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For anime lovers

If you're a fan of Japanese comics (think Pokemon), catch the Ichibancon convention.

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By Michael J. Solender
Special to the Observer

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Charlotte is quietly becoming a destination city for lovers of comics, animation, superheroes and cartoons. The Queen City is hosting an expected 2,000 attendees next week for Ichiban 2011, its latest comic book-related convention.

The third such national convention in the past seven months, Ichibancon is the most recent entrant to the growing list of conventions held in Charlotte that target enthusiasts of comic books and related products.

Ichiban is the Japanese term for "number one" or "best." That is precisely what organizers of Ichibancon hope participants will think of their gathering. The convention comes on the heels of Charlotte ComicCon in December and the nationally regarded HeroesCon held in Charlotte last June.

At Ichibancon, the focus is anime (AH-nee-may). The convention was held last year in Concord.

According to the Anime News Network, in Japan the term "anime" refers to all forms of animation, regardless of genre or country of origin. In the U.S. as well as most western nations, the term has come to refer specifically to animation of Japanese origin that embodies a particular stylized look. Japanese anime typically depicts characters with large eyes, small mouths and jagged, pointy hair. Their chiseled and angular features combine to provide a distinctive look that is instantly recognizable - Pokemon is a famous example.

Anime is most often represented in manga, or Japanese comic books. Manga subject matter covers a wide variety of popular culture content including love stories, sci-fi, fantasy, even sports and politics. Not limited to the printed page, anime is found in video games, television shows, feature film and music videos.

Peggy von Burkleo is a mangaka, or artist/writer/creator of comics in the Japanese manga style. "Manga is characterized by a character design that places an emphasis on emotional expression and minimalism, detailed layouts and images primarily shown in black, white and tone instead of color," she says.

Compelling and often mythic characters spawn a fervent fan base and connect with varied age groups. It is not uncommon to see parents accompanied by their children at these conventions.

Lynn Alexander of Pittsburgh is attending Ichibancon with her 16-year-old daughter, Elyon. "We've been to several similar conventions over the past few years, including those held in Philadelphia and New York City," says Alexander.

"Meeting the artists who draw our favorite characters and participating in the special activities is really special and entertaining."

Many enthusiasts revel in dressing in costumes representing their favorite anime characters. Ichibancon is set to provide a variety of forums for "cosplay," or costume play, events where attendees can strut their stuff in competition or just for fun on stage and even in skits.

In addition to dealer rooms with anime merchandise, Ichibancon will offer video showings, gaming, panel discussions, an artist alley and many special guests. Popular anime voice actors Vic Mignogna, Lisa Ortiz, Todd Haberkorn, J. Michael Tatum, and Maxey Whitehead are scheduled to appear.

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