

Halloween 2008: The children lead us beyond the 1960s

Editor's note: Stetson professor Paul Croce lives on West Minnesota Avenue in DeLand; annually, he views the American scene through the lens of the Halloween parade down that street.

By Paul Croce

White witches and gob-lins walked the sidewalks of Minnesota Avenue, a contro-versy-brewed

Maybe I should have seen it coming in the number of politi-cal outfits kids were wearing:

two Sarah Palins, one John McCain, one Joe the Plumber, and four Obama-themed out-fits, including one with Martin Luther King Jr., one "kickin' it" for the candidate, one "Obama Mama," and one "loving school" (OK, not all Democrats are student rebels).

Before the Big Day (on our street, that's Halloween), I of-fered the use of my front lawn to both political parties. With the election, and hundreds of people descending on our street, I figured it would be a good chance to put some democracy into action.

The Republicans did not respond, but the Democrats did, big-time.

I suspected they would do more than hand out palm cards

when they asked for exten-sion cords. That was for floodlights to illuminate the big Barack

Obama sign. They had hun-dreds of flers and bottles of water decorated with remind-ers to vote Nov. 4.

Guest Commentary

To me, it was all part of the theater of our street on Halloween, but one neighbor objected to the injection of

politics into the fun. I should have gotten another clue about the disagreement when eight trick-or-treaters showed up as hippies.

To them it was a fun and colorful outfit, but in the 1960s, a big message of the counter-culture was "the personal is political." In the 1960s, the way you lived your life came from political choices, and had political implications.

Our dispute on the street was in the same spirit: Should the debates of politics be kept separate from the local fun of a family event?

This was not the only intru-sion of the 1960s into the 2008 election year. The race of one candidate became a big talk-ing point.

(Full disclosure: Every previous candidate for presi-dent has had a race, but when they were all white, race could be assumed, so it has always been taken off the table for discussion.)

The civil-rights movement prodded Americans to demand that people stop taking unequal race relations for granted. Also, Barack Obama's brief

interactions with education professor Bill Ayers in an

education project in Chicago

of 1960s rancor, but it was a

reminder that, as in the public debate in general, we have not figured out how to cope with the questions raised by that divisive decade.

On Minnesota Avenue, it was an echo of the "personal is political," while the national candidates fought over America's military role abroad and respect for authority back at home.

The children scouting for candy did not pay much attention to the politics. Most liked the lights, they recognized the political signs, and they were glad to get free water — al-though a few turned it down when they found out it was from the Democrats.

Most kids steered clear of politics, not only on the lawn, but also in their outfits.

There was a surge of 115 animals, especially cats, but also a lot of bees (including the Queen herself), dogs (one

skeleton dog and one dead, but somehow still walking around); five penguins (and two were "going to the ball!"); four pigs; and a menagerie of other critters.

To liberals, a raised aware-ness of the public life of personal issues was a vehicle for liberation, to conserva-tives, that trend brought the unwelcome side effects of

reduced public inhibitions and disrespect for moral standards in general.

Of course, the Democrats'

lawn campaign and its discon-tents did not rise to the level

of 1960s rancor, but it was a

spider, and even regular

Princesses were snow, rainbow, dark, and evil.

Pirates came in skeleton, girl, sweet, and wench.

Vampire varieties included one-toothed, cannibal, with wings, and madame. There was one other with wings, another whole vampire family, and one only "sort of" (if you are attacked by a vampire, this is the one you want).

Other delightful highlights included a heavenly devil, an overeducated dad, a sumo bal-lerina, one guy ("See, I've got the boxers and everything!"), one combat cutie, one chic sheik, one depressed child, a few nothings (but one was "gonna be a gangsta"), one just plain creature, and one "opposite of what I'd be at school."

Reader response, please: These call out for sly com-ments!

Do the 1960s live for the kids the way they seem to for the candidates?

Yes, but in a much lighter way: The hippies were flow-ery but not political, and there were no outfits for Black Panthers, draft dod-gers, or Young Americans for Freedom.

Although the young today seem out of touch with the political, and most did not even have references to popular culture.

They did include wild variations on their themes: through the calls of their own imaginations.

For at least one night a year, they, too, are counterculture, counter constant pressure to achieve, counter adult expecta-tions, and very much pro-spill into the everyday during the rest of the year.

— Croce, professor and chair of American Studies at Stetson, had help from Cindi Brownfield and Stetson stu-dents, including Ali Aldrich, Elizabeth Bennett, Holly Bennett, Camille Billy, Kaylyn Caracausa, Angela Malmowski, Suzanne Reffel and Kyle Schmitt during the evening count, and from Sharon Tonjes in the final tabulation.



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Halloween 2007: Be all you can be

By Paul Jerome Croce
SPECIAL TO THE BEACON

Do you ever get tired of being yourself? Psychologists and spiritual advisers give the wise counsel: Be yourself.

It sure makes sense, since you can't really be someone or something else. But we try all kinds of things — including makeup, dieting, hard work, education, self-help, and religious conversion — to step outside the box of who we currently are.

Both the striving to improve and the work of simply being true to yourself can be really difficult. There must be a simpler way.

Try Halloween. Our kids have an elegantly simple idea. Even if it's just for a few brief shining hours (plus the days of getting ready and the delicious anticipation), they dress up and take on whole new identities. Sure, it's just dress-up and role-playing ... or is it?

A chance to dream of who we might be

Maybe adults could get some pointers from the younger set about dealing with those identity blues. Striving for self-improvement? Be true to yourself? Fuggetaboutit! Halloween gives a whole new

meaning to "be all you can be," and I'm not just talking about the three Army men, two Marines, the King Arthur and the Zorro I met Oct. 31. On this night, identities are not limited by mere facts. It's a time for the full play of imagination.

Dress up and have a ball. A few adults joined the party

on Halloween night, but it was mostly children who walked up and down West Minnesota Avenue, hunting for candy, scoping

out costumes, and joining the carnival atmosphere.

The street has gotten a lot of trick-or-treaters for years, but lately the numbers have swelled.

the small city of junior humanity that filled the street. An extra bonus from the helping hands was that I could actually take a break from my front lawn to survey the scene.

In almost two decades of candy-giving at my house, I had never been able to stray from my property. At last I have witnessed the whole scene firsthand. Thank you!

More than 1,000 to count

Scene becomes more ghoulish

We counted 1,020 on our front

lawn in a riot of different outfits,

but we must have missed quite a few. And can you blame them? Why stick around with these

West Minnesota Avenue egg-

heads who give a candy and keep count of the outfits, when within a few hundred yards you could get hot dogs, soda, a light show, a few hundred yards you could

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BEACON PHOTO/MARSHA MC LAUGHLIN

Last ride? — Ben Davidson dares trick-or-treaters to see what's inside his hearse Oct. 31 during Downtown DeLand's Halloween event 'Monsters on Mainstreet.'

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outfits like the Baby Body Guard, Crypt Keepers, and the many Knights (although one was "killed by Mom." So much for family values!).

The trend toward depictions of death and destruction continues unabated. Whether it's the contemporary social contexts or the ancient message of All Hallows Eve, the kids came up with a host of characters: Biker, Hippy, Prom Queen, Werewolf, Zombie, and even Willy Wonka and a Soccer Player, that were all Dead. So too was Little Dead Riding Hood.

Victims of violence

Quite a few trick-or-treaters reported other bloodied or mangled versions of their characters, including a Neutered Fairy King (Sir, was it worth the crown? Or, was this a tacit suggestion about ways to deal with corruption and incompetence in our political leadership?).

A few lightened it up a bit as the Living Dead, but they seemed right in company with Ghosts, a Dementor, Jack the Ripper, and Chucky. Another came at the theme more bluntly: "I'm Death," he said sternly.

That bluntness came through with a few others: one Mike Myers and one Killer of Mike Myers. Fortunately for the former, they were not traveling together;

fortunately, for the latter, he did not appear near the Police Man and the Police Woman.

There were quite a few Devils, which I particularly enjoy since they give the opportunity to dress up my cheerful greeting for a safe trip home: "Thanks for coming. Have fun. Go to hell."

The outfits are us, enhanced

There is always a bunch of kids who declare "I'm me" or "I'm nothing," but on this evening, one added a clever twist: a Sinister Nothing. And there were two who were simply Human Beings, which made us wonder who, or what, all the rest were.

The outfits are us, but with

our identities enhanced or darkened by our wondrous imaginations.

It's a night when our children lead the way in reminding that the playful reaches of our minds can help to shape our identities. Hard to believe? Well just listen to the teenager who responded to the question, "So what is your outfit tonight?" with a wry smile, a broad wave of his hand, and the telling comment, "Whatever you want."

— Paul Croce, professor and chair of American Studies at Stetson University, had help from more students than he could count to help with his annual trick-or-treat count, and from Sharon Tonjes in the final tabulation.



Youngsters and their parents enjoy Halloween at Florida Technical College



BEACON PHOTO/MARSHA McLAUGHLIN

Treats abound! — There were plenty of treats to be found Oct. 31, when Downtown DeLand store owners and their employees passed out candy to trick-or-treaters.



Batty about bats — Levi Vasquez, 14 months old, is fascinated by the bats flying through the lobby at Florida Technical College. He's even more thrilled to be held aloft by his dad, Brian Vasquez, as mom Tasha Hathcote looks on. Both parents are students at the school.



BEACON PHOTO/PAT HATFIELD

Lil' angel — This littlest angel, Kiarra Lowe, wasn't sure about the strange-looking people around her. Her mother, Destiny Lee to school for Halloween at Florida Technical College.

The youngest one — Baby Aurora Lee, at 10 weeks old, is one of the youngest trick-or-treaters, accompanying student mom Kimberly Lee to school for Halloween at Florida Technical College.

The second-most-important vote of the fall season

You remember the campaigns were vying for votes in the swing states. In Volusia County, a swing region in the largest swing state, we were expecting the candidates themselves would show up at our doors with more FEMA money or lots of campaign promises. Then, just days before the election, John Kerry appeared at my door. The only trouble was, I couldn't tell if he was there to support the senator or to mock him.

It was Halloween, and the boy behind the mask wouldn't say. If Democrats are looking for a tougher persona these days, Kerry was with some good company that night on West Minnesota Avenue: There was Daniel Boone, Tony Hawk, the Abominable Snowman, and the king himself, Elvis.

Helen of Troy and Pocahontas were there, as well, along with contemporary royalty: Elvira, Paris Hilton, Avril Lavigne, Britney Spears, and one of the Power Puff Girls.

These were just some of the outfits during the carnival night when I counted more than 600 trick-or-treaters at my door. Some neighbors reported even more. Maybe some of the kids walked right past our house — and can you blame them? I had some candy and a survey question, "So, who are you tonight?" Neighbors down the street, on the other hand, offered hot dogs, sodas and bottled water, and ice-cream sandwiches.

When I asked my question to each newcomer, a few of the little ones looked at me dutifully and shyly said their names. Some of the older kids just said "I'm nothing!" and were ready to bolt for the next house to fill their bags.

In addition to all the lighthearted



Guest
Commentary
Dr. Paul J. Croce

fun of the evening, the Halloween ritual is a delightful window into the contemporary world of childhood. Where do children get their ideas for outfits? Many borrowed from TV and movies: There were Scooby-Doo, Shrek, Wonder Woman, Batman, Winnie the Pooh, Peter Pan, the Incredible Hulk, Buzz Lightyear, Luke Skywalker, and a few Harry Potter characters.

But a lot more kids got their ideas from their own experience. Some of them dress up based on things they like to do: There were a few gymnasts, a disco dancer, and boys of every sport, plus a few added the twist of their own dreams for success, such as the "karate champ."

Some look to the animal world. There were a few dogs, cows, spiders, bats, ladybugs and butterflies. A few took ideas from the world of work, such as the flight attendant, waitress, and a few police officers.

Some of them may have been commenting on their own youthful dilemmas: one "just woke up," one "hygiene problem," one "unpopular person," one "confused girl," one "unique individual," and one "unknown comic" (and I was sorry to say, I had not heard of him).

There was an increasing trend, begun a few years ago, of outfits displaying raw violence: a "dead cheerleader" and "dead gymnast," a bloodied biker, "Jason's bride" (suit-

ably bloodied), and a "car-accident victim." One guy spoofed me by saying he was a "blowup chicken," and then proceeded to flip a switch to inflate his outfit.

By far, most kids wore fanciful if slightly scary outfits: monsters, Greek goddesses, gods of the underworld, rock singers, hippies, pirates, hula girls, ghouls, demons, trolls, firefighters, prisoners, doctors, hillbillies, dinosaurs, astronauts, a Gothic person, Medusa, Little Red Riding Hood, a duelist, some jelly beans, Mount St. Helens, and a feminine statement.

While there is still some lingering doubt about the actual count from the Nov. 2 election, the final tally is in for this second-most-important vote of the year. Plus, those in the running were much more appealing than any of the leading political candidates, so maybe the parties ought to take notice.

Here are this year's Top 10 winners: 1. Witch (35); 2. Vampire (24); 3. Princess (21); 4. Cat (20); 5. Ninja (18); 6. Scream (16); 7. Spider-Man (14); 7. Skeleton (14); 7. Cheerleader (14); and, 10. Clown (12).

As any social scientist knows, there are challenges even in the simple process of counting. What category for "zombie ballerina," "devil cat" or "spider witch"? I generally choose the second word, since it had more emphasis.

These wild combinations and all the outfits show our kids have a lot of imagination. Keep watching the children who lurk beneath the outfits all year long. Then join the carnival next year, or dress up and sway the vote yourself.

— Croce is professor and chair of American studies at Stetson University.

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DeLand Beacon

WEEKEND, NOVEMBER 13-16, 2003

The Halloween Outfits of West Minnesota Avenue

Children's choices give us opportunity to study our culture

By Paul Jerome Croce
SPECIAL TO THE BEACON

There was an Elvis sighted in DeLand recently — and a bat, some hula girls, Mulan, a poor starving professor, and a dentist with rotten teeth.

These were just some of the more than 500 people (and other creatures) who showed up at our family's door to ask for candy on Halloween night. But they were not the main characters in the carnival setting in DeLand's northwest quadrant Oct. 31.

Who were the winners, in terms of Halloween-costume frequency? The envelope please ...

The Top Ten (and the number that came calling at our door on Halloween):

1. Princess (28)
2. Witch (23)
3. (Tie) Scream and Vampire (15)
5. (Tie) Cat and Ninja (14)
7. Spider Man (13)
8. (Tie) Fireman and Self (10)
10. (Four-way Tie) Grim Reaper,



Hulk, Rock Star and Skeleton (3)

As always with the social sciences, there were questions of interpretation.

A gender-neutral approach to the Witches (adding the three Wizards) raises that tally. The fifteen Vampires include one Vampiress. The Power

Rangers were all the red one, except for two blue and one black. The Cats included many kittens and one "in the Hat."

There were also variations within the above categories that I simply included within those larger sets: Princesses included

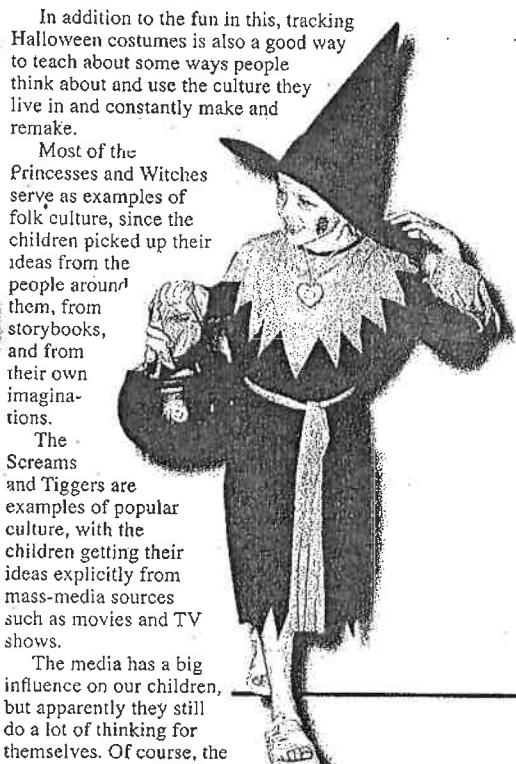
"snow flake," "Egyptian," "medieval" (two of these), "Arabic," and "gothic."

Witches included "adorable," "baby," "Sabrina," "Wicked, of the East," and "pretty." Ninjas included one "Turtle, Teenage Mutant."

Of the ones who identified themselves as "Self," one said he was Iris "regular self." (I didn't ask what the others were.) Rock Stars included one "punk dead rapper," and all the Hulks were Incredible.

Other noteworthy costumes that didn't make it to the Top Ten include five ghosts (one with "a happy face"), four devils (one "with no horns"), four "Indians" (no one said "Native American"), including one Pocahontas, four pumpkins, including one declaring to be "evil." Four Tiggers included two Tiggers and four with "no idea" what they were.

There were also three hobos, including one declared to be "undead," and three police, including one member of a SWAT team. There were two Bat Men but only one Robin, one good child, one guy from darkness, one bum wanting money for nothing, one Uncle Sam, one alien abductee, one nurse disguised as a doctor, and two rabid dogs held by a man on a leash, but only one Harry



In addition to the fun in this, tracking Halloween costumes is also a good way to teach about some ways people think about and use the culture they live in and constantly make and remake.

Most of the Princesses and Witches serve as examples of folk culture, since the children picked up their ideas from the people around them, from storybooks, and from their own imaginations.

The Screams and Tiggers are examples of popular culture, with the children getting their ideas explicitly from mass-media sources such as movies and TV shows.

The media has a big influence on our children, but apparently they still do a lot of thinking for themselves. Of course, the abductee and the no-idea kids show a lot of adolescent anger and irony, coming out in clever and healthy ways.

Join the carnival next year, and try to guess which character — folk, popular, or ironic — will be the winner.

— Croce is professor and chair of American studies at Stetson University. Each year he tallies the costumes of the creatures who visit on Halloween at his West Minnesota Avenue home, in one of DeLand's most popular neighborhoods for trick-or-treating. Send him e-mail at

