

# **NatsuCon convention attracts widespread crowd, many in costumes of favorite characters**

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**COLLINSVILLE** – One of the fastest growing communities, both online and in person, is the world of cosplay. Conventions across the country and around the world give fans the opportunity to dress up in costumes of their favorite characters, whether in comic books, Japanese anime, science fiction, etc., and interact with each other. These gatherings also allow participants, who usually chat online, the chance to meet in person and forge lasting friendships.

Such was the case over the weekend at **Collinsville's Gateway Convention Center**, which hosted **NatsuCon 2016**, a celebration of all things cosplay. The event was revived last year after a brief hiatus and attracted 2,000 participants; this year, organizers were hoping to attract 3,000 attendees. The event featured numerous panel discussions, storytelling, a costume contest and a Dynamo Pro Wrestling card, among other events.

After undergoing a reorganization, **NatsuCon chairman John Nelson** had a very simple goal that's become a part of its mission statement.

“I wanted to make sure that we were filling gaps that other organizations don't do,” Nelson said, “such as having an educational theme and making sure that our participants are having fun and are not just a number.”

Nelson became interested in anime as a child in his native Cleveland, when he watched a program called Inuyasha, one of the oldest and longest running anime shows. It became one of his favorites, and he started to find friends who also liked the program. Later on, he became involved in a anime club in high school and started organizing shows at age 16. Today, the 27-year-old Nelson, who also has a background in retail work, has a very experienced crew that helps him keep things running smoothly.

“I have an awesome team that keeps things going and keeps things together,” he said with tremendous pride. His current crew has a total of 40 years experience in organizing shows of its kind.

“I've personally known my staff for 10 years,” Nelson also said. “They've watched me grow in anime culture and running this event.”

Nelson also gained knowledge by working with a traveling company, and for all of his success, he knows it takes a team effort.

“Success is nothing without your friends,” he said, “and you need to bring them along to help accomplish your goals.”

Participants in the convention have their own reasons for coming out as well. Jessica Leonard, an artist from Indianapolis, did character tokens and portraits for the convention goers.

I've always had a talent for art and we played a card game called Magic The Gathering.” Leonard said. “I started making tokens for my friends, then I decided to start making more professional (tokens).”

The Valparaiso, Ind., native started out watching Dragon Ball Z and making fan art for the show. Her love for the art grew in high school, which she still has today.

“The story and the art work were so beautiful,” she said.

Leonard also has an appreciation for classic anime, such as 1960s shows Astro Boy, 8th Man and the iconic Speed Racer, programs that are still popular today.

“I really didn't get into Astro Boy until later, but I definitely watched Speed Racer as a kid,” Leonard said. “I do appreciate the older anime. They are definitely classics.”

Science fiction was also represented by some of the cosplayers. Ronald Lakin of Freeburg came dressed as a Star Wars Jedi Knight from the Republic era, while his friend, Kenny Johnson of Belleville, dressed as a Sith warrior.

“I love the chance to dress up, see old friends and reconnect with people I don't get to see often,” Lakin said.

Lakin first got interested in the Star Wars series as a child, when the first three episodes of the famous series were re-released to theaters.

“My father was a big Star Wars fan in the 70s, and he took me in the 90s to see the re-releases,” he said.

And although Lakin dressed up in his Star Wars costume, he's also a devoted fan of Star Trek.

“Actually, I'm a big Trekkie,” he said, referring to the term used to describe the iconic show's devoted fans. “I have the phasers, the uniforms, the whole thing.”

He also called himself a term used to describe fans of both Star Trek and Star Wars.

“I'm definitely di-fi,” Lakin said with a laugh.

Star Trek is celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, and Lakin feels that creator Gene Roddenberry had a tremendous vision that still resonates today.

“Gene Roddenberry did a lot of great things,” he said. “It was right between the end of World War II and the Cold War, and he saw a vision of a united humanity without racism and bigotry. It was human beings all getting along so well, working on the same vessel at the same time.”

The original series and its sequels helped make Roddenberry's vision come alive. Examples are the multiracial crew in the original series, Whoopi Goldberg as a bartender in *The Next Generation*, an African-American commander of a space station (Avery Brooks) in *Deep Space Nine* and a woman captain (Kate Mulgrew) in *Voyager*. Today, Lakin feels that humanity is falling far short of Roddenberry's dream.

“We're way behind (Roddenberry's) dream,” he said. “We've gotten worse in the last 20 years, and today, we're more divided than ever.”

And it's his famed dream and vision what makes Star Trek still popular.

“It has a meaning behind it,” Lakin said.

As for the future of anime itself, Nelson sees it as very positive, especially in the age of on-demand programming and online services such as Netflix and Hulu.

“I've been asked about it before, and there's so many new things coming out,” he said. “So many kids are being born into pop culture and seeing anime figures at anytime. You can see anything.”

And the future of shows such as NatsuCon is bright as well. Whenever fans are brought together by a common interest, friendships are bound to bloom.

“I really enjoy meeting new friends,” Lakin said. “The biggest thing this weekend is seeing old friends I don't get to normally see in person.”

“It just seems to be getting better and better every year,” Leonard said. “People can do this as a career and we're getting great support. Even people who do this as a hobby do a great job.”

Nelson, who described his organizing job as a hobby that he pours his extra time into, is quick to credit his team for the success he's enjoyed today.

“I'm more of a mouthpiece, honestly,” he said with a smile. “I make sure that everyone and everything that I do has the same ideas that I live by, and I try to make sure that those I work with share the same ideas.”



