity out."

Cosplaying allows fans become the heroes in their own journeys.

"To 'become' a character by dressing up in costume, the real-life person becomes liberated in the play of being able to literally walk in the

same shoes at their heroes, and perform what it is they love about the character," Mayerson said. "When it comes to superheroes and super beings, (cosplay) can help guide readers into being the best people they can be to make the world a better place, even if they aren't wearing the costume."

Senior writer Kristen Fiore can be reached at 352-753-1119, ext. 5270, or kristen.fiore@thevillagesmedia.com.

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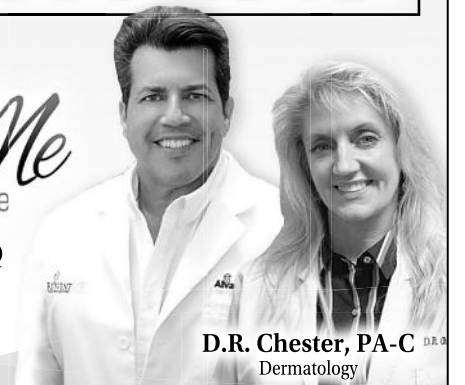
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