

Putting the “Extra” in Extraordinary

Creating a Library Comic Con

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I am a lady of many hats—children’s librarian by day, Renaissance faire rogue and comic con cosplay queen by night (and weekend). I was drawn to these activities not only because of my passion, but because of other people’s exuberance for the characters, the activities, and the stories. It’s something I see in the library all the time when children want to share stories about their hobbies or their new favorite book.

That exuberance got me thinking—how could I share my weekend passions with my library patrons?

You might be saying to yourself, “It’s cool that you have such interesting hobbies, but WHY would I want to throw a comic con in my library when patrons can just go to one on their own time?”

Our profession focuses on closing access gaps. We know that libraries bring communities together, are avenues of learning, and help people have experiences they might otherwise not have for whatever reason. Comic cons are expensive, and not everyone is privileged enough to be able to afford them. Aren’t we, as librarians, all about equity of access? Why



The original band of heroes from FCBD 2.0 (2014) with author and librarian Molly Virello second from the right dressed as Wonder Woman.

should access to experience be any different from access to physical materials?

“Great,” you might say, “but throwing this kind of program is a BIG job, and I’m not sure that is something my library/budget/staff can handle.”

While those are valid concerns, throwing a comic con or other big idea program doesn’t have to break the bank or be mentally, physically, or financially exhausting. I’m here to show you that throwing such an event is doable. And while my experiences and planning techniques might not be the exact way you would throw a similar program at your library, they are a starting point. You can learn from my experience, take those ideas, and improve upon them. And don’t be afraid to program what excites you. While we traditionally strive to ignite passion in others, we should also take that fire and use it to fuel our own ideas.

When I started as a part-time children’s librarian, I inherited a Free Comic Book Day (FCBD) program. FCBD is always the first Saturday in May, when participating comic book shops around the world give away comic books to people who visit



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their stores. It’s a fabulous day full of comics and camaraderie, and I wanted to keep it going at my library.

In 2013, the FCBD program at my library had been run as a two-hour passive program. There was a craft, a table with some coloring sheets, the opportunity to take photos with a cardboard standee, and a scavenger hunt, all in a single room in the lower level of the library. As this was my first real program as a new librarian, and already established, I thought I would keep everything the same and see how it went. We had about thirty people attend.

At this point in my life, I enjoyed reading comics and graphic novels, I liked dressing up for Halloween, I had watched all the superhero movies released so far, and I had even written my MIS thesis on why graphic novels should be included in school settings. Yet I had never been to an actual comic convention on my own. I didn’t know what I was missing at the time, but I did know there was some work that I needed, and wanted, to do to make the FCBD program better.

The next year rolled around and, taking a page out of Walt Disney World’s book, I decided I wanted to have live-action characters. I reached out to some of my friends who cosplay, or dress up, for comic cons and asked them if they would be willing to come in costume.

I managed to cajole two of my best friends, a Wolverine and a female Robin, into service with the promise of a homemade dinner. I dressed up as Wonder Woman, complete with duct-taped boots. Another friend, who couldn’t make it, graciously donated his Spider-Man costume to the cause, provided I could find someone to wear it (*spoiler alert: I did*). The friend I asked to wear Spidey got stuck in the web of wearing the costume with the promise of his favorite cookies, and I spent some time coaching him on poses and key Spidey phrases (“With great power comes great responsibility” after all).

Live action heroes now sorted, I thought about activities that would be more active and engaging. I made stations like Kryptonite Disposal (foil balls that had to be moved with chopsticks to a box without being touched by hand), Professor X’s Guess (guess the number of jelly beans in the jar), and Spidey’s Web (a spider web made of masking tape where kids had to toss objects and see if they would stick). Activities finalized, I found a local comic book shop who donated some comics for our giveaways. With more hands-on activities, live superheroes, a trivia contest and prize, and the encouragement of families (and staff) to dress up, we had seventy attendees that year. I knew I was on to something and pressed to make it bigger.

It was shortly after FCBD 2.0 that I experienced my first *real* comic con, ComiConn—a small (at the time) event in Connecticut, where I was bitten by the proverbial radioactive spider, and my life was forever altered.



As the word spread, heroes answered. The heroes of FCBD 3.0 (2015) with Virello in the center dressed as Supergirl.

I got to see what all the excitement was about, find out what other people loved about the day, and figure out what it was that I loved. I attended panels on how to cosplay, looked at exhibits, met some amazing cosplayers, and watched as many shows as I could. I left the con plotting how I could make an event like that happen at my library.

I attended several more cons that year, walking away from each one with more ideas. I worked on creating my own costumes. I volunteered at the Connecticut Children’s Medical Center’s Superhero Day, where I met a few reporters, and we got to talking about superheroes, comic cons, children’s excitement regarding anything hero-related, and the library. They were interested in what I was programming and invited me to contact them as my FCBD event drew closer.

I reached out about a week and a half before the program, and they published a little blurb online and in print about what was happening. Getting out in my community and doing what I loved allowed me to meet the right people, essentially getting my program free publicity.

That year, more than two hundred people attended. We outgrew that single lower level room of the library and had to move up to the main level. This not only gave us more space but also more visibility. We got a lot of feedback from families about how much they liked the program and how much they’d been looking forward to it, especially how kids got to meet their real-life superheroes.

With the success of FCBD 3.0, and with everything I learned from the conventions I’d attended, I knew it was time to go big or go home. And so, in 2016, our fourth year of FCBD programming, we introduced our first full-blown Southington Library ComiCon. This event took an entire year of planning, budgeting, organizing, brainstorming, and nail-biting.

Staying true to the spirit of comic cons, we looked at what was happening in pop culture and what our patrons were

interested in. That year (2016) saw the rise of Pokémon Go. We already had the established popularity of the old GameBoy game and TV show, and then with the hype of the impending app release among patrons, we went with an All Things Pokémon theme.

Spreading the Word

For publicity, we contacted local newspapers, created a Facebook event page, used some of our budget for online advertising (also through Facebook), and made a giant sign to hang on the outside of the library building the week leading up to the event. I also looked into other free places to get the word out online, all through location-specific events listings.

We also had a series of e-mail blasts sent out to our patrons and ran Facebook teasers in the month leading up to the event.

To generate excitement and awareness among our patrons, we held a series of monthly superhero events—storytimes with a superhero guest who would come and take pictures, read a story, and interact with the kids. We posted signage on all of the public desks and tables around the library, alerting patrons about the upcoming event. We created displays of our superhero materials to draw attention and interest (which also boosted circulation!). We were slowly preparing our patrons for the extravaganza that was coming.

During the planning stages, we dove deep into what we wanted to see at the event. I thought about what I had seen at the bigger events and how we could apply that model to what we offer at the library. The entire children’s department brainstormed what we were good at and tapped into our in-house talent to stretch our budget. One librarian made a Pokéball craft, another started planning superhero storytimes, and a third got creative with edible Pokémon creations.

We created Pinterest boards for all our crafts and activities, weeding out ideas that proved too impractical or expensive. From previous FCBD programs, I’ve found that hands-on activities work best for this kind of event. Kids and adults like to get up close and personal with the action, the characters, and the experience. When you’re allowed to touch everything, it becomes that much more real, and we strive to bring fantasy to life.

While we were adept at creating some things, I also knew our limitations. We couldn’t make *everything*. So, for exhibits, I tapped the connections I had made at other cons and local businesses who gave us good deals.

We were loaned a life-size Star Wars prop area that was built for another local con happening later that year. It was mutually beneficial; we promoted their event, while also providing a cool experience for our patrons. They also gave us passes to their con for a giveaway. Again using my comic con

connections, I contacted some display vehicles who would set up in our parking lot, so kids could see S.H.I.E.L.D cars in action—lights and sirens blazing.

With the static exhibits finalized, I booked a face painter, a professional princess sing-along, and a balloon twister. I reached out to three comic books shops about donations, to which they readily agreed.

For all our planning, we couldn’t predict how busy the day itself was going to be—but judging from our past programs, we were hoping for a large turnout. To be safe, we contacted the local police department to help us monitor traffic and ensure the safety of everyone involved. They sent over a few officers who directed traffic when the parking lot was full and helped give directions about what fun things were happening where.

Since we had outside exhibits, we blocked off one of our parking lots, therefore needing cones and a police monitor to make sure no unauthorized vehicles snuck in, effectively keeping our patrons safe.

With the outside safety concerns addressed, we took pains to enforce existing policies about food and dress code inside. We wanted to ensure that we kept things family-friendly, safe, and fun for all involved, while not stifling creativity and expression. After all, we encouraged our attendees to dress up for the occasion, just like a real con!

For our dress code, we limited the amount of exposed skin allowed in costume, what props and replica “weapons” were allowed—making sure there were absolutely no sharp objects or anything that fired a projectile (not even a Nerf object)—and tried to keep costumed characters from being too scary. We also kept a fairly strict count of attendees because of building and fire codes. We looked at the rules and regulations that other comic cons already had in place when writing our own policies, since we didn’t want to reinvent the wheel.

Not wanting to waste an opportunity to give back, we partnered with a local Boy Scout troop, and together we ran a can and bottle drive—making us Recycling Superheroes. Anyone who came to our con was encouraged to bring their cans and bottles for free recycling, which we included in all the publicity and event pages, well in advance of the day. A portion of the money collected was donated back to us for the Library Expansion Fund.

And . . . Action!

The day of the Southington Library ComiCon arrived, and we were ready. The library opened at 9 a.m., but the event didn’t start until 10 a.m. We needed that extra hour to set-up all the events, exhibits, crafts, and performers. We opened the doors with an Anna and Elsa sing-along—to rousing applause.

After that, we kept the ball rolling with constant activities. We arranged our schedule so that we had some activities happening for the entire event—scavenger hunts, coloring, video game tournaments, tabletop gaming, storytimes, specific crafts, Superhero Training Camp, and other activities—scheduled to start every half hour or hour and only lasting for a specified amount of time. This constantly rotating schedule, we hoped, would keep people from getting bored and encourage them to stay in the library to try all the activities.

A nonstop line-up works up an appetite, and that meant having food readily available for our patrons. We had a free water tent, and we invited a local food truck to set up in our front parking lot. Attendees were advised to bring cash if they planned to purchase food, which was the *only* out-of-pocket expense for patrons.

When all was said and done, we had almost nine hundred people attend the very first official Southington Library ComiCon in 2016—a major increase since our humble FCBD beginning three years earlier.

Those numbers and this story might seem daunting, but it should also reassure you. This program didn't happen

overnight. It took time, patience, and a lot of planning and commitment.

An event like a library comic con has longevity and fluidity. It grows with you and reflects your experiences, what's happening in pop culture, and your patrons' interests. People are always seeking out new and exciting experiences. Libraries are uniquely positioned to offer just that—often in a budget friendly way.

With a little elbow-grease, determination, and perseverance, you too can throw a big idea program. Do you have a passion for Renaissance fairs? Host your own! (I did, but that's a story for another time.) Are you obsessed with *The Greatest Showman*? Throw a small-scale circus. Love *The Great British Bakeoff*? Conduct your own. Stuck on *Downton Abbey*? Host a high tea. Have you noticed something else your patrons are interested in? Think of how you can use it to get them through your front doors.

When an idea strikes, write it down. No matter how far-fetched, dream big and make it a reality with the resources available to you. Don't underestimate the power of your community's interest, engagement, and generosity and your staff's creativity. &



Army Specialist Ivory Mitchell, 21, of Green Bay, WI, loves sharing book time with her little sister, Solara, 3. Ivory was stationed at Fort Carson in Colorado and spent nine months in Iraq, so she relished coming home to the comfort of family and books. Photo courtesy of Leah Liebergen.