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Steampunk cosplayer, robotics team ready to shine at sci/fi convention

by Kathy Goldsbery

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John Strangeway removes his Steampunk Boba Fett helmet to reveal his real self.

Cobb residents are putting the finishing touches on their superhero costumes in anticipation for the weekend extravaganza known as Dragon Con, a multimedia pop culture convention focused on science fiction and fantasy.

Dragon Con runs for four days from Aug. 30 to Sept. 2 through five hotels in downtown Atlanta and features thousands of hours of panels, seminars, demonstrations, workshops, costume contests, celebrity guests and a parade for fans of sci-fi, fantasy, video games, comic books and other elements of fan culture.



Strangeway becomes Steampunk Boba Fett.

Among the more than 52,000 in attendance will be cosplayer John Strangeway in his steampunk Boba Fett costume and the Kell High School robotics team as they host a robotics workshop from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturday at the Sheraton hotel in the Atlanta room.

Cosplay is an activity in which participants wear costumes and accessories to represent a specific character or idea from a work of fiction. Cosplayers often interact to create a subculture centered on role play. Boba Fett is the villainous bounty hunter hired by Darth Vader from the "Star Wars" franchise. When Strangeway attended his first Dragon Con event in 2008, he knew he wanted to develop a costume that was both different and paid homage to his love of "Star Wars."

"I wanted a unique Boba Fett," said the Marietta resident. "I've always been a 'Star Wars' fan and I was like, 'Well, I wonder what would happen if it was modified.'"

Strangeway works at Crestron, a company in Alpharetta that makes commercial and residential touch screens and keyboards.

In May 2009, Strangeway became interested in the steampunk genre after attending a steampunk conference in Atlanta and making friends with a group of steampunk cosplayers and enthusiasts. Steampunk is an artistic and cultural cosplay movement that merges modern day technology and fantastical fiction with Victorian style.

Strangeway communicated with members of the group via phone and Skype and began trading ideas for steampunk costumes. The Boba Fett costume was created by Whitestone Productions, a company that produces short films where Strangeway was formerly employed. He wore the

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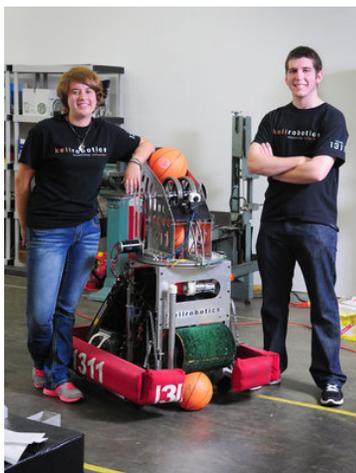
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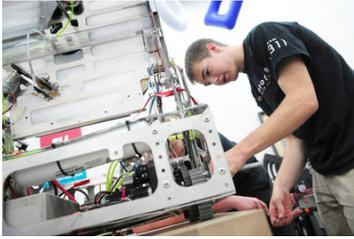
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Kell High School Robotics Team captains Elizabeth Hoyla and Alec Kumpf will be attending Dragon Con this year with the rest of the Kell Robotics team. They stand next to a robot built to scoop and shoot basketballs at their facility in Kennesaw.



Wyatt Owenby of the Kell Robotics Team makes a small adjustment on a robot built to throw Frisbees.

costume for the first time in 2009 at Dragon Con and received widespread cheers.

"The reception was insane. I started a Facebook page ..." the 33-year-old said. "I just go around having fun. I've made a lot of friends throughout the community."

He attends about one or two conventions a month throughout the country and rotates wearing about 10 costumes. Strangeway wears costumes based on characters such as the Jedi knights from "Star Wars," Beast from "X Men," a coal miner from the "Silent Hill" video game, the fifth "Doctor Who," and more. He is currently developing a costume for Sean Connery's character Juan Sánchez Villa-Lobos Ramírez in "Highlander."

At Dragon Con, Strangeway will be working as a staff member for the Alternate History track, a set of programming and panels catering to steampunk. He'll also be walking as Boba Fett in the Dragon Con parade on Saturday at 10 a.m. in downtown Atlanta.

Costumes are made with the help of artistic friends, area fabric stores, production companies and Strangeway's wild imagination.

"I find material on websites, thrift stores," Strangeway said. "I've never been to so many fabric stores in my later life. (I go) to Joanns and Hancock's and Hobby Lobby and Michaels. There's a Fabric World over by Stone Mountain. ... That's where I got most of the Jedi outfit. The robe is multi-layered and some of it's made from upholstery."

Over the years, Strangeway has made a name for himself in the steampunk community. His Steampunk Boba Fett Facebook page has almost 32,000 fans to date. But even after visiting ComicCon in San Diego and various other conventions throughout the U.S., Dragon Con is still No. 1 for him.

"It's my favorite because it's for the fans," Strangeway said. "You still get to meet celebrities. But you get to go to panels of any of your interests in the genres of sci-fi/fantasy and they've got it there."

Robot fans and Leomaniacs can get their fix of machine fun at Dragon Con as well with a workshop presented by the Kell High School robotics team called Lego FIRST Challenge. The students will direct participants on how to build and program a Lego robot from a kit.

This is the second Dragon Con the 10-year-old team has attended, said program director Ed Barker.

Students range from ninth-graders through 12th-graders and also hail from Sprayberry High and other Cobb schools.

The robotics team is a program lead by mentors from the science and engineering industry with participation from teachers. Barker worked for 30 years as an electrical engineer for a defense contractor named Raytheon.

"You know from thousands of years of history that's really the way how people learned a lot of things was through mentors," Barker said. "In the modern era, everybody just kind of sits in a classroom and studies stuff and takes tests and they really don't get the chance to get their hands on something and actually do it. ... We allow the students to take the stuff they're learning in school, the math and the science and the writing and everything else, and actually apply it to work on real-world problems."

During the workshop, the team will also be showing off two 150-pound robots that play Frisbee and basketball.

"Each one is about the size of a washing machine," Barker said. "We have a fleet of about a dozen robots but we'll only bring about three or four ... The bigger robots will be more for demonstration. The little robots will be things people can do. They can build them, program them, drive them around — that sort of thing."

With about 32 students on the team, 15 or 16 will attend the Dragon Con workshop, Barker said.

"The mission of our team is to get kids excited and get them fired up about what they're learning and go off and have a great career," Barker said. "The robotics thing is a way to hook them in."

The team program is affiliated with a nonprofit organization called FIRST which emphasizes the STEM careers of science, technology, engineering and math. FIRST stands for For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology. They design programs and lead international

science competitions with 300,000 students participating, Barker said.

Former Kell High robotics team captain Alex Epstein graduated from Kell two years ago. Now as a Virginia Tech student, he studies industrial systems engineering and is currently doing research on STEM and engineering education. He considers his robotics education at Kell to be essential in giving him a solid background for his studies at Virginia Tech.

"It was vital," Epstein said. "I think I already wanted to get into engineering before I got onto the team but it helped to reaffirm that. ... So I was already a little bit ahead of some of my peers coming in."

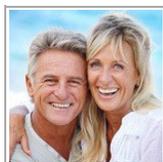
Barker has seen the program's life-changing effects in creating future engineers and scientists.

"We've had students who come through who thought they wanted to be an English major or ballet dancer and they wind up going off and getting advanced degrees at schools like Georgia Tech and Virginia Tech and places like that," Barker said. "They're off working in engineering and medicine or science."

The Lego FIRST Challenge at Dragon Con will also be accompanied by robotics battles, panels and workshops produced by the Lego Fan Track.

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