



Comic book guy

"I remember seeing comic books for the first time in probably, like 1975, 1976, as a young little boy," Brett Swanson said, "and I was just so awestruck."

Spider-Man and the Hulk had been on TV at the time, so Swanson had been into comic book characters since he was 5 or 6 years old. "My grandfather was a fine artist, and I was always drawing. But I had never seen a comic book before," he said. "So, when I went into a store, they had those old spinny racks. And I just remember seeing the comic books, and ... to a young little boy, it was magic. And I knew that's what I wanted to do."

Within a year or two, he began creating his own comics and still has boxes of them. And when he got older, in the late 1980s, he went to art school at the Joe Kubert School of Cartoon and Graphic Art in New Jersey, an iconic institution within the comics industry.

"Joe Kubert was one of the Golden Age artists [who] was drawing comics in the '40s and the '50s, and he was

doing all the old war comics and 'The Flash' and all that stuff," Swanson said. "He started a school, and it was like a trade school [where] you learn various things about the business, from art to how to publish your own stuff, anatomy, everything else. So, it was every aspect of the comic business."

Upon graduation in 1991, "it was so hard to get an art job back then," Swanson said. "And that's when I fell into the Postal Service. Because I was literally a starving artist."

Swanson said he had been visiting his post office box to check his mail when "I saw they had a sign on the thing that said, 'We're looking for help.' And I'm like, 'I'm looking for a job.' And that's how that all started," he said.

Swanson began as a postal clerk in 1992 in Groton, CT, before switching to the letter carrier craft in 1994 and transferring to the nearby Mystic office,



where the Connecticut Merged Branch 20 member has been ever since. "Most artists, we have a day job," he said, adding that his postal career "allows me to do what I want to do, and it allows me to pursue my passion."

He's kept up with making comic books throughout his three-decade postal career. "When I first started working for the Postal Service, I came up with a character called US Male," he said. "It's basically this character and his little friend [Little Max]. They fly in space, and they go to various

planets, and they fight aliens, and all that stuff."

The carrier created his brand, Sick Puppy Studios, in 2005, and the following year he fell into children's comics and began producing them professionally. "There's a huge market for kid comics," he said. "All of a sudden, it's exploded."

Swanson's series is called "Power Kid" comics, and he's published one book a year. "It's about the main character, Power Kid, but he has his little friends with him, and they all have powers, and they fight crime when they're not in school," he said. "So, I came up with this idea, and it took off, and I have 14 books in the series."

He's currently working on Book 15. "I have what the kids call a graphic novel, but we call them collected editions," Swanson said. "So, I have a bunch of collected editions that have basically five books in each volume. ... Every five books that I get done goes into a volume. So, with Book 15, I'll have Volume 3 out."

He tries to connect with people through his websites and on Instagram, X and Facebook. "And I'm just



so thankful and honored that people love my story so much that they come back and keep buying my books. Because there's a lot out there," he said.

While most of his commercial success has been with "Power Kid," the carrier offers individual titles as well with other characters, like "The Sentinel," America's military man of might. And once in a while, he'll still draw a strip on his character, US Male. "That was the precursor to the 'Power Kid' series," he said.

Swanson sells all of his works, including some fine art and abstract paintings he creates, at various art shows and festivals or comic conventions, and on his website. He typically debuts his comic books in August at an annual art show in Mystic.

He's been on the same route in downtown Mystic for 17 years, so the carrier has come to consider his customers as friends. "A lot of them buy my books for their kids, and their grandkids, their nieces, their nephews, and they keep coming back every single year," he said. "So, I have a huge support from a lot of my customers that I deliver to."

In the Mystic area, he adds, "people just know me as the cartoon guy, the comic guy. They know what I do, and I'm the only one that does what I do.

So not only does my postal job allow me to do that, but the contacts and the friendships that I've made through this job over the years works that way, too."

Around five years ago, he began teaching children how to make comic books. "Every once in a while, some people would ask me if [I] can come over to the school and [I] can show some kids how to draw. And I'm like, 'Absolutely,'" he said. Then the COVID-19 pandemic started. "And then once that hit, everything stopped for a little while. But then it started up again, and it's been super crazy, because I'm getting asked to go everywhere. I go to schools, libraries. I have a quarterly regular five-week class at the Mystic Museum of Art."

Swanson enjoys passing that knowledge on as he teaches about a dozen kids at a time how to make comic books, and he practices his art as often as he can. "As I tell the kids, it's always important to try to find at least an hour a day, and working for the post office, it's difficult," he says. "But I do draw very often. Basically, my days off, nights, weekends. I'm always at my art desk working."

Comics are really big now, Swanson says. "Everything you see on TV, the films, is based on a comic book now. So, everything is so comic-oriented that the kids are really into it. And



Swanson on his route in Mystic, CT

when I go to the schools, their libraries are full of comic books and everything else,” he said. “Some of them already know how to draw. ... My goal for the five-week class is that by the end, I want the kids to create their own mini comic book from start to finish, say, a cover and maybe four, five pages that they wrote, drew, inked and colored.”

He continued: “And I do it the old-school way. No computers. Everything is done by hand. ... Most comics are done in groups or teams, but I teach them step by step how to do everything themselves, from writing, to drawing, to inking, to coloring. Basically, the way that I was taught by the artists that I admired.”

That means he uses pencils, Bristol board paper—the traditional comic

paper—and various tools like rulers and pens. An artist typically draws the comic pages in pencils first before an inker—often someone separate from the penciller—goes over the pencil lines in ink. “Most people don’t realize this, but a traditional comic book is inked with a brush and a little bottle of ink ... so you have the different line works that we use,” he explained.

“When I teach kids, obviously, they’re too young, so they use markers. Markers are OK in a pinch, but you generally want to use a brush and ink. And then when I color my books, I do [it] the traditional way with watercolors.”

He starts by teaching basic shapes. “With all the basic shapes, you can draw anything. It’s basically the building blocks,” he said. “So, once you

learn that ... you build upon it, and then you go to design and layout, and you start creating your own characters, and you start creating a story.”

He explains that comic books are sequential storytelling. “It goes way back to prehistoric days, when people were drawing on cave walls,” Swanson said.

“They were telling you a story through pictures, and that’s one of the oldest art forms that’s ever been. So, you fast-forward to our time now, we still have this. ... Not only is it

one of the oldest mediums that’s been around, and will always be, because people will always draw, people will always write, people will always tell stories. And that’s basically what this is, right? We’re storytellers.”

With comic books, “we’re telling you what it is, it’s basically a movie, but we’re telling you in drawings, we’re telling you in artwork, and then we’re adding words onto it. We’re adding dialog, because obviously now we can talk,” Swanson said. “And that’s what has become comic books, and it’s become the basis for all kinds of stuff now. So, I always find that fascinating, because it’s something we’ve been doing for millennia, only now it’s more up to speed.”

He’s inspired by comic book artists like Jack Kirby (a main artist of Marvel Comics from the 1960s through the 1980s who drew the “Fantastic Four” and “Thor”), as well as Kurt Swann, Sal and John Buscema, Frank Miller and John Byrne. He also credits Bill Watterson, the artist of the “Calvin and Hobbes” strip as a heavy influence on him as a young teenager.

The comic medium is a phenomenal medium, Swanson says, because you can always bend the rules. “As I tell the kids, here’s a page, here’s a couple panels, right? So, you’ve got three or four panels. OK, this is the grid, but you can tell I’m trying to bend that a little bit, and you could have your artwork coming off the panel or going into the panel. There’s always these little tricks that you can do. You’re only limited by your own imagination,” he said. “You’re your own creator. You’re the master of your own special effects.”

Above all, though, comics need to be fun. “Basically, that old line: ‘If it’s not fun, why bother?’ ” applies, Swanson said.

Swanson teaches kids how to make their own comics.





He's proud of his pupils and loves to see what ideas they come up with. "A lot of the students that I teach, they're just so creative, and it always just makes me think of myself at that young age," he said. "It's just really cool, because when guys like me pass on, we want this to continue. We want to just inspire the next generation of artists. Some of the artists I grew up reading, and some that I actually got to meet and know, inspired me. So, I just want to give that back a little bit to that little kid that's drawing. I was like, 'You can do this. You can make your own books. And if you put in the work, you can become successful.'"

The carrier gets a lot of feedback, too. "The parents come back to me and said, 'My kid loves drawing, and they're so excited. They want to take your next class.'"

Swanson even dedicates a fan art page in some of his own comic books.

"I have various kids that like to draw my characters, and if they do that, they give it to me. And ... I will dedicate a page to showcasing some of the young artwork. ... I give the kid a copy of the book and [am] like, 'Hey, your artwork is published,'" he said. "I have a huge file of stuff that kids draw me because I think it's really cool."

Swanson's currently preparing for retirement from his career as a letter carrier, and he plans to keep himself busy. "I have so much on my plate that I really want to do—stuff that I've had in mind for years," he said. "I average about a book a year because I'm always working at my job. But when I retire in January, I'm going to have a lot more free time."

In retirement, he plans to teach more kids' classes, and will start teaching classes for adults as well, and perhaps for military veterans, which he says might be a good way

to get their stories and any angst out. And not just on Sundays when he's off work, but hopefully a few days a week.

After 33 years with the Postal Service, Swanson is ready to move on. "Not to use the artist's phrase, but I'm ready to turn the page. I'm ready to start a new chapter, and just, actually, for all these years, I finally want to pursue what I want to do. And that's just to create more comics, tell more stories. And if I can inspire, that's even better."

He added: "I'm getting to the point now where, if I can pass that knowledge on, even if I could just inspire one kid that says, 'You know what? I want to be a comic artist.' ... It's worth it. It is totally, totally worth it." **PR**

Swanson made this art for this December issue of *The Postal Record*, recognizing letter carriers as the true Santas.