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EVILDOERS...

NYC'S OWN SUPERHEROES

BEWARE!

BY JAMES FANELLI

With great costumes comes great responsibility.

"Kick-Ass," an action movie opening this week, spins a tale of average Joes becoming masked crime fighters, but New York has been home to real-life caped crusaders for years.

Gotham's legion of real-life superheroes includes a leather-clad martial-arts expert who battles drug dealers, a masked religious hipster who feeds the homeless and an engaged pair of relationship counselors, Arjuna Ladino, 42, and Shanti Owen, 50, who don star-spangled spandex as the "Transformational Warriors" to spread the power of love.

"We are just people who really care and try to go out and make a difference," says Chris Pollak, 25, whose alter ego, "Dark Guardian," strikes fear in the hearts of drug peddlers in Washington Square Park. "The idea is to be this drastic example of making change in your community."

The Staten Islander has been patrolling city streets for the last seven years, frequently putting himself in harm's way. A drug dealer flashed a gun at Pollak once, and he has almost come to blows with thugs.

"My fiancée is very supportive, but she gets worried if I'm doing anything that involves danger," Dark Guardian said. "When I met my fiancée, I told her I liked to do this thing where I go out and help the homeless and patrol the streets. I didn't get into

the whole costume thing — I waited until a little bit into the relationship."

Occasionally, Dark Guardian gets an assist from two fellow superheroes, Chaim "Life" Lazaros, 25, and Ben Greenman, 23, a.k.a. "Cameraman," who has videotaped the Washington Square showdowns. The plucky pair also hands out food to the city's homeless at least once a week.

Lazaros, who shares a Harlem hideout with Cameraman, said it takes a certain type to don a mask and do good. "They all have extremely strong personalities and a desire to change the world," he said.

That's not to say all real-life superheroes seek change through crime-fighting.

"The Phantom Zero," a 33-year northern New Jersey-based superhero, raises money for charities and donates to the homeless. He has also accompanied Dark Guardian on some of his patrols. "I was scared out of my gourd," The Phantom Zero said, declining to give his real name.

But his 20-year-old masked sweetheart, "Nyx," has shown some gumption. Before moving to New Jersey to be with her super man, she lived in Kansas, where she would secretly snap shots of meth labs and send them to the authorities.

"I used to carry weaponry with me. But seeing as how I'm in New York... I don't," Nyx said.

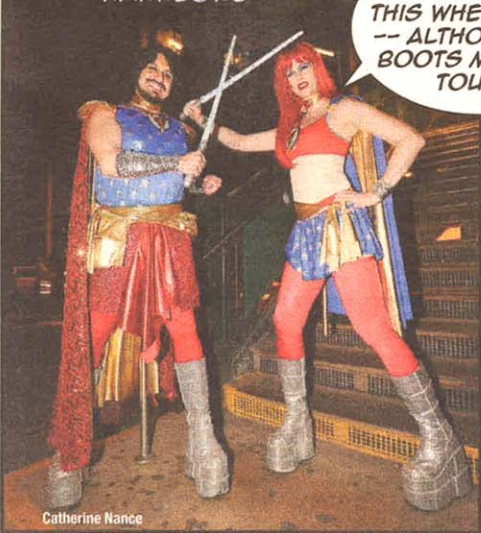
REAL-LIFE SUPERHEROES DON'T HAVE SUPERVILLAINS. THEY HAVE SUPER-HECKLERS.



NYX AND PHANTOM ZERO

TRANSFORMATIONAL WARRIORS

I'LL BE DRESSING LIKE THIS WHEN I'M 80 -- ALTHOUGH THE BOOTS MIGHT BE TOUGH.



Catherine Nance

DARK GUARDIAN



Steve White

LIFE AND CAMERAMAN

I BECOME SOMETHING GREATER THAN MYSELF WHEN I'M DRESSED AS A SUPERHERO. I CAN'T FALL BACK ON THAT SELFISHNESS OR CALLOUSNESS. I HAVE TO ACT AS A SUPERHERO.



Catherine Nance