



Above: It takes Grow Hair about an hour to “transform” into his schoolgirl persona. Opposite page: Grow Hair in the middle of Shibuya Scramble Crossing, moments before being swamped with requests for selfies.

GROW HAIR

A ramen-shop dare that created an international cute icon.

One of the rarest sightings one can have in the jungle of Tokyo is a silver-bearded old man dressed in a schoolgirl’s sailor uniform. Tourists lucky enough to sight him can brag that they have seen the legendary Grow Hair, or Sailor Uniform Grandpa, a mythical figure in the kawaii fashion world.

Grow Hair, aka Kobayashi Hideaki, is 58 at the time of writing, and it was only in the last decade that he began dressing in a schoolgirl uniform. “I was always jealous of the cute frilly things girls could wear,” he says. As a child, Kobayashi would swipe the hair accessories of girl classmates and wear them throughout the day, to his teachers’ good-natured amusement. “Of course, I didn’t have the courage to wear girl’s clothing myself, except around friends as kind of a joke.” The turning point came when a friend told him that a ramen shop was holding a campaign where anyone over 30 who wore a sailor uniform to the shop would get a free bowl of ramen. “I thought, at last! I finally have a reason to go outside wearing the uniform.” Despite having the excuse ready in case anyone gave him a hard time, not a single person commented on Kobayashi the entire trip. “That was when I decided to see how far I could get with this thing.”

He and his sailor suit have since been invited as guests of honor to Japanese cultural conventions in countries including China, France, and Russia, and his status as an unlikely ambassador of kawaii culture has landed him in documentaries for CNN and Vice. “I’m just a regular old guy who likes dressing up cute,” he says. “And that’s all it took for me to become famous.”