

The real-life superheroes like to portray their motives as wholly benevolent, but if they were being driven purely by philanthropy they'd have become police officers or firefighters or charity volunteers. Something else is evidently propelling them—a narcissism. It's an odd sort of narcissism, of course, when the narcissist disguises their face, but the lust for fame and glory is unmistakable.

Only one of them, however, is achieving it: Phoenix Jones.

Back in Seattle he said he knew why he, alone, has captured the public's imagination. It's his bravery amid a community of superheroes who talk the talk but in practice basically don't do much more than hand out food to the homeless.

"When you wake up one day and decide to put on spandex and give out sandwiches, something's a little off," he said. "I don't call them real-life superheroes. I call them real-life sandwich-handlers."

In fact there's only one other crew out there actively looking for dangerous scrapes, and that's the NYI—the New York Initiative. And so, in the days before returning to Seattle, I email to ask if I can join them. I receive a very non-comic-book response. Yes, I can, but only if I accord them "... professional respect by cooperating with our scheduling and more importantly our tactics in the field ... A bullet-proof vest will be available for your use ... The scheduling is not negotiable. —Zero, co-founder of the New York Initiative."

We meet for a strategy briefing outside a movie theater near Washington Square Park, Lower Manhattan, at 10:00 p.m. There are ten of them. They don't look much like superheroes. They look quite intimidating, in fact, like a street gang, or some kind of private security detachment dressed entirely in black, with only cursory flashes of color.

"I look at it like a homeland soldier who has stickers on his helmet," explains Zero, a tall, good-looking, blond man. "I'm an artist. I'm a fighter. I'm a radical. I'm in a state of unrest." He pauses. "I'm trying to promote a new term instead of *superhero*: X-Alt. It's short for Extreme Altruist. I think it's going to open a lot of doors for people who don't want to be directly linked to the superhero stigma."

"Is any of this because of Phoenix—" I begin.

"We're not going to comment on Phoenix Jones," snaps Zero, shooting me a look.

Before Phoenix came along Zero and his crew—headed by the