
UCF Forum

8-18-2021

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Peter W. Telep

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How Becoming a Professional Star Wars Sandtrooper Changed My Life

By Peter Telep
UCF Forum columnist
Wednesday, August 18, 2021

The world has never needed volunteers — especially those dressed as the famous sci-fi characters — more than it does now.



Dressed in his sandtrooper costume, Peter Telep has participated in volunteering opportunities at schools, science fiction conventions, weddings, parties, animal rescues, charitable organizations, and children's hospitals.

In a world shaken by political divisions and a still-raging pandemic, it's hard to find solace and self-worth amid the chaos.

Fear not. TD-33348 of the Makaze Squad, Florida Garrison at your service to share my story in the hopes that you might become a volunteer in your community — because when we give back, everyone wins.

I joined the 501st Legion of professional Star Wars costumers in June 2020. The 501st is the largest Star Wars costume group in the world, with members in nearly every country. We have thousands of members in Florida alone.

The group's webpage notes, "While the 501st was initially founded to unite costumers with a penchant for Star Wars villainy, one of our real-world missions is to bring good to our communities through volunteer charity work. The 501st is always looking for opportunities to brighten the lives of the less fortunate and to bring awareness to positive causes on both a local and global scale."

Why did I join this particular group? Because Star Wars is my passion.

I've been a fan of the series ever since I sat on the steps of a standing-room-only movie theater to watch *A New Hope* in 1977. I have seen every film, studied the reviews, analyzed the characters and read dozens of books and blogs on the trilogies. I even [teach a class about Star Wars](#) at UCF.

To become a member of the 501st, you must first build a costume and have it approved by your local garrison. In my case I spent nearly six months ordering plastic armor from the UK and sourcing parts from all over the states to complete my sandtrooper build. A buddy remarked, "This is the largest model kit I've ever put together." That's an apt description.



Peter Telep connected his passion for Star Wars to a volunteering group last year.

Once your costume is complete, you submit photos to the garrison for approval. Once approved, you can “troop” with your local squad, participating in all kinds of events. The cool thing about being a trooper is that it combines my love of Star Wars with the importance of giving back to my community.

Our group has participated in troops at schools, science fiction conventions, weddings, parties, animal rescues, charitable organizations, and most importantly at children’s

hospitals, where we are able to bring fun and joy into the lives of families facing some of life's most difficult challenges.

My first troop was at a comic book shop for a toy collectors convention. The owner of the shop made a sizable donation to help support our local Orlando charities. I had a great time meeting parents and children, and it was heartwarming to see their reactions to some of their favorite characters from the movies.

During the past year I've completed nearly 30 troops, and I've come away from every event with a deeper sense of gratitude. I've learned that volunteering is as beneficial to the volunteer as it is to those in need.

The Mayo Clinic has done extensive research on this subject and shares the benefits of volunteering, from decreasing the risk of depression to developing new and meaningful relationships to even enabling people to live longer.

It's a win-win, or as Obi-wan Kenobi might say, if you volunteer, you'll take "your first steps into a larger world." I never realized that putting on a "bucket" (stormtrooper helmet) would allow me to experience so many emotions and so many mental and physical benefits.

I also didn't realize how rewarding it would be to put smiles on people's faces and show my support for organizations like the Make A Wish Foundation and Give Kids the World Village in Kissimmee that provide so much aid to children and their families.

Students who want to learn more about volunteering at UCF can visit the [Office of Student Involvement's VUCF webpage](#).

The world has never needed us volunteers more than it does now. I urge you to get out there, donate just a few hours of your time to a worthy cause, and then reflect on that experience.

Being empathetic to the plight of others is a great step toward a kinder and more peaceful world—and a more healthy you! These are the volunteer experiences you're looking for.

Do or do not. There is no try.

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VUCF Facebook page: facebook.com/volunteerucf/

May the volunteering be with you!

Peter Telep '95 '98MA is a senior instructor in UCF's Department of English. He can be reached at Peter.Telep@ucf.edu.