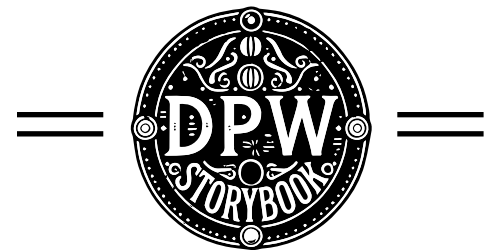


# CAPTAIN PLANET AND KARLA

Captain Planet and Karla are a dynamic duo dedicated to environmental sustainability and resource management. As of 2016, Captain Planet, also known as Mikey, has been the TSA recycling collections manager since 2012 and is heavily involved with the Department of Public Works (DPW). His wife, Karla, joined him in 2014, working with the TSA team and helping coordinate green teams at various festivals. She has been one of Captain Planet's supervisors since 2017. Together, they co-own and launched the website Department of Consciousness, which promotes transparency and sets standards for festival cleanup and production.

Update: They welcomed a baby in 2023.

This interview was conducted by “Flo,” Flore Muguet, a French anthropologist, in 2016. Most of Flo's questions have been omitted to improve the reading flow.



“We only live on one planet”

**CAPTAIN PLANET** I'm Mikey, Captain Planet. I'm a resource management specialist focusing on coordinating and managing green teams for events. Specifically for music festivals. I'm the co-owner and editor for the Department of Consciousness, which I started with my wife, Karla. It's a website that deals with projects of the different events that we work at and the reviews that we do—trying to do more transparency by creating a standard for music festivals and what they ought to be doing regarding their cleanup and production. Their ethos, and how to educate participants going into the event with specific subjects that are extremely important in our communities.

**KARLA** My name is Karla. I am Mike's wife. I work with him at festivals. We do green team. I help him coordinate and lead some of the teams. I work back-to-back with him most of the time during his shifts.

I have a Communications degree, so I help in creating the website 'Department of Consciousness'. I started doing physical clean-up for green teams three years ago at Cosmic convergence in Guatemala. It's a beautiful event. Very different than any other events that I've been to, and yeah, I go around the United States volunteering my time to do more for the planet and learn about different things every day.

**CAPTAIN PLANET** This was my 5th burn. I started in 2012 working for TSA's Transfer Station Authority, which is essentially the green team for DPW and all staff members. I am currently the TSA recycling collections manager for DPW, which deals with larger staff camps and helps them collect their cardboard, recycling, plastics, and aluminum. TSA is essentially five groups. Four really—I count—Recycle camp, which is the volunteer, non-DPW camp that does recycling. They only accept aluminum cans from

participants. But, Blue, our waste logistics manager, still heads that as well, so I consider that part of TSA. We know a lot of people in that crew. Then there's Commissary TSA, BLM TSA, the Transfer station—which we usually call TSA actual—and then Recycling collections. So, we all do various things regarding recycling services for staff members.

I was studying geography and environmental studies at the University of Oregon, focusing on waste management. I had worked at Oregon Country Fair and got a trade fair pass to the Burn. I was under the impression that I was going to be working, and apparently, I wasn't. It was like a free ticket. I was gonna be a participant. But I ended up showing up in Gerlach, which is not what you're supposed to be doing. Just like “Hey, I'm here to work!” and everything just fell into place. I ended up being able to be out here working and working with TSA.



Source: [doczerowaste.com](http://doczerowaste.com), 2016.



Captain Planet and Karla are using their Burning Man vehicle for their collection route. Photo credit: Flore Muguet, 2017.

So, I've never been a participant. I don't think I would want to come to Burn solely as a participant. I participate working DPW, but I really enjoy putting in that work for the city for the event, because I look at Burning Man as not necessarily being a giant party, but a New-age university. There are so many workshops, there's so many talks, so many things that go on. And a lot of times I'm working a lot, so, we don't have a lot of time to go see those. Like, we saw one this year. This is my first year as a manager for Burning Man, but in every event that I work now, I am a manager or a coordinator for the green team.

**KARLA** I met Mike at Cosmic Convergence: the first festival I volunteered for. He told me he was going to be in Burning Man, so he invited me to come. He said, you're not going to be a participant, you're going to be a volunteer for DPW, which are the people that build the festival, that build the city. So, it got me really excited. I decided to come and the first year I wasn't a participant either. I was working or volunteering already, and I really liked it. I work TSA, but for one of the other groups, the Commissary, which is in charge of all the food waste that the staff produces through spectrum. So, we are standing at the station and we pretty much tell people where to put their trash or food.



CAPTAIN PLANET There's not many people on TSA that have worked a full year in each one of the crews, and I have going around just because I want to know what each one does. There are spaces following years when they needed experienced people because a new crew popped up or a manager left. So, it's been really interesting to be able to see what each individual crew is able to do and then how we work together to get everything done. It's a lot of work.

So, we work at three different places. You have Gerlach estates, which are like Burning Man properties, which we work at pre-event. You have Black Rock Station, which is the work ranch, and the different crews that work out there. Then you have all the stations that we set up on the Playa during the event week and pre-post. So, in Gerlach, we have the Office, the Saloon, the Showers property, the Community center, and the Gerlach estates. We have stations at each one of those.

The Showers property is where we have our dumpsters, our roll-offs. We do hauling rounds, servicing rounds; to go and pick up the materials from each of those locations and then dump them off at the dumpsters. The ranch has its own dumpsters and will collect certain materials like aluminum and haul those to specific, segregated dumpsters so that we don't necessarily just put them in to co-mingle. We also deal with a lot of the food materials out there. They're very self-sufficient because they're there year-round. So, special projects, early build things like that. The Auto shop has a 6 or 9-month contract. They're out there for a really long time. So, they're usually self-sufficient and that's why they have dumpsters out there. They're required to dump their own stuff, and sort through them, and stuff. I mean, they do a decent job. We do

co-mingle for them so they don't necessarily have to segregate it. Certain areas like Special projects will sort it.

They collect plastic and aluminum, and they'll hold that in super sacks over the years, which is what my group, recycling collections, will use. They're these giant 3 by 3 by 5 ft. plastic bags that we collect materials in. So, then when we get onto the Playa, we use plastic gaylords and super sacks to collect cardboard, plastic 1-7, and aluminum. We have 14-16 stations and 3 vehicles that we drive around and collect materials in the mornings, doing two different routes. The inner route, which is all the staff camps right next to each other: the Commissary, the Ghetto, Black hole, etc. And then the outside route, which would be Greeters, Gate actual, Station 3, Station 9. That takes a lot longer because you have to drive slow and they are spaced far apart from each other.

That's pre and during the event. Then post-event, like this week, the week right after, we tear down most of our locations. But there's still four



**“We have [on playa] 14-16 stations and 3 vehicles that we drive around and collect materials in the mornings, doing two different routes.”**

locations out there that we still have to take down because we're out there so long, so we don't want to take away a lot of locations that produce a lot of materials. Those crews don't necessarily have a lot of time or the resources, the bandwidth to haul the amount of materials as often as if we didn't have this service. So, we still require those crews to sort and segregate their materials.

The recycling collection crew is at very specific locations with crews of 50+ or more. We haul those three materials from them: plastic, aluminum, cardboard just because they produce so much, and they wouldn't necessarily be able to haul it as often as they would need to.



Karla is top-sorting the dumpster with Captain Planet, who is giving her a hand. Photo credit: Flore Muguet, 2017.

FLO Cool. And would you describe your everyday routine?

KARLA Well, every day is pretty much the same. It just changes a little bit because it depends on the schedule: like, we don't really have a schedule. We go day by day. But what we do is they have a morning meeting, right? Then after that, around 9 AM or 10 we start the routes. So, this year we have two routes: outside collections and inside collections. So, outside is where Gate, #3, #9, and all the Collections that are farther away like Greeters. And then inside routes were like the closest ones: the bar, the Commissary, and other collections that we had. So, we've divided the crew into two teams.

CAPTAIN PLANET We just split the crews up depending on which we think has more work. The outside ones don't tend to have that much work, so it'd usually just be me and Karla. Then, Crack Baby, Fly Will, and Coon would do the inside routes.

KARLA And every day, like the first day, we set up all the stations. We all go around and set the stations. And then during the event, we just go and pull up and then switch the bags. We don't sort it. So, the bags are huge. So, we have moop sticks and then we just top sort it because the bags are very big.

CAPTAIN PLANET Top sort. We look at the top to see if it's clean, and if there's

any contaminants that you can see, we pull them out and put it in the right one.

KARLA And then we bring it to the Transfer station and we help—between 2 people or 3—we empty the bag into the dumpsters and then we top sort again.

FLO There's a Transfer station at the Depot, right?

KARLA Yeah. TSA actual. And then we just pull the materials that don't belong in the dumpster depending on the material—aluminum cans or plastics. That's what we do. It's not that dirty, because the crew this year did a good job. Also, we were going almost every day to try and keep the bags clean.

CAPTAIN PLANET Yeah, we wouldn't always have to pull it, but if it was over halfway or more then we would switch it out just because in one night you can fill a super sack with one crew. They are all big, it's a lot of room. But if it's halfway or more, you can easily fill it up in one night if you had a huge party.

KARLA I think that the bags got very mixed and very bad by the end because everyone was in a hurry, and everyone was having parties. So, when we were pulling the bags and emptying the bags into the dumpsters, we needed to clean them more because people just stopped caring because it was the end of the event.

FLO But all of you felt an improvement compared to the previous year?

KARLA Yeah.

CAPTAIN PLANET There was less materials than last year to haul, and it was cleaner than last year. There's almost always an improvement. So, one





Karla is at the Transfer Station Authority, TSA, sorting items on tables. Photo credit: Flore Muguet, 2017.

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**“We have solar panels out here in Black Rock solar [...] I would love to see more solar panels, especially for staff infrastructure.”**

thing that really gets me is that we produce a lot of carbon emissions from burning fossil fuels. We have solar panels out here in Black Rock solar, which Mr. Blue used to work with. But I would love to see more solar panels, especially for staff infrastructure. It's hard when you have to do so much driving, but it's necessary because you're the city's infrastructure.

It would be really cool if we were able to reduce the amount of resources that we are using and, I like to say, resource management. I don't like to say waste management because I don't think it's waste. I think it's resources that we are wasting, and I think the way you word it or say it is half the battle. If you're already thinking of it as waste, then you're

like, “Oh, whatever, it's waste,” you're able to waste it. But, if you're thinking of it as resources, then you're really trying hard to look at what you're consuming. Trying to figure out how to take your post-consumer by-product and turn it into another product to use instead of it just being, “oh yeah, we can't do anything with this: we're gonna dump it in the landfill.” So, really cutting back on that, as we do a lot of Burn Gardens and trash train.

I know that we save a lot of wood, and certain wood can't be used because of whatever: it's warped, or it's messed up or too short and you have to have specific measurements. But I still think that a lot of that could be used for something. Or at least if we're going to burn it, then

be able to utilize and harness the energy that we're giving off from burning that boiler or trying to gather energy through heat transfer via cables or something. I would love to see a project or be able to start a project where we're able to harness those areas for something else. Reduce something else or turn it into something else.

We just bought Fly Ranch. Especially with the Commissary here and how long people are out here, I would really like to write a petition for an organic garden, organic greenhouse, so that we actually get fresh produce and get more vegan/vegetarian options that are really healthy. Because it is hard to be healthy out here. The environment is very detrimental, and there's a lot of fried

food available, and it's not necessarily easy for you to have a very healthy diet. So, I would love to see more permaculture and utilize that on the land we own and be able to have that year-round for the people that are out there.

Then especially for the time being that the majority are: from July to the beginning of October and have a crew just doing permaculture: growing food to give to staff and everything. I would love to head that and be a part of that. I think that'd be really cool, and we totally have the opportunity for it because we have so much sun out here. As long as you have the right environment for it, you can grow anything that you want. If you have solar panels, like more permanent infrastructure on our permanent properties, then I think that we can do a lot more.

We have a lot more opportunities. We have all the materials because we get a ton during Collexodus. So, it's not like it would be hard to build anything. We have so many talented people out here. We could build any structure that we want. I just think like giant domes. Growing food would be perfect.

KARLA The first year I came, I was amazed by the beauty of the event, because it's an amazing event. It has the potential to change your life and your perspective on a lot of things. But it also is a huge waste of resources. Like, they burn so much wood. Not just for the Man, but also for Temple, and early Man, and Trash Man.

You see all these totally usable woods that can be transported out of the city, but they'd rather burn and get rid of it as a problem than use it. So, I mean that's one of the ideas that we have. It's to just let the people know that they can take the wood.

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**“I don't think it's waste. I think it's resources that we are wasting, and I think the way you word it or say it is half the battle.”**

They can bring a trailer or some way of transportation and just take and build a house, two houses, three houses, and gardens. I think that will be much better than just burning the wood because we're not just talking about the wood. We're talking about trees and all the emissions that are created, not just from that, but for all Burning Man.

I like the bikes. I really like how the Yellow bike crew is pushing people to use more bikes. But, by the end of the event, I saw so many bikes abandoned by participants that they become trash. So, what's the point of “Don't be driving a car” to feel that you are being good with the environment if at the end of the festival you're gonna just abandon your bike? That's something that I wanna really push to participants is to not do that. Not just with the bikes, but all the camps. Tents and single-use shade structures, air mattresses, bikes. All kinds of materials that we need to deal with, and nobody thinks about it. They just abandon things. Not just on Playa, but all the festivals that we work. It's sad to see how the participants and staff don't care about it. They just get rid of it, leave it on the ground, and the green team needs to deal with it. We have tried to save it.