THE DOCTOR IS IN

Bill Albert, from Amana, Mike Williams, from Hiawatha, and Heather Armstrong, from Hiawatha, pose with Doctor Who memorabilia in a display case at the Cedar Rapids Public Library. The three belong to Universal Network of Iowa Timelords, or UNIT, an online fan club of the '60s television show.
Fans know the answer to ‘Doctor Who’

Club getting together to view ‘lesser moments’ of longtime sci-fi series

By Suzanne Barnes

Neither Mike Williams nor Bill Albert was watching at the beginning. After all, “Doctor Who” was the first program broadcast in November 1963 by the BBC after continuous coverage of the Kennedy assassination concluded in England.

Bill, however, says, “I’ve been watching for at least 25 years. It would have been about the mid-’70s that I started watching it on Iowa Public Television.” IPTV still broadcasts the show Friday nights.

Mike’s addiction is more recent, having started three years ago when a friend gave him an episode on tape.

Who is “Doctor Who”? The Doctor is a Time Lord from the planet Gallifrey. With his ship, called the TARDIS, the doctor and his companion can travel anywhere in time and space. “So creatively there’s no bounds to the show, they can go anywhere in any time. I think that’s what attracted me to it,” says Bill.

Although other Time Lords do not interfere, Doctor Who has rebelled against that policy and become actively involved in events from the past and future. But like the other Time Lords, when Doctor Who is sick or injured, he can regenerate into a new body.

As a consequence of the regeneration process, over the series’ 687 episodes, eight actors have played Doctor Who: William Hartnell (1963-66); Patrick Troughton (1966-67); John Pertwee (1969-73); Tom Baker (1974-80); Peter Davison (1980-84); Colin Baker (1984-86); Sylvester McCoy (1986-96); Paul McGann (1996). They are accompanied by companions, who also change over time.

Apparantly, the only change fans of the Doctor make is to increase in number. Both Mike and Bill are members of the Universal Network of Iowa Time Lords (UNTL) for fans of “Doctor Who.” The fan club began in March 1999.

“I started it,” says Bill. He had seen complaints on the Internet about the lack of any organized “Doctor Who” fan organization in Iowa or in the Midwest.

So Bill set up a “Doctor Who” e-mail discussion list. Mike was the first person to post.

Although it’s relatively new, “we’ve got people from all the surrounding states,” says Bill, as well as Nevada and Australia. “We had a surprising number of people all in this area join up.”

The two men are sitting in Beems Auditorium at the Cedar Rapids Public Library. A collection of memorabilia from “Doctor Who” currently is displayed in a lobby window because a gathering of UNIT members is scheduled in Beems from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sept. 23.

The men expect about 50 or more to attend. They are calling the convention “Exiled 3: The Klunkerfest” because they hope to show “lesser moments” of the series.

In England, “Doctor Who” is probably more popular than “Star Trek,” is in the United States, says Bill. “It is a national icon in England,” agrees Mike.

“Doctor Who” fans don’t dress up like “Star Trek” fans might for their conventions, and actors and actresses who appeared in the series seem happy to visit, sign autographs, pose for photographs. An upcoming convention Nov. 24-26 in Arlington Heights, Ill., will feature Sylvester McCoy, the seventh Doctor, and he will be a big draw, says Mike.

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