

DaveX

Dave has attended Burning Man since 1992. A full time Burning Man employee over two decades, he oversees the Fire Art Safety Team ensuring the safe execution of fire art projects. DaveX is known for his technical expertise and ability to guide artists through the intense and emotional process of burning their art.

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



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Photo credit: Flore Muguet, 2018.

Well, I’ve been attending the event since 1992, which makes 25 years this year. But I’ve been working for Burning Man as part of DPW and as part of the art department. So, this will be my 20th year working for the organization.

There was a piece of paper that was printed every month or so by the Cacophony Society in San Francisco. They would distribute it to various places. It was called the Rough Draft. When I was in Rainbow grocery in


San Francisco, I brought home one of the Rough Drafts. It talked about the zone trip to the Black Rock Desert and, you know, I love deserts and stuff. So, I’m like, “Hey, this is like camping with some crazy art going on!” I had seen pictures of the Burning Man thing when it was in San Francisco at Ft. Mason, so I kind of knew what the wooden sculpture was. Kind of anything that was in the Rough Draft from the Cacophony Society was bound to be fun.

So, I asked my friend Charlie Gadeken if he wanted to come out, and we bought tickets for \$10. Charlie was a little bit indignant that we were paying \$10. He thought that was a maybe too expensive to camp in the desert, but we bought it anyway. And then we came out here and that first event, you know, you volunteer for stuff as you do. I volunteered to work Gate, and me and Charlie went out to the Gate on Saturday, and we worked a gate shift out there.

It wasn’t like your average festival or whatever. There was a lot of stuff going on. We saw all kinds of projects going on. It just seemed like a real interesting thing that not many people knew about, and that there was a lot of freedom to do what you want. Back then there was not much authority presence out here. You could just go wild and do things that you normally wouldn’t be able to do in the city: drive 100 mph across the desert in the backseat with nobody driving. The kind of crazy

stuff that you didn’t want to do was encouraged.

Well, there were two paths that I followed. I followed the path into the art department, working for Crimson Rose and her partner, Will Rogers, who’s working for the DPW. I started a path to work for DPW, but they’re tied together. I worked: my first role for DPW was managing the fuel, all the propane and the gasoline at Burning Man. The reason I was managing the fuel was to make sure



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the pieces that had fire art on it had enough fuel.

There was an incident in Gerlach, the little town which is next to Burning Man here. There was a small place where they sold propane in the town of Gerlach there. A guy from Burning Man showed up there with no pants on. He had what he called a “flamethrower” and he asked the propane guy if he’d sell him propane for the flamethrower, while he was wearing no pants in the town in Gerlach. They don’t go for that in the town of Gerlach. So, I think the propane guy went in and got his shotgun, came out and said, “Get the hell out of here. I’m not selling you any propane.” Then he called up Will Rogers, from Burning Man, and said, “Hey, I don’t know what the hell is going on out there, but I can’t sell propane to a pant-less guy with a flamethrower. You know? I’m in a real business here. Something bad happens, I’ll lose my business. You guys need to figure out something different.”

That was probably ’96. Maybe? Twenty years ago, yeah. That’s the start of when I started this up. Then Will Rogers suggested that what I do is call the propane guy. I told the propane guy:

“Hey, I work for Burning Man, and I’m coming out to get these propane

tanks because we’re cooking hot dogs and hamburgers. I need a lot of propane to make these hotdogs and hamburgers. We’re making a ton of hotdogs and hamburgers.”

So, I would go around to all the artists who are using propane for their fire art, round up all their tanks, put them in a truck, and then drive them into Gerlach. I would fill them. It became my job to make sure that nothing bad happened.

That was the second part of my job which began. I was already working on big fire stuff: which was Jim Mason’s project with flamethrowers, which were some really big flamethrowers. Along with Jim I was really the only one working on big fire art at that time. As other people decided to do fire art, they figured, hey, maybe somebody else should take a look at this stuff and make sure that it’s actually safe. So, with that job with the fuel, like I said, I took on responsibility. Then I really had a motivation to make sure that all the stuff as safe so that I didn’t end up in trouble as well.

Now, in order to make it safe, I didn’t know much more besides plumbing and how I was making my particular flamethrower. But I sought out training: I sought out fireworks training, I sought out training in handling propane gases, and I took certification courses in handling propane. There was an instance when a fire broke out and the sheriff came out. We had one of the flamethrowers catch on fire. The sheriff came out and said, “What is this machine, what are you doing?” and they made drawings and diagrams and stuff. At the end of it he said, “Hey, well you Hollywood guys really know how to have a good time. We’re going to go home and build one of these machines.”

I realized that they thought we were professionals! They thought that the fire was a one-off accident, but that we were professionals and there was nothing to worry about. I realized that I had to become the professional that he believed that we were. So, over the years I became that professional, and sought out that training. Now I’ve gotten so much training and so much experience over the years that, yeah: we have become the people capable of regulating this stuff because we have spent so much time working with it.

Well, in the beginning there wasn’t very much fire art, and so there wasn’t much need for fuel. I could do most of it myself. There was a small team of a couple of guys who were delivering gasoline in an old school bus. They worked on that for a while, and I just took care the old propane. After a while those guys stopped doing the liquid fuels and took over liquid fuels and the propane delivery for all the art projects.

But, as the event grew and there was both more fire projects, and the infrastructure needed for more fuel, and more fuel for the artists, I eventually developed a team of maybe a dozen people who were delivering fuel. That became a real big responsibility. People would knock on my trailer at 2 o’clock in the morning and say, “Hey, Dave the generator stopped at first camp, and they can’t make margaritas at the margarita machine. Can you drop off some gas in the generator?” You know, like crazy questions like that. That was making me very tired. Meanwhile, as the amount of fire art grew, some types of fire art I didn’t understand. So, I had to bring in people to the team who understood that particular type of fire art. I also had to bring in licensed professionals to burn the Man.

We had some incidents where the Man would go off early because people were doing the pyro and didn’t understand how pyro worked: they weren’t professionals. So, we brought on professional pyro technicians to burn the Man and to help advice on the other fireworks. I started seeking out people with experience in other areas to help build the team of fire inspection. As the years went on, there was no way I could look at all the fire art myself and understand all the fire art myself. I had to develop a team to go out and look at the fire art and then manage the team.

Then, between the responsibilities of delivering all the fuel for Burning Man, and inspecting all the fire art, it just became too much for any one person to do. So eventually the fuel department I let pass on to some other folks, and I just kept my eye on the overall safety of the fuel department. It’s become its own thing now. You can see it’s become its own city over there with all the fuel tanks and stuff. Now I focus my attention on just the fire art. Even then managing the fire art, I have people who focus on certain areas. Propaniac manages all the flame effects, and propane/gas type effects. I have a woman named Doxie who manages all the structure fires that go on. There’s a guy named Jack who manages all the vehicles that have fire on them. There’re all the various people who are in charge of various aspects with the fire who report back to me. Then I make decisions on the higher level, and I keep an eye on the biggest projects that have the most risk to make sure that they’re going safe. I show up at all the big burns and manage the incident command centers at the big burns.

So, the job has evolved from me doing everything myself and going to every single project, and dropping off every load of fuel to every little project,

and engaging with everybody on that level... To now mainly engaging with my team members and acting as manager. To making sure they’re going out to all those inspections, and only jumping in when there’s big problems, or challenges, or issues that need to be resolved. Full time: I work in the Burning Man office in San Francisco.

Well first, when people wanna do an art project they go on our website. They register their art project. If they say that they’re having fire in their project, a whole new webpage will open up and there’s maybe 50 questions about fire that are fire specific that people fill in. Then they also provide schematics and drawings showing how the flame effect works or how the structure that they’re building is gonna get burned down. Where they’re gonna place the fuel. We gather all kinds of information about it. If you’re burning your wooden structure, we have a half hour to an hour meeting with you over the phone to talk about your plans for burning your structure. So, the first process is in-taking all of the plans and information and drawings. Then I and all my team members view those. They make comments. I make comments on that. Then whoever is managing those artists will feed back that information and we’ll work before we even get out here to the playa to make sure it’s as safe as possible. Sometimes people say crazy things that you’ll just have to say no to. It’s very rare that I’ll say no to something. Usually I’ll just say, “That sounds great, but here’s the list of problems that I see with your idea. If you can resolve these problems, then we can move forward.” But somethings are just no.

That’s very important. Let’s take the Temple, for instance. There’s the mechanics of making sure where you’ll place the fuel and how much fuel you’re gonna use. How much

wood should be where and what’s the timeline of that burn. But then you also have to remember that the Temple is a completely emotional structure, and the people who are going to come to help light it are gonna come basically in tears. There’s a lot of emotion attached to it.

So, at some point you have to wear two hats. You have to have your super practical technician hat on. But, when those people come out with the emotional stuff that they have to deal with at the Temple, you have to put on your shaman hat. You’re like the person at the church. You know the person who goes into the church before worshipers come and place fresh candles on the altar? They don’t care what the wish or the prayer is that people are making. They just want to make sure that everybody has a fresh candle, so they can have the experience that they’re gonna get when they make their prayer or offering at the church.



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So, that’s the job with the Temple: to make sure that these people who come emotionally charged don’t have to worry about where the fuel was placed or where the wires are. I then put on the other hat of the shaman, or the helper, to bring them out and show them where they’re gonna light it. If they start crying, I hold their hand or tell some story about my own loss that makes them equal. So, you have this kind of ritualist role where you’re helping you do their ritual. I don’t care what their ritual is, and I’ll never make a judgement about what your ritual is. But I’ll help walk you through the ritual so you can perform your ritual in a way that won’t end up in your demise or you being burned or injured or whatever.

But I try not to make any judgement on the ritual itself. If you want to worship some god in your offering, or if you want to remember people who you’ve lost, or if you want to burn away some pain or something that needs to be removed from your life, and you want to burn it out—that’s great. I’ll just help steer you along that path to doing it safely while trying to respect and embrace your ritual along that path. I mean I’m pretty flat emotionally as far as these projects go. Truthfully, I try not to get wound up in any one direction emotionally. I’m trying to keep the focus on the safety and think technically.

As you probably know, once you get into the emotional range of either sadness or anger on the other end of the thing, your brain shuts down with its ability to think clearly or properly. The moment that you get angry with someone, your reason has gone out the window and you’re talking with your lizard brain or whatever small area of your brain that anger comes from. Your intelligence is diminished. So, I can’t let my emotion come into it because

I need to be on top of my emotional intelligence game at the time.

If I started crying with all those people who came out to bring to the Temple, I would be crying and unable to do the job. I have to let all that stuff roll off of me. As far as how we burn the Temple we have electrical ignitions so that we know that it’s gonna burn in the proper sequence. But we also invite people to come and light torches and light the edges of it. So, symbolically, and ritually they’re lighting it. But technically, I know that it’s going to go right because they’re also electronic ignition in there that nobody sees and ensures that it’ll burn in the right sequence. On a small project where it doesn’t matter people can light it all they want. They can have their ritual, they can have fire spinners, or whatever they want to do that’s important to them. Again, the most important part of this job is listening to what their dream is. Then, telling them the technical steps to achieve that dream, or suggesting a slight change to their dream which would allow it to proceed.

That’s the joy of this job: that people are coming into it with a strong idea and a strong ritual. I’ve also worked fireworks back in my real life in the city for the A’s and the baseball teams and football teams and all this stuff. Those people don’t give a rat’s ass about any ceremony or whatever. They just say, “At this time you push the button,” and the music comes on, the fireworks go to the music, and all this stuff. But they don’t show up crying and say, “Will you respect my father with these fireworks” or whatever. They just want a straight up client relationship with it, and you produce a predictable product that they can show.

That’s not how it is at Burning Man. People go out of their freaking

minds here. People who’ve been building those projects for months or whatever. By the time it comes down to that last day for their burn, they’re pretty much out of their mind. They have no more energy left or whatever.

They have all this strong emotional stuff. You step in at that moment and say, “I’m going to guide you through all this stuff.” Like shamans, when they’re guiding people through psychedelic experiences like licking the toad or whatever. They’re just there to follow you along and right before you’re about to step into the fire by accident. They kind of move you to the side away from the fire right before you drink the second glass of the toad tea—which you probably shouldn’t have—they say, “No, wait for the first glass to kick in.”

You’re the technician of the ritual. Then when it is burned and destroyed, they have the catharsis where they break down entirely. Then everything is gone from them. Now that they’ve built it with all their energy, and maybe they cut themselves. They’ve had emotional ups and downs. Maybe they’ve broken up or gotten together with somebody because of all the emotion in the project or spent all their money. By the time the thing burns they literally can collapse. I’ve seen artists collapse on the ground and have nothing left to give once the project is down. So, then that’s where the team and the people there have to follow through all the way into the end: make sure that nobody runs into the pile of ashes, or make sure that once the perimeter is down, people are still there watching, so that bicycles don’t ride into the hot embers or whatever. So, you’re there to walk people through all these different states.

Well, I probably wouldn’t have started working with fire if it wasn’t for Burning Man. [laughs] I don’t know! I don’t feel especially transformed here. I mean, I just am, and have evolved in all that. I mean the whole thing as a whole is transformational, but I can’t think of any one moment where I just woke up and was like, oh, now I’m different. It was just slowly but surely changing and evolving like most people do, but just in a weird context or a weird world.

Sometimes you’re on a roll though, and you can tell that you’re nailing it and doing a great job or whatever. I remember one time they called me on the radio and said, “Dave, we can’t get this structure to start burning, and we’ve thrown in a lot of road flares, and they all went out.”

Now they’re afraid to go into it because the road flares are burning and it’s next to the fuel and nobody can make the project start. I’m like, oh, I’ll be right over. I just drove over in my truck, and as I got out of my truck, I lit a road flare. The road flare is burning: I just walked right through their perimeter, walked over to the structure, lit the fuel, threw the road flare in, walked back to the perimeter, got to my truck, and drove away. I think that I just felt like I nailed it! Everyone’s like, “who is that guy?” and then there I am lighting it, and then I’m gone. Like, who was that dude? Who was that kind gentleman? You know? Sometimes you just feel like you’re in the moment.



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