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Bronies are proud of their allegiance to 'My Little Pony'

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Josh Gerlach isn't ashamed to admit it: He's a Brony, a male fan of "My Little Pony."

The 17-year-old Ephrata resident wears rainbow-hued "My Little Pony" gear, and not ironically, either. He keeps a couple of "My Little Pony" plushes in the rear window of his car, where anyone can see them. He watches the animated series "My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic" on days he needs "pony time."

"There's a little bit of a stigma to being a Brony," Josh says, noting, "I have a friend who has a whole bunch of Brony stuff — he keeps it in the closet."

But Josh, a musician who performs as Josh Morgan, is unabashed. "Yeah, I like, 'My Little Pony.' If you have a problem with it, I really do not care. ... There are people my age going out every night, doing drugs, drinking. I'm just here, watching ponies."

Josh is far from the only teen or adult who self-identifies as a Brony. Indeed, there are so many Bronies that they have their own convention: BronyCon.

The Baltimore Sun reported that more than 7,000 people attended BronyCon 2013 at the Baltimore Convention Center in August.

Josh Gerlach works as a model at Hollister Co., and as a sales associate at Hot Topic, at Park City Center. The latter store has a sizable selection of "My Little Pony" merchandise for adults: hoodies, wigs, smartphone wallets, and knee-high socks adorned with little yellow wings, like the ones on the pony named Fluttershy. The store also sells "My Little Pony" lacy underpants and padded bras.

"It's a huge craze," says Hot Topic sales associate Mariah Santiago. "It's insanity."

The term "Brony" is a blend of "bro" and "pony," but many female fans embrace the label, too. Other female fans prefer the term "Pegasister" (a Pegasus is a winged pony).

These ardent fans create pony art, and contribute it to websites like Equestria Daily, named for the fictional setting of "My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic," which airs on the Hub cable network.

Seventeen-year-old Sumrestar Roach, a Lancaster city teen, was elated when one of her drawings was featured on Equestria Daily. She had drawn a background pony named Lyra attempting to draw with a pencil clutched in her hooves.

Other Bronies create "MLP" fan fiction and fan comics, and engage in "MLP" cosplay, or costume role play. They wear T-shirts bearing the phrase "about 20 percent cooler" (a quote from the character Rainbow Dash) and they welcome new Bronies "into the herd."

Colleges have Brony student clubs. A documentary, "Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of 'My Little Pony,'" explores the Brony phenomenon.

Recently, one adult Brony took to the website Reddit, asserting he was fired because of his penchant for ponies. Other Bronies, including one claiming to be a lawyer, suggested that the fired Brony find a labor lawyer, and see if he had a case for wrongful termination.

Children have been drawn to the bright hues and sweetly drawn ponies of "My Little Pony" since Hasbro introduced the franchise in the early 1980s.

But it's the latest incarnation of "My Little Pony" — "My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic" — that has inspired the Brony phenomenon. The series was launched October 2010; its fourth season is set to premiere Nov. 23.

Developed by Lauren Faust, who previously had worked on "The Powerpuff Girls," this rebooted "My Little Pony" series began with a bookish, lavender unicorn pony named Twilight Sparkle being sent by her mentor, Princess Celestia, to the town of Ponyville, in the land of Equestria, to learn all she could about friendship.

The third season ended with Twilight Sparkle becoming a winged princess, a transformation that

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caused an uproar in the Brony world.

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The show explores the adventures and relationships of a diverse group of magical creatures.

"It's not an army of cookie-cutter nice-girls or cookie-cutter beauty queens like you see in most shows for girls," Faust wrote in Ms. magazine. "Cartoons for girls don't have to be a puddle of smooshy, cutesy-wootsy, goody-two-shoeness. Girls like stories with real conflict ... Girls are complex human beings."

Jessica Perez Blasko, children and teen services manager at the Lancaster Public Library, organized a "Ponypalooza" program last winter at the request of some local teens.

Aimed at young people ages 10 to 20, the program featured pony activities, pony snacks and screenings of "My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic."

Blasko says she finds the show "really funny," and its humor fairly sophisticated.

But she was initially a skeptic. "One of my friends asked me, 'Have you watched this show? It's good.' ... I said, 'Are we talking about the same thing — little plastic ponies that smell like cupcakes?' "

She thinks young adults, faced with a complicated world and a difficult job market, may be drawn to the show's positivity.

Dystopian fiction, which "asks some really hard-hitting questions about the world we live in," is also popular now with young people, but "not everyone is going to want to go into a darker place," the librarian says. "Maybe this is an alternative."

"It kind of allows people to go back to more of a childhood state," where there's "a lot less to worry about," Josh Gerlach says. "I don't know of another show targeted to little girls that two guys can sit and watch for an hour and a half."

Sumrestar Roach was one of the teens who convinced Blasko that the library should host "Ponypalooza."

She believes there are several stages to becoming a Brony: disbelief, denial, then acceptance.

Josh says much the same: "You don't really think you're going to get into it. ... And then, slowly, you'll think, 'Oh, that's really funny.' It just sucks you in."

Sumrestar's younger brother, Nicholas Beauchamp, started watching the show before she did. He says the show appeals to different people for different reasons.

"For me," Sumrestar says, "it's escapism. ... It's stress-relieving, and it makes me happy."

"For me," says Nicholas, 15, "it's the writing."

He says that on many Cartoon Network shows, "the characters have lost their innocence and the jokes are stupid."

On "My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic," the characters can be flawed, and occasionally not nice, but they're compelling, he says, noting that he wasn't as enamored of the writing in the show's third season.

Sumrestar says she appreciates how the characters talk like "normal" beings — albeit in breathy, sometimes trilling, tones.

In one episode, "Look Before You Sleep," the characters Applejack and Rarity argue during a sleepover. The moral wasn't that beings should ignore their differences — they should embrace them, and "be friends anyway," Sumrestar says.

"Some people have claimed that the show made them a better person," she says.

Her favorite character is a gray, cross-eyed Pegasus pony originally named Ditzzy Doo, but dubbed "Derpy Hooves" by fans.

Nicholas says he likes Pinkie Pie, an "Earth" pony, who's "extra-hyper and very entertaining." He also likes Rarity, a unicorn pony, for a reason he can't quite pin down. ("Because she's fabulous!" his sister offers.)

As in any fandom, there are "creepy" elements in the Brony world, Sumrestar and Nicholas say.

There is racy "My Little Pony" fanfic, for instance, and "My Little Pony" porn (Google that at your peril — it is, as the pony Rarity might say, "the worst possible thing").

Sumrestar says she thinks it's perfectly fine for grown men to like "My Little Pony" — "as long as they don't get creepy."

David Brubaker, of Narvon, acknowledges that Brony culture has a "dark side," but he says, firmly, "I don't promote that sort of fandom."

Brubaker started a meetup group of local Bronies in 2011. A half-dozen or so area Bronies get together for activities like picnics and miniature golf, he says.

He started watching "My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic" several years ago when he was out of work. Now 27, and employed at a bakery, he remains a diehard Brony.

He attended BronyCon in Baltimore and went dressed as Fancy Pants, a tuxedo-wearing unicorn pony. (Brubaker also enjoys attending Renaissance fairs in period costume.)

Brubaker enjoys "the all-around positive feel" of "My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic."

"The show promotes morality and treating everyone else that's different than you as a friend. Don't automatically write them off as weird. ... You just try to get along. That's the part I appreciate the most."

He's unfazed by the naysayers — or as the unicorn pony Trixie might call them, "neigh-sayers" — who find the Brony phenomenon to be strange.

They've probably not watched the rebooted series, and still think of "My Little Pony" as a show strictly for little girls, he says.

"The general Brony you come across is a nice person," Brubaker says. "The world is the way it is. There's nothing we can do to change it. We're just trying to enjoy ourselves along the way."

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Jody Ford · a month ago

It's not very often you find a positive article about bronies. I am reminded every day how happy I am that I found this show and fandom, and this is just another one of those reminders. :)

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Ian Huerta · a month ago

Bronies are for forever!!

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Pony Time is Bro Time! /) XD

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Artie Lange · a month ago

You all are a bunch of very disturbed freaks. Go get the help you desperately need before you get into trouble

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Peshmelba → Artie Lange · a month ago

Maybe you guys have a pastebin where every single hater's comment is stored ? Because they all look like the same, just a copy-paste from one other.

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Johnny Domino → Artie Lange · a month ago

You could paste that comment into every single discussion here, and be right a surprisingly large percentage of the time.

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Phillie_Chi → Artie Lange · a month ago

The freak would be the one calling other people freaks. Yes, I include myself in this statement.

Freak.

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Artie Lange → Phillie_Chi · a month ago

Oh I'm different but I'm not fascinated with images for children. A short circuit in the brain

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Axel Shirahama → Artie Lange · a month ago

Ummm...

Look. As Phillie_Chi said, we like the show for what it is. Quit hiding behind the holier-than-thou excuses and maybe develop a legitimate critique as to why the show is bad rather than say things about it that don't match up to what it is.