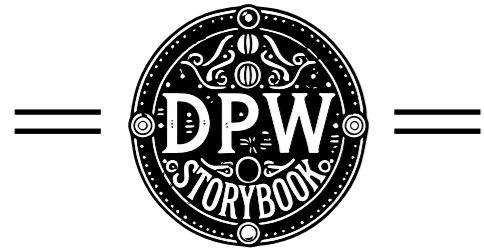


# BULLWINKL

Bullwinkl has been with the DPW since 2013. A former Marine, artist, Cherokee citizen, and schoolteacher, he brings a unique blend of skills and experience to his role as the Sign Shop Manager, creating informative and signaletic signs for Black Rock City. His journey from combat illustrator in the Marines to designing signage with his DPW team underscores his commitment to art, education, and community. He earned a master's degree in Science and Art Education in 2020.

This interview was conducted by “Flo”, Flore Muguet, a French anthropologist in 2017. Most of Flo’s questions have been omitted to improve reading flow.



# “I got my name because of a water truck driver...”

**BULLWINKL** So there was this water truck driver at the time who was flirting with Squirrely. The water truck driver, being an old man with a young, pretty girl, says something inappropriate. He says: “Is there a moose in your life?” thinking of himself. Or, “is there room for a moose in your life” or something. At the time, they didn’t know what to call me yet. So [when this happens] they instantly thought of “oh, squirrel. Moose. Bullwinkl and Rocky from the cartoon way back in the day.”

So I’m named after a cartoon because of my boss’s lineage to the name Squirrely. This was back in 2013, after the instance with Coyote, the water truck driver, and Squirrely. And one day Coyote just rolled up in his truck, looked at me, and says, “hey, Bullwinkl” I knew it had stuck. You could see the smile on his face. He knew the name was gonna stick. I got my name because a water truck driver was flirting with Squirrely.

**FLO** What is Bullwinkl? It’s a cartoon?

**BULLWINKL** Yeah. It’s a slow-witted moose. And because of my size, my muscles, and my girth, people often say moose or bull, or anything that resembles a big, dumb ox. So, it’s supposed to get under my skin. It does sometimes just because I’m smarter than that. But, the perception is that I’m big and dumb. I am actually more keen-minded than most people give me credit for.

**FLO** So I guess from 2013 to now, you had different roles and experiences?

**BULLWINKL** Nope. I always did the same thing. I’m a T-stake pounder. They used me for my muscles. I also got over the competition side of things [quicker]. When you’re new, you’re trying to prove yourself. You’re trying to fit in. So you go through



Photo credit: Aaron Muszalski, 2017.

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# “To name things, you have to put that thing on a sign.”

all these exercises to process that experience. To me, my world was fence crew, intersections, and sign shop, because that’s where I pounded all these intersection signs. I did gate road. I pounded all the stuff with this and that.

**FLO** And you did that from which year to which year?

**BULLWINKL** 2013 was my first year with DPW. From 2008 to 2012 I was with Front Porch. Then we were part of Empire of Dirt, which was John, and the Front Porch, and the snail car.

In 2014 my mother passed, so I took the year off and helped her in her passing for many months. Almost a whole year. Then I came back to DPW in 2015. I was in roadworks in 2016, and this year I came back as the new sign shop manager. There is certainly a lot more responsibility in having to manage people. Before, I just had to worry about myself, and showing up on time, and working hard... which I knew how to do. But, that’s management.

In total there’s 11/12 spots available for sign shop, with all the volunteer positions available or whatnot. And so... you know, I had an incredible opportunity to come in. I put my hat in the ring. I interviewed for the position. I got the position.

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home.”

FLO So for someone who may not know DPW or sign shop... would you like to describe what the sign shop department is?

BULLWINKL Sure. Sign shop makes all of the signs. If someone is gonna look at it, it has to impart a message with information. Whether it be important information like safety, directions... the saying is “you’ll be lost without us.” You can’t have a city without someone having to name a street. Inherent. In a village, the first time there was two left or rights, someone had to put a sign up there to say which way you’ll go for what.

That’s inherently the way societies are built. You have to name things, and to name things you have to put that thing on a sign. Larry Harvey, from what I understand, has two things that he holds very dear. He holds, obviously, everything dear because, you know, with a lot of work and other people involved, it’s his manifestation and his idea. Spires

was one of his ideas, I believe. And sign shop. With the intersection signs.

So, he—I believe it’s him—makes the signs, or he picks the theme with other people as well. I think they’re involved in that process, or he’s allowed them access to that process. They decide what the A-L is going to be in reference to the theme. It’s going to be different every year.

This year’s theme was radical ritual. You know, so A was “Awe.” B was “Breath.” C was “Ceremony.” D “Dance,” E “Eulogy,” F “Fire,” G “Genuflect,” H “Hallowed.” I is “In Spirit.” J was “Juju,” which is a really cool one. K was “Kundalini” and “Lustrate.” So those were the names of the streets this year, and they were chosen by Larry Harvey, and I believe Jennifer Reiser may be involved in that. But, she’s also involved in the [Bhurma Shave] signs.



The Sign Shop crew. Photo credit: Allison Funderbunk Sanchez, 2019.

When you take Gate Road, you see the signs. One after the other, and they’re quotes. Jennifer Reiser picks the quotes on the signs. They’re a throwback to an old American tradition of having signs that are spread out so they keep your attention. Because you have an inherent need to finish a sentence or a thought, if you have an incomplete thought, you wanna keep your attention there. So, that’s the idea.

Back in the day, you’d see an old shaving crème sign that did that. Like, “Come... Buy... Our... Shaving Crème.” I believe that’s the story. So, the signs carry the quotes that they want to impart. Messages and feelings of what the theme this year means for them, so that participants can look at that as they’re entering Burning Man.

FLO So are you in charge of making those signs specifically, or all of the signs?

BULLWINKL All the signs. I have a great team. I could not do it without them. My assistant manager of installation

and my assistant manager of production. Jedi is my assistant of installation, yes. She knows where the signs go, and she puts them there. She assembles the crew and she leads the team that goes out and installs all the signs in the city so we know where everything goes.

Everyday I get up and drive out to the ranch. We begin the day with a meeting, talk about what we have going on... people would begin the process of creation for the intersection signs’ artwork. We had a brainstorming session about the artwork: what the name was, and how it was going to relate to the theme. Then we tried to push the art directions in different ways, and back and forth, and blah blah blah. Then we’d have to build some No Smoking signs. “Don’t park here.” “Don’t die.” If it has words on it, we make it.

FLO Which machine are you using?

BULLWINKL It’s a graftech. I think the actual size was 8600... it was a really high-end machine. That being said, I wish we had more time for

hand painted signs. I wish we had more times for more elaborate, artistic signs. I’m pushing towards that in the future. I’m trying to get more involvement with the local community: with the Paiute reservation. I’d love to be able to reach out and participate, and do things like that.

FLO So you have the freedom to create your own stickers if you want to.

BULLWINKL Yes. As well as the artwork for the intersections, which is important. I try to make the art the best I can, but I cannot have direct influence. Because each artist is their own artist. All my crew are artists. It’s just trying to get them to tap into what they really want to say, and give them the techniques to say it. But... by and large, I think it is one of the great endeavors of trying to explore one’s own humanity. That’s why art is so important.

After high school, I joined the Marine Corps. I was in the marines from 2000 to 2004. I was lucky enough to have the best job in the military. I



The front Porch. Photo credit: Xela La, 2009.

was a combat illustrator, or combat artist. So, I got to be trained by the military to be an artist.

Every marine is a basic rifleman. You have to know how to shoot and kill. That's the job of every marine. First and foremost. Then you do your job after that.

My job was to have a sketch book, have watercolors, have charcoal, and paint pretty pictures of terrible things. I never went to combat. I was fortunate. Many were not. So, I count my blessings that I made it out in one piece. Many did not. I feel bad for them. I'm empathetic to the suffering and the lost because of the war. It wasn't my time.

I ended up going back to school to get my master's degree in science and art education. I'll be a high school art and science teacher. So, that's why I'm currently enrolled at UNR. The University of Nevada at Reno. So, I just live in Reno, about two hours away. I go to school there, and I'm taking three graduate classes now.

I will, hopefully, be graduating within the next year/year and a half. Depends. I mean, graduating in May means I can get my license first and start teaching right away because I'm almost short up on the license part. But, I want to get my masters degree too. So, that means I have to stay in a little bit longer.

I want to teach and help educate. Teaching art is fun to me. So, this job being sign shop manager, and trying to be an art teacher, and a science teacher... it kind of fit in nicely.

I look pretty white, I know. But, I have Cherokee blood. I have relatives that have crossed the Trail of Tears. I have documented proof of my lineage to these people. I have family who was on the Dawes Enrollment papers and

the Dawes Allotment Act. We have Indian land in Oklahoma now, which has been passed down from family to family over the years. So, now my family has this land which was inherited by the land disbursement from the government once the Trail of Tears was over.

I recently got an art grant from the Nevada art council. I made a ceremonial jacket. I hand embroidered and quilted this ceremonial jacket that described the way I relate to my Cherokee heritage. And the taxpayers of Nevada gave me money to produce this! So, I'm very thankful to them, and I was able to produce the artwork successfully. I demonstrated that, and I turned in all the appropriate paperwork that corresponds with the artwork. That can be viewed publicly wherever. Eventually, I would like to show [my jacket] publicly.

I relate it to people here in DPW and at Burning Man. And I relate it to my Cherokee heritage as a citizen and, you know, a fighter in the government that subjected so many people to so many terrible things.... I'm trying to come to reconciliation with all of that. I'm trying to provide some giveback or cultural expression of "thank you for allowing us to be here in your neighborhood." This was all formally Paiute land. It was taken by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and then passed through as hand-me-downs, so to speak.

My great grandfather worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs as an educator. In 1934 my grandmother was born in Austin, Nevada. There's a place about 3-4 hours away from here. She used to come to Reno a lot as a small girl. She also used to tell me, when I was a child, about how beautiful the Black Rock Desert was, and how beautiful Reno was.

So, I know she went out to the Black Rock Desert. I know for a fact she had before I ever heard of Burning Man. I think it's interesting that my great grandfather was a teacher for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, teaching local Paiute in 1925 or 19-whatever, and he was Cherokee. There's a lot of things that make me feel at home here.

We do a lot of signs for Gate. Mostly infrastructure signs. If it's for other departments, it's usually "don't turn here, turn here," "don't get lost," "no smoking, don't blow us up." They're mostly infrastructure signs. We also do the signs for center camp, and we're going to move on to doing hand-painted signs, I believe. Or at least, I would like to hope. Some of the conversations I had this year may lead to sign shop being responsible for painting the center camp signs.

One of the things they want to enculturate new participants in is the Principles: having the Principles that we stand on in Burning Man displayed, and making sure that new participants know them. They want to have nice decorative signs in the center camp. Right now there's wood and metal, cut-out vinyl plastic stickers on metal signs. But they want us to be more professional. I would like it to be more art related, with more wood and hand-painted, or carved signs and stuff. We'll go from there and see what works. You have a very cohesive comradery that exists at DPW, that you can't experience in too many other places I've seen.

FLO I guess as a marine, you've experienced that kind of comradery?

BULLWINKL Sure. I prefer this one. [laughter] It's combat art, man! What happens out here is hardcore, and very militarized. Well... it's not, but it's also very hard and in desert-like conditions. You have to be tough

to be out here!

You wake up at the same time. You get up early, you go to work. You do your shit, and at the end of the day you're tired as hell. And then you go party with your friends. That's exactly what the marine corps was like.

But then in DPW, you're also making cool art, and you're around some of the most spectacular, beautiful, strong willed women that you will ever experience in your entire life. And you'll be around some of the most switched on, incredibly sharp, focused individuals who are out there just burning lean tissue to get shit done. Fuck 'em. I'm lucky to be around the type of people I'm around. My life is constantly enriched by the diversity and the type of people who come to DPW.

FLO Would you like to talk about that difference in terms of vocabulary of what the DPW is using, vs. the burners?



"Portraits Series". Photo credit: Bree Ann St. Onge, 2018.

“My life is constantly enriched by the diversity and the type of people who come to DPW..”

BULLWINKL I have to make that distinction between DPW, myself as a worker, a DPW manager, and my understanding of what I believe the org is trying to accomplish and do. They have a very specific brand and message that they're trying to get out there. DPW is part of that. You know... we're extreme, we're radicalized in many ways, we're also "fuck this." But, we also try to adhere to the principles, and we call each other on our shit.

Some of these people I only see out here, but I spend every waking moment with them. Half of my girlfriends I've met and lost out here. So, this is a tribe in a way. A very nomadic tribe that comes together to build the greatest art experience that I've ever imagined. We come out and we burn it.