

Star Wars 30th Anniversary

THE EMPIRE AND ME

Local fans keep the flame burning in Black Swamp Squadron

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BY RYAN E. SMITH
BLADE STAFF WRITER

Mike Shull is not a *Star Wars* geek.

Even though he has seen the movie about 100 times.

Even though he has hundreds of action figures on display in his basement, most in the original packaging.

Even though he knows that the Jedi called Mace Windu - that's the dude in the movies played by Samuel L. Jackson to you and me - has a special fighting technique called Vaapad.

But he is not a *Star Wars* geek.

Technically.

"We always talk about the fact that the only thing that separates me from what you think of as a *Star Wars* geek is I'm married and have kids, instead of living at home with my mom," the 39-year-old said.

It's a joke, of course. Despite the stereotype, hard-core *Star Wars* fans are just like you and me.

The thing about these aficionados, like Mr. Shull and other members of the local fan group, The Black Swamp Squadron, is they continue to find great relevance in the most popular movie series of all time. Thirty years after the first film wowed a generation, their passion burns unabated.

Mr. Shull still wears *Star Wars* ties to work, still wears *Star Wars* watches. He still loves to quote from the movie. In fact, he estimates it still crosses his mind five to 10 times a day.

"It's pretty well ingrained," the pharmaceutical representative from the Old West End said.



Reese, 4, Reagan, 8, Corinne, 2, and their dad Mike Shull, in their *Star Wars* costumes in his Scottwood home backyard. (THE BLADE/LORI KING)

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Like many *Star Wars* devotees, Mr. Shull was hooked from the beginning. He was 10 years old when he saw *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope* with his mom at Southwyck Shopping Center in the summer of 1977.

"We watched it, and like everyone else, when the first Imperial ship came through the screen, right in the very beginning, it kind of took your breath away," he said.

So much has happened since then. *Star Wars*, and the movies that followed, became an inescapable part of American culture.

The bad-guy anthem "Imperial March" became a mainstay at sporting events around the country. Some schools even introduced the furry Ewok's celebration song from *Star Wars: Episode VI: Return of the Jedi* into music classes. (Go ahead, sing along: Yub nub, eee chop yub

nub!)

The movies still speak to the members of the Black Swamp Squadron, a small group that formed a few years ago. They communicate online through a forum on the fan Web site boards.theforce.net and get together occasionally to talk about the movies and so much more - there are the novels that continue the storylines, animated episodes, and a television series that is in the works.

One of the group's younger members, Joshua Kensler, 22, was born well after *Star Wars* came out, but he's about as die-hard a fan as anyone.

"It's one of my biggest hobbies," the Springfield Township resident said. "I wear T-shirts. I talk about it. I read the books. I play the video games."

He takes his passion with him wherever he goes, even to Owens Community College, where he is studying to be a nurse. Mr. Kensler remembers one time when someone ahead of him in a line suggested getting married to the "Imperial March." He chimed in, saying he'd like to get married to the Rebel theme song from *Episode IV*.

"I just made the joke. I knew no one would get it. Everyone looked at me," he said "That was the exact look I was going for."

The reason for his obsession is the same as so many others.

"I sat down and watched [the movies] and I instantly fell in love with them," he said.

Why?

Charles Coletta, a pop culture instructor at Bowling Green State University, has a few ideas. It helps that the 38-year-old knows partially from experience, being the proud owner of a bootleg copy of the famously bad 1978 made-for-TV *Star Wars Holiday Special*, whose cast included Bea Arthur.

"It's a communal experience," he said of having watched the movie. "That's something that everybody of a certain generation saw."

But it's more than that. It ties into human nature on a more basic level.

"We talked about it in class, how it sort of ties into all the key, core mythological concepts," Mr. Coletta said. "I show this video where George Lucas says every religion has used *Star Wars* to explain itself to young kids."

The concept of the hero myth is ancient: a young, immature person is thrust into the world to do some great task. He goes on a journey, collects friends, and finds a power within himself. It's the same thing at work in other stories with cult followings, like *Lord of the Rings*.

Those are the kinds of things - issues of good versus evil and of redemption - that resonate with Mr. Shull, who's brought up *Star Wars* and how it relates to these issues in church.

There's something else at work for many who see it for the first time. Mr. Kensler summed it up in one word: imagination.

"I have a really wild imagination, and I feel that *Star Wars* just adds to that," Mr. Kensler said. "Being a 10-year-old imagining flying an X-Wing. That'd be cool."

Tobey Robison, 31, a member of the Black Swamp Squadron from Tiffin, echoed those sentiments.

"It's a whole universe to kind of play in. It was George [Lucas]'s sandbox and we all get to play in it," he said.

The first movie from the series that Mr. Robison saw in the theater was *Return of the Jedi*, when he was about 8. When *Star Wars: Episode I - The Phantom Menace* came out in 1999, he took the day off work and waited in line for 11 hours with a group of friends, passing the time by playing *Star Wars* video games and *Star Wars* Trivial Pursuit.

Mr. Robison, assistant director for information technology for Heidelberg College, still reads the novels and hones his knowledge of minutiae. (He knows, for example, that Cheers actor John Ratzenberger appears in *The Empire Strikes Back* on the planet Hoth.) Last week, he left to go to California for the official fan convention called Celebration IV.

But the movies' importance have evolved for him, especially now that his 6-year-old son Gavin has taken a liking to them.

"I feel it strengthens my bond with my son," he said. "It's something that he and I can share. He can ask me *Star Wars* questions and I can try and answer them."

In the Shull household, re-enacting scenes from the movies and making up new ones has become a family affair that sometimes involves costumes.

There was Reese, 4, on a recent afternoon, posing with a gun in his clone trooper outfit. Eight-year-old Reagan had on a white gown and a wig as Princess Leia, while dad donned a Jedi's robe and grabbed his light saber - a blue one that actually made noise as he waved it around.

"Our dog's usually Chewbacca - she's brown - and we just have hours of fun in the backyard," Mr. Shull said.

There's even an adorable Yoda costume for little 2-year-old Corinne, if she can be convinced to put it on.

So there's little doubt that Mr. Shull's passion will be carried on by a new generation. Anyone still worried need only have asked Reese what he watched that day.

"*Star Wars* and *Star Wars*."

Contact Ryan E. Smith at: ryansmith@theblade.com or 419-724-6103.

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