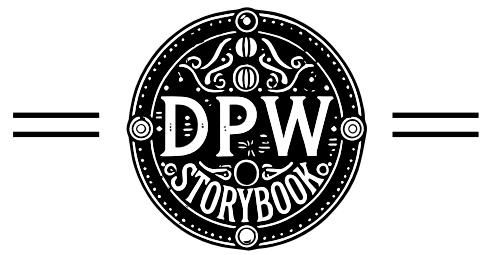


HAPPY MAX

Christopher, known affectionately as Happy Max, hails from Richmond, Virginia. His first regional burn was in 2014, and he joined Burning Man's DPW in 2015. While bravely battling an aggressive form of cancer, Max has contributed significantly to the DPW, working in Dispatch and TSA.

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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My name is Christopher. I'm from Richmond, Virginia and... I work in Trash and Commissary recycling, sorting. You could say Max. I go by Max. My playa name is Happy Max, which has a story behind it which I can get into later.

I have two friends who've been coming to Burning Man for many, many years. I don't know exactly how many. From the early to mid-1990s. So, quite some time. They've been inviting me for many years. I just couldn't come. Each year was a different reason. And then last year I was diagnosed with cancer in early July. So, I told them about it and they said "well, you might as well come to Burning Man because this might be your last chance." I was tired, sleeping 12-15 hours a day that it seemed like "yeah, this might be it."

I was diagnosed with prostate cancer and what a lot of people don't know about prostate cancer is that it comes in different varieties. The kind that most people are used to is the kind that their grandfather gets when he's 70-something, and he dies of a heart attack long before the cancer gets him. I have a more aggressive variety that's more common among younger guys but also isn't as common. More common among younger guys, but not as common. That's the kind that killed Frank Zappa. It's rated on the Gleason Score.

The Gleason Score is a 6 when it's kind of potato shaped cells: not what they're supposed to look like, not perfectly round, but oblong with some bumps like a potato. And as it gets more aggressive it turns into a starfish shape. As it turns into a starfish shape, the tips have acid drills on them and they drill into surrounding tissue to spread. And bone. They love bone. So, I have a Gleason Score 9/10. I have the most aggressive shaped, star fish variety



Happy Max working Dispatch at the Depot. Photo credit: Flore Muguet, 2018.

and they don't think they got it all. But, I'm getting ahead of myself probably.

So, I came last year and I said, "well, I'd love to come but I haven't been working because I've been so tired." Apparently from the cancer, but I didn't know that first half of the year. Detour, who at that time worked in Dispatch said, "let me see what I can do," and she found me a job in Dispatch. Apparently, they had been short one person. So, I actually came to my very first Burning Man experience as DPW. I don't imagine I'm the only one who's had that experience, but I've not yet personally met anyone who's done that.

I worked DPW as Dispatch last year, and then this year I came back and I didn't get a paid job this time, but I got a volunteer job with TSA, which means that they paid for my ticket and I get food and water and showers. Dispatch means that I worked up at the Depot and I'm in a room with a bank of radios--two way radios. My job was to hear calls for Dispatch to get information and or relay information to other channels, because there's 30 channels for different functions.

So, I would dispatch information and make sure they had information they needed and were connected to people they needed. There are two-way radios used by leaders of their units from all over the playa. It's a two-way radio system. Like CB radio except not CB, but same idea: a little hand-held, two-way radio.

We have a computer spreadsheet that tells us where [anyone's] home channel is, but they're not always on that channel. So, another thing I do is I'm listening constantly to all the channels and writing in a daily notebook where people have

moved to. I also have to listen to all the traffic and make notes all the time. I'm basically tracking all the radio activity on the playa so I can connect people and information. It's actually very stressful because, you know, I'm very distracted by the cancer and whatnot. It's a job requiring continuous focus. So, it's not a physically demanding job, but it's a mentally demanding job.

It was kind of hard. But, I was glad to have it and it was very interesting. My very first exposure to Burning Man is literally the information flows inside of it! So, I mean, what an introduction to Burning Man: to be there listening to all the minute details and, you know, hear about so

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and so being arrested, and this other person is doing this crazy thing. I think it's fun. You know, it's a little dangerous, but I came here with cancer.

In fact, on the way here I got pulled over by a police officer. I had picked up a hitchhiker. The police officer ran both of our identifications, and the police officer pulled me aside, after a while. Well, first of all, the police officer was very scared of us. Yeah. I don't know why. We were in the middle of the Nevada desert. One police officer, two of us, so that might have been it. Two people in a car he doesn't know.

He asked me to show up my hands, and he's looking at his, you know, police computer and looking at me and looking at him. It turns out there's somebody with my name—and my license plate would have brought up my name—who was an escaped rapist from another county who was missing three fingers or two fingers, and when I held out my hand he realized I wasn't the fugitive.

He then told me my co-driver was wanted for strangulation in Indiana or Idaho. So, he just said to be careful and I was like, “I got cancer, I don't need to be worried about it! And he's not gonna strangle me while he's driving!” So, coming back to Burning Man, that's the kind of attitude I have with people shooting exploding rockets at me. “Yeah, whatever.” I think probably the story would be different but people have a lot of similar attitudes, like, “fuck it.”

Burning Man is known for unusual events that sometimes defy whatever explanation we may have for it. Basically, Burning Man is the reason I decided to live. Because when I had the cancer diagnosis, I had not actually decided to bother fighting it.

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I did not really enjoy my life in many aspects and felt like what I did was not appreciated. It seemed like all the social benefit went to everybody else. That everybody else got all the hugs and the cuddles, and the invitations to parties, and jobs and committee assignments, and I got “Oh, thank you for all your hard work building this radio station or whatever. You make us feel weird. You can go piss off and die now.” That's how I felt most of humanity felt about me.

So, I had not even decided to bother getting treatment or anything. So, I'm sitting in my—somebody had given me a Hexi-yurt, and I'm way out on east end like 3 or 4 o'clock all alone. By this point in the [Burn] all of the participants had left, the art installations, so it's just me out there all alone. About this time last year: I was out at 3 o'clock. I couldn't find any shade, and I needed to be able to nap during the day because of the cancer. And... you know, I was new. It's common for new people to be hazed by people who've been here before, so I never got any shade.

So, I wake up one morning and a bird flies in my tent. Not a big, predatory crow like you see around here. Rarely. Little tiny brown bird. Flies around the tent several times, and finally I jump up to get his photograph and he flies out the tent. I'm already standing, I run out behind the bird, I'm literally a half a second behind the bird, and I go outside, I look around, and no bird. There's nothing between me and anything else for a quarter mile. Nothing. For hundreds of meters. I think I would see a bird. I would hear it! There's no sound except for the wind and a little bit of sand. I'm just reporting what I saw. I could not find the bird. It wasn't under my car. I could not find the bird.

Well, the next morning I woke up to what sounded like a multitude of voices coming from the northwest. And it's not male or female, it's just a multiple voices saying, “we love you. We want you to thrive and succeed. You have talents to do with as you wish. But in the sharing you will find the connection you seek.” And it just repeats that over and over for five minutes, and just stops. And I walk outside and there's nothing around! Yes, and then the next morning? The same thing the second time. And then the third morning, the same thing the third time! Fourth morning, nothing. So three mornings in a row, the same experience just before the sunrise. Just before the sun comes up.

There's something about this space that seems to bring these amazing... some people call it playa magic? I don't know what it is. But there's something about this space and time and gathering that seems to generate stories like this. And that was the moment I decided to make the effort to live.

We're in Trash and recycling. I'm

specific to the Commissary, so I'm gonna see a different stream of trash than TSA up by Depot. So, you will have a different conversation with them. But, I do know from overhearing conversations with them that a lot of what they get really is trash. It's broken junk. It's broken tents. It's buckets and, you know, canisters and bottles full of pee. They're not gonna recycle a bottle full of pee because the volume of eurea overwhelms the process. So, they don't want caps on it. It's a different conversation with them.

I sort the trash and recycling to make sure that all of the resorts—when you separate garbage into separate components like paper, plastic, then they can become commodities that can be sold, then they become useful to somebody else. So what we do is make sure they stay separated into their correct category so that they are useful to somebody else.

Well, you know, whether it's breakfast, lunch, or dinner, I do the same thing. I go behind the line over there to make sure people throw things into the correct bins. If not, I reach into the wrong bin and put it into the correct place. I also go into the back where all the food preparation is and do the same thing but on a larger scale. They're generally better separated, but not always. So there's some separating. Then I put them all in the correct bins. We try to educate people as to why we're doing this. So, there's some education component.

I know some people have said to me, “oh, wont working for Burning Man ruin the magic? Because you'll know how it was built.” And, I don't know about other people, but for me I've always been a builder type. I've always been the type who builds things with their hands. So, I know darn well that there's... anything you see is made by somebody, and there's

details behind it. So to me it does not remove the magic one bit to know the details beneath the surface of how a thing was built. In some ways it makes the mystery deeper, because how could something so mundane create such amazing outcomes? I mean, it's just wood and steel and nails like any other place. You know?

It's a bunch of people who are kind of misfits and don't fit in much of any other place coming together for a few weeks in the desert. Why does this create such outcomes? You know? I don't think that removes the magic one bit. If anything, it's even more amazing to me.

To me there is no difference [between Burners and DPW]. Some people make it a distinction: “fuck your burn” and all that. I don't really get into that. In fact, I'm surprised when I went out to many workshops they're like “oh, your from DPW?” They seem shocked that somebody from DPW would come to their participant events.

So I was almost like a unicorn. I think I have one foot in each camp. I have one in each. I'm a unicorn among unicorns!

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