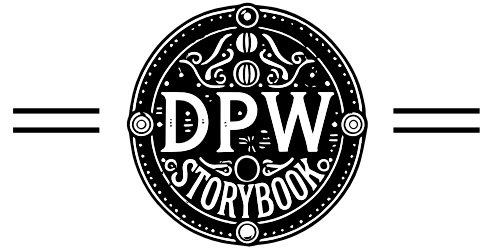


TRAINWRECK

Trainwreck first attended Burning Man in 2002 as a participant. In 2006, she joined the DPW for Collexodus and Strike after meeting Duck Hunt at her camp, where veteran DPW member Chicken John was also present. By 2011, she had become the manager of the Spires team. Her path to this role included working on bike maintenance in 2007 and returning to Spires in subsequent years. The name “Trainwreck” originated from a 2012 accident where her truck was destroyed by a freight train. As the Spires manager, she is responsible for assembling and sometimes fabricating new spires, while ensuring her team remains well-organized and motivated.

This interview was conducted online by “Flo”, Flore Muguet, a French anthropologist, in 2021. Most of Flo’s questions have been omitted to improve reading flow. Trainwreck edited the text in 2024.



“No, not really
that kind of
trainwreck...”

My first year of Burning Man was 2002. I was a participant, and I was 22. I attended every year after that. In 2006, I came to the event late, and was camping with Chicken John, who I didn’t know; he was just friends of friends. It turned out he was one of the original members of DPW, and lived in San Francisco and ran a bar there.

One day at camp, Duck Hunt flitted through with a toy lightsaber. She



Photo credit: Michael Garlington, 2012.

was waving it around all silly. She was like, “I’m here for a month!” blah blah blah. Bragging and yelling about being on playa for a very long time. Like I said, I had shown up late to Burning Man that year, all by myself: no crew of friends.

So, I asked, “What do you do? Why are you here all that time?” She said, “I work for DPW!” I told her I didn’t really have anything to go back to and I would like to stay in the desert a little bit longer. So, she said, and I had never met this person before in my life, “You meet me Monday night at Collexodus.” By the way, Collexodus was nothing in 2006. It was one burn barrel and dirt. There was nothing else, there weren’t two stations either. Someone had dropped off a couch by Monday night, so it was a burn barrel and a couch and a stuffed bear. So we met up at Midnight, days later—which is like an eternity at Burning Man and I don’t even remember how I got there. I probably walked out there, I guess. Duck Hunt proceeded to eviscerate the stuffed bear with a knife, step into and wear the stuffed bear’s head on top of her head almost totally enveloping her hat.

She had told me at camp “You do a midnight to 6AM shift with me, and I’ll take you to morning meeting. You can join DPW from there, so you can stay.” I didn’t know anything about it before that year, so I was lucky I met her. We slept next to the burn barrel and barely anybody came by. In 2006, almost all the participants were gone by Monday morning. There weren’t that many participants at the time: 30,000 or something, maybe 35,000.

So, we woke up and went to morning meeting. They stuck me on Spires de-install. I remember meeting TPR. He was doing Spires at that time. I remember meeting Coyote and some other folks. [Some were] super

annoying. Full of sophomore DPW piss “WE don’t call the Fluffers..... they call US,” kind of stuff...Pointless bravado, and patently incorrect at that. I didn’t care for that attitude, I still don’t. So, yeah, we did de-install, and I just stayed for about a week, strike week. I loved it. Strike is still my favorite part of any event. I love the after-glow and seeing it all go away. All the quieter moments you get to have with people who partied well and are still on their feet.

I got a call from Logan the next February to ask if I wanted to volunteer again, and the week before I came out the second year for DPW (two weeks before the event), I broke my toe! So, instead of doing Spires install which has a lot of walking, I ended up doing Bikes. I was on Yellow Bikes that year.

In 2011, I became manager for 2011 for Spires Construction. I did Bikes in 2007, and I was back on Spires in 2008, and 2010. We went through a couple of managers and I was on Spires install for a couple of those years. They stuck me with Marty for a bit the first Spires construction manager.

Working with Marty was fine, but wasn’t my favorite, it was too quiet in the shop! I actually preferred install. I liked being by the town and setting things up and seeing things. But then Marty left and 13 took over, and 13 has a penchant for getting herself fired, which happened at the end of her first year managing. So the next year, in 2011, they were hiring for the build manager. I had to advocate pretty hard for myself.

So the reason I’m telling you this is to let you know that the time between starting Burning Man in 2002, joining DPW in 2006, and getting my manager job in 2011, in all of that time I didn’t have a Burning Man name.

I needed a radio handle as a manager in 2011 and since 13 had been the last manager of Spires I tried to name myself 14. I was forbidden from using 14. You see, 13 got fired, and she’s a passionate person that makes people react in a lot of ways. One of those big, complex personalities like so many of us, one of those people that just make our community tick the way it does.



Trainwreck’s train-wrecked DPW truck. Photo credit: Trainwreck, 2012.



Trainwreck behind the wheel. Photo credit: Sean Finnegan. Year unknown.

So when she did something get herself fired again, it was a big to-do, they had lots of meetings about it at management, this, that, and the other thing. So, I tried to pick the name 14 and, for the Management Powers That Be, it was too painful for them to hear that name on the radio. They didn't want to be reminded of 13, so I was told I couldn't have that name.

My assistant manager Janessa made a joke about how I got "the wrong number" and that stuck for a minute. So I was Wrong Number. However, a name was headed my way...I just didn't know it yet. The very next year 2012 after Final supper I was trying to go to Trego hot springs to spread Joey Jello's ashes. I got stuck on the train tracks, and about 60 seconds later, a freight train came and pulverized my truck. Luckily no one was hurt. If you're lucky you'll get to hear me tell this story in person someday...

I was traveling with Dumpster Coon,

Macaroon, and Ballyhoo Betty, and we all got out of the truck in time. Yeah! It all turned out ok. And now I have a name.

People are always like, "Gosh you seem put together, I don't really think of you as a train wreck. Did you like, get too drunk, pee yourself, and fall asleep in the middle of the playa?" No, not really that kind of a train wreck situation. [chuckles] There is someone else, who also has the playa name Trainwreck on Gate. We probably should have a story throw down for the honor of the moniker some day. Hi Gayte Trainwreck!

So Spires construction: our job is completely under the shade at the Depot. Besides the Depot staff and Dispatch, we're the only other ones down there. We set up a wood shop every day and break it down every day. I usually have somewhere between three and four volunteers, and two other paid staff under me, an assistant and then a construction lead.

What people mistakenly think is that we actually build around 300 spires every year, but that's not true. We really assemble them every year. We do build some spires from scratch: so that's receiving the lumber, 2x4s, 4x4s, plywood, the dowels, slicing the 2x4's in half for the Greater Spires and chamfering the sides of the 4x4 post for the Lesser Spires so they look pretty. There are a number of them we make from scratch, but it's a small percentage of what we put up every year. Mostly its assembly.

So, the beginning of the season I'm getting all the things I need from the shop, getting all my orders in, making sure I have enough screws and tools, making sure that my roster is full of the right people for the right days. And then waiting for the Depot to have the shade erected! Our timeline is really dependent on the Depot getting put together, and the Depot can't really get placed until the large unusual shade structure is put in place. It can be a little bit of a sense of sore feelings sometimes. [There is a new more boring shade structure as of 2024, no more morning meetings at Depot...yay!]

I also like for my crew to have had breakfast before the meeting, but it doesn't always happen for us. We don't have the oppression of the sun the way the install team does. Hopefully some folks have had breakfast by the time the morning meeting is done. We put the shop together, and then once the shop is together, if some folks haven't eaten they usually go eat. If they have, we get right to work. First couple of days I'm usually training on what we call the Greater Spires.

The Greater Spires are the ones that were designed by Larry Harvey (Hi Larry!): they have a split post. So, the post is actually two 2x4's ripped in half so four long pieces of wood set

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around tangs at the top and bottom. They're the fancy looking ones that go from 6 o'clock to the man. So we usually make those first, then I train them on the lesser spires. We just kind of try to get to a place where we're running like a machine. We put on music, and sometimes irritate the Depot staff with the incessant sound of impact drivers, zipping those things together and getting them in the yard, where we wait for Blackthorn to come and pick them up.

The beginning of the season, for us, is a lot of assembly. Then somewhere around mid-season, we're going at a good pace, and mistakes are at a minimum. They're putting out a lot of products that are very straight and beautiful. They can deal with any problems and issues that arise in putting the Spires together. At that point I'll pull a couple of people off assembly who are proficient and teach them a little bit about fabrication.

That's also why my construction lead is there. Usually that's a person who does carpentry more than I do, year-round. So, I kind of think of myself as a novice at doing woodwork. Yes,

I've done it for 11 years now for the event, but its still only a month of my life a year. So, I like to have someone who has their head around the tools, and is working with wood more often than I do.

My opinion is that, with the work we do out there, it's great to have a materially skilled person in a management position, but if they aren't good at being a project manager or a personnel manager, it is going to be tough going. From start to finish how to manage a timeline, hit goals and to be a good people person, be someone who knows how to be supportive, motivating, and help keep their volunteer staff happy and safe.

I think that's most important for my position. That I'm good to my volunteers, that I'm fostering a positive experience, that I'm managing them well. The woodworking details, I need to know a lot of those, but I like to have another person who does that stuff better than I do. That way I can focus on a happy staff and my deliverables! Get those candles on that big playa birthday cake!



Spires in the DPW yard. Photo credit: Trainwreck. Year unknown.