

Real-Life Superheroes

By Kevin Fritz

This local group is dedicated to dressing up for charity.

There is a whole other world out there whose inhabitants never lost the joy of dressing up. But as adults, they work to combine their passion for costumes with raising money for children who may never have such child-like aspirations.

Spearheaded by **Rick Stafford** and his wife, **Lisa**, of **Orlando**, who have been dressing up and raising money for more than seven years, Costumers With a Cause (CWC) was founded by the collaborative efforts of several charity groups and friends in late 2008.

The organization, which has grown to 35-plus members, with spin-off chapters in Chicago and New England, entertains at approximately 12 events a year, raising an average of \$1,000 per outing. You can find them in malls, children's hospitals, movie theaters and at parties portraying the likes of Captain America, Iron Man, Spiderman and Wonder Woman. "We just love costuming," says Rick. "It's a fantasy world."

But it's the real world that really drives the Staffords and CWC to help as many children as they can. In 2003, Rick and Lisa's son, **Christian**, was diagnosed with Lymphoma Leukemia and passed away two years later at the age of 8. Today, in its efforts to brighten up a child's day, CWC has built strong relationships with Nathaniel's Hope, Toys for Tots, the Spina Bifida Association of Central Florida and BASE Camp Children's Cancer Foundation.

"Costumers With a Cause has created moments in our children's lives that are immeasurable and irreplaceable," says BASE Camp Founder **Terri Jones**, adding that the fictional characters foster an atmosphere that allows the children to forget—at least for a little while—that they have cancer.

Rick admits that his costume of choice—Iron Man—allows him to hide his emotions behind a mask when he is entertaining at an event for sick children.

"When I am behind the helmet, it's okay, but when I am a face character like Aquaman,



PHOTO COURTESY OF RICK STAFFORD

Rick Stafford as superhero Aquaman.

it becomes difficult," he says. "It hits me hard when I see a small boy crying."

When Rick is not putting on a costume to help children, he is a fitness guru. The owner and lead instructor of Operation Fitness Boot Camp, he helps people get in shape and stay there. His first client, **Melissa Daly**, who weighed 380 pounds when they met, is now his partner in the business. Rick, 41, who has competed in hundreds of triathlons and swam across Tampa Bay and around Key West, is also a three-time Iron Man champion, which bodes well for his passion of costuming, especially his penchant for portraying the real Iron Man.

"You have to be an Iron Man to stay in that costume," he notes. "It really is armor. It takes 45 minutes to put on and weighs 85 pounds." **L**

For more information on Costumers With a Cause, visit CentralFloridaLifestyle.com.