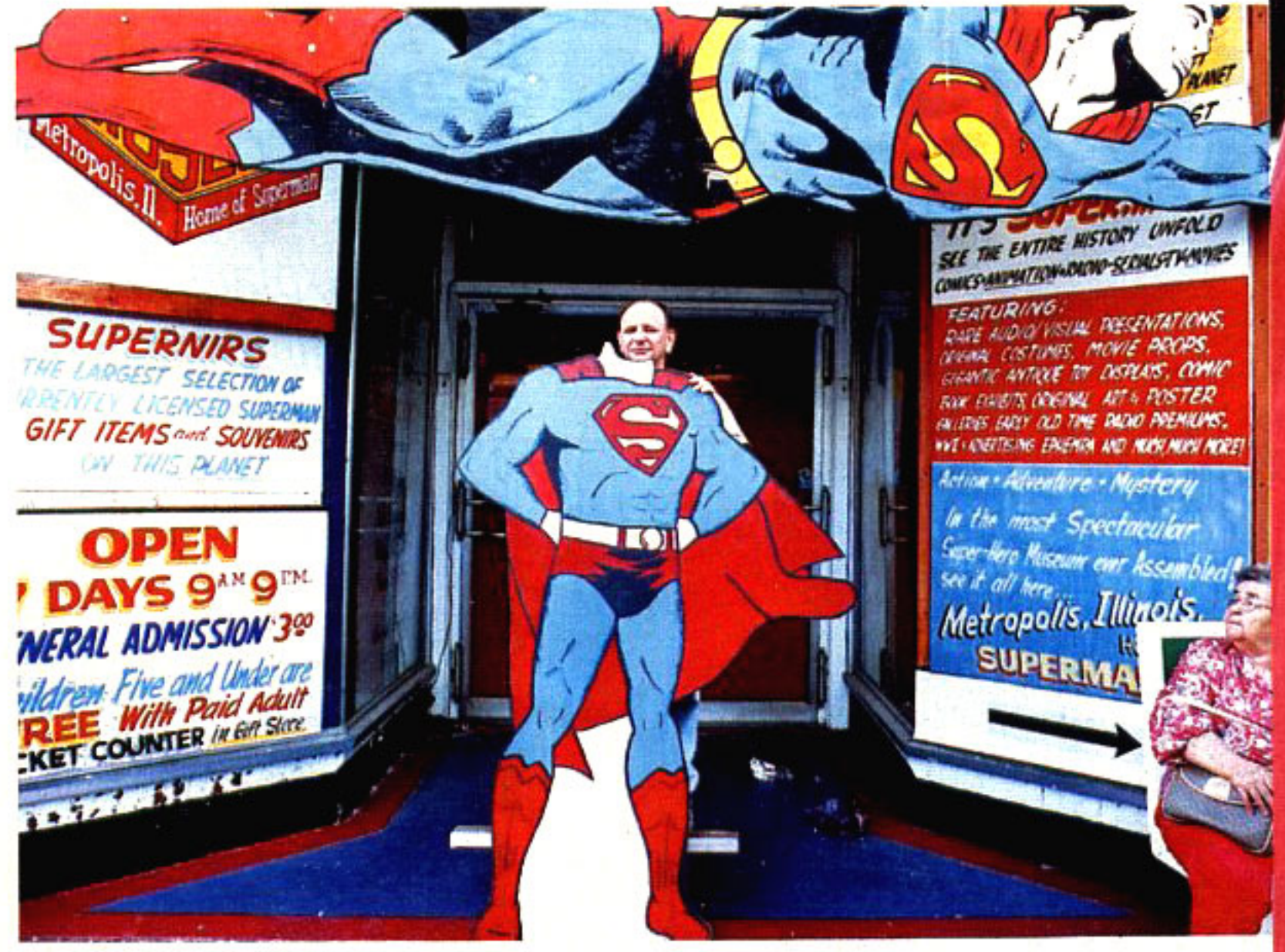


Come fly with us

M's holding out for a hero at the world's biggest Superman festival



Clockwise from above: Clark Kent's newspaper the *Daily Planet* brought to life; the Superman Museum; Jim Hubert, Don Roush and John Koen - bigger and better than the real thing?

It's a stifling summer morning in Midwestern America. The air is thick with the smell of onions and burgers from outdoor stalls as passers-by in the small main street of this southern Illinois town guzzle candy floss and try to keep their kids from rampaging across the recently mowed grass squares. Small dogs pee on neatly planted flower beds: It could be any fête in any small American town. Except it's not. It's 93°C and the revellers, busy necking sodas like it's going out of fashion and checking out bric-a-brac stalls, are all dressed in tight blue suits - men, women, children and terrier dogs. They even wear their underpants on the outside. What is this madness? A Lycra fetish fair? A spandex spectacular? No, this is Metropolis and we are in the midst of the town's 24th annual Superman festival.

Every year around 15,000 Superman fans swell the streets of Metropolis - the only place in the States to share the name of the town where comic book hero Clark Kent's alter ego Superman fought the forces of evil. For the hard of thinking, a giant billboard at the entrance to the town boasts 'Welcome to Metropolis, home of Superman!' Fans have travelled from all over the US to imbibe the super vibes, making sure not to miss Metropolis's permanent Superman Museum, the giant 15-foot bronze statue of The Man Of Steel, Lois Lane (yes they've even renamed a street in honour of Clark's journalist amour) and the town's 'Super police' - they have Superman badges in place of ordinary ones. You can even catch up on the news courtesy of the local paper the *Daily Planet*, renamed after the rag Clark and Lois worked on. There's also an exciting range of contests including

Man of Steel weightlifting and game shows – The Weakest Kryptonite Link and Who Wants To Be A Superman Millionaire – for would-be Clarks to test their physical and mental powers. 'I've always loved Superman,' says Scott Cranford, a 34-year-old actor from LA who's thrilled to have been designated the festival's official Superman. Standing well over six foot, with jet-black hair, complete with trademark kiss curl, muscly pecs and strapping thighs, he's almost as good as the real thing but sadly, rather than leaping buildings in a single bound or running faster than a speeding bullet, his job is to, er, shake hands, sign autographs and pose for pictures. 'It's my third year as the official Superman,' he says proudly. 'I've always loved superheroes. I run a website teaching moral values through superheroes. You know, things like: listen to your parents, get up early, eat healthily.' He's serious. Scott's so into his hero he even married his wife here last year, in full blue suit, cape and underpants. The recent hit US TV series *Smallville*, which



Scott (above) is so into his hero he married his wife here last year in full blue suit, red boots, cape and underpants

chronicles Clark's early years, has sparked a Superman revival. But Metropolis is for diehard fans only. In the past, special guests have included Margot Kidder, who played Lois Lane in the movies, and Terence Stamp (General Zod in *Superman II*). This year's guest is Noel Neill, who played Lois in the 1950s series. In the main Metropolis square, tents have been erected to host the competitions and the streets are lined with stalls selling everything from comic books to BBQ ribs and corn dogs. There are hundreds of children everywhere, swinging from trees in an attempt to prove they really can fly, and caped dogs are being coaxed through hoops with piercing cries of, 'It's Superdog!' Some of the costumes are home-made, others off-the-shelf, and lots have built-in muscles for added effect. We check phone booths, but where they all got changed remains a mystery. Attending to their Superman stall in the main street are former paramedic Jamie Reigle, 28, and his heavily pregnant wife Dawn, 25, in matching his 'n' hers Superman T-shirts. They drove for 13 hours from Cleveland, Ohio, and have everything from Superman lunch boxes, car mats and shirts, to an original unopened tin of Superman Macaroni Cheese from 1975. Nice. Crew-cut Jamie proudly displays the Superman 'S' tattoo on his leg and blonde Dawn shows me hers on her shoulder. It's a joint obsession. 'It's an addiction,' says Jamie. 'I know someone who lost their house, their job and their wife

after getting into so much debt from collecting.' 'It could be worse,' says Dawn. 'At least it's not drugs or alcohol. My doctor advised me against the trip because I'm due to give birth next month, but I'm a big Superman fan too and I wanted to support Jamie. He's been collecting most of his life.' It may not be drugs but it can certainly give you a case of the crazies. 'We're calling the baby Kal-El,' Dawn confesses. 'It's Superman's Krypton name. Kal-El James. And though I'd rather not give birth here, in a weird way I'd like to so it can say Metropolis on his birth certificate!' Over at The Weakest Kryptonite Link – it's *The Weakest Link* format but the questions are all about Superman, such as 'What was Superman's favourite food?' (Beef bourguignon with ketchup, apparently) – I bump into a portly Superman. In a country where 70% of people are overweight, and 40% obese, the chances of these Supermen being able to out-run a speeding bullet are remote. John Koen, 52, has already won four Superman Frisbies, five Superman T-shirts, three Superman watches, two Superman alarm clocks, two Superman baseball caps and a wall clock in the quiz. He's probably the oldest Superman in town and has an impressive paunch straining at his home-made outfit: 'I made it out of a blue sweatshirt and sweatpants,' he says. 'The "S" is made from felt. It's the only suit I know of with pockets! I've got to keep my hanky somewhere.' Grey-haired John has been coming to Metropolis for over ten years and this is the



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second time his wife Lauri, 49, has joined him. 'We met on an Internet chat site three years ago,' explains Lauri, a mum of three. 'He sent me a picture of himself in a Superman costume. I thought, well, either he's got a good sense of humour or he's crazy. He asked me to marry him six months later. I said yes, but didn't realise quite what a Superman nut he was.' When John, a postal office worker, moved in with Lauri in New York he also moved in a 24-foot trailer to house his Superman collection. Diane Hubert, 40, from Philadelphia, is fully costumed-up – along with husband Jim, dad Don Roush, sister April and brother-in-law Bret. 'I saw it on TV and rang my dad,' says Diane breathlessly. 'He's a Superman fanatic. He's even painted the inside of the house in Superman colours.' Even though Superman has been around since 1938, Metropolis only fully adopted him in 1972. After *Superman: The Movie* starring Christopher Reeve hit the cinema in 1979, the festival was established and, when Jim Hambrick moved here in 1993 with his huge Superman collection worth around \$3m (£2m), it really took off. 'I'd been touring with my collection for years,' says 49-year-old

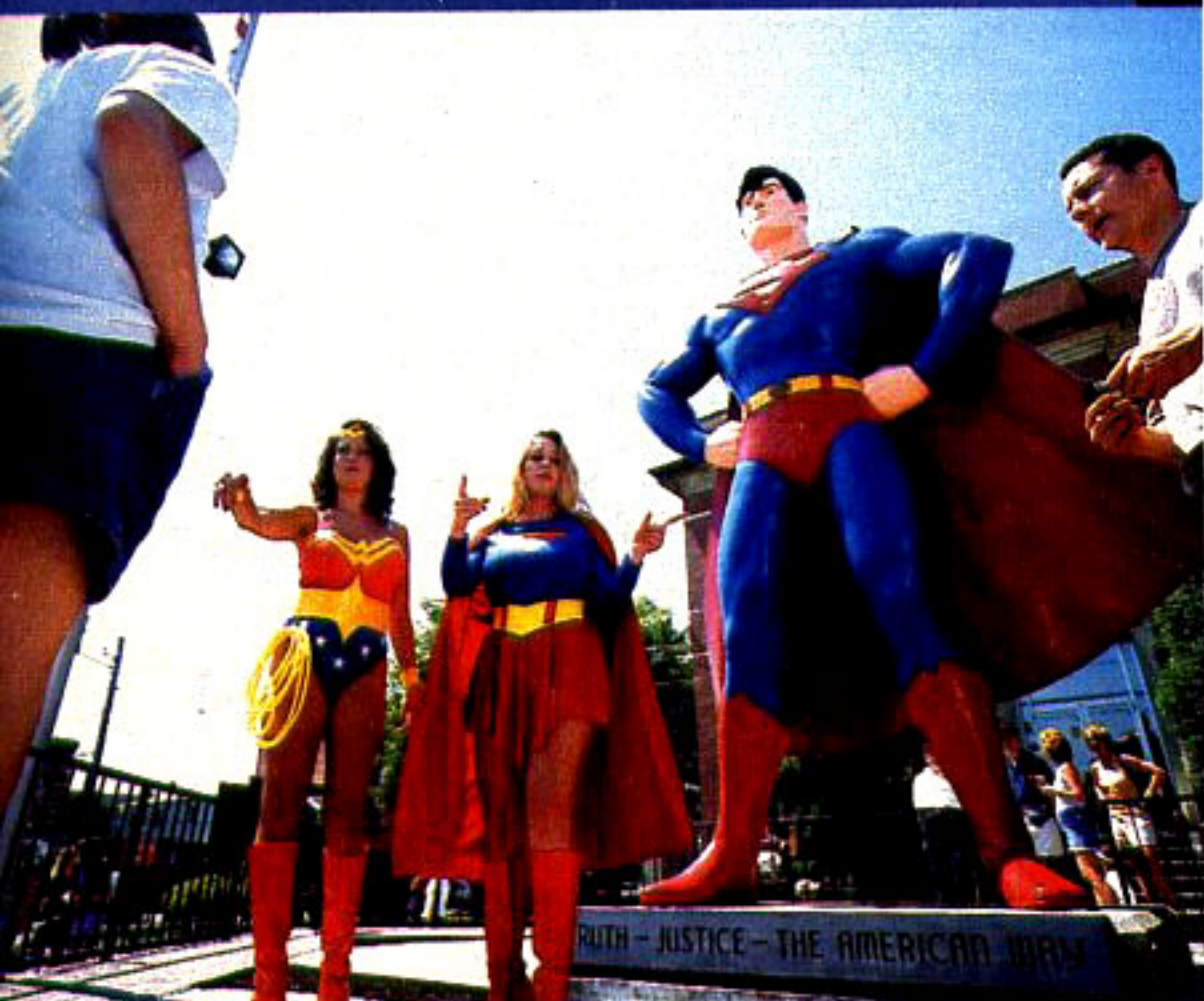
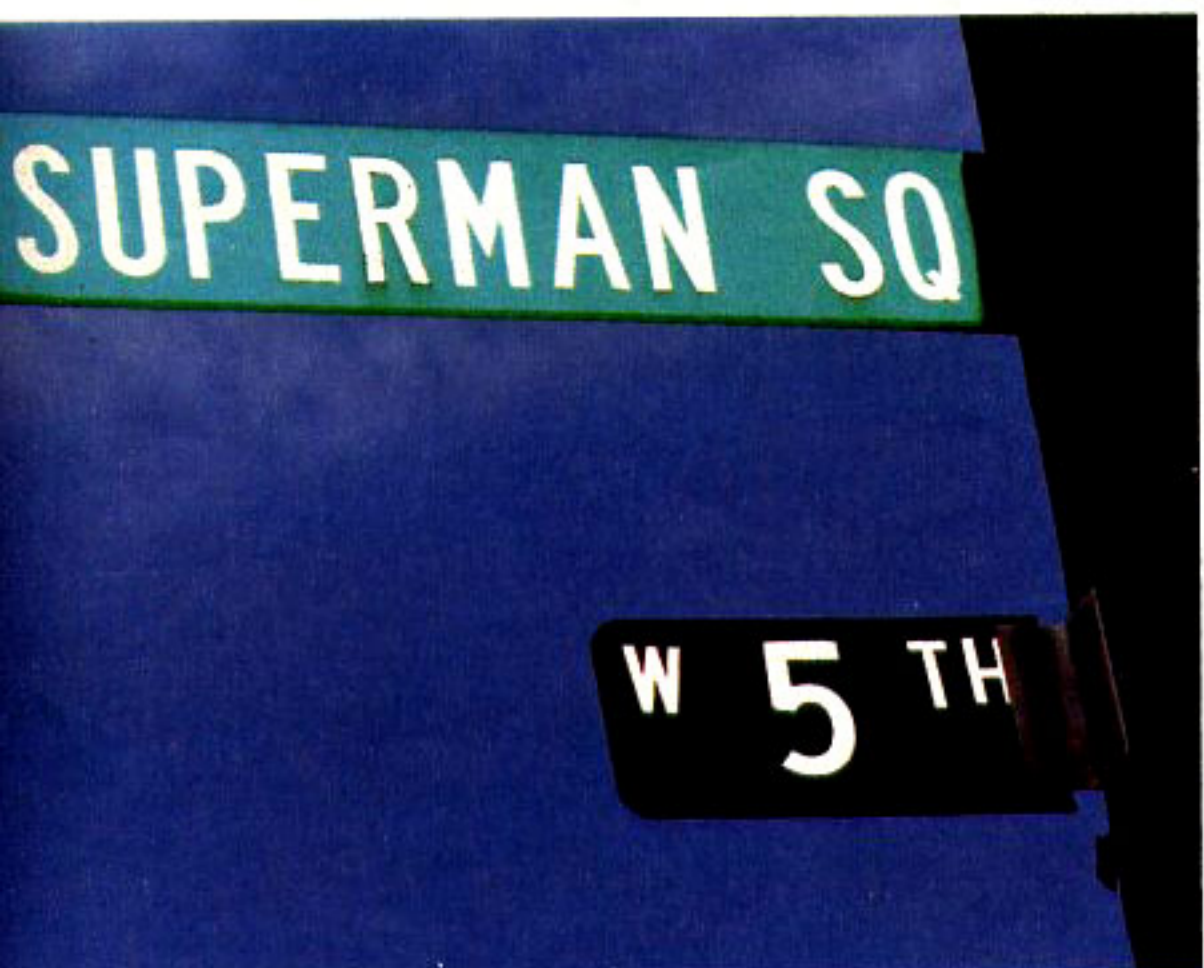
Jim, or Super Jim as he's known. 'Metropolis was the perfect place for me to settle.' As if a town filled with sweating thousands in shiny Lycra suits wasn't crazy enough it all gets a little more mad as Malina Clark, 27, a teacher in a figure-hugging Wonderwoman costume, and her blonde sister Morgan Dusch, 20, dressed as Supergirl, step from their silver Ford Mustang into Superman Square in the heart of the festival. In their tight costumes and high-heeled shiny patent boots the girls cause chaos. The Superman nerds can't quite cope with this sudden injection of glamour-girl power and they are swamped with admirers. They try to manoeuvre away from the crowds of mullets and rednecks, who all want to have their photos taken with them. 'We enjoyed it,' sighs Malina later. 'We were really nervous, we didn't know if we'd be the only ones dressed up.' Malina has a bedroom dedicated to Superman and a collection worth thousands of dollars but came as Wonderwoman as, 'I think Superman secretly had a thing for her. He's just an ideal man. Intelligent, smart and strong.' On the final evening the celebs go to a dinner and public auction. Katie Hambrick, 23, Super Jim's daughter, hangs around outside



the venue and reflects on the popularity of the superhero who has been fighting crime for 64 years: 'Superman's old-fashioned but after September 11 people have become really patriotic and reclaimed things like Superman as symbols of America. He was all about Truth, Justice and The American Way.' But he can't be that clever. They're talking about a bloke who wears his underpants over his trousers.

Chris Morris

Photographs by David White. The *W* tent at Metropolis in Chicago with Malina Clark. For more information call 0845 606 0461 or see www.aai.com



From top: Scott Cranford, official Superman, with some mini-heroes; Superman Square – where it's all happening; Malina and Morgan pose with the 15ft statue