

Furries

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he was 13 years old. He said with a laugh, "I thought they were weirdos. I was really judgmental." He started talking to someone at the convention who had a booth selling furry costumes—tails, ears, paws, full suits. Les said he found the seller to be one of the nicest people he's ever met. And that got him hooked. He went home to learn more about the community and started attending furry conventions the next year.

In his costume, Les said: "I got to be myself without the baggage." Then it pushed him to try to resolve that in his everyday life. He filed a police report, talking about his allegations of child abuse for the first time, crediting coming forward to the confidence he got from the fandom.

As the couple talked about how the hobby had supported them, they sat together in their little apartment while their dog begged for scratches. On the walls around them hung posters from each of the AWCU conventions they've attended—with themes like "Furlock Holmes" and "Bark from the Future"—next to Zena's designs for fursuits that she now makes for others.

Zena put on pieces of her fursuit to show how much goes into one. It requires about 30 minutes of tugging, tying and twisting for someone to put on a full furry costume.

She slid on thick foam paws over her hands, saying "they're basically pillows" crafted like gloves. She would normally add a pair on top of what she proudly calls her "excellent knock-off Doc Martens," too. With a final little grunt, she pulled on the head of the costume over her head with her hair tucked under a balaclava to make it easier to slide on.

In the suit, she looks like a character from "Bluey" or "My Little Pony." And to Les and Zena, that's part of the point. They get to go off and act a little like kids and be free.

"These suits, as dumb as they are, they help people realize who they want to be," Zena said.

Often, both said, kids will come up to them when they're



BETHANY BAKER / The Salt Lake Tribune

Jolo Larrabee, left, and Ven Ferlin, co-chairs of Anthro Weekend Utah, hold up four heads to fursuits created by Ferlin. Anthro Weekend Utah is an annual furry convention in Utah.

in their fursuits and want to take pictures with them like they're at Disneyland. It makes Zena smile; she doesn't hide it.

A PLACE TO FIT IN

Ferlin thinks a large reason for the furry aimed at furies is that many members of the fandom are LGBTQ+. That includes Ferlin and Zena, who is gender fluid and uses both she and they pronouns.

"Furry has become a dog whistle to target LGBTQ+ people," Ferlin believes. The fandom is about "people being able to present themselves and experiment with their identity. They don't like it, so they attack it."

For Ferlin, the fandom has provided a community that accepted their identity as nonbinary when they say they didn't feel accepted elsewhere.

Growing up, Ferlin was a

member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The dominant Utah faith doesn't ban LGBTQ+ members but instructs, in order to remain in good standing, they must not act on any feelings of same-sex attraction.

Ferlin said they were pushed into doing conversion therapy around 2012, in a program run by the LDS Church. The therapy involves a counselor attempting to change the sexual orientation or gender identity of a client. The church has since taken steps away from those efforts. But Ferlin spent about a year and a half in the program, which they said left them depressed and anxious. They left therapy and the faith at 25 years old.

That same year, Ferlin made their first fursuit, the blue and white fox. It's based on Ferlin's love of video games, particularly Zelda, and includes a pixelated faux fur heart on the back. Ferlin

named their fursuna Giga, short for gigabyte.

They didn't have a ticket to their first convention, held at a Salt Lake City hotel, but they went anyway. Ferlin said they sat down at the piano in the lobby, wearing their fox head and playing "All Star" by Smash Mouth—an image they laugh at now—as a crowd gathered around. They met a group of friends they've had since.

"I was wearing a mask, but it felt like the first time I wasn't in a way," they said.

When the convention fell into financial trouble, Ferlin and friend Jolo Larrabee put down their own money to save it, hosting their first one in 2017. They also give to charities at their conventions each year, collecting just shy of \$27,000 last year for an animal sanctuary.

"I've had so many people come up to me and say, 'This

community has saved me and kept me here,'" Ferlin said. "It moves me, but it also breaks my heart. There's not that many places, especially in Utah, where people can feel welcome as they are."

Ferlin knows firsthand because it saved them, too.

They have since created a new fursuit, an androgynous hyena with wings and mohawk named "Ven." Ferlin felt like it captured their true self so much, they took on the name full time.

'WE DON'T PUSH IT ONTO OTHER PEOPLE'

Ferlin said they understand and support Nebo School District enforcing the rules, particularly on a dress code. But they want the district to understand what it might mean to students wearing the headbands that have caused the stir—even though the kids are not likely members of the fandom, they said.

The way Ferlin sees it, the animal ears are a way for kids who are different or ostracized to cope. "When it's too hard to be yourself, you try to be something else," they said.

Ferlin compares it to goth or emo kids or horse girls. Ferlin said that kind of thing can be comforting to someone being bullied. It can also help those who feel left out see others who share their interests—like a signal, an owl's hoot or a dolphin's sonar.

What the furry fandom previously enjoyed quietly sharing with others like them has been dragged into a public debate that they never asked to be a part of.

"We don't push it onto other people," said Les from Salt Lake City. "We're just doing our own thing," Zena added.

Those in the Utah fandom say they're leaning on each other and the community they built to get through being targeted. And they want people to know they aren't going anywhere—except maybe on another run to the craft store.

If you have a student in a Utah K-12 school who is in the furry community and want to talk about it, reach out to reporters Courtney Turner at cturner@sltrib.com and Carmen Nesbitt at cnesbitt@sltrib.com.

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