

~Fantasy Zone Comics and Used Books~



Much like a hardware store, or an auto parts store, comic bookstores and book shops have their own unique scent. It's these smells that let connoisseurs and aficionados know they've found their quarry, that they've reached their ultimate destination and that they're free to participate in some escapism, fueled by their passions. So too is the case with Fantasy Zone Comics and Used Books! The comic bibliophile instantly recognizes the smell of paper and ink, of future rainy days and their promise of adventure as they walk through the door. With over 35 years at their location on 7610 Post Road it's clear why Michael and Julie have been so successful in making this comic book and used bookstore a mainstay destination of the North Kingstown community and Rhode Island as a whole.

Started in 1988, Fantasy Zone Comics and Used Books is the oldest ongoing comic bookstore in operation in Rhode Island and stems from the childhood vision of Michael.

"I was 5 years old when I decided I wanted to grow up to own a comic bookstore."

But more than simply "owning a comic bookstore" Michael and Julie found one another, and worked to create and fostered an incredible, warm, and inclusive community.

"I started collecting when I was 5 years old and went to my first convention in 1975 when I was 12 in Albany NY."

And in 1982 Michael and a childhood friend opened up Earthworld Comics in Albany NY which he ran and co-owned until 1987 when he decided to sell.



"Opening another store, I knew I didn't want to be in a city anymore and that I wanted to cater to people who love comics. So, I opened in North Kingstown because there was nothing for miles around me, and I knew the people who loved comics would come and find me. I think when I opened, I was one of 5 stores in the state."

Having been in continuous operation over the past 35 years and witnessing boom and surviving bust, Fantasy Zone Comics and Used Books is now the oldest continuously run comic book destination in Rhode Island.

"I remember during the speculator boom that comic bookstores were opening everywhere, I think there were 50 stores or more at one point, but after the crash it went back down to 5 of which we were the only original still open."

And when you visit Fantasy Zone Comics you see why this unassuming mom and pop has stood the test of time. And the answer is community. When asked what accomplishments they're most proud of in addition to 35+ years of slinging comics there isn't a moment's hesitation.

"We love comics, and we love being a mom and pop store."

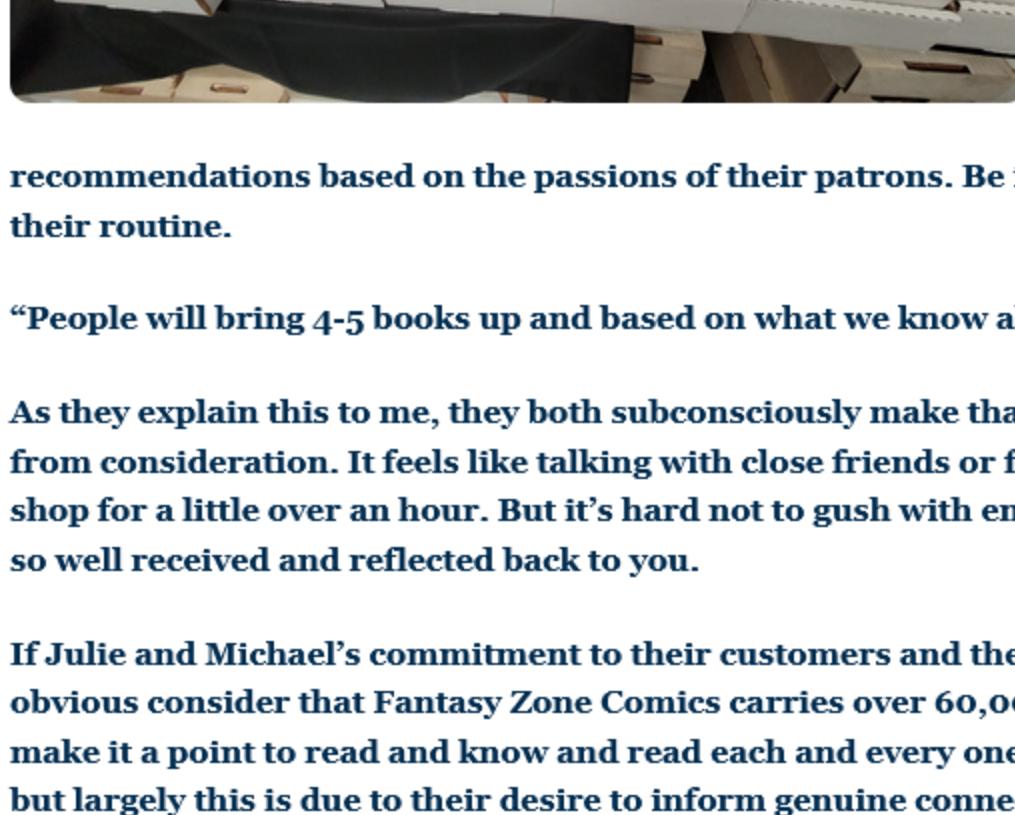
It's this unassuming approach coupled with Michael and Julie's unbridled love of all things comic books that has allowed them to flourish and build an incredibly rich, vibrant and active community.

"It's definitely a community we've worked hard for, and it's a great and supportive community. You're never gonna feel strange in here and that's big! Especially for women. The culture in some comic bookstores can make some women feel out of place. Not us, we're here for everyone."

As Julie talks you can feel the pride and love she has for the community swell that she so clearly delights in being a part of.

"We're like bartenders in a way. I see our customers more than we see our family sometimes. I wasn't expecting the level of community!"

But walk through those doors, and you're struck by just that, the sense of community. Whether filled with fellow enthusiasts or in a quiet moment, something about the stacks of comics and used books in conjunction with Julie and Michael's reassuring and knowledgeable presence echoes the community these walls have witnessed over the year and the sense of home and comfort they've provided and stand to provide for many to come.



"Our inventory isn't computerized. We like to know our customers and learn them. We know what we have and what we don't."

And it's true! In my time familiarizing myself with Michael and Julie and their fantastic comic bookstore, and then afterwards, following up with an interview, I found myself just scratching the surface of what it means to be a regular at Fantasy Zone Comics and Used Books.

Whether stopping in for your regular issue, hunting for something new for yourself, or gifting the world of comics and used books to someone else, being at Fantasy Zone Comics means you always have an expert "dial a friend" option. Michael and Julie enjoy learning their customers' tastes, because they are great at and love making tailored

recommendations based on the passions of their patrons. Be it a onetime stop and shop, or a regular, stopping in as a part of their routine.

"People will bring 4-5 books up and based on what we know about the person we'll say, not this one."

As they explain this to me, they both subconsciously make that hand gesture you make when you want to eliminate something from consideration. It feels like talking with close friends or family, and while lost in my own nerdery, I've only been in the shop for a little over an hour. But it's hard not to gush with enthusiasm when you see and feel your own passions and nerdery so well received and reflected back to you.

If Julie and Michael's commitment to their customers and the passion they share for comic book collection wasn't already obvious consider that Fantasy Zone Comics carries over 60,000 comic books, and that between them, Michael and Julie make it a point to read and know and read each and every one. Partly this is due to their natural passion and love for comics, but largely this is due to their desire to inform genuine connections between the world of comics and local enthusiasts in their community and to see those connections blossom over time. This also means they have a great knowledge and ability to make age-appropriate recommendations that may be important as a parent or daunting to consider when shopping for a gift for someone else.

As our interview wraps up, Michael quietly and nonchalantly steps away from conversation to thumb through a stack behind me while I continue to talk to Julie. I assume he's searching for the latest issue of some title for a regular, or piece of obscurity for a collector and think nothing of it.

I make my way to the counter still eagerly picking Julie's brain for future reading when she too makes her way to a stack to pull a couple comics. "You'll love this one, you've got to check this one out, and this one was book of the year last year" Michael chimes in with agreement. "We're pretty good at making suggestions individually, but when we agree on a suggestion, it's locked in. you'll definitely like it!" I can't help but beam back. That's the magic of a spot like Fantasy Zone Comics and Used Books. It's a love story. A love story about a boy and his dream, about two passionate people who found each other over their shared love of comics, and a love story to the art of comics and the passion of collecting and shared community. As for me, I left a new regular of Fantasy Zone Comics and Used Books anxious to read the two new titles tucked under my arm and eagerly looking forward to my next visit when invariably I'd get to discuss them with Julie and Michael.

