

# Still laughing

## IF YOU GO

THE COMIC  
NEWS 25TH  
ANNIVERSARY  
PARTY

**WHEN:** 3-9 p.m.

Saturday

**WHERE:** Santa Cruz  
Mountain Brewing,  
402 Ingalls St.,  
Santa Cruz

**TICKETS:** Free

**DETAILS:**

thecomicnews.com

Thom Zajac celebrates 25 years  
as the one-man publishing empire  
known as the Santa Cruz Comic News

By WALLACE BAINE

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The day that Thom Zajac conjured up his One Great Idea, there was no such thing as YouTube mash-ups, Huffington Post screeds or cable-TV rants. It was an era when the primary vehicle for commenting on the socio-political issues of the day in any kind of irreverent or cutting way was the editorial cartoon.



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Thom Zajac will be celebrating 25 years of the Santa Cruz Comic News with a party on Saturday.

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## COMIC NEWS

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It was exactly that kind of cartoon — an integral part of the newspaper industry's long history — that formed the basis of Zajac's Santa Cruz Comic News, and though the Internet age has clearly toppled the editorial cartoon from its favored position in the pop-culture landscape, Zajac remains the kind of businessman that Benjamin Franklin would recognize and, no doubt, admire: the independent local publisher/editor.

This year, the Comic News celebrates its 25th year in business and Zajac, the monthly newspaper's one-man show, is still standing after two recessions, one earthquake, countless competitors, the abrupt retirement of two cash cows and one enormous technological revolution that has put the printed word in all its forms on the defensive. Through it all, the Comic News has survived.

"It's a time to feel pretty good about it all," said Zajac, who will be the center of attention at the Comic News 25th Anniversary Party on Saturday in Santa

Cruz. "I can remember the day I got the idea, and now it has totally changed my life. It's really defined who I am. I'm the editor of a comic newspaper. Who would have guessed?"

In fact, Zajac was likely the first such editor. Since he began the Comic News, dozens of other similar newspapers have popped up all over the world.

In his youth, Zajac, 54, had aspirations of his own to be an editorial cartoonist. He was just coming to grips with how difficult that was when the idea came to him. Zajac decided to combine all the editorial cartoons that he could get his hands on from all the newspapers across the country into one package. The idea came to him on April Fool's Day, while browsing in the beloved Peninsula bookstore Kepler's, where he came across a book called "The Best Editorial Cartoons of 1983." Why not a newspaper that compiled the same cartoons?

"I thought, I could have the lowest overhead ever for a newspaper. It's just me. I could sell the ads, distribute the newspaper. No reporters. No typesetting. No photographers. No nothing. I could charge very little for ads. I could be expressive, and I

could do something that's never been done before."

The Santa Cruz Comic News used to be published twice a month, but is now printed monthly. It brought together many of the nation's most prominent editorial cartoonists, three of whom are still published in the Comic News today: Tom Toles, Pat Oliphant and Tony Auth.

The paper was a success from the beginning, thanks largely to disappointed liberals looking for something to laugh about during the Reagan years (Zajac makes no apologies for his decidedly left-of-center approach). Business really started to pick up when the Comic News landed the rights to publish perhaps the two most popular non-political strips of the 1980s: Bill Watterson's "Calvin and Hobbes" and Gary Larson's "The Far Side."

Ironically, the golden era for the Comic News came about after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. The quake effectively put out of business the Sun alternative weekly, positioning the Comic News as the only alternative free newspaper other than the Good Times.

"I had a nice double office in the ID building," said Zajac, "laid out like Sam

Spade's office. I had two full-time sales people and an office worker." Circulation was high and so were his ad lines.

But then the tide turned and the Comic News absorbed one blow after another, all in the space of a year. Both Watterson and Larson retired their popular strips. Bill Clinton was elected. And the Santa Cruz Metro opened for business, instantly regulating the Comic News to No. 3 in the free weekly pecking order. Gone was the office and the employees.

Today, Zajac runs the Comic News out of the Bonny Doon home he shares with his wife Frauke and 17-year-old son Kai. He's back to running the whole show, but now must contend with the systemic problems all print media must deal with. Circulation has gone from a high of 12,000 to today's 3,000 (plus another 1,700 out-of-town subscribers).

"The thing that has allowed me to survive," he said, "is the smallness of scale. The recession presents a particular challenge, but I remain optimistic. With this kind of operation, I'm always one good idea or one good subscription season away from doing just fine."