

# Everyone loves dressing up for Halloween ... even Rick Kogan



Rick Kogan as a ghost carrying the last edition of the Chicago Daily News. (Kathy Murray photo)



By **Rick Kogan**  
Chicago Tribune

OCTOBER 27, 2017, 10:10 AM

**H**alloween is the most America holiday,” Mark Kelly was saying on a recent Saturday night as the sun dipped below the skyline to the west and hundreds of people gathered along the stretch of sidewalk on Columbus Drive between Balbo Drive and Monroe Street in Grant Park.

Some of these people were in costume. Most were not.

Kelly was wearing a colorful outfit he described as that of “a circus ring master meets ‘Alice in Wonderland.’”

Kelly is the commissioner of Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, a position he took in 2016 after more than three decades as an administrator at [Columbia College](#).

It was while he was at Columbia that he served as chairman of the Wabash Arts Corridor, an initiative aimed at transforming the South Loop into a center for public art. One of the things he did was create and serve as the artistic director of 2015's inaugural Halloween Gathering, a parade and festival held along the lakefront.

It was a modest success, described by my colleague Steve Johnson this way: "It's not every parade that includes Lupe Fiasco in a skyscraper costume, low riders, an homage to Michael Jackson's 'Thriller' video and architects pushing iconic Chicago buildings on wheels. ... And the bigger point is that the parade itself was kind of a quirky gem."

A similar "gathering" took place last year. This year Kelly decided to refashion his creation into something called Arts in the Dark, a Halloween-season bash produced by the new nonprofit organization called LUMA8 (Light Up My Arts), in collaboration with DCASE and the Chicago Park District.

And that's when I came in. A few weeks ago, over drinks with Kelly, whom I had not before met, and Tim Samuelson, the city's cultural historian who is an old and dear friend, Kelly asked me to participate in the event, to serve as an honorary grand marshal and ride on a float in a parade with a small handful of other such honorees (we were dubbed "illuminaries").

"And you won't even have to wear a costume," Kelly said.

I took this as a challenge: Not wear a costume?

Still, the last time I had dressed in costume was for a party at the Los Angeles mansion of the late Hugh Hefner in 1998. I had spent some days beforehand interviewing Hefner for a Tribune magazine story and, invited to end my stay in California with his Halloween bash, I dressed as a Sigmund Freud and spent a few hours mingling with hundreds of other guests. Many were in costumes so skimpy as to be almost invisible, and I saw only four people who were not in costume: Alan Thicke, Fabio, Kato Kaelin and Lou Ferrigno.

Of course, every Halloween my memory goes back even further, to the ghost, bum, Viking, cowboy, fireman, cop and all the other garments of childhood. Eventually, costume-wearing ceased, though I did for some years act as a judge for the pet costume contests held at the bygone Parkview Pet Store in Lincoln Park. It was mostly costumed cats and dogs, but there were a few snakes, turtles, a pig or two and, most dramatically, a horse named Lady Guinevere, who arrived in her trailer from Mundelein. One year she was dressed as a taxicab.

In my lifetime, I have watched Halloween become more and more extravagant and popular.

According to the National Retail Federation, nearly 180 million Americans plan to taste of Halloween festivities, up from 171 million last year. And they are expected to spend \$9.1 billion, up from \$8.4 billion in 2016.

One reason, I believe, is that unlike some other holidays (think Thanksgiving and Christmas), Halloween is not shadowed by familial guilts and responsibilities. It's just fun, candy, tricks and treats.

Now, there is no explaining the mysterious forces that compel people to dress in costumes. But it is worth consulting the man I consider the greatest expert on Halloween. He is George Garcia, the owner of Fantasy Costumes at 4065 N. Milwaukee Ave., with its more than 5,000 masks and 40,000-some costumes and all manner of tricks, toys, gizmos for Halloween or any other party time packed into a wild 22,000-square-foot complex. “The name says it all — fantasy. It’s the fun and fantasy holiday,” Garcia says. “At Halloween people can live their fantasies or at least dress up like someone who has lived their fantasies.”

I decided that this year I would be the ghost of the Chicago Daily News and its weekend arts and entertainment section called Panorama, arguably the first such free-standing section in any American newspaper. It died at 104 years old on March 4, 1978, and this costume was more personal than any in my past, for not only had I worked for the paper during its final year, my father, Herman, created Panorama in 1963.

So I still had a copy of the final edition with its “So long, Chicago” headline and had the front page and the front page of the final Panorama both emblazoned on a five-foot-tall banner. I hung that around my neck, put on a spooky mask and a black ghostly costume and that was that. The whole thing cost about \$200.

I rode on the float with other folks, some in costume, some not, but all waving to the crowd that watched us and also watched floats with inflatable replicas of Alexander Calder's Flamingo and Jean Dubuffet's Standing Beast; performers from Lookingglass Theatre, the Actor's Gymnasium and the Art Institute; folklorico dancers, neon centaurs and a variety of musicians and drummers, including a jazz combo dressed as skeletons.

After the parade, there was music and dancing and candy. All of it was free, and 8-year-old Hector Sanchez, dressed as Spider-Man said, “This is my favorite Halloween so far.”

There are an ever-growing number of Halloween happenings around town, but this one — artful, frolicsome, vividly colorful and just plain fun — has the potential to be the centerpiece of future Halloween seasons here.

Some days after it was all over, I asked Kelly what he thought.

“Over the years I have helped put on many events,” he said. “And honestly I would often go home at the end of them and think, ‘Well, that was fun, but not all I hoped it could be.’”

“This time, it was everything I hoped for. Such diversity of people and a great mix of arts organizations, from the big boys to the upstarts. I had a great time.”

Then I had to ask, “What about my costume?”

“Well, it was ... genius,” he said, the model of diplomacy. “But I’m not sure many people got it.”

*rkogan@chicagotribune.com*

*Twitter @rickkogan*