

# First encounter with a 'furry' on campus

By William C. Kashatus

For better and worse, teenagers have always amazed me. That's probably why I chose a career in teaching. I envy their idealism and try to encourage it as much as possible, while providing an occasional reality check to prepare them for the difficult challenges of the adult world that lies ahead.

I understand the adolescent desire for independence and self-expression, and appreciate the fact that young people on college campuses have taken a conspicuous part in social causes of various kinds, including the civil rights, antiwar, and anti-apartheid movements.

At the same time, I realize that teenagers are historically prone to feelings of isolation and a need to seek affirmation among their peers by creating their own subcultures, whether the party-crazed flappers of the 1920s or the rebellious hippies of the tumultuous Sixties. It's just a natural part of how a young person comes of age.

In fact, I thought I had seen everything until recently, when I met a "furry" on campus.

Since I teach at a community

college in a rural, conservative part of Pennsylvania, I usually don't witness the latest cultural fads until I return to Philadelphia for the summer. So you can imagine how surprised I was when I saw a student prancing down the hallway with a fox-tail protruding from the back of his pants.

When I stopped to ask him about the significance of his tail, he introduced himself as "Winterfox" and informed me that he was a member of the furry subculture. He also explained that the furries' strong passion for anthropomorphic animals, or creatures with human characteristics, inspires the group to dress as rabbits, horses, squirrels, and other furry mascots. They refer to each other as "mate" and usually travel in "packs," and some engage in sexual fetishes with "furverts," or those with an erotic appeal.

After thanking him for the information, I went on my way, giving serious reconsideration to the historical impersonations of Daniel Boone I perform for my history classes. After all, Winterfox and his cronies might get the wrong idea about the meaning of my coonskin hat.

I've since done my own research on the furries so I can better understand how to treat them in my classroom. It's been quite an education! Furries, who have been around since the 1980s, surfaced at early science fiction and anime fan conventions. But their numbers have grown recently as the conventions are becoming larger and because, as the community ages, they are marrying and having families.

Furries are one of the most misunderstood groups, though their penchant for anthropomorphic sexual fetishes doesn't help matters. Still, members complain that they are regularly harassed, sometimes physically attacked, and can even lose their jobs for suiting up.

It's difficult to determine exactly how many people identify with the subculture, though. According to internal surveys based on convention attendance numbers, there are between 5,000 and 10,000 furries in the United States.

The surveys also reveal that the typical furry is between the ages of 15 and 19; that most have participated in the community for at least five years; and that

the subculture is overwhelmingly male, with only about 25 percent identifying as female.

There are many kinds of furries, and they come from a broad range of socioeconomic backgrounds. But all furries seem to have four things in common.

First, they experienced a "coming out" process beginning with a childhood love of cartoons, especially ones that feature talking animals like Bugs Bunny, Scooby Doo, and Mickey Mouse.

Second, in preadolescence, the prospective furry takes refuge in these cartoon animals. Having been bombarded by tigers telling them what cereal to eat, camels smoking cigarettes, and shirts with alligators, they decide that human beings are not nearly as interesting as those animal characters.

Third, the future furry feels alienated from family, peers, and/or the larger society and desperately wants to be part of a community. After some googling on the Internet and participating in furry chatrooms, the awkward teen not only discovers that there are others like him, but that they are organized into a subculture that will make him feel like he belongs.

Finally, the teenage outcast becomes a full-fledged furry, choosing a character name, a species, and personality traits, purchases a fur suit or animal costume, and joins the furry community, where he is mentored by older furs.

While the subculture is one of the most unusual I've seen in my three decades as an educator, Furdom does have some redeeming qualities. Many furries are extremely intelligent people who eventually find employment in the computer and physical sciences, becoming productive members of society.

Furries also donate thousands of dollars to animal rights groups, demonstrating that they have a social conscience.

Eliminate the anthropomorphic sexual fetishes and I have no problem teaching furries. I just hope they stay clear of the many deer and squirrel hunters who frequent the forests around our college each fall, or they might lose more than a tail.

William C. Kashatus is a writer in Philadelphia.

✉ billkashatus@yahoo.com