

HEROES,

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Shield is ex-military and felt his experiences while deployed in Afghanistan were something he could use once he got home. He began watching the rise of what was later known as the Real World Superhero Movement in 2006, but he waited nearly nine years to first don the spandex.

Still, there were stumbling first steps. He did practice runs in Colorado while stationed there, but he was as scared of any encounters with real people as they might have been suspicious of him.

"I basically had the red suit and belt and a mask. I was hiding behind cars and moving around them as other cars passed. I was totally creeping," Shield says.

At one point, an enthusiastic preteen ran up to him and he froze. Shield stood up straight and just stared before the kid took off running.

"I realized after that I needed to be able to engage with people," Shield said.

By the time he assembled his full costume in Beaverton, almost everyone got a wave and a reminder to stay safe at the very least.

Arachnight's first contact didn't go much better. He went out on patrol for the first time the day his mother died and, like Shield, he wasn't quite prepared for new role he'd taken on. He wore a balaclava mask, a Spider-Man T-shirt, jeans and tennis shoes. For security, he slung a large metal baton across his back. The first two evenings were uneventful, which is one of the reasons the third is so memorable.

"I was walking down a suburban neighborhood and I heard this rumbling coming from the distance. It got closer and closer and then a pick-up truck full of teenagers switched on the headlights and drove past me honking. Then I heard this screech and I looked back and saw the truck reversing, spin around and head for me," Arachnight says.

He did what any wise, nascent hero does. He ran. He ran for three-and-a-half blocks before turning a corner and diving into a bush where he stripped off his mask and web-slinger T-shirt and left his baton behind. He re-emerged after the truck passed.

The truck came back and asked Arachnight, the civilian, if he'd seen anyone matching the description of the guy in a mask with a six-foot katana. Arachnight played dumb, but the high schoolers didn't call off the search for another six weeks.

"I know because I was working at the local gas station and I would be filling up their tank while they told me about the masked man they were looking for. I had to play it off like 'that guy sounds like a real freaking nutcase,' then I would go out on patrol again that night."

Both men found that donning a mask and superhero outfit gave them a sense of mission that stretched beyond what they encountered on the streets.

"When I look in the mirror now, I ask myself what would GS do? I can't have a double standard or be a hypocrite, and I've definitely cleaned up my language," Shield says.

"I suffer a lot of anxiety and low self-esteem issues. Putting on the mask awakened something inside of me. You act more professional and have a

more heroic demeanor toward yourself," Arachnight added.

Both said their heroic personas felt more like their destinies than their civilian lives.

"Patrol night comes along and it's like this chance to be who you really want to be. A lot of times my everyday normal life feels less natural to me," Shield said.

IDENTITY CRISIS

It might have been that comfort in his superhero skin that led Shield to try something new when deciding to patrol in Keizer. For the first time, he announced his presence and intent to patrol online.

The blowback that resulted from the posting was unexpected to say the least. Messages piled up questioning his motives, his mental state, and just about everything in between. It took minutes for someone to post a photo of him out of costume with a loved one. Shield isn't trying to cover up anything in his past, but he is concerned about the possibility of upsetting someone who would target his friends and family.

"Keizer has been the hardest town to crack. I don't want to get killed if I end up in a confrontation with someone," Shield said. "No other town has come after me to unmask me. That makes me nervous."

There are a number of people in Shield's personal life who know of his activities. Arachnight has only a few.

"If I take the mask off then you know I'm just the guy who you see walking down the street and you don't know I'm here to help," Arachnight said.

The initial wave of online skepticism blew over in a few days and a few apologies even cropped up in the mix once some doubters had time to re-



KEIZERTIMES/Eric A. Howald
Mat and Quentin Evans pose for a photo with Keizer's new community superheroes at a meet-and-greet in Claggett Creek Park.

flect.

Truthfully, community superheroes inhabit a grey area. Other community superheroes in other places have run afoul of the law and even the inhabitants of the communities they set out to protect.

Shield carries a ballistic shield, a tactical flashlight, pepper spray, bad dog spray, utility knife, seatbelt cutter, glass breaker, Taser, a polypropylene sword that could defend against a crowbar or bat, and a personal medical kit.

Arachnight carries mace, a telescoping baton, tactical flashlight and stun gun along with his medical kit. He wears alloy-knuckled gloves, but he's also CPR- and first aid-certified. He counts local police among his personal heroes.

The sheer amount of gear is costly, but also legal, and the totality of it in list form appears threatening. On the other hand, Shield finds it helps him make his case when law enforcement officers roll up.

"We're already a joke and

we look legit. Half of the battle is won when the police look at me and see that I'm well-prepared. If you dress like a clown, people will treat you like a clown," Shield said.

When Shield went into Shari's earlier in the night, the manager went pale and immediately said no face masks were allowed in the restaurant. They make it a habit not to go too far into any establishment to avoid those specific types of reactions.

There also aren't too many spaces they see as out-of-bounds. Private residential property would be taboo, but they'll check out dark spaces around businesses and apartments.

"I've walked around places on patrol I would never walk around in broad daylight," Shield said.

They try to balance their appearance with friendly demeanor and a healthy dose of humor.

"You never hear of Batman obeying the 'No Trespassing' signs. You have to go where the

bad guys are. It's not like I'm going to yell over the fence, 'You're lucky you're not over here obeying the law,'" Arachnight says.

"If you were, I'd shake your hand and congratulate you on being a good citizen," quips Shield.

Shield and Arachnight don't have a record of instigation and don't intend to start in Keizer. More than anything, the pair just hopes to inspire people.

"I love seeing kids' reactions and the awe on their faces. I have a lot of siblings and kids are a big deal for me. Knowing I can make someone feel good puts an insanely large smile on my face," Arachnight said.

"My only agenda is to make superheroes real," Shield said. "Why aren't they real? It takes a little guts, a little courage, but there's strength in numbers."

Time will tell. But if the mere presence of a few community superheroes prevents some crime along the way, it's hard to argue with those motives.

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