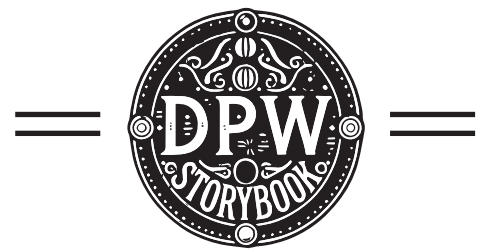


BALLYHOO BETTY

Betty, known as Ballyhoo Betty, is the dedicated manager of the DPW Yellow Bikes department. She began in 2011 as a volunteer under the original, old-school Black Label leadership of the program. With a passion for freak bikes and cycling, a background in circus arts and street performance, and a keen interest in DIY fabrication, Betty has transformed the bike program, expanding the fleet to over 1,000 bikes and fostering a community-oriented approach. During Resto, she also leads 'metal yoga sessions' for those who catch the first bus to the playa.

This written interview was conducted by "Flo", Flore Muguet, a French anthropologist, in 2021. Most of Flo's questions have been omitted to improve reading flow.



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Self portrait, 2019.

2011 was my first DPW year (and Burning Man event). At that time in my life, I was getting by as a street performer of sideshow arts, e.g., fire breathing and human blockhead, and had begun a weekly circus arts swap with DPW Bike Crew veteran KT. She was teaching me fire staff; I was teaching her fire eating...

Also, at that time, I was in the middle of a 12 year stretch of no car/bike-only and had grown passionate about cycling as a lifestyle and culture—and possible solution to our civilization's pollution issue. However, I knew very little about bike mechanics, and had very little money for the occasional repairs or maintenance. I found out Austin had a Yellow Bike Program, where anyone could drop in and get help learning these skills. I biked my janky bike 9 miles to get there. It completely broke down the last 1.5 miles, and I walked it that last stretch. My heart and mind were blown open by the sense of empowerment that came along with these newly acquired skills and competencies.

At our next circus arts swap, I told KT about the experience, and she said I should make my way to Reno in August, and do this Yellow Bike thing with her at this place called Burning Man. So I did. In 2011, I was a volunteer under the original, old school Black Label-leadership of the program. In 2012, I was a staff member under an interim manager who was only involved for a single season. In 2013, I was the manager and restructured the program to be more collective in nature (we all received equal pay) and include more women. I bring up this little bit of history because I feel grateful to have witnessed and been involved in the transition of this program, both experiencing its roots and bridging it to something new.

The bike program essentially has four phases, and the daily routine is very different for each:

1.) The Ranch - Before DPW moves onto Playa, the bike crew builds a little shop on the Burning Man Ranch, and the primary goal of this

time is to add to the community fleet. We'd attend the morning meetings in Gerlach, drive to the ranch, and spend the entire day stripping parts off old donated Huffy Cranbrooks from previous seasons, sanding the frames, and paint them our signature lime green using the paint booth built out of a shipping container. We'd typically take an hour break for lunch and picnic under the tree by sign shop with that crew, and drive back to town.

2.) Playa - Once on Playa, our primary focus shifted to tuning up as many Yellow Bikes as possible. Our goal was 1,000 free, communal bikes on the streets of Burning Man by the time the gates opened. A typical day involved attending DPW morning meetings, meeting back at the bike shop for our crew

morning meeting to outline daily goals, and then wrenching on bikes from ~9-5 every day, with an hour lunch break in the middle.

3.) Event - Event week involve a) repairing broken yellow bikes as they're brought to the shop and b) rolling around to enforce yellow bike etiquette (which largely involved cutting locks and bringing ones hidden in camps out onto the streets for folks to use). Some seasons we would also roll around with a mobile bike repair squad, and fix broken yellow bikes out on the streets of Burning Man.

4.) Post-Event - As soon as the event ends, our focus shifts to collecting, breaking down, and packing the yellow bike fleet into semi-trailers, where they are stored in the off-season, as well as collecting all

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abandoned bikes on site, running bicycle lost & found, and then donating remaining bikes to a network of non-profits putting the bikes to use in community-oriented programs.

The DPW means family. Skill-sharing. Debauchery. Some of my favorite memories every year involve the nights when we light up the shop and work late into the night helping



Photo credit: John Curley, 2014.



Photo credit: unknown, 2019.

each other dream up and chop up and weld up freaky mutant creations utilizing the mountain of abandoned bikes from seasons prior.

We got fairly good at tall bikes, small tall, choppers, and swing bikes. (Once I attempted to make a “penny-fake-thing”, a freak version of a pennyfarthing, but I can’t say it was rideable.) I’ll never forget the year Bianca Black made a tall bike stacking 6 adult frames! She had to rest the giant thing up against a semi trailer to climb up it. It was quite a beautiful sight.

I think what made this so cool for me was that the very idea of DIY fabrication was something I hadn’t really experienced before. There was something so deliciously magical about dreaming up a rideable, moving machine, making it, and then

riding it (and all from free stuff!). There are few things more exciting than that first test ride on a freshly made freak bike. I appreciated how everyone would put down whatever they were working on to come to the front of the shop and witness these test rides. (They were at times failed, always hilarious.) At some point, I understood how riding your own, personally made freak bike was a badge of honor.

My personal trajectory in DPW helped me step into my power with leadership, management, cat-herding, realizing visions, and creating the change you want to see in the world. It also solidified a desire to live outside the mundane path society tends to push us into and stick to the fringes.

Lingerie Day started a few years back when I noticed the productivity

and overall mood of the shop really started to slump about a week before event. At that point in the season, most of us have been out there for about a month and the crust was getting real. I remember thinking, “wrenching on bikes together in the dust listening to rock & roll all day use to be sexy, how do we make this fun and sexy again?” and suggested to the crew we indulge in a day of mechanic work in lingerie. I had no idea how thoroughly everyone would leap at the idea, or that it would become an ingrained tradition of the shop’s culture.

These past few years, everyone coming onto bike crew knows to have a special outfit for the occasion, and a photoshoot with John Curley often gets planned for the same day. We also have a comical spike in volunteers from other crews on this

day (and they always dress up/down with us, too). I know few thrills more potent than riding together as the sexiest, strangest, freak bike ridings mob to commissary lunch on Lingerie Day.

Once upon a time, a huge portion of the Yellow Bike fleet was assembled on the work ranch, and when posed with the challenge of how to get them to playa, the old school Black Label-run bike crew decided that instead of loading them onto a vehicle and driving them to site, it would be more fun to RIDE them to site. Thus began the tradition of the 12 mile DPW ride from the ranch into Burning Man on the day the gates open to the public. The ride has been called the Bologna Hole Blitz since before my time, and is one of my favorite events of the year.

One year a girl came to the Yellow Bike shop on playa during event week. She said she’d never ridden

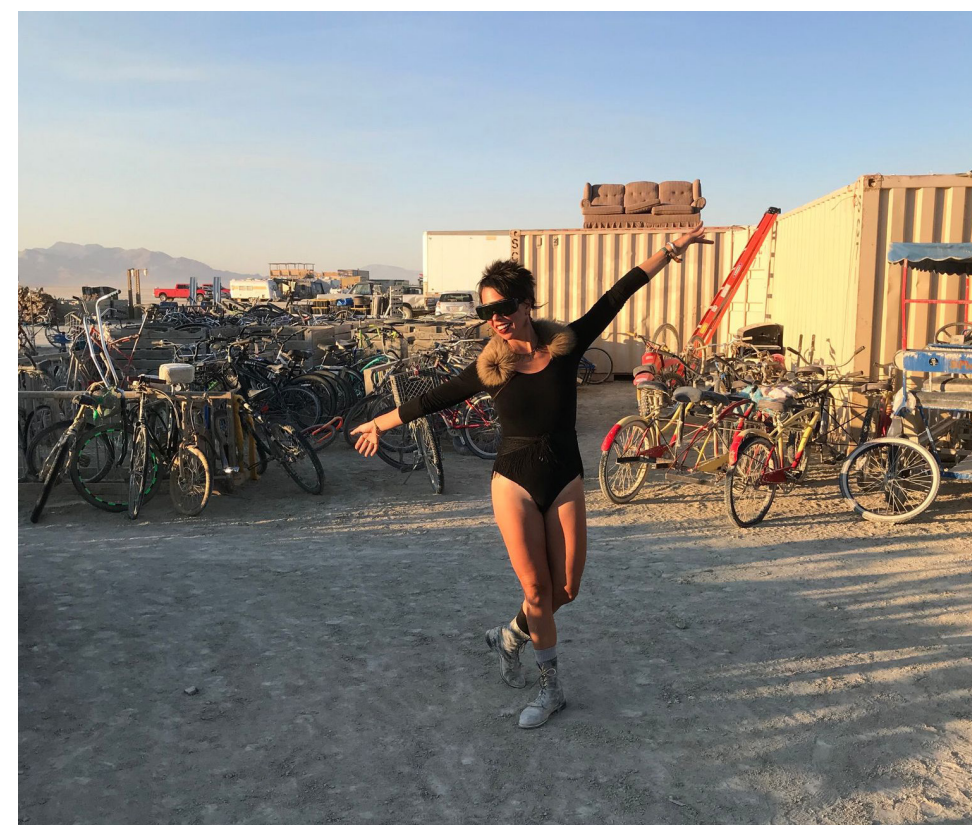


Photo credit: unknown, 2019.

bikes as an adult, and decided to try one out when she stumbled across one of the community bikes. She was empowered at how easily she could traverse the city by bike, thrilled at the exhilaration of using her body’s power (as opposed to gasoline or electricity) to do so, and enamored with the idea of offering this freely to a population. She wanted to volunteer with us for a day and give back to the program that helped her experience all this.

She put in a solid day of volunteering and I kept in touch with her for a few years. She went on to sell her car, shift to bicycle-only transit, got involved with the Reno Bike Project, and became an advocate for city planners to implement more bike lanes. That trajectory began with a ride on a yellow bike at Burning Man. Every year, there were similar stories, although hers always really stuck with me as to the power of this program.

“The ride has been called the Bologna Hole Blitz.”



Photo credit: unknown, 2019.