



Three leaders of the United Utah Furry Fandom are shown in their fursuits. From left are Jayo, a 26-year-old man in Draper; Kayo, a 32-year-old Bountiful resident, and Pom, a 32-year-old Sandy resident.

Furries

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animal costumes.

Now Ferlin, 33, is a leader in the furry fandom here and runs the state's only annual furry convention: Think Comic-Con, but with big stuffed animals come to life instead of Marvel characters.

"It's really as G-rated as that," Ferlin said.

So it surprises Ferlin that the costumes and the community make some people so angry. The way Ferlin sees it, it's kind of like hating a Disneyland staffer dressed as Baloo from "The Jungle Book" or getting upset with the Utah Jazz bear mascot.

The vitriol has come, though, as the political right has framed fursuits as a threat. Some conservatives fear the community may influence kids into identifying as an animal (even though furies don't actually think they are animals) or be harmed by a classmate who is a furry (even though most school districts will say that they haven't heard students actually refer to themselves as furies and haven't had reports of children who wear animal accessories hurting others).

It's a cultural crusade playing out in Utah and across the country. And Ferlin feels it's being framed by misconceptions — some deliberate — that unfairly stigmatize furies.

In the latest confrontation here, videos quickly spread in conservative social media circles in late April of students walking out of Mt. Nebo Middle School in Utah County to protest classmates who had supposedly been dressing as animals and biting and scratching other kids.

Staff at Nebo School District have said the claims of furies there are false. They've said no students at the school are wearing full-body animal costumes or using the term "furies" to describe themselves. They've said the protest came out of a misunderstanding from a message sent out by the school calling for kindness after a group of students, some wearing animal headbands, was made fun of by peers.

Some parents felt that the school was picking a side, and the situation has continued to unravel. In the weeks since the original April 17 walkout drew attention, there have been at least three hoax

bomb threats at Mt. Nebo Middle School that officials believe were tied to "outrage" over furies.

With the uproar directed at them, Ferlin said many in the furry community here now feel they have to defend their hobby — or hide it.

"More than anything, people should be allowed to find happiness where that is for them," Ferlin said.

Ferlin said the first time they felt happy in a long time was when they first put on the suits they crafted and joined a group of others who accepted them and found it just as fun and silly and benign.

WHAT'S TRUE ABOUT FURRIES — AND WHAT'S NOT

The Salt Lake Tribune spoke to the three leaders of the United Utah Furry Fandom via email and agreed to identify them by their furry names, as they fear violence or threats for speaking about the hobby that's been demonized. They are: Pom, a 32-year-old man in Sandy; Kayo, a 32-year-old woman in Bountiful; and Jayo, a 26-year-old man in Draper. The Tribune has verified their identities.

Having heard the claims all many times, the three leaders have rebuttals ready for every misunderstanding or stereotype associated with the furry community.

No, members don't think they are animals, the leaders say. That's a different thing called therians.

No, being a furry is not a sexual thing. Maybe some consenting adults wear their fursuits in bed. But they're extremely warm inside and, honestly, they're really expensive — so getting sweaty in them isn't ideal.

And no, members of the community don't regularly wear their fursuits to the grocery store or the post office, instead donning them mostly only for conventions and events with other furies. They also don't bark or meow at passersby in public. They don't bite people. And they don't use litter boxes (no, schools are not putting them in restrooms for students, either, a claim raised by critics across the country and since debunked by The Associated Press).

Most members of Utah's furry community are adults, though there are some younger kids and teens who go to the state



RICK EGAN / The Salt Lake Tribune

Zena, a member of the Utah furry community, started work on her fursuit when she was 14, and it "became a sort of therapy" as she battled depression and social anxiety.

convention, usually accompanied by parents, the leaders said (and there is background screening for all attendees to keep the event safe). But the fandom doesn't want anyone to act out or violate rules. Students biting or scratching peers, whether they are furies or not, should be disciplined, some members said.

"If you did that at convention, you would be kicked out immediately," said one furry who spoke to The Tribune.

The stigmas, the three leaders wrote, "come from a lack of understanding. People are afraid of what they don't understand, and the furry fandom is undoubtedly weird enough to be subjected to this judgment."

SO THEN, WHAT IS TRUE ABOUT FURRIES AND THE COMMUNITY?

The United Utah Furry Fandom has roughly 600 active members — though leaders estimate there are thousands of furies in the state overall.

Nearly 2,000 attended last year's annual convention, led by Ferlin and friend Jojo Larrabee. It's known as Anthro Weekend Utah, shortened more often to AWU — which is meant to sound like an animal howl. It's considered the eighth-largest furry convention in the country.

There's been an organized group on and off in Utah since about 2005, though the fandom,

as a whole, started in the 1980s.

"The best part about the fandom is the sense of community and meeting other amazingly creative individuals," the three fandom leaders said. "We've seen folks who could barely muster the courage to talk to others at their first meet make new friends and gain the confidence to participate more actively."

Some people who are shy will create a "fursuana" — what the community refers to as the personality of the character — that's outgoing. Someone with a disability might create a character where that turns into a superpower. A large number of members are also LGBTQ+ or neurodivergent and have found a safe haven in their fursuits, leaders say.

"The fandom is a vehicle and platform for judgment-free expression where these traits are not considered negatively or punished," they said. "Many people who are judged or pushed out of other communities will often gravitate to the furry fandom."

While the furry costumes are a way of masking, members of fandom also say they're a way to unmask and be embraced with open, albeit hairy arms. "Those really are the best warm hugs," Ferlin said with a laugh.

COSTUMES AS A WAY OF HEALING

Les and Zena's second-floor Salt Lake City apartment is a

testament to their love of animals: It houses more pets than people. The couple has an attention-loving rescue dog, a quiet furball bunny and two snakes. "That one is really good at hiding," Zena said, tapping softly on a glass enclosure. One of the snakes was curled up in a little hut inside, barely visible.

Zena, 24, can relate. Since she was a kid, she's battled depression and social anxiety.

On the hardest days, she would stay home, curled up in bed, scrolling through YouTube videos. That's where she stumbled on furies. She loved seeing how happy the people were dressed in their fursuits, how comfortable they seemed to be. And it inspired her to start making her own.

"It became sort of therapy for me in a lot of ways," she said. The Tribune agreed to identify both Zena and her partner Les by their furry names to protect their privacy. Both were verified by The Tribune.

Her original fursuit started as a wolf, but as Zena has grown into the community, she said she started shifting the design into a dog — a more approachable animal. She describes the fursuana as being like the golden retriever Dug from the animated film "Up": hyper and friendly.

The character doesn't have her anxiety. Putting on the fur helped her shed anything that was holding her back.

Zena started making the fursuit when she was 14 years old, buying up all the red, gray and white faux fur she could afford with what she saved up from allowances and birthday gifts. It took five years to complete. She wore the costume for the first time after moving to Utah in 2019, when she went to the AWU convention.

She had searched for the furry community here when she got settled, hoping to find friends who shared her interest. Zena joined an online chat group, which are popular in the fandom. She met Les through one that she managed (it has anywhere from 5,000 to 8,000 participants at a time).

At first, Les and Zena didn't like each other. They were like cats and dogs. Well, sort of. Maybe more like dogs and dragons, which is the creature Les chose for his fursuit.

Les, now 22, first saw furies while attending Comic-Con when

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