

looking for crimes to thwart. We were the lame ones, running shrieking from real-life danger, cheering Batman vicariously on from our homes. How did all that change? How did my nerd successors get to be so brave?

The Real-Life Superhero Movement actually began, their folklore goes, all the way back in 1985, in Winter Park, Florida, when a young man (whose real-life identity is still a closely guarded secret) built himself a silver suit, called himself Master Legend, and stepped out onto the streets. He was an influential, if erratic, inspiration to those who followed.

"Ninety percent of us think Master Legend is crazy," Phoenix Jones told me. "He's always drinking. He believes he was born wearing a purple veil and has died three times. But he does great deeds of heroism. He once saw someone try to rape a girl and he beat the guy so severely he ended up in a hospital for almost a month. He's an enigma."

The rise of the mega-comic conventions has surely helped fuel the movement. I remember a friend, the film director Edgar Wright, returning from his first San Diego Comic Con, saucer-eyed with tales of hitherto reclusive geeks wandering around in immaculate homemade costumes, their heads held high.

"It was like Geek Pride," he said.

But the community has really blossomed post 9/11 and especially during the recession of the past few years.

"It's in the zeitgeist of our nation to help strangers in need," says Phoenix's friend Peter Tangen. "Many RLSHs [real-life superheroes] were raised learning morality from comic books and have applied that to their everyday lives. It's our natural way of reacting to the challenges of the day."

There's no national convention or gathering, but Peter Tangen is doing all he can to make them a structured, self-respecting community, with a coherent online presence.

Peter's origin story is as remarkable as any of the RLSHs'. He is by day a Hollywood studio photographer. He's responsible for a great many of the instantly recognizable superhero movie posters—Tobey Maguire as Spider-Man, etc. But he's always felt like a cog in the machine.