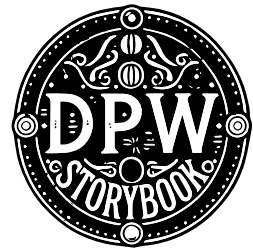


BLACKTHORN

Blackthorn has been a member of the DPW since 2005. After working in Metal Shop, he joined the Spire Crew in 2007. He became the Spire Manager in 2018 and has held the position ever since. Known for his eye for precision, Blackthorn brings attention to detail to his work. He is also a member of That Damned Band, where he plays the accordion.

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.



“It’s rewarding to make a line and look down it after the Man burns...”



Photo credit: unknown. Year unknown.

I first volunteered in 2005. When I joined the DPW, I was really going to see Burning Man. It was a cheap way for me to do it. I was homeless, so I didn’t have rent to pay, or bills too much. So, I was on tour with our circus show, The 999 Eyes Freak Show and Surreal Side Show. Samantha X and I—she brought me there—asked some friends to get me on the crew. So, I had a spot to be on the crew. I didn’t really know anyone there except for a few people I knew from before. I think I knew more people from before that had just gotten fired from Burning Man, or had left, because of some kind of labor dispute.

When I came, I was volunteering, and we had arranged to do some performances at the Man Base with our Freak Show. When I got there it was Fence Day, and when I came in, the first thing that happened was that somebody gave me a big, fat joint to smoke. We were tying the fence onto the t-stakes. That’s how it

started: it was a flurry of activity. It was OK. I kind of got to meet some interesting folks on the crew at the time: Doctor Holderdown, Spoono, Lo-Dog (a veteran of the French Foreign Legion).

I started working in the metal shop, because, at that time, my best skill was in metalworking. I don’t know, maybe I wasn’t cool enough or something, so I didn’t stick with metal shop. There’s some people who go out there and are pushing themselves way too much. They use drugs to do it, and I don’t agree with that. I like to sleep! I really enjoy sleeping and dreaming, so for me there is absolutely no incentive to stay up doing drugs at the risk of my health and valuable sleep time [chuckles]. Now, none of the same folks are involved, it’s a totally different crew.

I did Metal shop, then I helped with someone on the fence crew - I bounced around a little bit. I helped

on the Auto shop, on the Ranch workstation (Black rock station). Then, the next year I came, I was doing metal shop a little bit, but joined Coyote in doing the Spires - probably, 2006. Then I stayed on Spires in 2007 and got my first job - not as a volunteer - in 2008, working on Spires.

Well, I’ve always had a good eye for seeing things that are straight and plumb. Part of that is training that I did working for my father, making gates and fences that were hand-forged, for the most part. Artisanal work. High end. Everything had to be right and look good, you know? So, I’ve got some training for that. The job of putting the spires in is an art installation. I actually have a lot of experience doing art installations.

Sculptural forms: sometimes in forms of fences, sometimes in the form of gates. There are so many things I did with my dad in terms of that. So, I had a lot of experience

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doing that, and then, I had some experience doing installations of convention booths, which have an aspect of that also, with the union of sign and display installers in San Francisco. I am more of a wobbly, but they hooked me up with some good paying gigs.

So, doing the spires. Of all the jobs that are done getting Black Rock City together, it is, in my opinion, the most fun job. It’s rewarding to make a line and look down it after the Man burns and see everything perfectly straight all the way from where the Temple once was down to center camp. It’s very rewarding. It’s a mile, I think.



Photo credit: Owen Kelley, 2008.

I did a week or so building them also. In fact, I think that's why I ended up with this job. I was working with Marty, who was known as "Bigger Nipples". He was the first person who was building the spires in 2005, when I joined. I think he told Coyote that he had someone who could swing a sledgehammer. I switched out with the install crew, and it turns out I could swing a sledgehammer.

It must have been 2008 or 2009 when I became Spires manager.

Well, the spires are an extension of the city plan. They are the final ornament that goes with the city plan, which is designed with the streets in the formation of a clock. The spires carry on the lines that

are created by the roads. As they lead to the Man, they define the promenades, which go through the empty space in the center of the city, surrounding the Man, where there are a lot of art installations. The spires act as guideposts, day and night, for people wandering about in states of altered consciousness.

I'm also part of the Survey crew. We put in all those little flags that denote the centers of the intersections, and then later, we go around and put t-stakes at the corners of the intersections. After that, the sign crew comes and puts signs up on those t-stakes. The spires, the ones that are in the city, are aligned with that. The first thing we do is put the spires up at the ends of the

promenades and try to line up the middle ones. So, the promenade goes from 6 o'clock to 12 o'clock and the Man is in the middle.

Looking back at my first burn in 2004, I never even noticed any of the T-stakes.

On the 6 o'clock side, we set up two spires next to the city. On the 12 o'clock side, we set up two spires next to the Temple.

Then we try to get our marks for the ones that go in the middle, by where the Man is. That's the first thing we do. Usually, by that time, there is a semi-trailer and a bunch of construction going on, and some heavy equipment there at the Man Base.

It's very challenging to get a clean line of sight from one end to the other. I try to do it if I can. If not, we just use our apparatus to get as close as we can, based on the survey flags. The apparatus can measure out a triangle from central points. That's how we get the corners for the intersection.

I encourage my crew to eat breakfast before the morning meeting, and sometimes they do. Sometimes we have to roust them out of their tents or trailers, if they did not get up in time - for whatever reason. Then there's the morning meeting. After the morning meeting, we talk about what we're doing, and how the project is going, with Trainwreck and her crew. We decide how many spires we need to make; how many are left to put up, and we go over all that. Then we load up the trailer on the work truck full of spires, as many as we can fit. We take them out and we start putting them up.

We have to sight them in. So, a lot of times, if we're still doing the promenades, I'll at the far end, like the Temple, and the crew will start at the Man Base. They'll set up spires and I'll tell them, either with flag signals, or on the radio - I'll tell them to move it one inch in, one inch out, things like that - until it's perfectly lined up, as near as I can tell. We continue like that until we run out of spires. We go back and get more. If the crew is feeling very vigorous, we'll leave some people in the field with a smaller truck that has water, snacks, and some tools and hardware that they may need.

Then I'll go back, or my assistant manager will take the truck back to the depot, to load up with more spires - so we can keep rolling like that without coming to a full stop. Then, at the lunch break, when people are getting a little hungry,



Photo credit: unknown, 2016.

they'll eat at the commissary. They'll take a siesta, because it's very hot to work in the afternoon swinging a sledgehammer with no shade. Then, we'll get back to work after an hour or an hour and a half, depending on how people are feeling. Meet back at the Depot, check in with Trainwreck again with how we're doing, how everybody is feeling—if there are any feelings that need to be expressed, we can talk about that—then we load up the trailer again and go out. We usually do two to four per day. Two in the morning, two in the afternoon: trailer loads full of spires.

Well, the most intriguing aspect of our work with the Spires crew is bringing the city up into a three-

dimensional existence from the two-dimensional plan. Black Rock City is a city based on the design of a clock, yes - but also there is a fractal keyhole element to Rod's plan that makes this a city of doors, you are the key that unlocks possibility - within your own mind, soul, whatever you want to call it, maybe also your community.

Personally, it is very meaningful for me to be a part of this city of doors, paths or maybe perception. It allows folks to imagine - like a sandbox - or dust box, I guess - of possibilities, alternate realities. It is a good chance that one comes to burning man and leaves a profoundly different person. I am proud to be part of that "great work" - you know, like the idea of the medieval alchemists? We can become greater than what we currently are, turn our shit into gold & learn some kind of lesson in this incarnation.



“It is very meaningful for me to be a part of this city of doors, paths or maybe perception.”



That Damned band. Photo credit: Michael Garlington (probably). Year unknown.