

AUSTINTATIOUS

Austin became the DPW Oculus manager in 2019, overseeing the construction of Center Camp Café. She first joined the DPW in 2006 for Playa Restoration, following an intense and life-changing period from 2005 to 2006. This journey began with her involvement in Burners Without Borders’ Hurricane Katrina relief operations and concluded with a season as a ski patroller and rafting guide during a record-breaking, deadly year.

She has always enjoyed her role with the Oculus, appreciating the range of skills required to build Center Camp and the collaboration with various crews and departments that contribute to its vibrant atmosphere. Since the COVID pandemic, BMOrg has chosen to discontinue coffee service, and Center Camp is now exploring new ways to reestablish itself as a dynamic heart of Black Rock City.

This interview was conducted by “Flo”, Flore Muguet, a French anthropologist, in 2018 and edited to its final version by Austin in 2024. Most of Flo’s questions have been omitted to improve reading flow.



“Austin is my real name”

Austintatious, my radio handle, is long for my real name, which is Austin. People think it’s my playa name because I must be from Austin, Texas, but I’m not. I don’t love it because the word ostentatious has a connotation to an extravagant, gross display of wealth, which is not me, but most people think that the word means grand or over the top.



Playa Restoration 2014. Photo credit: J.H.Fearless, 2014.

Since my personality is big, it kind of works. I began working DPW during strike of 2006... That was a significant time in my life because in 2005 I was part of the [Hurricane] Katrina relief efforts, when Burners without Borders was born. When I was doing that, there were other volunteers—some who started with me and are still here now—who were saying they were thinking of joining the DPW. I had never even heard of it, though I had been a participant for four years. I said, “Well, I’ll never do DPW because anytime I’ve loved something and I’ve made it my job, it’s taken the luster away.” So, I thought maybe I would join the Temple Crew.

When I left Biloxi, I went back to work at Mammoth Mountain, and it was a really hard season. I was a ski patroller, and we had several deaths, including four of my friends and co-workers. I was on scene for the death of three of them. So, I went

from the intensity of Katrina relief to the highest snowfall on record at the time, which was also incredibly intense. From there I went to my job as a rafting guide on the Kern River: all that snow had melted and it turned into crazy high water, which was fun, but also high intensity. Altogether it ended up being a really stressful year, and then I came to Burning Man 2006.

One of the people I had lost was the person with whom I would go to Burning Man. He would always drive. Because he was gone, I decided I’d drive that year and just stay a little longer to volunteer. I caught up with my Katrina buddies and I was told there were morning meetings and I should talk to a guy named Logan. Then I found him, and he said, “Yeah! There are, and we kinda need you on a roster.” I had the Katrina people vouching for me, one thing led to another, and before I knew it, it was the end of Resto and I’d stayed the whole time.

“Café is interesting because it’s a many layered onion and there are several departments that work within it.”

What was so great about the experience was that I’d had that traumatic year, and it was Resto that got me back on track. When I left here, I was so damn happy. I felt put back together. I remember that when I was rolling out of here onto 447, I didn’t have any cell phone service and I couldn’t call any of my family and tell them about it, so I put down my window and just shouted towards the sky with happiness. I had no other way to express it. And now I’ve been going out there and working ever since. For pre and post season (build and strike), I’ve been on the Oculus crew almost every season, and I’ve also worked Resto every season.

The structure itself is a design by Rod Garrett. Rod’s Road is named after him. I’ve been told it’s the largest temporary tensile shade structure in North America, and possibly the world. Its design is simple, yet ingenious. People often wonder how a giant shade structure survives



Photo credit: unknown. Year unknown.

in high winds without incident. For one, the rigging pulls the structure in to the ground, but also, the shade can easily break away where there is stress. People often inquire why we use zip ties that can break under pressure and suggest other methods of attachment like small carabiners or paracord. What they don’t realize is that the zip ties are meant to be the failure point. If there are high winds that put stress on a certain area and the zip ties break in that spot, the stress is released, and we don’t end up with lumber snapping or shade ripping. A point of failure is necessary to avoid catastrophe. Broken zip ties are easy to replace. All the shade, all three shapes that we have, are 12x24 and custom made, which is not cheap. Snapped lumber compromises the integrity and safety of the structure, and replacing it isn’t inexpensive either. Zip ties being the point of failure makes the most sense structurally and economically. We use more than tens of thousands of them, but they are the end of the

line of recycled plastic, so it’s not as wasteful as one would think.

I love the rigging of Center Camp. Anyone who is curious should come in sometime and I’ll show how it is run, which is easier to understand when you see it. The best, most beautiful part is the center Oculus, for which our crew is named. There are 24 cables that run up and over the 12 6x6 king posts in the center and attach to the inside of the opposite posts. The cables must weave through each other in a certain way so that they do not touch and deflect. Some are just a millimeter apart. It creates an open center and when we are finished with the rigging, we put a scissor lift in the dead center and as we go up, we can just barely pass through the opening. The rigging is so gorgeous from that vantage point and forms a visual parabola.

The Café is interesting because it’s a many layered onion of crews, in

“I went from the intensity of Katrina to the highest recorded snowfall in Mammoth that year.”

that there are several departments that work within it. So, when you say Café, it doesn't necessarily mean Oculus. Café Construction is Oculus. We show up and we do the survey. Then we get the lumber in the ground. We get the cables up in the air. We put up the shade panels. Then, when we're finished with the main structure, we start on the secondary construction, which is building the coffee bar area.

The bar is underneath the structure on one end. We build the bar, then the floor, which has individual

pieces, many that are custom made each year because it's on a curve and must go around the roof posts. Four years ago, the coffee shop wanted a roof covering that was completely waterproof, so we've had to try something new every year, just to find that one thing that will work every year going forward. We haven't quite mastered that yet. The Café Crew's operational area has become part of the build too. Each year they've asked for new shaded areas where they can do volunteer training, dishwashing, etc. The secondary construction is much less of what the participants see and it's more so creating an operational space for those that serve the coffee.

The flags are designed each year by a specific group of people and the designs change according to Burning Man's theme each year. There's a really beautiful one on the side of the 12 o'clock post this year, [2018]. We didn't know what was going to be on that flag and once it unfurled with the wind, it was Larry's hat in his hand. Everybody started crying.

Center Camp Café all starts with Oculus crew. Then there's the lighting crew, décor crew, Café operations,

volunteer coordination, etc. Oculus puts up the plywood wall and then other volunteers on the Café Ops side of things prime it. Then the panels are paired with the artists who paint it and make it pretty. Then we store it at the end of the season and flip it around the next year to have another side that can be painted by artists. Then when it's double sided, we ship it off to the Burning Man Ranch. They use the artistic panels on various projects, like this! [*knocks on large plywood panel of art*] That's an old fence piece.

It used to be that Oculus and the other crews associated with Center Camp were very separate. The volunteer coordinators on the Café side would tell their crews, "These people are working, they've been here for weeks now, they may feel a little bit crusty, and just stay out of their way." We'd have people coming into our lounge, timidly asking, "Can I get some water?" It seemed ridiculous to me because of course someone could, and should, be able to come in and take care of themselves. Once I became assistant manager—along with the managers I was under—we tried to foster more of a relationship.

Then, two or three years ago, one of the main people on the Café Crew was hanging out at a HEaT party [with DPW]. I said, "This is so weird, we've been walking around each other for years and I don't know you." He was like, "I know! What's your story?" And then I was curious about his story. We sat there and got to know each other, and at the end of that party we came into a big hug and wondered, "Why aren't we friends? Let's be friends!"

It's weird to me. I keep overhearing people telling their crews to stay out of our way. To an extent it makes sense, especially when we're on ladders or

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driving machinery, because it gets crazy with lots of people running around. It goes from being just us to being a ton of people in sparkly tutus and it's very not DPW. That was always a bit weird. But having people "stay out of our way" seems a bit elitist and divided and we all have the same goal ultimately. I make sure to prep our crew and let them know, "There's gonna be a lot of people who show up who aren't us, and a lot of people who have never been around heavy equipment. Just be cool." Be educational, be cool, don't be an asshole.

I'm glad we eventually realized we should know each other better. Last year, Café accounting gifted us a couple of handles of alcohol. We said, "You Café people come over to the Oculus lounge and we'll drink this together on one of the last days." It was kind of awkward at first. We seemed like school kids at a dance on opposite sides of the room. Then we started drinking and everybody

relaxed, and we had a great time. Now our crews are closer than we've ever been. It *is* separate departmentally: we're DPW and they're not. The cultures are different. But, over the years, I and some other managers have tried to make it more of a space that is collaborative instead of US and THEM. It's been nice.

[The following text has been added on January 2024 by Austin]

In 2019, I became the manager of Oculus. That season we finally built all the operational areas of the coffee shop in a way that they loved, and they said they wanted it that way every year going forward. It felt like a big win for me my first season as manager. Then Burning Man did what Burning Man does, and everything changed all over again. Covid happened, we lost two years, and the Org decided to eliminate the coffee shop altogether. You can never get too comfortable out here. Building Black Rock City, in this environment, definitely keeps you on your toes. Center Camp Café

is just Center Camp now, and the build is much simpler. There is no secondary construction or more detailed carpentry. Because of our previous efforts, Oculus has a great relationship with the Center Camp crews and I really feel for them because they are trying very hard to make the space relevant despite the absence of the coffee shop. Some participants don't think it matters anymore without serving coffee, but I disagree. I see it as a hub for art and performance. It's a wonderful, shaded area for tent campers who need a place to chill and be comfortable. It's a great middle spot to meet. I think if Placement makes the area around Rod's Road more of a busy town center, then Center Camp will be the gazebo in the center of town. The flags are always a way by which I orient myself when it's dark and I'm in deep playa, and I love the soft, cozy light that emanates from it at night. There is definitely still a place for it, and with some imagination and cooperation, I think we can make this genius structure of Rod Garrett's thrive again.



Austin on top of the scissor lif, 2010. Photo credit: unknown.



Austin in the center of the rigging, 2010. Photo credit: unknown.