



## WonderCon '22: Creators offer advice on supporting diversity in the comics industry

A panel of comics writers and other content creators discuss bringing diversity to the industry.

By Beat Staff - 04/02/2022 1:30 pm 0

By Joanne Saunders

During a panel yesterday at WonderCon, a panel composed of creators engaged in acting, writing, and creating in the comic industry gave their advice on why it is essential to have diversity in the industry and how to take action to create work product and support others in that endeavor. The panelists included a variety of persons in the industry, including cosplayer **Jason Aulicino**, director **Patricio Ginelsa**, writers and content creators **Joelle Sellner**, **Josh Trujillo**, **Kayden Phoenix**, and **Cherry Davis**, and actor **Nhut Le**.

### How they succeeded in the industry

The panelists each discussed their backgrounds and how they ended up having a career in the industry. Cherry Davis, a comic, writer, and host, started by reporting for CNN on San Diego Comicon. Jason Aulicino, a cosplayer and content creator, shared that his first big break came from winning WonderCon years ago, “As a gay kid, we love escapism and dressing up lets us get out of our closeted life and get to be someone.” Kayden Phoenix, a Latina comic book universe writer, director, and producer, started in screenwriting and wanted to see Latina superheroes on screen.

Nhut Le, who plays Judomaster in HBO’s *Peacemaker*, shared that the earlier part of his career involved martial arts and stunt work. After struggling to make a successful career in acting for ten years, a week before he was offered the role in *Peacemaker*, he had planned to move back to Philadelphia to become a full-time pottery maker. Fortunately, he got the role before he moved.

Patricio Ginelsa, the film director of *Lumpia with a Vengeance*, which premiered at WonderCon this year, got his big break by directing music videos for the Black Eyed Peas. In film school he knew people of color casting white actors for parts in their films. He learned early on that people wanted to see people of color in their films, and even though it may take time to develop such projects, it’s worth it. “With *Lumpia with a Vengeance*, we did Kickstarter 8 or 9 years ago and funded it. It took 5 to 7 years. I’m not ashamed to make films about Filipino Americans.”

### Why it’s important to encourage diversity in the industry

The panelists agreed that encouraging diversity in the industry was essential and some felt a personal stake in this mission. “As a creator,” Phoenix said, “it is my responsibility that I have the power to say we exist. And I need to say it as authentically as possible.” Phoenix has written eight books, and her characters range from transgender to non-binary. Josh Trujillo, a gay comic and video game writer, who has worked with clients such as Marvel, HBO, Google, and DC Comics, said, “I wanted a character that reflected what I saw. People want to see themselves in popular media. We want to create the stories we want to read about in the world.”

When asked what steps creators can take to encourage diversity, moderator Kevin Winston said to buy diverse books such as Marvel Voices Anthologies, which include LGBT characters and indigenous characters. Marvel produces a compendium every year. “[Purchasing these books] will encourage Marvel to produce more of these. We want them in the mainstream. DC has published similar ones for Asian Americans and the pride community.”



Watching films made with diverse casts and created by various groups of creators would help support such growth of diversity in the industry. “People can also show support by being kind and supportive on social media by calling out mean comments and generally being a good ally,” said Aulicino. “It’s nice to see minorities rallying around each other and helping each other out,” said Le.

### What can these creators do to ensure diversity?

As a content creator, you must do the research if you want to write about someone who does not represent your experience. You have to know if something is offensive, the panelists advised. Joelle Sellner is an experienced animation writer with credits including *LEGO Friends*, *DC Super Hero Girls*, and *Avengers*. She explained that she’s currently writing a story with a black lead. Her team will hire a black director and diverse cast because it’s important to have a team to support telling your story accurately.

When an audience member asked what to do if a creator was “not enough” of a particular group to be able to write or create content about that group, Trujillo said he finds resources to help support his work. “I barely speak Spanish, but it’s always ongoing work to learn more.”

Both Sellner and Phoenix agreed that if you’re in a position to hire anyone in front of the camera, behind the camera, in your script, and create diverse characters, then do it. Mentoring others is also important.

Networking is also important to help you find such resources and to succeed in the field. Sellner moved to Los Angeles from New York knowing no one in the industry. She met someone from a writing class, who was well connected, and she ended up writing for projects which broke her into the industry. She advised the audience that most of her work comes from her network.

Davis’ advice seemed to encompass what all the panelists believed in taking action toward diversity, “It’s important to say yes to yourself. If you don’t ask, you won’t know, and nothing ever happens.”