



photo by Samiruddin Stewart of the State Press

BY ALYSON HURT • STATE PRESS MAGAZINE

The most powerful man in comics is deceptively normal. Todd McFarlane is rich, too — rich enough to pay \$2.7 million for St. Louis slugger Mark McGwire's 70th home run baseball. And \$600,000 more for Nos. 1, 63, 67, 68 and 69, along with Chicago Cubs right fielder Sammy Sosa's Nos. 33, 61 and 66.

Sitting in an armchair in his Tempe office in a room filled with toys, McFarlane wears a polo shirt, jeans and sandals. His keychain, on the table in front of him, has a Smith's grocery "Fresh Values" card attached to it. He drives a dented 1992 car. He's a big fan of hockey legend Wayne Gretzky.

His "aw-shucks" manner and casual appearance belie the empire he's built. He comes across as just a comic book guy. The words "powerful" and "mogul" just don't fit.

McFarlane, 37, created the comic book *Spawn*, owns McFarlane Toys and McFarlane Entertainment and is one of the founders of Image Comics. In 1997, *Forbes* estimated his net worth at \$75 million.

"I think he's very smart," said his wife, Wanda Kolomyjec. "He's like the Tortoise versus the Hare, and he's done very well. I'm proud of him."

Although *Wizard*, a popular comics trade magazine, labeled him "the most powerful" last year, McFarlane really didn't move into the national eye until January, when he was the "anonymous buyer" who bought nine home run baseballs — six belonging to McGwire, three from Sosa — in assorted auctions and private deals. Now he's got them in a safety deposit box and plans to take them on tour later this year.

McFarlane was also up for a Grammy last week for his animation work on Pearl Jam's music video "Do the Evolution." He lost out to Madonna's "Ray of Light."

FINDING A NICHE

McFarlane was born in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, but spent 12 years in California before his family moved back to Calgary when he was 14.

Although McFarlane wasn't a big comic book collector when he was a kid, he said he clearly remembers the day he started

actively buying comic books. He was 17 and was browsing the turn racks at a grocery store near his Calgary home. His purchases that day: *Amazing Spider-Man* #167, *Dr. Strange* #23, *Black Panther* #3, *Marvel Tales* #77, an issue of *Marvel Super-Heroes* with the Hulk and an issue of *The Incredible Hulk*.

"I was collecting bubble gum cards and other things," he said. "It was just part of collecting. Once I got those (comic books) — I think I got about five that day — the floodgate went *ptooosh!*" He spread his arms wide, mimicking an explosion. "I became just psycho about comics after that."

As much as he liked comics, though, baseball was his first love. McFarlane played center field through little leagues in California, then in the "majors" when he moved back to Calgary. He got a baseball scholarship to Eastern Washington State University and briefly played in the San Diego Padres' minor league system.

Al Simmons, who would later become one of his business partners, was his roommate and baseball teammate.

"(When I roomed with him in college,) Todd was very low-key, very easygoing," Simmons said. "I will say that describes him now. He's very easygoing until you put a challenge in front of him. You wouldn't know he was there unless you asked him a question, and then *watch out!*"

McFarlane called it quits with baseball before he finished college.

"It's that little thing called talent," he said. "I tried to go out. I went to college. I even wound up playing for the Padres minor league system — I was good enough to do that. I just wasn't good enough. I wish I was ... You just have to move on."

"When they said, 'You *suck* as a ballplayer,' then I was like, 'Well, OK. Gotta go do something else.'"

BREAKING IN -AND BREAKING OUT

McFarlane spent his last two years of college sending out portfolios and art samples to comics companies across the United States and Canada. He estimated that he mailed 40 packages a month during that time.

Getting all the rejections was tough.

"It was rough, and I was keeping track of *everything*," he said. "I had a little chart: I sent out like 750 packages and half of them got no responses and half of them got rejections."

"My wife was cleaning out the closet the other day and came across a bag of rejection letters. I used to carry them (around), and I'd pour them on the table, moaning, 'I sent out two packages, and I don't have a job and I'm discouraged.' I used to literally have my bag full, and I'd just go *pkeeeuwuf!*" He mentioned as though he were dumping the contents of a bag on the table.

"I somehow made it," he continued, shrugging his shoulders. "You've got to persevere, right? You're not going to get a job your first two cracks at it."

Just before McFarlane was graduated from college in spring 1984, Marvel Comics offered him the opportunity to pencil an 11-page back-up story in the comic book *Coyote*.

"I guess you could say that my big break was getting into comic books," he said. "I mean you've got to get your toe in (the door). My first job was in probably May of 1984 — I actually got *paid* for my first job."

"But my first *real* big break probably was doing the *Hulk* comic book, because you're doing a character that almost everyone has heard of."

McFarlane pencilled several issues of Marvel's *Incredible Hulk*, then did a few issues of DC Comics' *Detective Comics* and *Batman: Year Two*.

In the meantime, he married Kolomyjec, his high school sweetheart, in July 1985.

"I've known him since I was 13," she said. "I guess you could say we grew up together."

Despite her husband's profession, Kolomyjec, a former

biology teacher, said she doesn't read comic books: "Didn't before and still don't now."

McFarlane said moving up the ladder in terms of drawing prominent characters taught him a certain degree of cynicism about promotions in the comics industry.

"So you start climbing the ladder in promotions and comic books. (The companies) don't give you money — but they give you characters," he added. "They *knew* which character was the favorite for each guy. So when (an artist) would come in there, (the editors) would say, 'OK, his favorite's Green Lantern.' And when the artist would ask for more money, (the editors) would say, 'Can't do it. But if you keep your nose straight, we've got the *Green Lantern* annual coming, and we haven't picked the team yet, and there's a chance...'

"And the (artist) would go floating out the door. He never did do the Green Lantern, and he didn't get a raise."

McFarlane's strategy for getting jobs was to make his name and face known in all the offices at DC and Marvel Comics, to the point where he would frequently stop by and ask what opportunities may have popped up.

That's how he got Spider-Man, one of Marvel's oldest and most well-known characters. McFarlane's work on the title catapulted the Spider-books to the top of the sales charts — and made McFarlane a superstar in the comics world.

"It seems weird, but *Spider-Man* was really in a disarray when I got there," he said. "They had the three books — *Amazing (Spider-Man)*, *Spectacular...*, *Web of...* — and, for whatever reason, they were changing the creative team over and over and over and over. I just happened to really be in the right place at the right time.

"I went over to Marvel looking for another job, and literally struck my head in all the editors' offices. That's how you get jobs. 'Oh, yeah, so-and-so just quit last week. You want to do the book?' You don't really push people off books. It just happens to be people leaving or deadlines or whatever. My very first regular job I got was because someone, like, *died*. You need those breaks.

"The only thing that (everyone else) *did* say was, 'Todd, don't go in the Spider-Man office. You don't want to work in the Spider-Man office.' I was like, 'Oh, cool. I'm going in the Spider-Man office.'

"They ended up offering me *Amazing Spider-Man*, which to me was like the granddaddy."

McFarlane spent about two years on *Amazing*, then moved over to launch the adjective-less *Spider-Man* in September 1990. Selling more than 2.5 million copies, it became the best-selling comic of all time. (It was later passed up by the launch of 1991's *X-Force* #1 and by *X-Men* #1, each with five variant covers by Rob Liefeld and Jim Lee, respectively.)

He credits a lot of his success in becoming a favorite with fans to his consistency on the book — and to good timing.

"I found that if you follow a bad act, you actually look better," McFarlane said. "If you follow a good act...? Ooooh — It's a little bit tougher. Not too many people have followed a man who's made a career out of any book and actually done better.

"But if you follow inconsistency, all of the sudden it's easier to shine. One of the reasons why I think people paid attention to *my* work was that no one was really staying on the books for more than two or three months at a time.

"And then I ended up doing some arty-farty stuff on it that they liked."

BIRTH OF AN EMPIRE

McFarlane left *Spider-Man* in August 1991. But he wasn't just leaving the Spider-titles. He was leaving Marvel.

"Comic books have been around for about 50 years, and (the companies) have been getting rid of us (artists and writers) one at a time any time we had a squabble or somebody had a disagreement or one of us wanted to stand up for our beliefs," McFarlane said. "We just kept quitting one at a time, and it was easy to replace one person at a time."

From August 1991 to February 1992, McFarlane laid the foundation for his own comic book company. In early 1992, he and six other popular Marvel artists officially quit their jobs and established Image Comics.

"I left because I just got tired of the system," he said. "Every system has its 'Twelve Rules,' and it can't see beyond them. It's a pecking order ... There is no 'Mr. or Mrs. IBM.' There is no 'Mr. Warner.' There is no 'Mr. Time.' It's just a company. You come to McFarlane Toys or McFarlane Enterprises, you can actually have a discussion with the guy whose name's on it."

The seven Image founders — McFarlane, Lee, Liefeld, Erik Larsen, Whilce Portacio, Marc Silvestri, Jim Valentino — also made a stand for artists and writers to retain ownership of the characters they create.

At Image, writers *would* maintain ownership. Their stand eventually led DC and Marvel to give the green light on more creator-owned projects and to begin compensating writers and artists for their original creations.

The departure of Marvel's most popular artists — McFarlane on *Spider-Man*, Liefeld on *X-Force*, Lee on *X-Men*, Portacio on *Uncanny X-Men*, Silvestri on *Wolverine* — got Marvel's attention.

"Seven people leaving at once is a lot different than just one person," McFarlane said. "And the seven people were some of their elite — we were 'the boys.' We accounted



The hallways of the Todd McFarlane Productions office in Tempe are literally lined with comics, with every issue of *Spawn* and other McFarlane-related comic books and magazines lined up side-by-side down the walls.

for a vast majority of their top sellers. We were on their heavy-hitter books. It really made an impact when we left.

"Let's take ASU as an example. If they were doing something that the student body perceived of as wrong and one or two guys go, 'Screw it, I'm not coming back next year,' what does management care? If 43,000 people decided not to show up, then they've got a serious problem on their hands.

"It's one of the reasons why we have unions, and it's one of the reasons why unions strike."

Politics aside, when McFarlane wasn't working on the business side of building up Image, he was polishing up a character that has proven to be his Holy Grail.

Spawn.

The character debuted in May 1992 in the comic of the same name. A decorated American soldier who was assassinated by order of the government, Al Simmons sold his soul to the devil to be able to come back to Earth to be with his wife. The devil had a sense of humor and sent Al back five years after his death. His wife had remarried to his best friend and had a daughter. And Al, now an amnesiac Hellspawn, was haunted by fragments of memories he couldn't place.

"He's got a bit of a bad attitude, like me. But it's not *completely* autobiographical," McFarlane said. "He's got a lot of forces around him — *big* forces, like Heaven and Hell and all that theology stuff — and he doesn't really care about it. All he really cares about is his little, finite world and his little family. And he wants to get back to his wife and lead a normal life. But he has to deal with all this stuff around him; it's just a byproduct of his existence.

"To some extent, I could say that it's all metaphors: the government and big corporate America all think that they've got you, and because they're bigger than you they should be able to dictate the way that you live."

Not as polished as the cape-and-tights set, Spawn functions best as an anti-hero.

"(Spawn's) not a hero in the truest sense of the word," McFarlane said. "He's a guy that I believe to be more realistic, if you will, in terms of if you strip away the cape and the costume and all that, underneath it all he's just a

look at comic books in terms of paper, the computer coloring that we did, the presentation of some of our characters and the artistic impression," he said.

"And then, just the mere fact that we existed and that we continued to exist started making the other companies, like Marvel and DC, a little bit nervous. So they upgraded their standard freelance contracts because they didn't want to lose people. And the truth was many of those people who (supposedly) were going to leave never intended to leave — and actually hated us (the founders of Image).

"But our existence got them a pay raise and better working conditions. And people began to see that they could get along without 'Big Mom' and 'Big Dad.'"

In the end, though, even some of the Image founders couldn't resist the call of 'Big Mom and Dad.'

In 1996, Lee and Liefeld returned to Marvel to draw and write the company's Heroes Reborn storyline, featuring a relaunch of the *Fantastic Four*, *Avengers* and *Captain America* titles. Last fall, Lee sold his WildStorm division of Image to DC Comics and now operates under their label. Larsen is now the writer on Marvel's *Wolverine* and DC's *Aquaman*. Liefeld recently was named the new penciller and co-writer on Marvel's *Cable* (a character he helped create before leaving Marvel in 1992).

McFarlane was less than glowing in his comments about his former co-founders' activities.

"I don't care *how* these guys want to spin doctor it," he said. "It's always amusing to me. First Rob and Jim went and did the Marvel 'Heroes Reborn' thing, and they were all 'Well, we grew up with these characters, and we love them and...' And it's always a bunch of crap. The reason they went and made a deal with Marvel Comics was that they got a ton of cash. End of the conversation. Finito.

"Rob Liefeld did what he did, God bless him. And Jim Lee did what he did, God bless him. But they're the competition now."

McFarlane wouldn't completely rule out the possibility of working for DC or Marvel again, but he said he doubted he'd ever go back.

"I mean, if I completely fall, crash on my face, lose every single company and nobody wants to give me a job, would I come crawling on my hands and knees? Yep," he said. "But I've set myself up so that the world would have to, like, blow up for all my eggs to disintegrate.

"Let me tell you, I *love* Batman. I love Spider-Man. But I don't care what they put on the table. I wouldn't go back to those characters. I've tasted freedom."

BUILDING A BETTER TOY

With Spawn dominating the charts, McFarlane was soon given the opportunity to merchandise his newly popular character. Toymakers such as Mattel, Hasbro and Playmates offered him toy contracts.

Because McFarlane wanted to have creative control over the plastic incarnations of his characters — something other companies weren't willing to give him — he decided to create his own toy company.

And Todd Toys was born.

The company introduced the first line of Spawn toys in fall 1994. The action figures in the series were more detailed and better articulated than many of the most popular toys on the market, and McFarlane's toys became a hit.

"You can't beat them with money and you can't beat them with exposure," he said. "The only thing you can

SPM

do as a small guy to beat the big guys is to build a better mousetrap. That's it.

"It's served us well for five or six years now, and it's kind of solidified us as kind of a strong-niche company. If we can beat them aesthetically, then the average person then can look at our toys compared to *their* toys and go, 'Well, yeah, your toys are better.' I've got a chance, a chance to sell them something."

In the past five years, the company has added new characters, further developed its toymaking technique and undergone a name change (to McFarlane Toys, because of a trademark conflict with Mattel). Last year, they produced the heavily anticipated *X-Files* toy line, as well as introduced other toy lines based on the rock group Kiss and on movie monsters.

This year, McFarlane Toys will release action figures based on the movies *Austin Powers* and *Yellow Submarine* (the latter featuring the Beatles looking almost identical to their cartoon counterparts) and the video game *Metal Gear Solid*, as well as make more *Spawn* and movie monsters toys.

"As the head of a company — as much as I like li'l Spawnie because he's my guy — I have to be smart enough not to put all my eggs in the proverbial basket," he said. "If nobody likes Spawn in two years, then I've done my company a disservice by being too egotistical to let go of my baby."

SILVER AND GOLD

Spawn made the leap to the big screen in summer 1997 with a \$100 million-grossing live-action movie. With one movie under his belt and two on the way (a *Spawn* sequel and a different movie for Columbia Pictures), McFarlane has learned from experience and already has a plan to make the next *Spawn* movie an even bigger hit.

"The next movie will be R-rated and kind of a thriller movie, along the lines of *Silence of the Lambs*," he said. "We're going to get rid of all the special effects and make it more of a boogeyman kind of story. That should, hopefully, hook in some new eyeballs. And if you do another nice movie soundtrack, you get some new people coming in just because of the band that you happen to have."

Spawn also made its small-screen debut in May 1997 with the debut of *Todd McFarlane's Spawn* on HBO.

Both the show and the comic series are a family affair. McFarlane's 4-year-old daughter Kate is the voice of Cyan, Spawn's ex-wife's daughter, in the show.

The character Cyan, featured in both the comics and the TV show, is named after McFarlane's 7-year-old daughter, born just before his move to Image. Cyan's mother and Spawn's ex-wife, Wanda, is named after McFarlane's wife.

"I'm not sure the character is any more closely related (to me) than just the name," Kolomyjec said about her namesake.

"Same thing with the little girl (in the comic) named Cyan, although with Cyan it was a little more immortalized because when he started *Spawn*, he made Cyan the

character the age that our daughter was at the same time.

"A lot of the stuff that you read in that book where she's doing things and saying things Todd did pick up from our daughter."

Spawn himself is named after former baseball teammate Simmons, who now tours the country to promote the company.

"When he called me up (in 1991), he did not tell me I was going to be the lead character," he said. "But I was honored by it. I mean, my name was going to be in a comic by *Todd McFarlane*. I thought it was just going to be something like 'And then the garbage truck ran over Al Simmons...'

"It's a real honor. I mean, sports figures become like superheroes, but to be named a 'real' superhero is a real honor."

Spawn's HBO incarnation has received good reviews thus far in its two-year run, even winning an Emmy.

And, in an odd way, it led to another venture for McFarlane: music videos.

In 1998, McFarlane was approached to help create the video for the Pearl Jam song "Do the Evolution" — the usually anti-capitalistic band's first music video in five years.

"Pearl Jam isn't really big on doing any kind of commercial stuff," McFarlane said. "They hadn't made a video for five or six years, and the record label was going, 'You know, it'd be nice if you guys could advertise something. It'd be nice, because we'd like to promote this (album).' And so (the band) cracked

after five years. But, again, they didn't really want to star in a video because it seemed kind of passé to them. So they were trying to figure out how to advertise and how to make a video and not star in it.

"Eddie Vedder, the lead singer, was at home watching the HBO (*Spawn*) series, and (he was impressed enough that he had his people call up McFarlane)... Eddie and I talked on the phone about what we wanted to do, I hired some people to help me with it, and first time out of the gate I get a Grammy nomination. Great, Todd! Seems like the music business was easier than I thought!

"Nah... Again, it's just dumb luck. I might go another 20 years before I get another nomination. Maybe it'd be better to quit while I'm ahead."

McFarlane doesn't seem to be quitting the music business any time soon. Last year, he drew the cover for the most recent Korn album (and appeared with the band at Tower Records in September to sign autographs). His work on the band's latest music video recently debuted on MTV.

Before the Grammy ceremony, though, he put his accomplishments and relative fame in perspective:

"I'm only going to be able to sneak towards two people: Celine Dion and Shania Twain. They're Canadian, I'm Canadian — we can go and talk Canadian. They're the only ones I can talk to. Everyone else will be like, 'Go away, *Ball Boy*.'"

So what does the "ball boy" have planned for this year?

"Workin' on a movie for Columbia, workin' on the sequel for *Spawn*, got the third season for HBO comin' out, got the new toys comin', got four or five new comic magazines coming out this year," he said. "So don't worry about me. We're busy."

Cover samples of *Kiss* and *Spawn* are scattered across a table in the design office of Todd McFarlane Productions.



SHOWING SOME BALLS

By ALYSON HURT
STATE PRESS MAGAZINE

When an anonymous buyer snapped up Mark McGwire's 70th home run baseball, as well as five others, at Guernsey's Baseball Auction Jan. 12, the sports and collectible worlds were abuzz with rumors and questions as to his identity.

On Feb. 8, Todd McFarlane announced his \$3.3 million purchase at a press conference in New York.

St. Louis Cardinals first baseman Mark McGwire and Chicago Cubs right fielder Sammy Sosa revived national interest in baseball with their 1998 home run

race to beat New York Yankees Roger Maris' longstanding record of 61 home runs hit in a season, set in 1961. McGwire finished the season with 70 home runs, Sosa with 66.

McFarlane snapped up McGwire's first, 63rd and 67th-70th in auctions and private deals in December and January. He also bought Sosa's 33rd, 61st and 66th.

The week of McFarlane's announcement, his collection was on display at Toy Fair, an annual toy trade show in New York, behind glass boxes, velvet ropes and the watchful gaze of security guards. Currently, the balls are under lock-and-key in a safety deposit box.

Promising not to charge admission to see the balls, McFarlane said he'd like to send them all over the country so baseball fans could see the collectibles. He added that he'd also like to lend them out to charity groups to raise money.

"(I'd like to) tour the country, take 'em out, create a lot of goodwill, (then) I've got 'em out to some

charities, see if some money can be generated for good stuff," he said. "I mean, I don't want it."

At the Feb. 8 press conference, McFarlane also said that he'd let major league ballclubs display the collection — for a price.

"I'd like to be able to take 20 swings in every major league ballpark," he said.

The nine balls will travel under the name "The McFarlane Collection."

"Given that I name all my corporations after myself," McFarlane said at the press conference, "I'll name this after myself. The McFarlane Collection. It's better than 'The Guy Who Has More Money Than Brains Collection.'"

The self-proclaimed "sports nut" put the hefty purchase in perspective. "If the record falls, I go from being a nut who paid \$3 million for the crown jewel of sports memorabilia to an idiot who spent \$3 million on a \$5 ball," he said.

McFarlane's pursuit of the balls began just after the end of the 1998 baseball season, which featured the celebrated Sosa/McGwire home run race.

"There's sports fans everywhere," McFarlane said. "About two months after the season, Al (Simmons, McFarlane's friend) and I were just, 'Where's those balls? We've got to get to these balls.' So (Simmons) somehow got ahold of the guy who had, like, 10 balls. He was representing like 10 different people for 10 different balls. So I just started thinking about it: 'Wow. He's got the 70. He's got the big fatie. And he's got the other ones.' And my wheels just started turning.

"To some extent I kinda sorta just had to get them because I'd been worked up for too long to lose."

McFarlane tried to buy No. 70 in a private deal before the Guernsey auction but couldn't get it, so he bought up a number of other McGwire balls, including Nos. 1 and 69.

"So, a couple of them I bought in advance," McFarlane said. "And I bought 70 at the auction — it was the very first ball that was auctioned off at the auction house. And then, after that, I think I wound up grabbing like five out of the next six balls. Nobody at Madison Square Garden was getting anything. It was just that 'phone guy.'"

He estimated that he spent about \$3.3 million total on the baseballs — \$2.7 on No. 70 alone.

"But the big one was 'The One,'" McFarlane said. "The winning bid on the fat ball, the 70, was about \$2.7 (million), with about \$300,000 in commissions — that's actually what blew my budget. But otherwise, I got all those balls in auction for roughly what I was offering two months earlier in a private deal."

McFarlane's wife, Wanda Kolomyjec, said that while she wouldn't have bought the baseballs, she understands why her husband made the investment.

"It wouldn't have been my first choice to buy (the balls)," she said. "I'm not sure now that I'm fully 100 percent happy about them or anything. I understand why he did it. I understand the mixture of publicity and philanthropy and self-indulgence. His reason's not just buying something and sticking it in a closet somewhere."

No tour dates have been set yet for the baseballs.

local scene

Todd McFarlane born: March 16, 1961. Calgary, Alberta, Canada. co-founder of Image Comics (1991). creator of Spawn (1992). founder of McFarlane Toys (1994). buyer of nine McGwire/Sosa home run balls, including McGwire's 70th. currently lives in Ahwatukee, a suburb of Phoenix