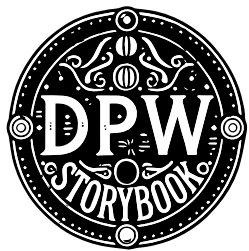


BAR-FIGHT

Bar-fight joined the Special Projects team in 2009 and now manages the department. Special Projects handles specialized carpentry work across the Playa, like building ramps, staircases, bike racks, and putting up signs. Before joining the DPW, Bar-fight spent years exploring caves in Alabama. He was introduced to the DPW and Burning Man by a fellow caver and longtime DPW member named Alabama, who gave him the nickname “Bar-fight,” which led to some initial misunderstandings. Bar-fight quickly gained a reputation for his wide-ranging skills, from detailed carpentry to heavy labor, ensuring his team runs smoothly and safely. He also does the anvil toss on the Playa with Miss Marley, a playful nod to a Southern tradition.

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



“All aspects of Special Projects, from technical to physical, is usually rewarding...”

I first came out in 2009. I’m a cave explorer in Alabama. I’ve been doing that for 20 years. One of my fellow cavers worked for Burning Man. He was a greeter and ranger for many years, and then he became DPW. So, Quinn approached them when he was handed special projects, and told Shane, who goes by Alabama. Quinn wanted to be manager of special projects, so there was a moment when I was on a canoe trip with some fellow cavers, and Alabama, who always talked about Burning Man. I had never been to Burning Man but heard about it for 10 years: he told an infinite amount of stories about Burning Man around the campfire, and how amazing it was out here, and how we would never go (kind of messing with us a bit).

He was coming up to me in a camp chair, around the fire, and asked me if I wanted to be on his crew. He knew that I had the time to leave and get away from things, essentially, and wanted me to come out. But before

he asked that, he was calling me Bar-fight that whole trip. You know? Like, we were driving to Arkansas, it was a 9-hour drive, we’re hearing phone calls: we’re not in the car together, but he’s calling me Bar-fight and I don’t know why.

Then he asked me to go work for him, still calling me Bar-fight. I still didn’t know what it meant, other than, “I guess this is my nickname or my radio handle.” I came out to DPW and had never been to Gerlach, never been to Burning Man. Didn’t really know what to expect. He introduced me as Bar-fight to the DPW saloon, but I nearly got in a lot of fights because of that name. I guess DPW was different back then: 2009, I would consider, pretty rough compared to what it is now. It’s a kinder, gentler, DPW. I nearly got into five fights my first year and I don’t fight at all.

Somebody threw a beer bottle at my head, but I still wouldn’t fight. You know? I don’t want to fight anybody.



Photo credit: Max Sisson, 2017.

“One of the funnest things we do is our early burn projects...”



R2D2 Early Burn by Special Projects
Photo credit: Flore Muguet, 2018

Second year was even worse. It’s like the second year with DPW I still was “Bar-fight” and I still had these interactions that were bad. It was that second year that I really found out what that name meant. It means kick my ass.

He wanted me to come to DPW and say that I was Bar-fight just so they would mess with me, and just so I would have these bad interactions. It was a joke and an opposite name. I’m a nice person. I don’t get into fights, but it was a long joke that he had. If you know Alabama, which most people do out here even though he’s retired now, you know he’d would do these long jokes that take many years to understand.

So, anyway, that’s why I’m called Bar-fight, and I hated the name for a long time. I finally like it. People like calling me that but, they know it’s a

joke. Usually, if I introduce myself as Bar-fight, there’s a bad stigma about it, then they realize I’m a nice person.

Special Projects is much different from what it was back then. In 2009, we were all ranch hands. We’d all work on the ranch and use machinery. We would essentially handle the ranch, as it was “Special Projects/Ranch.” Then we’d come out to the playa and we’d do what we do now. So there’s a lot of things that grew from that. At the time we would build boxes, we would repair trailers, and we’d work on the ranch. A lot of groups came from us.

This is my 10th year, which is good for me, because I’m also now a manager of Special Projects. So, that original position that Alabama had ten years ago? Now I have that position. I basically watched it evolve, which

“I’m a cave explorer in Alabama. I’ve been doing that for 20 years.”

has been fun, and I guess I helped with that evolution, in a way, this whole time. [Usually] it’s been that a DPW person would be in the same position for so long and not move around. But, as you know, Special Projects is different. Everything we do is different from day to day.

The basic definition of Special Projects is, “Everything that falls through the cracks, we do.” So we try to have a group of individuals that can do almost any kind of task with the city. So, when we arrive, we do a lot of manual, physical sort of things. The ranch is more technical: building things. But then the playa is a lot of moving things. We put in 374 4x4s in the ground. We put up 3700

feet of that vertical shade paneling. Wind walls for Commissary, and wind walls around the city and First camp. A lot of things that people don’t notice: it’s right there in front of you, but it’s a lot of work to do that. We put the blinky poles up all around the city, which are the solar beacons.

We do the entrance to Burning Man sign. Every year, Special Projects has help worked with Mad Dog. It’s one of our more fun tasks to work with him, and the artist, and do ‘Welcome to Burning Man.’

Strike is fast. We spend about two and a half weeks building things in

the city. We’re a little unique because everything we put up has to be taken down and has to be stored. Our group is one of the larger things stored at the ranch. If you look at our block of the ranch, where we store things, it’s enormous. We have about four days to take everything down that we put up in two weeks. It’s faster because it’s taking down, but it’s a lot of physical work. But people enjoy it: you know, all aspects of Special Projects, from technical to physical, is usually rewarding.

Every year at Burning Man, we will do the anvil toss. We have a mortar plate and a 101 pound anvil, and use one pound of black powder, and

fire it into the air. It goes about 110 feet in the air. Everyone loves it! It’s a Southern tradition—something from the state I’m in—that’s from the Civil War, that Ken Smith researched. He was kind of a buff: he took something did 100+ years ago to Burning Man. It definitely still has an appeal 100+ years later to hire a big block of iron in the air. So, we’ll do that.

I can be very gruff on the perimeter [of the anvil] because it is very dangerous. I usually apologize after the fact if I’m too mean while running the perimeter. The biggest problem are bicyclists coming straight at it. That’s the difference here. Everything is interactive at Burning Man. If you see people crowd around something, you think you need to go to it and look at it. So, the anvil is the opposite of that. It’s something that looks very interesting but we’re telling you to get away.

I do like doing the sledgehammer toss. But one of the things I love most about coming out here is the early burn that we do. Special Projects always really, really works hard for the art crew. We build, and we work, and we do a lot of things out here, but it’s very fun to see the artists in the group, or the people who can really contribute to making fun, awesome things. People who put a shade wall, or a block wall up, but then can build something really interesting for our party before the gates actually open. We talk about how that is one of the funniest things we do at Special Projects, it’s our early burn projects.

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Photo credit: Bar-fight, 2018.