

Hey Melby!

Michigan man with scleroderma is comic book illustrator

By Jeff Shmase

Erik Hodson is busy. He teaches continuing education classes in Web design and Photoshop at the College for Creative Studies (CCS) in Detroit. He is a substitute teacher for the Romeo (Mich.) School District. He is taking classes at



Erik Hodson

Wayne State University, in Detroit, pursuing his master's degree in arts education. He is on track to receive his degree in 2008. By the time you read this article, he will have published his third comic book and is planning on trying to release two additional books, one featuring characters from his animation company, the other for a more mature audience.

Hodson, 29, is doing all of this while living with limited scleroderma, a disease he has had since 2003. His hands have lost nearly 90 percent of their use, and several of his fingers are contracted. Yet Hodson has taken a page from the Bobbi Salmon quotebook when he says, "nothing is impossible."

Down on the farm

Hodson grew up on a farm in a small, Missouri town, living there until he was 10. Then the family sold it. He was a quiet child who often kept to himself, adding "A lot of my best friends growing up were the farm equipment. 'I'd ride on the tractor, helping my mom's father feed the cattle, or playing in grain in a pickup truck.'"

In fact, Hodson says he can remember staying with his grandparents one time, spending hours alone in a bedroom. They thought it was odd, but it did not bother him. "I never had a lot of friends, but ones I had were good, high-quality people," he said "That's



A cover from Melby Comics

what was always most important to me."

Drawing was also important. As soon as he could hold a pencil, he would draw—pictures of tractors and bulldozers and the like.

Then his dad did Hodson a big favor when he handed his son his vast comic book collection.

"My interest caught fire after that," he said. "I would read the books for hours and hours; those first comics of Spider-Man and Iron Man really fostered my love of that medium. From there, it would keep spreading."

A heavy kid who led a sedentary lifestyle, Hodson said he became a victim of hazing during his freshman

year in high school, teased because of his weight.

“To get my aggression out, I would write and draw characters in my notebook,” Hodson said. “By the time I finished high school, I had done maybe 200, 5–10 page scripts.”

One of his best friends in high school, Kyle Selby, was also teased when students called him Melby. That name would be the one Hodson would use to form his Melby Comics company.

Despite not being as attentive as he could be in class, he did well in high school, though he did have a motive: “I wanted to do my best to get out of that small town.”

Going up?

Knowing he wanted to go to college and wanting to pursue his interest in art, Hodson followed his best friend Anthony to CCS. During his sophomore year in college, he was riding an elevator when he noticed something odd.

“My fingers turned completely purple, as if I had been in art class working with purple dyes,” Hodson said.

Hodson said they didn’t feel cold, but he ran his hands under hot water anyway. “It freaked me out,” he recalled.

Then Hodson began to think, and he said around the same time of the elevator incident he began to lift weights, losing some of his school weight in the process. He remembers during lifting that his fingers would turn white. The following winter, he developed digital ulcers.

“My friend Anthony was my roommate at that time. He had a mind for science and puzzles, and suspected I had some type of autoimmune disease,” Hodson said. “He came across Raynaud’s disease, and it turned out he was right when a doctor confirmed it the next summer.”

Hodson was prescribed blood thinners and for awhile, the cause of his Raynaud’s remained a mystery.

The Graduate

Hodson graduated from college in 2001, and landed an internship as a Web designer and graphic designer. He subsequently quit, and began teaching a class at CCS. It was while teaching that he began to refocus on drawing, and eventually he launched his Web site *heyamelby.com* where he would post random images he created, and some stories.

At the same time, he had met a young woman

named Margaret, and in June 2003 they married. That same year, however, Hodson experienced more health symptoms. He had pretty severe joint pain, and his skin began to tighten. After seeing more doctors, the diagnosis was made: Hodson had limited scleroderma.



These days Hodson has limited cutaneous scleroderma. He has lost nearly 90 percent of the use of his hands, and his fingers are in various stationary positions—for example his thumbs stand almost straight up, while others are almost completely contracted. He drives, but with difficulty, and opening anything, from bags to containers, is challenging.

Hodson tires relatively easily, and he cannot sit, stand or walk for any extended periods of time. His voice is always gruff, almost hoarse, and he can no longer tolerate milk—although he is unsure that condition is related to his scleroderma.

Still, Hodson, as you can see from the very beginning of this story, is not the type to wallow in self-pity.

“If I gave in to my scleroderma and sat around the house doing nothing but occasional housework, I’d be very depressed,” he said.

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Melby

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“I have found teaching to be a very positive experience, especially teaching art,” he said. “When I was teaching a sculpture class, I had to reteach myself how to do sculpture and I found that demonstrating that inspired them. Frankly, they were amazed I could draw and make creative images.

“At first, I got a lot of I can’t do this, but I made the point that my hands are crumpled, and if I can do it, I

know you can.”

As much as Hodson feels students benefit from his example, he said the relationship works both ways.

“It also benefits me. If I can help them achieve, that inspires me as well,” Hodson said. It is the only career I could do, outside of drawing, that is rewarding while helping people in a creative way.”

Still, the comic book is Hodson’s primary vocational interest. The books are a combination of dark humor, satire and parody, and the characters are based on people Hodson knows. For example, the character of Melby Girl is based loosely on Margaret. Erik is well, Erik, and other characters are based on cousins and friends.

When not creating books or teaching, Hodson travels to conventions to promote his book while educating convention attendees about scleroderma.

And while he has his occasional setbacks (he fell in his kitchen recently), the good outweighs the bad.

“I thank God I can live my dream every day,” said Hodson, who emphasized that his faith serves as his inspiration to make each day the best he can.



Erik promotes his cartoon at conventions



A close-up of Erik's artwork, and his fingers affected by scleroderma