Universes Collide at Rockland’s First-Ever Comic Convention
Superheroes, villains and cosplay characters were among the many characters at Valley Cottage Library’s comic convention library season on Saturday, July 18.

“The original comic cons were groups of guys and girls getting together to swap comic books,” a costumed Jennifer Dadich, head of Teen Services, explained. “Libraries have joined in because it saves rental space and an entrance fee for people who attend.”

Dadich organized the event that drew close to 200 costumed and non-costumed patrons, some who came to use the library’s facilities. All were gathered at the door by Library Director Amelia Kalin, also in costume for the occasion, and a Storm Trooper of the 501st Legion.

While the “no talking in the library” rule was broken, those who brought oversized dishes of Gifford’s ice cream from Kups n’ Kones of Valley Cottage stayed outside.

The day began with a cape-and-mask-making workshop and panel discussion “How to Break into Comics” with “The Lunch Witch” author Deb Lucke. Artist and vendor displays, presenters, a cosplay contest and additional workshops (cosplay makeup and candy sushi rolling) continued throughout the afternoon, as did raffle and tee shirt sales that raised $350 for the library.

Publisher, author, lecturer and illustrator Mark McKenna discussed the assembly-line process of creating comics from writers to letters. McKenna worked for 29 years on Marvel Comics and DC Comics characters including The X-Men, Spider-Man, Batman and The Justice League and showed pictures of many of the 200 comic book covers — from Aquaman to Justice League — he worked on during his career.

Fans also learned why comic books are created with four colors and saw the final result via a treat when McKenna broke down the colors visually and layered them into a final Spiderman cover. He worked on in 1986.

Kids and adults saw a brief sword-fighting demonstration with Yoshie Amao from Samurai Sword Soul (Samurai Theater Company in New York) after which groups of kids were given bright plastic swords to learn some fighting maneuvers.

“Usually I bring five or six people (to demonstrate sword fighting) because the audience is not more than 10 people,” Amao said in the packed community room. “Today the audience was big so I brought one person.”

Visitors browsed its display of offering figures, comic books, trivia facts, special glasses, paraphernalia and LEGO® creations. The Nyack store offers LEGO® building classes at Brick U Learn to Build, where artist and contractor Brett Berland uses the pieces as learning tools for concentration, focus and creative skills.

Marvel Comics fans looking for a must-read this summer can opt for “Secret Wars,” an ambitious miniseries that ended the Marvel Universe. “That’s the series you’d have to read now,” Chris Burchuk, owner of Nyack’s Funny Business, advised the comic book newbies. “Buy monthly comic books. Find a series that you really like and follow it.”

Eleven-year-old Liam Mitchell offered a brief explanation of “Secret Wars.”

“Earts of the Marvel Universe collide, and Earth 616, which is currently the Marvel Universe, is also destroyed,” Mitchell said. “All heroes and multi-versions of these heroes are on something called Battier World and they have to fight for survival.”

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Guest of honor and Nyack resident Denny O’Neil, the original writer and editor of Batman Comics from the 1960s through the 1990s and known for Green Lantern/ Green Arrow, The Shadow with Mike Kaluta and The Question with Dennis Cowan — discussed his career, and how art and politics imitate and castigate one another.

“There have been a lot of versions of Batman, and when I took over editing Batman (as group editor) in the 1980s I aimed to change that,” O’Neil said. The character went through several evolutions and a 1960s television show starring Adam West and Burt Ward that ran for three seasons.

He explained the genesis of Spider-Man, Fantastic Four (the movie will be released August 17) and other characters, and of the industry’s dark days shortly after World War II ended.

By 1948, editors started questioning their content. “They were an easy target and had nothing to fight back with.” One psychiatrist, Dr. Frederic Wertham, MD, wrote Seduction of the Inocent in 1954, “which blamed comic books for the juvenile delinquency that was perceived as plaguing the country.”

While Senator Joseph McCarthy was investigating “communists” in the Army and

Publisher, author, lecturer and illustrator Mark McKenna
t the State Department, Senator Estes Kefauver launched an attack on juvenile delinquency with a focus on comic books. “There were 800 people who overnight virtually lost their means of livelihood and never got it back. Comics were in eclipse for 10 years, I never found out how many companies went out of business.”

O’Neil credited Stan Lee (creator of Marvel Comics) and the late Julie Schwartz (an editor at DC Comics) for reviving the industry in the early 1960s.

“Of the central figures in my world was Stan Lee,” he said. Schwartz reinvented the characters, and Lee told O’Neil they (characters) must change to reflect the world we live in. Comics later became an art and a means of expression.

“When I started in the comic book business, the advantage we had over film was we had an unlimited special effects budget,” O’Neil said. An exploding planet could be created in 15 minutes with a pen, and while “it was not possible for movies to do that, it is now. The process is continuing.”

Since 2012 O’Neil has been a board member of The Hero Initiative, a non-profit organization that helps comic book creators, writers and artists in need by creating a financial safety net.