

The Moss' sessions: An Interview with Ken Glanc - Part I: The Elyria Comic Book Initiative

May 18, 2009 by: George L. Stewart

I've been an avid reader of comic books since the age of four. In fact, they are the source of my life-long twin interests in journalism and private investigation. I'm not sure why I've never noticed how all three interests intertwine until just now; after all, Clark Kent and Peter Parker earn their wages at major metropolitan newspapers, the *Gotham Gazette* is a holding of Wayne Enterprises, and the alter egos of both the Question and Captain Marvel work in broadcasting. Hell, even Captain America freelanced as a graphic artist. But I digress: the unfolding monthly mythic arcs of mainstream comics for me have always been both a silent call to address social injustice and a broadly painted career map.

More than that, they've exposed me to ideas, schools of thought and works of literature which I would otherwise be ignorant of. From the subtle (for its time) influence of Tibetan Buddhism inherent in the original run of *Doctor Strange* to the exploration of Dante's *Inferno* in *X-Men Annual #4*, through the philosophical musings of Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing* to the social and political commentary of Grant Morrison's *The Invisibles* and *Animal Man*...and that's just covering the "Big Two". With the inclusion of independent graphic novels like *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, *Pedro and Me* by Judd Winick...Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor*... the list is as endless as the creations of the award winning novelist and literary "rock star", Neil Gaiman.

Still, for all of the mediums potential, most people view "comic book culture" as a frivolous pastime or a form of escapism for sand covered, 98-pound weaklings.

Most people. Not all.

I was in Keith's Comics here in Elyria this past "Free Comic Book day" when I noticed a flyer for something called "The Elyria Comic Book Initiative". Intrigued, I contacted Kenneth W. Glanc, branch manager of First Merit Bank in downtown Elyria and the "Tony Stark" of the ECBI*, to find out a little bit more. We met for lunch at Moss' Prime Rib & Spaghetti House on Friday, May 15th and — after a brief bit a chit chat about the books we're reading, favorite writers/artists, etc. — Ken enthusiastically outlined the principles behind the initiative and its goals to me:

So tell me a little bit more about the Elyria Comic Book Initiative.

Ken (K): "I'd love to, thank you for asking. Elyria Comic Book initiative is a literacy initiative to promote literacy through comic books..." "Life long learning through comics" is one of our internal "tag lines". As we all sat around the table on our first action committee meetings back in February, we heard countless stories in the room about how "when I was younger I didn't really like to read but then I started reading comics and I became a voracious reader". And then — when people started reading comics — then they had the next step evolution of "Well, initially I read it for... a particular hero, or I liked the colors of the book" but then it became more sophisticated and they began following particular artists or particular writers...types of storylines... So it became part of their being.

"A lot of us in the room have kids. I have a six year old now, a soon-to-be four year old, a soon-to-be one year old...and my daughter, we started off watching a lot of super hero cartoons — as I did when I was younger — and we got completely excited about super heroes and completely excited about ...just aspects of being a super hero...and as she's starting to learn how to read, we've started incorporating comics into her development. So, just starting

that cycle all over again and being here in downtown Elyria with First Merit — I gotta promote First Merit just for a second because...one of the big disadvantages and challenges for me coming out here is that: I'm not from Elyria. I wasn't born here or go to school here, I don't live here and — with First Merit being a community oriented bank — being involved in and being visible in the community, I needed to get my name out as quickly as I possibly could. And I started joining a lot of other service organizations and I became a board member for multiple non-profits that are out here and all of the work that we do for those...its fantastic. Its great, its noble and I fully believe in what they do but I don't have that passion for those boards and those organizations that I do for this.

”So last year, as I started to get involved in the community, one of the first people that I met was Jim Deery, a local attorney...and at the time he was the owner and operator of Jim's Coffee House... so I sat down with Jim and I said “Tell me about downtown Elyria. What do you see as something that's going to happen to help vitalize down here. What does it need?” (He said) “You know, Ken, I just want to see life happen down here.” You know, something to just generate activity and life.

“Well, as he said that, I noticed that downtown Elyria's got many open store fronts and I noticed this weird phenomenon where there's a lot of students — at any point in time in the day — that are just walking back and forth from some destination — I didn't know we had the high school right over here — to this McDonald's right across the street. I don't know about you, but when I was growing up, to...just to stay home from school, let alone leave school, I had to be bleeding out of my eyes or something! I mean something that extreme to not be in school. So I was often plagued about “why are we having all these kids walking back and forth?”.

“So — this was last summer — I looked at Jim and I said “Hey, listen: I got an idea for the upstairs of your coffee house”...and I had told nobody about this. I said “Let's put something up there called ‘the Comic Book Academy’. And he looked at me with this ... look that he normally has and he says “Huh...ok”. And I said “Yeah, let's put a resource in the community where individuals can come together and collaborate on an idea. You know, ‘I might be a good writer, you might be a good artist...you're a colorist...let's just all come together and collaborate and take our idea and make it into something tangible’”. And he looks at me and goes “...Ok...uh-huh...that's a good idea!” So I just kind of got it out, you know? I verbalized it, I exorcised the idea out of my system.

“Well, a week later I was doing a presentation at the county building and I introduced myself to someone, and they said “Hey, aren't you the guy with the comic book idea?”...I had told no one about this idea and it finds me in the community. So I went back and I started talking with Jim again and we started talking about this idea. “Do you come up with a 501(c)(3)”? “How does it work”? and as I shopped the idea through out the rest of the community and internally in our company, everybody *loved* it!

“Its important to understand the context of history over the last year. First Merit — being involved in the community — we have this check cashing store right down the street here. This is a CRA (Community Reinvestment Act) market and we felt that talking about financial literacy was crucial. To get engaged in the community, just to tell people ‘This is how a checking account works, this is how a saving account works’...not a First Merit product set, but just banking...’how do banks work’ because people are getting taken advantage of in the check cashing stores, over drafting their accounts, (not) understanding what their credit was and how to protect their credit score. So we thought ‘Hey, we should probably get into the schools and start talking to kids about financial literacy’.

“There was a mandate that was coming out ... that high school students had to have an element of financial literacy in their curriculum before they graduated...as that information was came about – in relation to the Comic Book Academy – I met a gentleman at the Small Business Development Center named Paul Kukuca and one day here at Moss’ he said ‘Ken, I don’t really understand your idea. How are you going to measure the amount of participation you have in it?’ I said, ‘Paul, I don’t know’...and it was just like that...’I don’t really know’. So I kind of hit a stonewall up into that point in time.

“So, how do you measure participation? I know what first merit wants...’we want to get into the schools’...I just went back home and I started google searching ‘comic books’, ‘comic book initiative’, ‘comic book project’ – boom! I got a hit! “Comic Book Project”. The Comic Book Project is a program that was developed out of New York by a Dr. Michael Bitz. He believed that he could engage students in the classroom with a visual learning element. Basically, have them make a comic book around a particular concept...and I’m reading a little bit more a see past projects...you know, (looking for) where have they done things: Cleveland Public School System. Cleveland Public Schools, for four years, were doing this program. So I’m like ‘Man, this is really starting to align’...you know...maybe First Merit can be the group to bring the project into the schools and maybe tie in financial literacy...because that was one of the themes that they chose for this.

“...I met with the Cleveland foundation and the Cleveland public schools – all the people that were involved in it...and my head was starting to swim...and I’m like ‘man, how’s this going to work?’...we wanted to promote literacy in general, so we took a step back and we said ‘Alright...let’s define this’. Because that was another issue of...you know, people were asking ‘how are you going to fund it?’ and things like this...we had to define ourselves and come up with a mission statement.

“So the Elyria Comic Book Initiative is now in place and it’s a three pronged initiative: To promote literacy through comics, phase two is to work with the schools to engage students with the learning platform, and then phase three is to find the future location within the community for the resource known as the Comic Book Academy. “

Note: After careful consideration, I’ve come to the conclusion that there is just too much valuable information to try to contain this story to one post. As implied above, this is the first part of a three part series.

**anyone who’s read Marvel’s post-Civil War titles got that reference. The rest of you, go hit the library...*