

Interviewer: Le'Evelyn Hammett

Interviewee: Walter Oliver

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Project: Alchemy Archives Oral History Project: Blerd culture - African Americans of nerd culture

Le'Evelyn Hammett

0:00:00

Hello, my name is Le'Evelyn Hammett and I am conducting an oral history project for black nerd culture and or blurbs. And I am interviewing Mr. Walt Oliver today. archive and document this interview for the purposes of my website and this project. Good morning, and yes you do.

Alright. So, Mr. Oliver, where did you grow up and around and about what year were you born? I can tell you exactly what year I was born.

Walt Oliver

0:00:37

Okay.

WO

0:00:38

I was born in 1950, New York City, New York.

LH

0:00:58

And how did your family or community influence your interest in nerd culture growing up?

WO

0:01:36

I don't know if they really did or did not but I was always into costuming. Costuming was a big thing in New York City especially for Halloween, only for Halloween really back then there was no such thing as what we're doing now. I can remember the first costume my father bought me. I think I was in third grade, fourth grade. And it was an upside-down clown, and I hated it. So, my mother got my father's attention and went back to the Five and Dime store and got a skeleton costume. Everything was good to go after that.

LH

0:01:40

Wow. And can you tell me a little bit about how you felt wearing that first... Can you remember

how you felt putting on your first costume and wearing your first costume going out? What was that feeling like for you?

WO

0:01:56

That's an interesting, it was exciting. My friends and I did the same thing. Back in those days, not only did we do Halloween, we also did UNICEF. So we were collecting funds to give back to the United Nations to help other children around the world. So it was all good. Oh nice. I don't know if they still do that anymore.

WO

0:02:17

What is your educational background? Tell me a little bit about where you went to school and anything you can remember about your first school, your younger school, and some pivotal teachers or educators in your life. to some very great secondary schools in New York City. In the Bronx, one was called PS 31, the Bronx

WO

0:02:46

affectionately called the Old Castle, because it looked like a castle. And I had quite a few teachers who were good mentors to me. Ms. Wayland, Ms. Golia, Ms. Russell, who eventually became the principal, Ms. Risan, who was a sixth grade teacher. She was very, very tough, but she was good.

WO

0:03:22

Junior high school, and they don't call it junior high school anymore, but it was now called middle school. But junior high school was grades 7, 8, and 9. And we had a fantastic math teacher for those three years, his name was Mr. Liest, L-E-I-S-T. We didn't know it yet, but he was teaching us college level mathematics back in seventh grade.

LH

0:03:46

Wow.

WO

0:03:47

That mathematics formed the foundation of digital logic, which I eventually became interested in college-wise.

LH

0:03:57

Thank you. That actually leads me into my next question. So did any of those teachers, for example, like Mr. Leist, were there other teachers that helped you choose your collegiate pathway? In 11th grade I had a teacher who taught us intermediate algebra in Trigg.

WO

0:04:21

In 11th grade I had a teacher who taught us intermediate algebra in Trigg. His name was Mr. Leahy. Mr. Who? Mr. Leahy.

LH

0:04:27

Mr. Who? Mr. Leahy?

WO

0:04:28

L-E-A-H-Y. I don't know why I remember all this stuff. It's good. I took him for that class. I also took him for analytic geometry and I took him for matrix algebra. He encouraged us to do so well that eventually I did become a member of the Mathematics Honor Society

WO

0:05:01

in high school. One of the things that was intriguing was the one about sine waves, cosine waves, that kind of stuff and that's very important in electrical engineering. And it amazed me because he said he wanted to be an electrical engineer, but the mathematics was too rigorous. And I kind of just shook my head. I said, okay. But I did it anyway. There was another teacher, I can't remember his name right now, but he taught us calculus in my senior year. He was good. And I had a stern physics teacher named Mr. Russell who was excellent. My high school was in Alberta High School right above the Bronx. Right above the Bronx.

LH

0:05:47

Now, okay, so since we're leading into college, tell me a little bit about, so what did you major in in college? and what were the demographics of your cohort? Were there other black men in the program? How many? Tell me a little bit about that.

WO

0:06:12

You're going to laugh when I give you the answer to that. There were lots of black men in my

cohort. Because I went to Howard University here in Washington, D.C. I kind of knew in my junior year back in high school that I wanted to be an electrical engineer. So I applied to several colleges that had those electrical engineering programs and when I heard what the recruiter said about Howard University, it's a black school and it has engineering, I said okay that's it. Yeah, wow. So during your time at Howard, how was, so I heard about your academics, how were things in terms of your cosplay and nerd culture? Like were you able to find any extracurricular things on campus or did you find any community around that during your time in college? about the period from 68 on to about 73 and really there was no nerd thing going on back then. So no. But it was more important to learn about being black. So that was a big transition there from going from being a negro to a black person. And you know, actually living and saying it loud I'm black and I'm proud.

LH

0:07:34

Tell me more about that. Tell me more about when you say going from a Negro to a black person. Explain, just so we have that on record, I'd love to hear your perspective on that.

WO

0:07:47

I'll try. Yeah.

WO

0:07:48

Okay. Just hold on for a minute. You want to pause it?

LH

0:07:50

Sure, take your time.

LH

0:07:52

No, no, take your time.

WO

0:07:53

I'll take my time, okay.

LH

0:07:54

Yeah, take your time. We got time.

WO

0:07:56

Okay, up until around 1967ish, 66ish maybe, leaders were promoting that concept of integration. And to me it never felt right. I said, I can be just as good about living next door to another person if I choose not to. And then when society started killing off our leaders, we really had to take a deeper look. We were talking about Malcolm getting shot, talking about Medgar Evers getting shot, talking about the assassination of RFK who probably could have been the next President of the United States. So all those things affected me including the Vietnam War as to how important it was to learn what you need to learn and become a leader in your community.

LH

0:09:08

Yes, wow, wow. And so, and you remember where you were when all of those scenarios, all those, all those happened? I'm going to have to come back and find the time to interview you about those because I have a lot of questions about that. That is a gold mine of knowledge and information that we need to document.

WO

0:09:34

I'll give you a hint though. Yeah, sure. I was on Thursday night Martin Luther King had gotten assassinated. I'll never forget that. That's when people started rioting and things like that. I was in New York City then.

LH

0:09:47

You were in New York? Around about what area? Were you near your home?

WO

0:09:52

We were either in the Bronx or the Queens. Not far from home.

LH

0:09:58

Wow. And with Malcolm X?

WO

0:10:01

Malcolm X was a Sunday afternoon. Sunday afternoon. And the bad news came in on the TV and the radio.

LH

0:10:07

Wow. Wow. And Medgar Evans, do you remember him?

WO

0:10:12

Just on TV.

LH

0:10:13

On TV?

WO

0:10:13

Yeah, I was in junior high school back then.

LH

0:10:17

You were in junior high school. Wow. Yeah, thank you so much for sharing that. So tell me about your... We're coming up to the 70s. What year did you graduate from Howard?

WO

0:10:31

73 with the bachelors, 76 with the masters.

LH

0:10:36

Okay, what did you master in electrical engineering or...

WO

0:10:41

It was an option in electrical engineering called biomedical engineering. So that's mixing medicine with the engineering.

LH

0:10:54

Oh wow.

WO

0:10:55

And the specific parts of biomedical was clinical, and it was doing devices to help doctors and nurses get their diagnosis.

LH

0:11:03

Nice. Interesting. Do they still have that program today, do you know?

WO

0:11:08

They tried to revamp it. I'm not sure what's going on with it.

LH

0:11:11

So we're in the 70s, has the con world come into play at this stage? This is like the Star Trek years, right? This is Star Trek years.

WO

0:11:23

Star Trek years. Yeah. So, I don't even think people are dressed up in the Star Trek costumes yet. No. No, no, no. So at this time, early 70s, no one's really doing cons yet. No. But collecting comic books, we're not doing cons.

LH

0:11:39

Collecting comic books, so tell me a little bit about that, like about your experiences. Like, did you buy comics? What was that like for you?

WO

0:11:50

Well, my father bought me comic books in the very beginning, so we had the Supermans and the Batmans and Aquaman. Aquaman, okay. And then in junior high school, that's when Spider-Man gets introduced and there was a surplus bookstore right across the street from junior high school that we used to trade.

LH

0:12:16

Do you remember the name of that comic book store?

WO

0:12:18

I don't remember.

LH

0:12:20

Don't worry.

WO

0:12:22

I can tell you it was on Morris Avenue, but I can't tell you the name of it. Okay, Morris Avenue there was some books there, okay, comic books there.

LH

0:12:24

What was your favorite? What was your favorite comic book?

WO

0:12:32

I got more into Spider-Man because Spider-Man was more realistic than Superman. In fact for Superman he was being introduced with every new feature like he had x-ray vision and all that kind of stuff and we thought enough is enough. This is too much. Wow, okay. Where as Spider-Man had real life problems to deal with.

LH

0:12:56

Yeah, nice. That's an interesting take on it. So you're buying your comics in the 70s. Was there anything else that you were doing to foster your love of these things at this time? Like were you just buying?

WO

0:13:18

Just buying.

LH

0:13:19

Okay, and so professionally, I know we're going in tandem, but professionally, so you completed your master's degree. What happens then? You finish school, what do you do at this point?

WO

0:13:31

My advisor at Howard said, I like what you're doing, why don't you stay? They were able to compete with industry, money wise, so I did stay, I met a professor at Howard. I taught electrical engineering and digital engineering, or computer engineering, excuse me, for close to, I want to

say 8 years, 9 years. and I used my biomedical engineering concepts there with them. And then I came back to Howard to teach in the School of Business in the Information Systems area. And it's been very fruitful.

LH

0:14:12

Yes. So you taught total, how many years did you teach total?

WO

0:14:17

Well, let's do it this way. I'm not sure about that answer. But I can tell you this, my total career experience at Howard is about 44 years.

LH

0:14:31

44 years, wow.

WO

0:14:33

Including teaching at the two places and also working at the same place that your husband is working at.

LH

0:14:38

Oh my gosh, you've made a difference in a lot of people's lives I'm sure. That's so good.

WO

0:14:44

One of the students that me and my colleague met in 1989, he just reached back out to us and told us, thank you for what we did. And we said, you still remember us? Yeah, I remember you. And to the fact that he was doing some serious stuff with President Obama when it came to cyber.

LH

0:15:05

Oh my gosh, wow, that's so cool. You contributed to that. That's so excellent. So, alright, so, what year would you say you first heard about POMS becoming a part of culture, people going to conventions to enjoy nerd culture?

WO

0:15:34

I'm going to say late 80s. Mid 80s. It didn't seem interesting to me. I was like what are they doing? That's kind of odd. But in parallel with that, Washington DC always had very big parties, that sort of thing. So we were doing that. Okay. Okay. And it wouldn't be costumes that you buy at the five and dime store. You were making them up.

LH

0:16:03

Really?

WO

0:16:04

Yeah, people were making them up. Where were these parades held? Georgetown had the biggest thing. The biggest thing.

LH

0:16:10

Really? So there was more than one?

WO

0:16:13

Georgetown was the biggest in D.C. New York had theirs. I didn't go to New York until much, much later.

LH

0:16:19

Okay.

WO

0:16:20

New York had theirs. I didn't go to New York until much, much later. But as far as house parties, everybody had house parties.

LH

0:16:28

Interesting. And so at these parades and at these concerts in the mid-80s, who would you say are the primary demographic? Did you see a lot of black folks going?

WO

0:16:58

A lot of black folks. There were a lot of black folks going.

LH

So, this isn't like a new thing?

WO

No.

LH

So tell me about the first time you actually went to one. So you did the parade.

WO

0:17:01

Uh huh.

LH

0:17:02

Tell me about the first time you went to a comic con and you were like, I'm going to go.

WO

0:17:17

That might have been eight or nine years ago. And the first con I went to was the Baltimore Comic Con. And, um... Oh!

LH

Oh, really?

WO

0:17:27

And, um... Oh! Yeah.

LH

0:17:28

Ah, okay.

WO

0:17:29

And I don't, I didn't wear anything. I just went to see what it was all about. Yeah. And I said, okay.

LH

0:17:34

Yeah, wow, okay. And did you go with friends? Or did you just like, you were like, let me just see what they're doing out here?

WO

0:17:41

Oh, one of my online friends was an author up there, so I knew he was going to be there. And I caught up with him. Yeah. And we communicated that way.

LH

0:17:53

What did you see, what did you see there that made you say, first, just ask the gentleman, what did you see there? Like, what were some things you saw for the first time at this convention? The Baltimore convention.

WO

0:18:07

The camaraderie.

LH

0:18:09

The camaraderie.

WO

0:18:11

And how realistic people's costumes were.

LH

0:18:15

Yes. And was that enough? That in and of itself enough to make you say, oh, I'm going to find more of these? Or what encouraged you to keep going?

WO

0:18:27

In parallel with that, Marvel had started coming out with the movies. So you had the Spider-Man

movies. So even if you didn't go to a con, you were going to buy a Spider-Man costume. So the first time I put on, I was a little nervous about it.

LH

0:18:46

Oh wow.

WO

0:18:47

Yep.

LH

0:18:48

Self-conscious.

WO

0:18:50

Yeah. And then it's like swimming, you take a deep breath and go into it.

LH

0:18:55

Yeah. Wow. Okay.

WO

0:18:58

It's about acceptance, it's about what you think people look at you like and that kind of stuff. Things like that.

LH

0:19:06

Yeah. So in all these years that you've been going, or so ago, have you started to see, what have you seen in terms of demographics? Let me ask it broadly. What have you seen in terms of demographics, the attendees that come, like talking age, talking race, gender, what have you seen in terms of that? Like anything that comes to mind.

WO

0:19:32

Well, see, in the DMV area, we're unique. So, there's a great representation of races, genders, alternate lifestyles, and everybody, for the most part, accepts everybody, no matter what. Yeah.

You kind of keep your personal things to yourself and just enjoy the moment. Yes, it's a really good space to escape reality, the trouble with the world, so to speak.

LH

0:20:10

How about in terms of age, like having to, for example, I'll give you a little, something that I noticed is I've seen people of a certain age demographic. I'm thinking my mother's age was 60 plus. Most of the time if I see them in a con, they're dressed in Star Trek things. But what have you seen in terms of this...

WO

0:20:39

I began to see more of them coming.

LH

What have you seen in terms of age and what are some of your observations in terms of age?

WO

0:20:52

Well, compared to what, let's go back to the beginning. I think when I first, when the guy who was older than me, said, oh, you were in Spiderman.

WO

0:21:03

That's cool. I can do that, too. And we got into it. Nowadays, even though I'm probably one of the oldest comic-con people, everybody else is catching up. They're in their 60s now. Late 50s, 60s. And one guy who you're going to meet soon, his name is Wendell Smith, he and another brother were just glad to see that somebody my age could pull it off and still do it well. And I inspired them, because they were one of themselves, I'm too old to do this.

LH

0:21:46

Wow.

WO

0:21:49

My wife is not into it, but she encourages me. So it's funny. That's not her thing, but it's like, yeah, okay.

LH

0:21:55

You know I have that same dynamic.

WO

0:21:57

You have the same dynamic. We tried.

LH

0:22:00

We tried.

WO

0:22:01

We tried.

WO

0:22:02

Um, can you give me a pause? Can you pause?

LH

0:22:09

Okay, so let's get into the meat and potatoes a little bit about your cosplay. So, first, how do you decide which characters you want to put together and recreate it for yourself?

WO

0:22:31

I look at black heroes slash villains. And the reason I do that is so that... It's a part of me. How about that? It's a part of me and if somebody asks, I can defend it.

LH

Yes, right? Have you ever cosplayed a character that you're like, I don't know anything about this character, or is it that you must have, must feel some kind of connection?

WO

0:22:58

I've felt some kind of history, connection with it. Absolutely.

LH

Have you had to learn any skills to be able to cosplay? Like what are some skills that you have picked up along the way or do you just outsource everything? Do you have people support you?

WO

0:23:11

No. I already knew how to sew.

LH

0:23:13

Oh!

WO

0:23:14

Because as a kid, if you get a hole in your pants and something like that, you gotta darn them yourself. Okay, so that was one of those skills, life skills.

LH

0:23:23

Yeah, that's right.

WO

0:23:24

You got to do it on yourself. That was one of those skills. Life skills. So making minor repairs to a sewer is no big deal. Making major repairs to somebody, I'll go over somebody else's name. Like Wendell, who I talked to you about. Who is a master at this stuff.

LH

Wow. Do you make any props?

WO

Yeah, I've made props. Some of them are electronic. I call it quasi-electronic.

LH

0:24:04

Oh, so like 3D printing? Is that it?

WO

0:24:06

Not that, no. Like remote control flashing lights.

LH

0:24:10

Oh, I see.

LH

0:24:12

Oh, so you're using your engineering....

WO

0:24:15

Engineering! Oh my gosh.

LH

Tell me a little bit more about how have you used, how have you used your degree and your cosplay? Tell me about that.

WO

0:24:26

That's a perfect question. Alright, let's pick one. One cosplay is Mantis. Supposedly, that's it. That's it, okay.

LH

0:24:34

It's so excellent.

WO

0:24:36

So, I finally found Etsy, the helmet.

LH

0:24:41

Yes.

WO

0:24:42

And it was unfinished. So I had to use my artistic skills to get the finish right, paint it black, spray paint it, that kind of stuff. I also had to find the red lenses. And then I said, you know, we're going to do something different. We're going to get some red LEDs connected back to a device we call a Bluetooth receiver. And the Bluetooth receiver has a button, like the same kind of button you used to turn your cars on.

LH

0:25:14

Okay.

WO

0:25:14

And when you press the button with your hand, the lights would light up. Wow.

LH

0:25:17

Oh my gosh, so cool.

WO

0:25:19

And of course, it had to be battery powered, all that good stuff. So it wasn't heavy engineering, but it was engineering.

WO

0:25:24

Yeah, it's definitely, yeah, you're going to have to know what you're doing to get it to work. Yeah, absolutely.

LH

0:25:31

I couldn't do that. So tell me, I was going to ask you what your favorite cosplay was, would the Mantis cosplay be one of them? One of them. One of them? One of them.

LH

0:25:43

It's hard to pick one.

WO

0:25:44

Spiderman, I've had lots of Spiderman variations. Black Panther and his cousin.

Friend of WO

Oh yeah, yes. Yes sir, how you doing?

WO

0:25:55

There's a good man.

Friend of WO

0:26:26

You're a genius!

WO

0:26:28

You're a genius!

Friend of WO

0:26:30

Good to see you too. I'm still here. I went to Boston. Right after I graduated with Sun Microsystems. Okay.

WO

0:26:40

That's a nerdy question.

Friend of WO

0:26:42

Yeah. I landed at Microsoft about four years ago.

WO

0:26:46

Oh, nice. I have since retired four years ago.

Friend of WO

0:26:50

Oh, nice. God bless you.

WO

0:26:52

Thank you. Yeah, that was a struggle.

(Conversation with friend - removed)

LH

0:27:17

Excellent. So, can you... Alright, so we talked about you, you told me you said like, Black Panther, Killmonger, Spiderman, those are some of your favorite characters.

WO

Killmonger wasn't wrong.

LH

0:27:28

He wasn't what?

WO

0:27:28

He wasn't wrong.

LH

0:27:29

He wasn't wrong.

WO

0:27:31

He wasn't wrong. He wasn't wrong, exactly.

LH

0:27:38

That's one villain that I'm like, yeah, he's actually one of the villains.

WO

0:27:43

And I said to people right away, I said, no, he was not wrong.

LH

0:27:49

Yes, especially the museum scene, like that.

WO

0:27:52

That was heavy.

LH

0:27:54

It's so good.

WO

0:27:55

It was good.

LH

0:27:56

So let's talk a little bit into like the culture around black characters. One, when Black Panther came out, what did you notice? Tell me about your experiences and what you noticed around black nerd culture, or blurred culture, in terms of cosplay or community. What did you notice? What did you see?

WO

0:28:29

When Black Panther the movie came out, there was an explosion in Blur. People were dressing up as all the different characters in the movie. People's pride, self-pride was coming back strong. People embraced what Killmonger was saying.

LH

0:28:51

Yes, they were, absolutely.

WO

0:28:53

Yes, they were.

WO

0:28:55

I like the fact that when the movie came out, they were referencing back to the Black Panther Party in California, which was not so bad too when you're peeled at that.

LH

0:29:08

Right, right. I swear I'm going to have to come back in and do separately on Black Historic Events because that's a separate project. I need to, I want to think and ask you those questions. Okay. So speaking of that, tell me about, how do you feel about the representation of diverse characters in some of your favorite fandoms?

WO

0:29:35

I think that's important. And that's why I like the current set of movies that are coming out. Marvel's finally got it together. Horror DC has not got it together. I don't know what DC is doing. Yeah, I'm disappointed in that.

LH

0:29:53

What are some of the ones that you're looking forward to?

WO

0:29:56

I'm looking forward to Black Panther number three when it comes out.

LH

0:30:04

I can't wait. I know. I'm so excited about that. Tell me the ways in which nerd culture has shaped your own identity. You said you started participating in cons about eight years ago. How has it changed you or how has it impacted you overall?

WO

0:30:27

I think I'm more outgoing. And at first I wanted to keep that nerdness to myself, not really put it out there. But now it doesn't bother me. And the fact that it doesn't bother me means that I'm able to communicate with children and get them interested in STEM because there's a method to the madness.

LH

0:30:55

Yes, yeah I've seen, so speaking of that, that's a great segue Mr. Oliver, what are, tell me about some of your experiences in doing that and how you choose which hospitals or places you go to visit the children in schools.

WO

0:31:21

Okay, it's not so much that I choose the hospitals, but there's an organization that I belong to called Heroes. It's called Heroes, I forget the rest of the word.

LH

0:31:32

Yeah, sure.

WO

0:31:33

Go to the shutting officers, whatever, whatever, and bring some joy. Wow. When did you start that?

LH

0:31:42

I want to say close to three or four years ago.

LH

0:31:45

Three or four years ago. Wow. What has been...

WO

0:31:48

It was by chance. They had a booth at one of the cons, and I said, oh, that's what you want to do? Yeah, I want to do that.

LH

0:31:54

Wow. What has been some of the memorable experiences that you've had when you've gone to visit those children in schools and hospitals dressed up in your cosplay? Tell me about those experiences.

WO

0:32:12

First of all, the kids recognize the characters right away. And they don't say who's behind the mask. They say, hey, can I get a hug, Spider-Man? Can I get a high-five, Spider-Man? Captain America, how you doing? That kind of thing. The officers in the hospitals, they're just glad to see us and stuff like that. One that really impacted me a lot emotionally was a young man who had terminal cancer, but we were able to see him at least two times before he passed. And he really liked the character Spider-Man. So we had, I was dressed as Spider-Man, the other guy was dressed as Spider-Man, that's the first time we met him. Then the second time, I knew he liked Spider-Man, so I made sure I had that suit on. He wanted to see how much he was inspired, so I gave him a big old hug and stuff like that.

LH

0:33:08

Yeah, oh my gosh. Wow, that's such an amazing cause to be a part of, and it's something that you really enjoy doing. So yeah, you've got to yet again make another difference in someone's life. Tell me about... How has cosplay changed your view of others within the community. Like now that you're participating has it shifted? I remember you said in the 80s it was like I don't know what those people are doing over there but now has it changed? Because I feel what I've noticed that when we go to these cons that there are so many different fandoms, there are so many different alternative lifestyles, it's like almost like a under every single umbrella.

WO

True.

LH

0:34:01

So what has, how has that changed your outlook on other people that attend these spaces? Or has it changed it?

WO

0:34:09

It has changed. And the thing I noticed the most, I don't know why I never noticed it before, is there are a lot of people on the spectrum who need help or want to talk to somebody. And it becomes a good outlook for them. So I'm able to be their mentor more or less to get through this thing called life. And even on Facebook when they have questions and stuff like that, I'll say, you know, think about this, think about that, you know, that sort of thing. A couple of folks who talk from coming over the edge and stuff like that, so it's fulfilling.

LH

0:34:46

What are your favorite cons to go to? I shouldn't ask you that because I know you're friends with so many of the people that created it. I don't want to get you in trouble. What are some of the top cons that people should make sure that they attend?

WO

0:35:02

In the DMV, the big three is the Baltimore Comic Con, the Amazing Comic Con, Awesome Comic Con in DC, and of course, Broly Con in Virginia.

LH

0:35:15

Have you been to any other cons?

WO

0:35:18

I've been to one in Virginia. I've been to Greater Philly and outside Philadelphia. It's not even in Philadelphia, but outside Philadelphia. They changed their name to something else. Annapolis, I've been to one in near Delos airport.

LH

0:35:40

Oh wow. Have you been to any in like, what are the ones in like the waterfront?

WO

0:35:46

I've been to New York. I've been to New York. And that's good enough. East Coast.

LH

0:35:50

Yeah, East Coast. I was going to ask you if you've been to one in Texas. Dream Con or Dragon or Bungle.

WO

0:35:55

No, I haven't done those.

LH

0:35:57

Okay. How about you? I haven't. Would you ever go? Or is that a thought? Is it just a caring thing?

WO

0:36:03

Nah.

LH

0:36:05

No, you're not into it?

WO

0:36:06

Nah.

LH

0:36:07

I get it.

WO

0:36:08

Dragon maybe because I got some friends down there, but not really. Yeah. It's not calling my name like, oh, you really got to go here.

LH

0:36:14

Okay. And do you find that the vibe is unique at, so let's talk about the Big Three, you said Baltimore, what's it called and Awesomecon. Tell me, what's the vibe, how's the vibe different at each of them for you?

WO

0:36:33

To me, Awesome and Baltimore are very similar, family oriented cons. Blerd Con does this theme thing and to me it kind of loses a little bit. Just because of my age group. Yeah, so just to keep it, you would like to just keep that open.

LH

0:37:01

Keep the theme open.

WO

0:37:03

Blerd Con is unique because it's 24-7 things, so you just pick and choose which parts you want to go to. But in terms of vibing with people, I think the other two do a better job.

LH

0:37:14

Really? Okay.

WO

0:37:15

Yeah. Even people you didn't know, you'd say, Hey, I like your cosplay.

LH

0:37:19

Can you tell me more about it? That sort of thing. It's interesting you say that. I heard someone say something somewhere that they wish there was more space at BlerdCon. I wish, they wish that there was more space at BlerdCon to actually connect with people. So I've heard that already.

WO

0:37:39

Okay.

LH

0:37:40

So how do you build or foster community at BlerdCon? Like when you go, like what are some things that you do to meet people and to connect with people or do you and do you feel like that's a hurdle?

WO

0:37:59

That's a hurdle.

LH

0:38:00

Yeah.

WO

0:38:01

That's a hurdle. I connect with folks I already knew already, but not so much as folks I didn't know. One thing I noticed at BlerdCon, people get so caught up in their cosplay, they don't come out of it enough to say, hey. There's no need to do that.

LH

0:38:20

Right. And you feel like that's not the case at AwesomeCon at all?

WO

0:38:25

That's not the case at the other ones.

LH

0:38:27

How do you feel, speaking of that.

WO

Now maybe, I'm sorry to interrupt. Maybe it's the space because both AwesomeCon and Baltimore have big cafeterias. Yes. So you're able to come out of your helmet a little bit and just chill, hey I saw you. That's the other thing.

LH

0:38:45

Yeah. Do you feel, speaking of that, not to say people are snobs, but do you feel that there's elitism in the community?

WO

0:38:48

Like there's some people that they're a little... Capital yes. Capital to yes. Yes. And you say why? There's no need for that. Right. Just don't really want to connect, like they want people to kind of flock to them.

LH

0:39:16

Right. How do you deal with that? Or do you engage with those people ever at all?

WO

0:39:21

Being a New Yorker, I ignore them.

LH

0:39:23

Ah, okay. I love that.

WO

0:39:27

Don't have time for that.

LH

0:39:28

Right. Yeah, okay. And what advice would you give to someone just starting out in cosplay and exploring your culture?

WO

0:39:39

They might want to follow the same path I did. Go there in regular clothes. Go see Kory, get your face painted. Go to the family-oriented cons where you can interact with kids and their parents and stuff like that. Be prepared to buy some old comic books or whatever from these dealers. I think that's a good start.

LH

0:40:12

You actually made me think of something else. What are some things that you typically buy from assuming comic books when you go? What do you buy at the exhibition centers there?

WO

0:40:23

Good question. I try to support black artists and black writers. So I'll get something that's not Marvel or DC just to see what it's all about.

LH

0:40:36

Oh, interesting. What's been an item that you bought that you... tell me about a memorable item that you bought at a con.

WO

0:40:47

I can't remember.

LH

0:40:50

It's okay, no worries. No worries.

WO

0:40:54

But I can tell you this. There was a prop that was pretty good for doing Star Wars stuff. And it was a lightsaber. So I got the double-edged lightsaber and did Darth Maul. Oh, nice. Corey did a face painting and I found different bits and pieces of the suit to put together. Does that help?

LH

0:41:24

Yes, no, that does. How do you feel about the future of cosplay and fandom culture for black folks? What do you hope to see in the years ahead?

WO

0:41:36

I think they're working on it, but let's take BlerdCon. It needs to be in maybe a bigger setting or multiple settings to bring back that family piece. I think they're going in the right direction because the con prior to this past year was a little bit too outrageous. And I made a comment about that.

LH

0:42:05

Yeah, yeah. When you say too outrageous, tell me what you mean. You feel like, face or...

WO

0:42:12

No, too much skin, too much, it was over the top that way.

LH

0:42:16

Okay, yeah.

WO

0:42:17

And people were saying like, oh well, you know it's Blerdcon so you shouldn't bring your kids there, but you said it's a family thing so you can't have it both ways. So this time they tailed it, they tailed it down.

LH

0:42:30

Okay, and that's good. Do you think that there are any hopes that you would like to see us do more of in terms of like cosplay or getting the word out or I'm not sure.

WO

0:43:03

I think it's going in the right direction.

LH

0:43:06

Okay.

WO

0:43:07

All in all it's going in the right direction because in addition to the cons we have the Facebook groups and that's how we communicate the most. And then sometimes there's a book signing, so sometimes we'll just show up at the book signing. Things like that.

LH

0:43:22

Yeah. I meant to ask you, this is the last question, and I'm going to ask, are there specific events that you try to go to when you get to the cons? Mr. O, I have a con plan, what is your schedule like for that day?

WO

0:43:40

I like to check on Corey, even though I do not get to see my face, I check on Anderson. He tends to draw some people that we know about. Oh, okay. I like to check in on Wendell, see how he's doing. There's another brother from Baltimore. He always does some outrageously unique stuff. I like to go to Artist Alley and see what's going on there. I don't really have a script, I just know I'm going to these places. Sure, yeah, these are the high priority things.

LH

0:44:29

So checking in on your friends, going to the artist alley. How long was yours?

WO

0:44:34

Sometimes we'll have a photo op. So if you know there's a photo op at 12 o'clock on a Saturday, you try to get in there for the photo op.

LH

0:44:40

Yeah.

WO

0:44:41

Things like that.

LH

0:44:42

How long does it typically take you to get ready before you head to the con in your costume?

WO

0:44:48

Oh, not long at all. Not long. Less than a half hour.

LH

0:44:52

Oh wow. I'm spending too much time.

WO

0:44:56

It depends on how elaborate it is though. A lot of times I'll go to con in my street clothes and then just switch up and go to the restrooms. It all depends.

LH

0:45:08

Okay, so you'll sometimes get dressed in the restroom. That's a really good idea too. Do you have any memorable stories?

WO

0:45:19

Sure. It's always important when you do a con to have a backup. Because in case the primary suit doesn't work right, people fall back.

LH

0:45:27

Oh my gosh.

WO

0:45:28

Yeah.

LH

0:45:29

That's gold.

WO

0:45:30

That's gold. Yes.

LH

0:45:32

Yes, we've had those cons before.

LH

0:45:34

Okay. Do you have any memorable stories from your cosplay journey or from going to a convention that you would like to share before we conclude?

WO

0:45:45

Memorable? Wow.

LH

0:45:47

I'm sure you have so many.

WO

0:45:49

Couple who just had a young child, a child maybe one or two years old, her name is Jo, this is Jo, I can't remember her last name, but she and her husband are so cool, they're from Canada. They always want to greet you and stuff like that and vice versa. Jo's mom was so cool, she wasn't dressed up but she was there.

LH

0:46:27

Yeah. So cool. Yeah. What stood out to you about this family? Just the fact that they brought their newborn?

WO

0:46:35

No, they're just very genuine. Very genuine people.

LH

0:46:38

Wow. So you've met, I'm sure you've met so many wonderful people. During your time.

WO

I have. Yeah.

LH

0:46:46

Yeah. Well, thank you so much, Mr. Oliver, for interviewing us. and we're interviewing this. Just for the record, we're at Meza, so there may be some background noise, but I just wanted to note that. that's the location of the interview. Also, Mr. Oliver, if you have any other people that may be interested in me documenting their story in blurred culture, please let me know. Please send me those names

WO

0:47:17

That's all.

LH

That's all. Thank you so much for doing the interview.