

Rhode Island Comic Con Growing Pains

Part One — All hell breaks loose!

Ah *Nerd Rage!* This is definitely the age of the nerd because when a comic con goes wrong, social media blows up with lambasting Facebook posts, furious Tweets, hashtags like #RICComicConFAIL2014, and tons of protest pics like the one of a guy in a dog costume holding a sign to rouse the public into action against the unjust organizers of a major pop-culture event!



And it so happened in Providence's backyard at the now infamous 2014 Rhode Island Comic Con!

Was it all bad? Well, having attended San Diego Comic-Con (SDCC) and Rhode Island Comic Con (RICC) every year since 2012 (that being the inaugural year for RICC), I feel like I have a unique perspective on this whole unpleasant situation at this year's RICC that I'd like to share. And then I'll write about all great things that went right at The Biggest Show In The Smallest State!

First let me start off by saying, "Calm down people!" Look, I understand your frustration believe me I do. And I know that you feel wronged in a way that just eats you up inside. And that you want to be compensated for your losses; I agree completely and I feel that the RICC organizers do as well.

But all of you have to understand that RICC is becoming a victim of its own success. Believe me when I tell you, standing in line for 2 - 4 hours in the rain (which sucks) is minor compared to camping out in line for half a day the blazing San Diego sun only to NOT get in to the panel that you've flown thousands of miles and spent thousands of dollars to attend.

I've had that experience at SDCC and many other super-unpleasant ones that make the disarray at RICC look a lot less like a disaster and more like an inconvenience.

And yet, I love San Diego Comic-Con with a passion. Why? Because at the end of the day where can you see at twenty-five foot tall Godzilla, Harrison Ford, The Guardians Of The Galaxy, a nine foot tall Apocalypse, all the Batmobiles, sit on the Iron Throne, and get spit on by a giant walking talking monster all in one place? And more and more and more!

And so too does RICC offer its unique series of magical encounters that I will get to in a moment.

But everyone's pain is different to one's own, and I do empathize, so let's deal with what happened and how the organizers, which includes a man by the name of Steven Perry from Altered Reality

Entertainment, can make it all right again and even better.



Okay, so what went wrong with RICC?

Simply put, the event was oversold. Somewhere upward of 20,000 tickets to RICC were sold and it appears that the Providence Convention Center can only handle about 14,000 people (according to Cvent.com). There's also about 100,000 square feet of useful convention space to put all of those people in. The expectation of the RICC organizers were that there'd be so-called "turnover capacity" that would keep people flowing in and out of the convention center so more people could come in (hence being able to oversell tickets) like in other conventions such as CES (Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas) or SIGGRAPH (the mega computer graphics conference). Only a comic con is **not** like other conventions!

I know from my experiences with SDCC that fans will linger for nearly the entire day checking out every little thing they possibly can with the exhibits, events, artists, photo ops, signings, panels, and of course waiting in line after line! After two successful years of RICC you think that the organizers would have realized that.

But they didn't and hence you got this:

- Tickets being sold long after the venue was closed by the Providence Fire Marshall
- Fans waiting in line outside in the freezing rain for hours. Fans with kids!
- Families and friends separated when fans went outside in search of food (since the convention center ran out of it) and then not being allowed back in.
- Vendors, exhibitors, and artists who paid huge sums of money to have a table on the exhibit hall floor not being allowed back in and potentially losing all kinds of business.
- VIPs and celebrities getting locked out, or their photo ops getting radically rescheduled because of the lockout.
- Fans missing out on their paid-for photo ops, paid-for VIP access to the panels, and the precious few hours they had to attend the con in the first place—after long out-of-state drives and struggling to find parking.
- Tales of inhospitable RICC volunteers who had no clue was going on or how to address the fans' ire and needs.
- Eliza Dushku's (*True Lies*, *True Calling*, *Dollhouse*) Louis Vuitton handbag getting stolen—though

that might be the Omni Hotel's issue but still, you can't have a con celeb getting pissed off like that and then trashing the con on social media—not good!

- Reports of vendors not getting paid.
- Reports of vendors, celebs, and exhibitors getting treated poorly by the con volunteer staff.
- Facebook and Twitter blowing up with mountains of negative posts about RICC to the tune of #RICComicConFAIL2014, and the con organizers both downplaying the problem and then furiously deleting the posts from their pages.
- And the con organizers not taking any responsibility at first for this mess, not offering any apologies or solutions, and ostensibly scapegoating the Fire Marshall.

This is not how a comic con is run!

And as I've been writing this article, Steven Perry (the con's head honcho) has also realized that. He has posted an extensive public apology to the con's Facebook page, plus lots of details on how they're going to reimburse jilted ticket holders and make things better for next year.

But really what happened was that the RICC organizers panicked when all hell broke loose. It happens, we all do. This event got too big too fast, and they didn't know what to do, so they panicked. Give them a break. Now that everyone's had a chance to calm down, Perry and his people are owning up and addressing the problems.

That's the perfect first start.

For if they didn't, it's not just the fans who won't come. If the vendors pull out, and then the sponsors pull out, and the celebs pull out or won't come at all, then the convention would be dead in its junior year!

It's not an easy thing. Even the New York Comic Con is having these problems and more in spades.

San Diego Comic-Con has been struggling with this very thing for the last five or six years! For all of its immensity and popularity, major studios like Sony and Paramount were not as prevalent at this year's SDCC. And one of SDCC's most longtime venerated vendors pulled out for next year as well, Mile High Comics.

Believe me when I tell you, between the insanely long and grueling lines, the crowded and often times in accessible panels, the lack of services like water and bathrooms, the inescapable noise and commotion, the way overpriced everything, the prurient occasional trouble makers who violate female cosplayers' space with inappropriate behavior, and the overall missed opportunities and aggravations of San Diego Comic-Con; what happened over the weekend at RICC was just a series of unfortunate but fixable circumstances.

And SDCC takes great pains to address these issues year after and year and will not rest until they can make everyone happy to the best of what's humanly possible. And that's why people will always love and return to SDCC.

Here's the shortlist of what Steven Perry needs to do to regain the fans', vendors', exhibitors', and celebs' trust so there will be a Rhode Island Comic Con next year:

Spread out the convention, and utilize more of the unused space at the convention center! An entire

level of the convention center was wholly underused. Like at SDCC take the celebs out of the exhibit hall and move them somewhere where there's room—the lower level or off site. SDCC puts them up above the exhibit hall in the Sails Pavilion. No muss, no fuss.

Also SDCC has tons of events off site from the convention center itself. They absorb the whole downtown area from the Gaslamp District; Petco Stadium and park; the local hotels like the Hilton, Marriott, and Omni; the marina, nearby parking lots, and even way off site at colleges accessible via shuttle buses.

There's plenty of available space in and around the Rhode Island Convention Center to move lots of the convention off site and make it way more accessible to fans.

Also, do away with the wristbands. This is not and over 18 nightclub scene. SDCC uses printed onsite badges in lanyards with adverts on them. The badges go into a special transparent sleeve. The badges also have a forge proof hologram and a bar code on them. The bar code allows vendors to scan them for fans to offer them special deals, discounts, entries into contests, and more. Between selling ad space on the lanyard ribbons and the bar code thing, that'd help pay for the cost of printing up badges that are way easier to track and maintain.

And no badge sales at the door!

This may be a hard reality for SDCC fans but it solves more problems than it creates. Everything is done online, and when it's sold out, it's sold out months in advance. That's it. The San Diego Convention Center holds about 65,000 people (yeah it's that big and the city is spending half a trillion dollars to double its size!) and they **never close the doors!**

Also, there needs to be line managers and line routes. SDCC organizers are masters at managing long lines. They snake around hallways, out doors, under awnings, split apart so people can get through, and it's all done in a super organized fashion with line mangers.

Crazy lines are awful but when they are managed well, then it's tolerable.

And the line managers along with the rest of the volunteers have excellent communications with walkie-talkies. They know what's going on. And they'll tell you if you're not getting into a panel. And they are nice, kind, courteous, well trained, and professional—lots of them are even in costume!

Have lots of panels happening both on site and off site. There was no reason why RICC shouldn't have had a **Farscape** panel with Gigi Edgley, or a **The Flash** panel with John Weseley Shipp, or a ton of others about making comics, Kickstarter campaigns for creative ventures, or the future of **Star Trek** from a Fan's perspective. Even at SDCC George RR Martin had his panel at the nearby Hilton hotel. In other words, get the fans to move around off site!

Also for the big rooms there's giant projection screens that show what's happening on the panel stage so people can at least see celebs.

Perry also has to make it easier for the fans, vendors, exhibitors, and celebrities to get in and out of the convention center exhibit hall. There should *not* be only one entrance. That RICC arch has to either go or there needs to be two or three more. The massive SDCC exhibit hall has lots of doors for people to move in and out of.

Vendors need to be reassured that they'll get paid. Artists and exhibitors need to be reassured that they'll be treated professionally so they'll keep reserving their spots for the following year.

Celebrities need to be reassured with gusto that they will always have a positive experience at RICC.

Perry, if he hasn't already done so, needs to give the SDCC organizers a call and get their advice.

And the fans need to be reassured that something like this **will never happen again!**

There's many more examples but that's all I can think of right now.

Fortunately for me, I was not locked out, which allowed me to report for you on all the amazing things that I had seen and heard.

All in all, when you look past the overselling/lockout debacle, and the panicked approach to handling the crisis at hand, and the untrained mistakes some of the volunteers made, it was still a great convention.

No convention is going to go off without a hitch. And RICC has a few hitches right now but that only means that it is growing faster than anyone realizes. People want this kind of super-sized pop culture event. Where else are you going to let your cosplaying geek flag fly without fear of ridicule from the more so-called conservative elements of our society? And where else are you going to find all the things you love about sci-fi/fantasy/comics/pop-culture in one place?

For a few precious days, people can express their inner geek and enter into a "nerd-vana" that we only catch glimpses of on television, at the movies, or in the solemnity of our own pads. At comic cons we are with our people, just like Woodstock in 1969—and we all know what a mess that was!

The only difference is that we get our *Geek-stock* all year round, every year, everywhere!

From the fledgling Rhode Island Comic Con to the granddaddy of them all, San Diego Comic-Con, our people gather to rejoice in our pop-culture passions!

So give RICC a break people and let's see how they bounce back from all this!

That being said, in the next part, here's what went totally right at the 2014 Rhode Island Comic Con.

Welcome to the big leagues, Rhode Island Comic Con!



Part Two — Shatner Gives Me The Finger!

So Day One of RICC started out like any first day at this event for the last couple of years. I got in early, parked my car at Providence Place, headed over to the Rhode Island Convention Center, charmed my way in without a badge or wristband because I write for *Motif* (woohoo!), and headed over to the *Motif* table.

But this time, I was in my Batman costume! Yep! I decided to do the whole day dressed as the “Caped Crusader Journalist!”

And I got a lot of nods for it. In fact, several times people kept asking me to take photos with them! Awesome!

That’s one of the great things about cosplay!

So, the first thing I did was instead of the heading straight to the exhibit hall—which I always seemed to do—I decided to seek out the less beaten comic con path.

And that’s when I found the *mechanical bull* on the upper level of the convention center!

That’s right! A mechanical bull! Hahaha!

I spoke with the owner of the company who runs the bull and the adjoining laser tag adventure in one of the ballrooms nearby, Jennifer Routolo of Okees Old Fashioned Amusements (www.okeesoldfashioned.com) out of Johnston RI, who had this pithy observation to make, “Having the bull at Rhode Island Comic Con for the first time has been a real adventure. I love getting people off—the bull that is!”

Then it was over to the New England Brethren of Pirates (nebpirates.com/) where I spoke with Brandon Berry the owner of this fascinating group of scallywags! Dressed in all Jack Sparrow he had this to say about his irascible troupe of brigands, “We have big chests and lots of booty!”

Then he introduced me to *Lola, the Kraken!*

After that, I walked over to the celebrity photo op area at the convention centers’ grand rotunda and I was amazed at that sight of the massive lines. It was a scene reminiscent of San Diego Comic-Con and my first indication that this year things were going to be different—and oh they were!

Good and...not so good.

But now it was time to attend a panel.

As you know, what’s a comic con without great panels? And this year, I was impressed that RICC had a good line up of these unique events. Though I would have loved to see more available, the ones that they had were fine and quite enjoyable.

The first big one was the Eliza Dushku Q&A. And boy was she in a bit of a snit. You see her Louis Vuitton handbag was stolen the night before when she was checking into the connected Omni Hotel. The idiots who took it were eventually caught but that didn’t diminish Ms. Dushku’s ire. And it showed even during her panel when she was struggling to be jocular and friendly. Who can blame her though?

She did generate a lot of goodwill and it was definitely enjoyable to listen to her stories. And who knew

there were so many ***Buffy/True Calling/Dollhouse/Bring It On!*** fans! Wow! The biggest ballroom where the panel happened was packed with about 2,000 people! Good for her!

She talked about putting acting on hold, going to college, and her desire to enter into the social work services field. She credits her acting for inspiring her change of career. "A woman came up to me and told me that my character gave her the strength to confront her abuser," Dushku remarks to a generous applause.

Then it was downstairs to the exhibit hall!

But first I had to check out the plethora of sci-fi TV/movies and comics themed vehicles that lined the periphery lobby of the main convention center level:

- **K.I.T.T.** from the show ***Knight Rider***
- An ***Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*** battle truck
- ***The Dark Knight*** Bat-Pod
- The ***Ghostbusters'*** ECTO-1 ambulance
- **Luke Skywalker's landspeeder** from ***Star Wars: A New Hope***, complete with an **R2-D2** droid
- ***The Back to the Future*** Delorean complete with *Flux Capacitor Time Travel Engine*
- ***The Mystery Machine*** from the ***Scooby-Doo*** cartoons
- And even a ***Breaking Bad*** bullet-ridden truck obviously from a drug deal gone bad!

But at this point I begin to see the swelling crowds trying to move around that are definitely giving me San Diego Comic-Con flashbacks! What's happening here?

As I try to head into the exhibit hall, I stop by the *Motif* table and learn that the Providence Fire Marshall had just closed the doors not allowing anyone else into the convention! This unprecedented act is a first in the convention center's 22-year history! Wow!

I'm astounded. I knew right then and there that this was going to be a big part of my story.

I had a feeling that all of us were in for a rough ride.

I pulled one fan, Ayah, out of the crowd and asked her what she thought about this overselling/overcrowding situation. She said, "My friend, who left to get food at the mall (because they ran out of food here) bought a ticket for a Vic Mignogna photo shoot for her birthday and now they won't let her back in!"

Wow!

Even when the 65,000 people capacity of the San Diego Convention Center is reached (and it is every day of SDCC!), **they never shut the doors!** I've never heard of such a thing. I was blown away.

And that wasn't all. Aside from problems with the celebs like Eliza Dushku, local talent and exhibitors were also having problems like Sarah Michelle, *Miss Terror Con 2014* (RICC's sister convention held in the summer).

Sarah was having all kinds of problems with getting to her table, getting set up, and getting help and professional treatment from the volunteers. "I'm really sad that the weekend went the way it did. This

was something that could've been great but was disorganized and handled unprofessionally. On top of what happened to attendees, I was completely disrespected by staff members. I did not return on Sunday due to the way I was treated and the uncertainty of having a table. Steve Perry and Joe Goulart apologized to me and said they would handle them. I truly hope this company makes things right with not only myself, but all the attendees."

And as we all know now there were many, many more stories like this.

But to RICC and Steven Perry's credit they have finally issued several formal apologies and are now offering refunds and assurances to make things right for the fans, vendors, exhibitors/sponsors, and celebrities.

Here's a snippet of what Perry posted on the RICC's Facebook page recently.

"I'd like to apologize once again to all of the guests who had disappointing or frustrating experiences at this past weekend's RI Comic Con.

"After we learned of the doors being shut at 2:00 pm on Saturday, my staff and I were so busy dealing with various issues onsite that we didn't have a chance to respond to social media postings in a timely manner. For that I am sorry, and have learned a valuable lesson that swift timing of responses is critical on all social media channels... 'Hindsight is 20/20' and I can guarantee that combined with our experience running RI Comic Con, we have learned a valuable lesson in how to run an event of this magnitude here in Rhode Island and will be training hard to ensure that what happened this weekend simply will not happen again."

See the event's Facebook page for the entire apology.

But I was still going strong and got into the huge exhibit hall and took a look around.

The whole space was completely filled with one side full of artists, the middle full of vendors and exhibitors, and the other side full of celebrities. Probably not the best layout for an oversold event.

But the stuff that was there was great! Lots of items on sale from books, hard-to-find DVDs, t-shirts, swords, fantasy jewelry, props, costumes, toys, and much, much more. Tons of exhibitors from 5-Wits Adventures, the Rhode Island Science Fiction Club, the local CW affiliate, Subway (why?), Providence Night Out, *Motif* magazine (gotta plug my people!), and Sarah Michelle (who is also a local celebrity and should have been treated as such), plus many, many more.

And of course tons and tons of great cosplayers everywhere—myself included! Hahaha!

It was everything and more you can expect from a comic con exhibit hall scene—I only wish they had more physical space for more stuff!

Next up was the *These Are The Voyages* Panel with **Star Trek** alums Nichelle Nichols and Walter Koenig (Lt. Nyota Uhura and Ensign Pavel Chekov respectively).

They told their usual *Star Trek* stories like how Dr. Martin Luther King told Nichols that she had to remain on the show to help further the cause of equality for all races. And how her character and William Shatner's Captain Kirk character shared the first television broadcasted interracial kiss (that was actually banned in the south in the 1960s!). Now-a-days with the likes of the big torrid interracial

love affair between Olivia Pope and President Fitz Grant on ABC's *Scandal* it's no big deal at all. But back then a lot of barriers had to be broken down and *Star Trek* was at the forefront doing so!

Koenig told the audience a crazy story of how he was asking for directions while on the way to a movie shoot and the only person around was a black lady who offered for him to feel her breasts in lieu of directions!

Okay!

Now on to Shatner!

That's right baby! **William Shatner**, Captain Kirk himself, and the big headliner star of this year's Rhode Island Comic Con!

And I was determined to meet him after all these years!

He arrived late at the biggest totally packed ballroom at the convention center, and left early. Figures. He fielded only three questions from a line of fans at the microphone. He mostly talked about breeding his dogs and other un-*Star Trek*-related stuff.

But he did open with how after he was asked to cameo in the next *Star Trek* movie, it was all over the Internet the day after—especially when he told nobody about it! Guess that's the power of social media for you! It was funny. And he also told the audience that he'd only do it if it were a meaningful role. Guess we'll see.

His best quote from the panel was, "Anything is possible in Science Fiction!"

I completely agree!

After the panel, I couldn't get near him but I did so on the next day that I'll get to in a bit.

Then it was back to the exhibit hall. Sensing a pattern yet?

Comic con fans don't leave. Since this event was only in the convention center, there is no reason to leave unless to get food. In fact, that's one more thing that RICC and SDCC have in common: lack of on-site food options.

For all its grandeur, the San Diego Convention Center is a little light on food options. There's a few concession stands and nooks that sell hot dogs and other quick bites, and lots of Mrs. Field's Cookie stands, and now there's a Starbucks in the convention center lobby, plus an almost never open cafeteria, but in reality, you have to go outside to get decent food—of which there's endless choices! One of my favorites is *Lolita's at the Park* near Petco Stadium with the best breakfast burritos anywhere in the US!

Same is true for the Rhode Island Convention Center. You've got to go over to the *Trinity Brew House*, *Fire and Ice*, and the *Union Station Brewery*, among many others for good food and beer during the convention. The only problem was that once you left, you couldn't get back in.

But they're going to fix that for next year.

This year, I decided to forego too much coverage of the vendors and exhibitors in the exhibit hall and focus on the local artists: writers, illustrators, filmmakers, and actors.

The first one I met was author Stacey Longo (www.staceylongo.com). Writer of several horror genre books such as ***Secret Things: Twelve Tales to Terrify*** and the children's book ***Pookie & the Lost and Found Friend***, among many others.



We had a long chat about the current state of the publishing industry, whether it is advantageous for writers to seek representation and traditional publishing or go independent, and about how venues like RICC allow independent authors a great way to showcase their work sans the nascent help that large press publishers don't seem to provide now-a-days. "This is my third year at Rhode Island Comic Con, and it's a fabulous event for meeting new readers, connecting with other authors, as well as illustrators, and networking. I wouldn't miss it for the world!"

And finally as the day was drawing to a close, it was time *coup de grâce* of the day: the *Costume Contest!*

This year's costume contest was exquisite. The level of costume design and performance has definitely reached the San Diego Comic-Con *Masquerade* level. I couldn't believe the complexity of some of these original works!

Works such as: Apocalypse from the *X-Men* comics (that will be the main villain in the next *X-Men* movie), a mesmerizing Snow Queen and Disney's *Frozen's* Elsa, a crazy indescribable chair thing that turned into Marvel's Red Skull complete with a glowing Tesseract/Infinity Stone, a winged creature girl with a branch-like wingspan so large she couldn't even get on the stage, amazing kid's costumes like Lilith (one of the *Teen Titans*), and the sci-fi themed *Yellow Brick Road Warriors* troupe of post-apocalyptic rogue cosplayers!

And many, many more!

As great as all of them were the best one was hands-down **Space Marine**. A giant blue and silver armored soldier/mecha behemoth that simply stole the show. In fact, it won best in show, and was

created and worn by last year's Rhode Island Comic Con *Costume Contest* Best in Show winner (for his giant foam Incredible Hulk) Austin Vincent!

At 16 years old, I asked him how it felt to have won this contest two years in a row. He said, "It's a great honor, and hopefully I'll be back next year!"

And I would be back the following day for more RICC and Shatner!

The second day started off with the George Takei (Lt. Hikaru Sulu from *Star Trek*). This was a well-received Q&A session with the star to a packed audience.

And for good reason.

A few years ago he came out publically about his sexual orientation and his support for marriage equality and the LGBT community. He talked at length about the struggle it's been in California and across the country to recognize same-sex married couple's legally. In fact, his husband and partner for many decades was also in the audience. People cheered when he waved.

Though Takei was a little light on talking *Star Trek*-related stories, he did mention that the movie ***Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*** should really have been titled ***Captain Sulu To The Rescue!***

He did have some great observations about how *Star Trek* presaged technological realities in our world today like smartphones (e.g., the communicator the crew of the Enterprise used). And that he'd love a device like the transporter that would allow him to bypass security at the airports!

Of course Takei's little rivalry with William Shatner was alive and well even here in Rhode Island as Takei mentioned that he patterned one of his characters (Dr. Ed Matsutani from the film ***Larry Crowne***) after a certain "...puffed up ego-centric *Star Trek* colleague." (Read: Shatner).

He also put the recent announcement that Apple's CEO Tim Cook is gay in *Star Trek* terms as being part of the **Vulcan IDIC** philosophy: *Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations*.

Then it was back to the exhibit hall to talk to more artists and some celebrities—including Shatner, but I'm getting to that!

On my way, I couldn't help notice how packed the convention center was on a Sunday even after all the craziness of the day before.

Fans love comic cons! Bottom line.

Back in the 80s and 90s I used to go to Star Trek conventions. They were kind of the precursor to the all-out mega-pop-culture-fests that comic cons are now. However, by the end of the 90s Star Trek conventions started dying down in both number of events and size of venues. Plus they were mostly about *Star Trek* with a smattering of other sci-fi/fantasy universes. So I stopped going.

And then came the 2012 San Diego Comic-Con. I originally went out there to promote my own independently published sci-fi novel ***NLV (a.k.a. New Las Vegas), Chapter One — The House Always Wins***. I knew SDCC was going to be big but I never dreamed it would be galactic-ly mind-

blowingly big! And in that same year Rhode Island Comic Con started up, and it was small but had doubled in size last year. This year was overwhelming for this venue. And even though I knew I was not in San Diego, I very much felt like I was in some ways!

Comic cons cover everything from sci-fi, fantasy, comics, cosplay, movies, TV, pop-culture, wrestling, gaming, technology, artistry, kids' interests, music, dance, performance, and just about anything else you can think of. And when you add in big studio, game makers, and publisher money like at SDCC and New York Comic Con, then things get taken to a whole new level!

That's the draw of comic cons way beyond that of the old-school *Star Trek* conventions.

On this second day of RICC, there was definitely a huge presence of fire marshals, police, security personnel, and extra staff. And the chaos was tightly organized. Only a few people at a time were being let into the exhibit hall.

No one was taking any chances.

Of course the damage was done but the RICC organizers just needed to get through this day without any more disasters and then figure out how to fix all the issues.

Which I believe they are judiciously working on now.

But I got in and started talking to more writers, illustrators, and finally celebrities.

I spoke with Chris Philbrook author of the zombie series ***Adrian's Undead Diary*** (thechrisphilbrook.com/), an indie publisher putting out books under his own name. I told him about my own war stories in the indie publishing world and my Herculean efforts going to NYC and LA, among other avenues, to find representation and getting traditionally published. We both had a lot of stories to share.

As for the con, he had this to say, "For me Rhode Island Comic Con has proven to be one of the best shows I've attended this year."

Awesome!

Next I spoke with Eric Dimpleby (***White Out, The Fetus Cloud***) another independently published author from small presses such as Severed Press and Damnation Books. His website (www.ericdimpleby.com/) has a rather funny title: "Here Lies Eric Dimpleby."

"It's good for me personally. I'm not selling a book; I'm also selling my worldview. Here they get to know who you are." He tells me when I ask him about his thoughts on RICC as a venue for indie authors.

Next up were the celebrities. With a huge selection of celebs this year at RICC, I decided to focus on a select few, as I knew I wouldn't have time to talk to everyone. So I chose the following three to talk to, and much to my pleasure, I got them!

First was Gigi Edgley who's best known for her rascally character Chiana, a white Nebari alien of the SciFi Channel's ***Farscape***. *Farscape* was one of my favorite shows on that channel (now foolishly rebranded as SyFy) before it was cancelled in 2003 and brought back briefly for a mini-series in 2004.

The crazy characters, the crazy sets, and that absolute crazy writing made that show an instant classic. And to hear that the show creator Rockne S. O'Bannon recently announced that there would be a **Farscape** movie, I knew I had to talk to Ms. Edgley.

The first thing I wanted to know was whether or not her first name was pronounced like "jee-jee" or "ghe-ghe." She said it was the former. Then we both talked about how awesome **Farscape** was. I cited a few of my Chiana-specific episodes. Then we talked about the upcoming **Farscape** movie. I told her that I hoped her character would be in it. She told me that Mr. O'Bannon showed her the printed script but didn't let her read it, so she has no idea yet.

Finally, I asked her what she thought of our beloved Rhode Island and here's what she had to say. "I absolutely love Rhode Island. Everyone here has been beyond amazing, so welcoming, so down to earth, and that you guys absolutely have the most sexiest accents that I've ever heard in my *whole* life. So thank you very much for having me. My motto to life is to always wake up happy and to dream the life and live the dream."

Yeah!

And then it was on to John Wesley Shipp of the 1990s TV series **The Flash** fame.

Now here I am totally psyched to talk to him because I've been watching the rebooted **The Flash** TV series on the CW. In fact, I saw the pilot episode on the preview night at this year's San Diego Comic-Con. And the best thing is that John Wesley Shipp who played the title character on the 90s show (a.k.a., Barry Allen) now plays Barry Allen's father, Henry Allen. I think it was a great way to pay homage to the original series while welcoming in the new series with absolutely amazing special effects.

In fact, we talked about "the flash effect." Back in Shipp's day, he told me they used to put him on the back of a moving truck in costume with a wind cannon blowing in his face while he pretended to run fast (actually he was on a treadmill), then they *green-screened* in all the stuff around him. Now it's all CGI, and impressive CGI at that. The last episode had a "flash" rescue that was on the same level as the Quicksilver Pentagon jailbreak scene in this year's movie **X-Men: Days of Future Past**.

It was great to meet him and here's what he had to say about RICC, "It's great man! I think they call it the biggest con in the biggest littlest state! Something like that. It was great."

He even remarked about the overcapacity issue as well. "It has grown so fast, and that we had so much more people even overcapacity. They're gonna have to find even bigger venues!"

And finally he said he'd be heading back to Vancouver to film episode number 12 of **The Flash** that he'll be in!

Cool!

And finally it was time to attempt to meet my boyhood icon, William Shatner!

Told you I'd get to him.

Part of the comic con magic is when something so cool and unexpected happens that it just makes the whole event for you. Just like when at SDCC when I thought I wasn't going to get into the super exclusive *Godzilla Encounter*, it just so happened that when I was lamenting that to my buddies in the

hotel lobby some guy popped up his head and said that his company made and runs the exhibit and he could get us in. And he did!

Same here at RICC. I was wandering around, and saw the autograph area where Shatner would be but because his photo ops were drastically rescheduled due to the overcapacity issue the day before, there was no line. But I wandered into the line anyway, and then Shatner magically showed up not two minutes later to do a super brief autograph signing.

What timing!

Actually, I was second in line. But no matter. The person in front of me though, had her kid's picture signed by Shatner and then the picture was taken by a staff member who then took off! Neither me nor Shatner had any idea what was going on but the mother was pissed!

I then seized the opportunity to say a quick, "Hi," to Mr. Shatner and told him that I write for Providence's only remaining pop-culture magazine: *Motif*—now that the *Providence Phoenix* is defunct.

He seemed to dig that and then it was the right time to get a quick quote from him. Here's what he said, "It has been a wonderful comic con; everybody has had a great deal of fun. And I'm glad to see my fans come out in the cool weather."

Short but sweet.

Even though I was told to take no pictures, like ten times, I did manage to shake Shatner's finger! That's right, his finger. I was hoping for his whole hand but all I got was his right index finger. At least it wasn't the middle one!

To be fair, he did have a Sharpie in that hand so, and I get the sense he doesn't do too many handshakes—germs and everything. So I'll take the finger!

It was a boyhood dream come true, and the highlight of the 2014 Rhode Island Comic Con for me!

Mission accomplished!

Okay so now it was back to the artists but first I went back out to the lobby where I was treated to Providence's **Big Nazo** (www.bignazo.com/) rocking the RICC fans. I don't even have to describe who they are. If you know *Motif*, and you know Providence, you know Big Nazo!

They were the perfect act to be performing here!

And upstairs during the con you had live music going jamming out tunes like the ***Ghostbusters*** theme.

Downstairs there was the Kidscon! A great RICC component of arts and crafts and entertainment designed specifically for the kids. That's something that you don't have at SDCC.

Back in the main lobby there was also a kooky strongman challenge where you wield a hammer and ring a bell to win a blow up Spider-Man!

All cool stuff!

Back in the exhibit hall I came across the *Boston Film Family*. A group of indie filmmakers from my hometown, Boston, Mass.!

Richard Chandler is the head of the Boston Film Family, a group that makes some crazy indie horror flicks that have actually starred Miss Terror Con herself, Sarah Michelle!

What a small world.

“We’re promoting the release of *Gilga Mesh* and the DVD release of *Boston Massacre*. Rhode Island Comic Con is a challenge to promote for the horror genre but it’s still been going well—getting the word out.”

They’ve got a Facebook page under the same name if you want to see what ghoulish tales they’ve done and what macabre stories they’re working on next!

Then I wandered over to the artist alley (that’s what they call the section of the exhibit hall at SDCC where all the graphic artists and illustrators hole up). Here I met Rich Pellegrino (www.richpellegrino.com), a real up and comer whose work has been seen on Wes Anderson’s *The Grand Budapest Hotel*.

Also Hugo award-winning artist Bob Eggleton, who did the famous *Cthulhu Motif* magazine cover! Of course it’s famous!

And finally Megan Yui a fine young illustrator who finds RICC a worthwhile venue to drum up new business. “A lot of people are looking for commissions, and I’m finding that I’m getting work out of it [RICC]. Mostly tattoo designs.”

The RICC artist alley has one feature that the SDCC one does not: lots of space! At San Diego Comic-Con the artists are so packed in as tight as sardines, you can hardly move. Here at Rhode Island Comic Con the artists have double the space to showcase their work and move around. May it always be so.

Lastly, just before I pick up my new Marvel *Deadpool* wallet from the Newbury Comics vendor table, I run into a long-time friend of *Motif* Thomas Broadbent and his posse. Tommy’s a regular at these events so when I asked where he was the day before he said, “After hearing about all the craziness yesterday I decided to wait; I would have come, but wouldn’t have stood out!”

And with that so ends my 2014 Rhode Island Comic Con adventure!

Whew!

Look people, I think though the organizers reach this time may have exceeded their grasp, I can already tell from the public statements that Steven Perry and his colleagues have some big plans in the works to not only repair and redeem this event but also make it bigger and better than ever!

Starting with adding a third day to the convention, moving some events to the Dunkin’ Donuts Center, training new staff, consulting with comic con experts maybe even the people at Comic-Con International (i.e., San Diego Comic-Con), and reworking the entire ticketing system to name a few.

Hang in there folks, because when it comes down to it, all of these overcapacity issues (overselling tickets to fans, the need for more staff, the need for more vendors/exhibitors, the need for more food,

the need for more everything) are actually good problems to have.

Rhode Island Comic 2015 is going to be a vastly different event from this one!

Steven Perry can rebuild it—faster, better, stronger!

Da, da, da, da ...