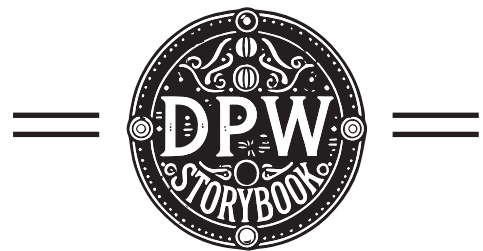


DACE

Dace attended his first Burning Man in 1997 and began his involvement with the DPW in 2003, starting with Highway Cleanup. In 2004, he joined the Shade Crew under the leadership of his friend Quiet Earp. The Shade Crew is responsible for building all the shade structures for Burning Man workers and public infrastructure. Dace's experiences at Burning Man have been transformative, profoundly shaping his personal growth and sense of community.

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



“We trust each other, we know how the other works...”

My DPW experience started with Highway Cleanup in 2003. I'd been to Burning Man the six years prior, but I only ever stayed for the week of the event; I had a job to get back to, an apartment to go back to. Every year I'd say things like, "I wish I could stay forever, and help with the cleanup, but, ugh, I have to go back to my job."

So, in 2003, circumstances found me with money in the bank and nothing that I needed to go back to, so I decided to stay. I'd volunteered with The Café that year, so I helped with their clean up. After a couple

days, they were like "we can't use you anymore. If you want to stay on site, you need to go to DPW meetings." So, I did. Taz got in front of everybody and announced, "I need people for highway cleanup. It's a terrible job, you probably don't want to do it, but I need people." And I volunteered because I was eager to just be on a crew. That was in 2003. Taz was running Highway Cleanup in this old, repurposed school bus. There was only one crew back then (they have a bunch now). We went around in that bus and picked up trash for miles in all directions.

The following year, Quiet Earp—whom I'd worked with on Highway Clean up— became the Shade Crew manager, as he'd remain for the next 14 years. I got along really well with him, and he asked me to be on Shade Crew. Part of my loyalty to Shade Crew is loyalty to him. He really defined Shade Crew and its culture, and we all really miss him. 2016 was the first year he wasn't there.

Shade Crew is such a strong community because of Quiet Earp. He'd pick everyone personally. He designed our initial Shade Enclave ("The Shenclave"). He guided us into

being a cohesive team, recruiting the good and weeding out the bad. We're all hard workers— you have to be. It's in the nature of what we do, and we take pride in that.

We're doing hard labor in the blazing sun, and, by definition, where there is no shade. Shade Crew used to be where volunteers got sent when they were being punished. It takes a certain kind of person— a certain kind of grit— to do that for 2 months and keep a good attitude about it.

For my first 5 years on Shade Crew, I'd still take time off to do Cleanup with Taz. For years we did it in Taz's personal pickup truck, and Burning Man reimbursed his fuel. A lot of times, it was just me and him. Often, we'd have a rotating cast of volunteers with us— whoever Taz and I got along with. There was Spunky, TrashMonster, PoleMonkey— quite a cast of characters. It was fairly insular work— stuck in a vehicle together all day, miles away from the rest of our community. Taz and I developed a strong rapport, and he actually quit doing it the year that I left— I think he didn't want to do it without me. We'd grown to trust each other, he and I, we know how the other works, we know how to not step on each other's toes.

He was distracted a lot of times by I.T. stuff, which I understand he does (or did?) the lion's share of for both Gerlach and for the event itself. He lives in Gerlach year-round, so he knows the sheriff. He knows waste management. He knows a lot of people in the area. It came in very handy when navigating the post-event highways.

Of course we'd clean the whole 447. That's where we'd start, getting the bigger stuff first, and then going back for the blowouts. We'd scan the 80 and the I80 rest stop. We'd

“This was a community that I could identify with so much more than anything I experienced growing up...”

do the 446, and the 34 between Gerlach and Black Rock. We went all the way north to Alturas. Burning Man's culture has a strong sense of responsibility for surrounding areas, not just on an altruistic level and as a matter of pride, but also as a major public relations effort.

For a week or three, it really is a big strain on the otherwise small and quiet local communities; their infrastructure just isn't designed to accommodate all the traffic. By and large, I think the locals appreciate the event, if only for the money it brings into their communities, but there's always pushback. Some locals jump on any opportunity to complain, "look what you're doing to the highway! It's a terrible mess!" A day or two later, we clean it up and



Photo credit: Michael Astraukas, 2019.



Dace honoring the ashes of his DPW friend, Leah Steele. Photo credit: Dace, 2016.

say “look, now it’s clean.” There are people who would rather the event not happen at all— like they have a moral issue with a bunch of hippies in the desert or something— and one of the only legitimate complaints they can leverage is that we leave a mess. The big goal of Highway Cleanup was that, after 2 weeks, those people would have nothing to complain about.

I feel committed to the Burning Man festival. It’s been a very meaningful part of my life starting at a very formative age. I grew up in a small Bay Area town which was just culturally and spiritually destitute, and I was hungry to get out. I learned about Burning Man my senior year of high school, and it just seemed like the epitome of the Rest of The World

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which I was so eager to explore and experience.

Burning Man gave me something to identify with that I felt really good about; That was something I didn’t have growing up. I didn’t want to identify with my parents or what they did, or with my hometown, or anything that I grew up around. Burning Man was everything that my hometown wasn’t. It was a place where I could be comfortable and be around creative people doing creative things, and it was buzzing and alive all the time. I felt instantly at home and at peace here. And when I started doing this at 18, I bought into all the pomp, all the, “welcome home!” clichés, all the idealism which saturates the culture.

My idea of it has matured as I have, but I’m grateful for the experience, and it was an important part of personal my growth. There’s a lot of stuff about community, about myself, which for a long time I associate exclusively with the Burning Man Festival, separate from “the real world”— stuff like BM ideals, living in community, expressing myself, etc. I had to learn these things in a vacuum before realizing that “oh, it doesn’t just exist here. This can be everyday if I want it. This can be anywhere”.

As a member of DPW, it can be easy to sort of resent the actual event, because we’re out here for two months, and the event itself is a relatively small part of our experience. We have this community of 200 or so people we know and trust and it’s all fairly insular. And then, very suddenly, this city of 70,000+ people, who we don’t know, floods in and everything changes over night. It can feel like they’re invading our

small town, which I suppose is how some of the locals feel every year.

For this reason, during the event, I detach from DPW. I make a temporary home with a non-DPW theme camp, with whom I’ve been camping since 2004. The psychology of that is, instead of the city being imposed on my small town, I’m consciously moving to the city, moving to Burning Man. The core of the theme camp is folks I know and love and only get to see during the event. I can move back to my small DPW village when the week’s over.

Being with my theme camp allows me to appreciate the Burning Man festival in a way I couldn’t with the DPW. This is especially true spending time with first-time burners. I spent most of the 2016 event with a first-time participant. When Burning Man is your backyard for 20 years, it’s easy to look out and just see a backyard. But when I’m with a first-timer, and they’re like “oh, look at the

Man!” and “Oh, dig this crazy dust storm! It’s so magical!”. I remember being that person.

For me, experiencing that initial excitement and joy vicariously through the first-timers is almost as good as being there for the first time again. And they benefit from having a veteran to show them around, show them what’s cool and how to deal with common issues. Yeah. I had a great, great Burn in 2016 because of that.

“I felt
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Dace honoring the ashes of his DPW friend, Leah Steele. Photo credit: unknown, 2016.