

Fighting a supervillain



A love of comic books offers surprising lessons in living with MS.

by Shara Rutberg

“CONTEST! HOLY FOOM!!!! Create a super hero or villain in the Mighty Marvel manner ... and contribute your own talent to the wildest wackiest comics company since the invention of the printing press.”



Andy Olsen made this comic strip especially for Momentum magazine. Click image to enlarge.

Artwork by Andy Olsen

When comics-crazed 16-year-old Andy Olsen saw this call for entries in Marvel Comics' FOOM (Friends of 'Ol Marvel) magazine in 1973, deciding to enter was a no-brainer. Olsen regularly blew his meager allowance on comic books at the local Jiffy Mart. He and his friends would race to the racks as soon as they'd heard that the newest issue in their favorite series hit the stands.

"Me and my buddies would have a grand old time discussing plot lines," Olsen says. "Thor. Captain America. Fantastic Four. We didn't have computers or video games. It was different back then. It was all about ink on paper."

Olsen grew up in Merritt Island, Florida, home to NASA's Kennedy Space Center, where his dad worked as an engineer. With America's space program in the neighborhood sending rockets to the moon, a world with heroes who could shoot lasers from their fingers and fly might not have seemed much of a leap to a kid with a good imagination.

Olsen and his pals spent hours debating critical issues like who would win in a battle between Superman and Hulk. When he wasn't reading or talking about comic book characters, he was drawing them. "I was a sketching fiend," he says. So when he saw Marvel's contest, he got to work. After all, supposedly none other than Stan Lee himself, comic book creator and publisher who made Marvel a household name—and Olsen's idol—would pick the winners. "Just the idea of The Man actually seeing my work was too exciting to pass up."

Olsen sent in as his submission a cyborg hero named Wolverine. Marvel picked it as a runner-up and printed it in the magazine. Olsen was thrilled.

Some time later, Marvel debuted its X Men: Wolverine comic, the same name as Olsen's hero, but with a very different character design and different superhero traits.

After college, Olsen turned his love for drawing comics into a career as a graphic designer. Today, he applies his skills as a Florida defense contractor.

A new villain

In 2010, at the age of 55, Olsen faced a villain more evil than anything he'd encountered in Marvel's world. He was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis after experiencing what he calls a "total meltdown" that included numbness and weakness in his left hand as well as from the waist down. "I went from bulletproof to a wreck within days," Olsen recalls. He spent a month in the hospital, where he had to relearn how to walk and use his left hand.

If life were a comic book, Olsen could have accessed one of Wolverine's powers: a "healing factor" that allows the character to recover from bodily injury or disease at a superhuman rate. In reality, Olsen had to draw on his own internal, and very human, powers.

Living with MS is different than superheroes fighting bad guys, he says. "I'm fighting something I can't defeat. This is not some person or monster. It's something you have to reach down and find the mental discipline every single day to just keep fighting."

A black belt in karate, Olsen says the focus and mental discipline he developed over his 35 years of martial arts training have been critical. He occasionally needs a cane to walk. He experiences fatigue as well as tingling and numbness. He drives himself to work three days a week and works from home the other two.

The challenge of living with MS is something you can't really explain to people who don't have the disease, he says. With superheroes, the struggle is easy to see—they head out to fight crime and save the world. "This a lot more personal," Olsen says. The power of determination is not always visible and does not always create dramatic results. "There are times when my wife, Yijuan, will come up and give me a big hug, and tell me how proud and grateful she is that I'm still working, that I'm still getting a paycheck, that I'm still keeping us going."

And as it turns out, Wolverine is not the superhero Olsen would choose to be. That would be Iron Man. After an explosion left shrapnel lodged close to Tony Stark's (aka Iron Man) heart, he worked with a genius physicist to design special magnetized body armor to keep him alive—and help him fight the bad guys. "He had an affliction and had to deal with it, turn it around and make it into something positive," says Olsen. "I admire that."

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