

Feature



Costumed Crusaders of the Urban Jungle Philip Gust*

A growing band of civilian crime fighters and social crusaders is taking back the streets of urban neighborhoods dressed as superheroes, earning support from citizens and suspicion from police.

Rumors of the costumed crime fighter began to surface as residents spoke of unconfirmed sightings around the streets. Then a Lynwood, Washington local had a first-hand meeting. He was returning to a parking lot on Sunday evening when he spotted a "bad guy" trying to break in to his car with a piece of metal.

He started dialing 911 but, before he could finish dialing, help arrived in a most unlikely form. "This guy comes dashing in, wearing this skin-tight rubber, black and gold suit, and starts chasing him away."

He is not the only one to have seen a real-life superhero. Seattle police say that a group of self-described crime fighters has been patrolling the streets of the Seattle



area at night. A police source reports that the their members go by names like Pitch Black, No Name, Purple Reign, and Phoenix Jones. They are part of a nationwide movement of real-life superheroes.

A bulletin sent to Seattle police officers cites two web sites, [Real Life Superheroes](#) and [Superheroes Anonymous](#), that contain information on the movement, its members, and constructing superhero costumes. The range of costumes shown on these sites goes from traditional comic book superhero fare to truly creative assemblies of bodywear, headgear, and accessories.

Phoenix Jones, who was born Benjamin Fodor, is the leader of the *Rain City Superhero Movement*. In a recent news broadcast, Jones is shown entering a back room of an unnamed comic book store, where he changes into a costume of his own design. His costume is typical of those worn by Real Life Superhero crime fighters.

Purple Reign (left) and her husband Phoenix Jones (right) are members of Seattle's *Reign City Superhero Movement*. Bullet-proof vest, and trauma plates on Jones' legs protect against gun shots and knife wounds. Purple Reign photo by Luke Fegan; Phoenix Jones photo by Austin Hargrave.



"I have a bullet-proof vest and various stab plates. The rubber suit is reinforced with wire and I've got trauma plates on my legs so if someone shoots or stabs me there they can't get the artery," says Jones. His equipment includes a stun baton, pepper spray or tear gas, handcuffs and a first aid kit. Neither Phoenix nor any of the other superheroes carries a gun or other lethal weapon.

"Everyone on my team either has a military background or a mixed martial arts background, and we're well aware of what it costs to do what we do."

Phoenix says he wanted to take policing into his own hands when his car was broken into and his son was injured falling on the broken glass. Several people saw the break-in happen, but did not intervene. The car window had been broken by a rock with a mask wrapped around it, which Jones left in the car's glove box. When Jones later encountered a friend being assaulted outside a bar, he put the mask and "made a

commotion" until the police showed up. "I thought, why didn't someone help him? There were seventy people outside that bar

and no one did anything." Jones developed his costume and pseudonym, when his crime-fighting behavior made him too recognizable.

Phoenix and the *Rain City Superheroes Movement* have received praise from citizens in the communities where they operate, as well as on Phoenix Jones' [Facebook page](#) where he has nearly 40,000 followers.



Not all members of the Real Life Superheroes movement fight crime.

Illya "Zetaman"

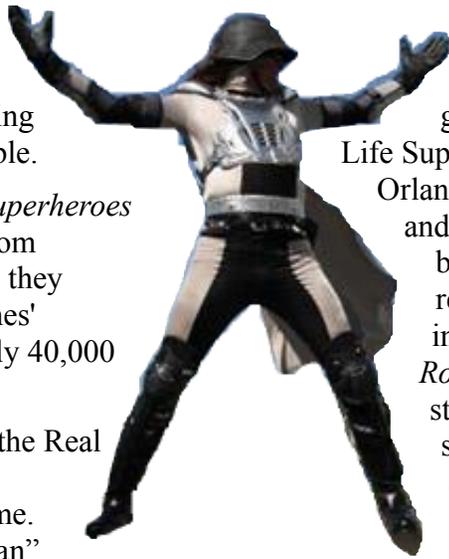
King and his wife Allyson "Apocalypse Meow" King don costumes to fight poverty and social injustice as members of *The Alternates*, a team of superheroes who dispense necessities to the homeless on the streets of

downtown Portland, Oregon.

Illya's costume includes stylized tactical S.W.A.T.

A armor, a first-aid kit, and a backpack full of supplies.

Allison's was inspired by various heroic female figures.



Another, Master Legend, is known as the granddaddy of American Real Life Superheroes. He is based in the Orlando suburb of Winter Park, and has been active for the better part of the decade. He received national recognition in December, 2008, when *Rolling Stone* ran a feature story and pictorial on the superhero, clad in a silver and black uniform with a German World War II helmet. He's garnered the

support of his community by fighting for causes he deems worthy, and working for charity. His shining moment came in 2004, when he received a commendation from the sheriff's office for helping to save people in the aftermath of Hurricane Charley.

According to Michael Barnett, the director of the new HBO documentary [Superheroes](#), about the Real Life Superhero movement, individuals and groups of costumed superheroes have begun to crop up in cities all over the world.

Why do they do it? Many of them say that the police and social agencies are "completely unreliable." But Barnett thinks their motivations may be a bit more complex. "I found very quickly that most of them had some level of trauma or tragedy in their lives, and this is how that trauma or tragedy manifested itself," very much like comic-book characters such as Batman.



Publicity photo from *Superheroes*, a 2011 HBO documentary directed by Michael Barnett.

The dangers some of these people face are very real. Phoenix Jones, a martial arts expert, has had his nose broken, and has been saved from several knife slashes and a gunshot wound to the chest by his advanced body armor. As with a number of Real Life Superhero groups, the police have an uneasy relationship with the *Rain City Superheroes*. Phoenix justifies their actions, saying that police sometimes take hours to respond, and that the perpetrators would be long gone by the time police arrived if his team didn't prevent the crime and apprehend them.

Phoenix was recently arrested for his role in an altercation. Close associates told reporters that he broke up a fight between two groups outside a nightclub using pepper spray.

Police officers who responded determined that, "there was no fight." Videographer Ryan McNamee



Photos of Zetaman, Apocalypse Meow and Master Legend courtesy of [Real Life Superheroes](#).

uploaded a video the next day refuting the police report, showing Phoenix responding to a fight in progress. According to wife and fellow *Rain City Superhero* Purple Reign, “I’m proud of my husband.” Phoenix was

released on bail several hours later with no charges filed, but police confiscated his costume and have refused to return it. He continues to patrol with a back-up suit.



Phoenix Jones and the *Rain City Superheroes Movement* on patrol in Seattle. Photo by David Mark Erickson.

Photographer David Mark Erickson, was covering the Occupy Seattle movement when he saw Phoenix coming from about a block away. “His entourage had about 20 people in it; he was not hard to miss. An editor had recently asked me to get photos of Phoenix and this was a perfect opportunity.” Ericson accompanied Phoenix and the *Rain City Superheroes* on their community patrol.

“After the patrol was over I arranged to take a few photos with him and his crew around the Pike Place Market, one of Seattle’s most famous landmarks. Phoenix mentioned that his costume is a new design and that he was still getting used to it. ‘When I walk into a neighborhood, criminals leave because they see the suit,’ Phoenix told me. ‘I symbolize that the average person doesn’t have to walk around and see bad things and do nothing.’”

For most costumers, stepping onto a masquerade stage or wearing hall costumes at a convention means admiration for their construction skills. For members of the *Rain Street Superhero Movement* and many others like them, putting on costumes and stepping onto the streets of an urban neighborhood means something very different to them and to their communities.

Philip Gust enjoys sci-fi and fantasy costuming, and has particular interests in props, special effects, and prosthetic makeup. He also costumes in historical periods, including Regency, Victorian, and early 20th C.