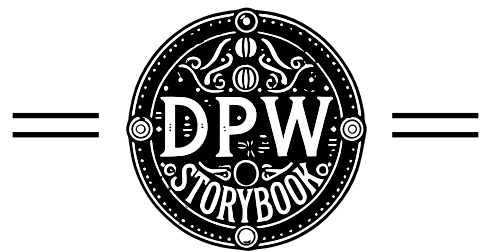


CAPTAIN KIRK

Kirk, known by his Playa name Captain Kirk, is an environmental educator and waste management specialist with a deep commitment to sustainability. Growing up in Orange County, California, Kirk's journey into the field of waste reduction began after he moved to San Francisco and started working at various transformational festivals in the early 2010s. With a degree in Recreation, Parks, and Tourism Administration from San Francisco State University, Kirk has dedicated himself to managing waste at festivals and events, collaborating with organizations like Green Mary and individuals such as Pytrbob. He first joined the DPW and Burning Man in 2016, where he worked with the TSA department, focusing on sorting and recycling efforts.

This interview was conducted by “Flo,” Flore Muguet, a French anthropologist, in 2016. Flo's questions have been omitted to improve the reading flow.



“My background is in environmental education.”

My playa name is Captain Kirk. My real name is Kirk. I grew up in Southern California, behind the Orange Curtain as they say: Orange County. Big Republican stronghold. I grew up there, but I didn't get started in the waste reduction field until I moved to San Francisco. I've been going to festivals for about six years now. It was through going to festivals that I was introduced to the recycling field as a career. But prior to that, my background is in environmental education. So, a lot of outdoor work focusing on connecting people with nature.

I went to San Francisco State and got a degree in recreational parks and tourism administration. So, a lot of the people in my field go into working for the park service, working for... you know, outdoor guide companies and nonprofits. Different things like that. Maybe about four years ago I was volunteering at my first festival in Oregon, called “What the Festival,” and I went up there. This is the summer right before I was going to transfer to San Francisco State.

So, I quit my job at Home Depot in June and just went to all these festivals that summer. By then I was two years into going to festivals. Mostly Lightning in a Bottle was my big festival. This past one was my 6th one since 2011. It used to be in Orange County, like, 20 minutes from my parents' house.

The first thing they had me do [volunteering for What the Festival] was sort through the waste of the festival. My initial thought was, “why are you doing this? This is shitty. Why are you doing this right now.” It was in eastern Oregon, so high desert. It's hot. So, we're sorting through this hot garbage, and I was partying a lot and not getting much sleep, and I was not really into it. That was about a month—I think it was July? —a



Kirk at Boogaloo Mountain Jam in 2016. Photo credit : unknown.

month and a half before I moved to San Francisco.

I moved to San Francisco; I started school. I went to a food festival in Oakland called Eat Real. I was leaving the festival and I see this guy who had been my shift supervisor at What the Festival coming around the corner with a can of garbage. He's got a very recognizable figure, so I stopped and chatted with him. He recognized me, and he was working for a company called Green Mary, she does waste events in the Bay Area, she's one of the largest providers of that waste service. And he pretty much told me to come start working for her and that was about four years ago... in I think, yeah, September or August of 2012. I'm 26.

I was going to school full time and working at these events which mostly were on the weekends. Anything from marathons—you know, like the finish line expo—to private fundraisers, to tech conferences, which are huge productions up there. I started working with the guy, Pytrbob. He is the TSA manager who manages the BLM compound. It's called the JOC this year: the Joint Operations Center. So, he's been my trash daddy, so to speak. Ever since then, I've been working for Green Mary and I've got really into the field.

After that first initial time sorting trash I was not into it. But, after about a year working with her, I was like, “Wow, this is actually really good work” and I started to learn

about why that work is absolutely necessary and important. I think it's just, you know, having been going to festivals and having only seen the participant side. But working behind the scenes and seeing how much waste was generated when you have thousands of people consuming for days at a time? Just the sheer volume of waste was incredible.

The first event I worked at was a party for one of the big tech companies called Oracle. They basically rent out Treasure Island and have this huge party. So, it's crazy because I think it's just thrown for the employees for free, so there's no incentive to finish your hotdog or whatever. So, we're getting pieces of chicken with one bite out of it and like, you know, almost full beers and all these things coming back to us. I was like, “Oh my gosh, there's so much waste!” One of my first tasks was to jump into the compost dumpster, and I wasn't expecting that, and I was literally soaked up above my knees in compost juice. And I was still like “Ah, what am I doing, this is crazy!”

So, it was really seeing the amount of waste that is created and I just found a lot of value in the work. I really just took a liking to it. The people who work for Green Mary are very much from alternative communities, so people who live in communal type living systems in the East Bay. A lot of trans people. People of color. You know, just a very diverse group of people. Maybe a year after working for her, I was just really into it.

I really started working with Green Mary from then on. Pytrbob, who works for Green Mary, does his own private contracts for festivals like Lucidity. He's the manager; I was his assistant manager at this past one managing all the waste. Yeah, he's the manager of the BLM compound. Burner's Express Bus,

“The people who come through that, they throw away a lot of good stuff...”

Burner's Express Air, for managing that waste stream. So, once I saw that side, I couldn't really go back to just being a participant. Once you see that it's like, “oh, yeah, this is what's going on. I can't not work with those people.”

So, since then I've been working with Pytrbob on a bunch of different things. The next year I went back: the second year of What the Festival I worked with him there. I work with Lucidity. Worked Lucidity with him three years ago and then this past year and... yeah. I think, you know, once you're exposed to that side, it doesn't happen to everybody, but certain people are drawn to become more involved with the production of the festival community.

So, this is my first Burning Man, actually. [Pytrbob has] been trying to get me to come out here for the past two years, but it was always just weird timing. I couldn't commit to the three weeks, and it just wasn't the right time. I've been wanting to come to Burning Man. It's been on my radar since I first went to my first festival. I remember seeing images of the Man on people's camps at LIB and I was like, “Ah, I feel a little less far removed.” And ever since then,

“The sheer volume of waste was incredible...”

it's been an inevitable thing. I can't believe it's taken so long actually.

So, this particular contract is kind of unique because for Burning Man we are only handling staff waste. So, only from staff operations. Other festivals I work it's, you know, it's participant waste as well, which is the whole extra layer of complexity. Here, it's relatively simplified because the system is that various departments bring their waste to the transfer system. Transfer stations pre-sort it, and if it's not sorted, then they come out and they sort it with us. You know, they have to sort it, and we're there assisting, telling them what materials go in what waste stream. The transfer station authority is made up of four different sub-departments, so there's a transfer station at the compound. Mister Blue is kind of the head, and then he has his department managers.

Sweet Ride? I think he's more of a facilities manager. Pytrbob typically manages basically a shade structure with a sorting table. There are four dumpsters back there. We don't really interact with the law enforcement agencies at all other than them bringing out their waste to us. They have their own commissary there. So, most of it comes from the commissary waste and stuff like that. But then we gather random trash from their offices. There's more

than a dozen of those mobile office buildings back there.

At the BLM compound, or the JOC this year—the Joint Operation Center—we get waste brought to us. Usually, we're not even there when the waste is brought to us. We'll show up sometimes because they have rounded the clock commissary times. They have a meal time twice throughout the night, so we have stuff in the middle of the night left

for us. So, we have to sort through that stuff. There is a compost, commingle recycling and landfill dumpster; ESD has a logistics office back there. They bring us their waste and law enforcement brings us their waste.

It's a pretty simple process back there. It's a very small thing, and our shifts go from, they were from 10-12 and then 3-5, and 10-12 at night. During the event week it was 10-12 at night

because it was round the clock shifts. Then in addition to that, during the last couple of days of the event, we were also responsible for managing the Burner Express Bus and Air shuttle system. So, every participant who came through Burners Express Bus was given one blue bag for their recycling and one clear bag for their landfill waste. So, at the end of the event, before they board the bus, they bring their waste to a little, central drop off station. Then that



Kirk in front of his 2019 art piece, “Discard”. Photo credit: Plamen Nikolov, 2019.

“I think here there's much more of a community and culture [about Leave No Trace] that it's practiced more.”

gets brought over to the TSA actual, where we basically just rip open the commingle.

There's a specific recycling dumpster. It all goes in there, commingle recycling. There's another dumpster for the landfill. I was told there's 5,000 people using that program, so we got a lot of waste from that. The people who come through that, they throw away a lot of perfectly good stuff. You look through a bag and you can see EL wire, you know, like good boots, and onesies. I got a bunch of cool stuff.

Like food. Good food. A lot of good stuff that we pulled out. We're dumpster divers too, so we don't have an aversion to pulling stuff out of the trash for our own use. At Burning Man, it's more of an educational thing. The sorting we do is more minimal because the departments are supposed to bring it in sorted. If

not, they have to come sort it with us as we show them. We do it with them but educate on how to do it with them. At BLM it's a little different. The only actual department we're dealing with out there is ESD. The rest of it is coming from the law enforcement compound, and we can't really educate them a whole lot because we're not allowed to interact with them a whole bunch.

I think only the actual managers can go into the commissary to pull out full bags. I think inside the commissary there's pictures, descriptions of each recycling receptacle to tell them how to sort it. But I haven't seen it. I'm just assuming that's how it is. Generally, with TSA it's an educational thing. It's there to assist the different departments with making sure their waste is properly sorted and then getting it into the right dumpster. Very simplified here.

A good example: I have this cup right now because I forgot my cup. Normally I'd be carrying around my little cup. Everyone carries their little cup around because that's part of the culture. So, yeah, I think that's... you know, a good step. Something I've seen for sure. I think people are just more conscious of what they bring out here.

All the events I've worked at brand themselves as a leave no trace event, but for some whatever reason, at these other events people leave shit. I mean people leave shit at Burning Man. I've already seen little piles building around. But it's just a much larger degree of people leaving a lot. I think here there's much more of a community and culture here that it's practiced more. And I don't know what that is. I don't know if it's more of a community enforcement thing. Like if someone saw you trying to leave your shit here, they'd be like “Hey, what are you doing?”