

MAKE-OUT QUEEN

Make-Out Queen first attended Burning Man in 2002. Initially skeptical about the event, she quickly grew to like it and started volunteering at the Center Camp Café. Her playful spirit earned her the nickname ‘Make-Out Queen’ after a memorable ‘Make-Out Monday’ contest. By 2011, she became the Housing Manager. As of 2017, the Housing department oversees 800 different types of living units used by Burning Man’s staff. This includes 190 trailers—123 owned by Burning Man and the rest designated as management personal support trailers—112 boxes, a similar number of LC Living Containers, and support for office boxes. Known for her hands-on style, she has been a key figure in the DPW community. Even before joining the DPW, she started MCing at the Death Guild Thunderdome, a Mad Max-style playfight dome. Her performances, especially during the DPW-loved ‘Friends and Family Night,’ remain a big hit.

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



[About Make-out Monday]
“I was just like:
89 people!!”



Make-Out Queen is wearing her DPW 10-year patch. Photo credit: Neil Girling, 2017.

I hated Burning Man. I grew up in San Francisco, and it was always just a bunch of crazy bullshit that I discounted. I met—through some mutual friends—a woman who worked for Burning Man. She was talking to me about preparing for Burning Man. I was just like, “Yeah, fuck that place.” She was like, “Have you ever been?” “No.” “I really respect you, but if you’ve never been, you can’t talk about it. You wanna come, then you can talk about it.” I was like, “I’m gonna go just to prove you wrong!”

I ended up coming out in 2002 with Nimbus, from Ticketing. She worked at café back then. I get a ticket and I show up, and it’s amazing: it’s Burning Man. So, I’m volunteering [for center camp café]. I’m there early, and it comes to Monday of the event, which is “Make-out Monday.” We’re all hanging out in camp at café village. We’re sitting there and Nambla the Clown is there—old school drag queen—and he’s putting on his makeup. He makes a comment about it being “Make out Monday.” I was like, “Oh, make out Monday, what does that mean?” He says you make out with people. I ask if there is a prize. He’s like, “... No.” “Well, what’s the point?” “You make out with people!” “I can make out with three people before leaving this circle.” “Well, then try for 10 people!” “I can make out with 10 people before leaving camp!” He says, “Great. You and me : let’s have a contest. Midnight tonight. We call in how many people we made out with.” And I rolled around the entire city. At midnight I was at the Lamplighter’s margarita party, and I get called on the radio. It’s Nambla and he’s asking me for my tally. I was just like, “89 people!!!” There’s dead silence.

This guy is sitting there, and he just looks at me. Fast forward like two or three days later, I’m running around

with Nimbus and he calls “Make-out Queen” on the radio. Apparently [Nambla] and Nimbus had been talking back and forth about how that was my new name. So, when he calls it on the radio he goes, “AMBER! I’m talking about you!!!” Nimbus looks at me. He says, “Well welcome to your playa name!” [...]

I started literally sitting in the pumper trucks with the driver. I would drive around with them to show them which trailers needed to be serviced. After my first year, I was SO unbelievably bored! I asked Playground, my boss, if it was cool if I just started [working trailers]. She was like, “You’re not gonna get paid for it. Yeah, whatever.”

So, I started taking off. The next year they [asked if I was] doing that again. The manager who used to run the ranch hated trailers. HATED trailers with the passion of a thousand suns.

I was like, “So, Quinn, how about I just handle trailers for you?” He’s like, “Have it! Trailers are going the way of the white buffalo!! The Org is never gonna do trailers! You’re gonna work yourself out of a job!” I was like, whatever, I’m bored. So, I started managing trailers. Then the next thing I know, they are [asking if I] need an assistant. This really, organically became a department. Every year it was bigger, and more and more, and bigger.

Then it just became Housing. It was probably a real department by 2010. I had a role, but it was not in the handbook. That wasn’t me. I think I became housing manager—with big asshole quotes—maybe in 2011? I’m even not sure anymore. It all bleeds together. [...] Everybody finds their place at Burning Man. You self-select. Maybe you start at fuel; now you’re on fluffers! Hey! Housing is such a weird fucking group of kids. It all self-selects.

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Because of that, and because its Housing, we deal with 190 trailers. 125 of them the Org owns. Then we deal with managers and people who bring their own trailers. We support that. Then we support PUAs. We do all that support. Then we do the boxes, and we do the LCs. So, it's like... you know, one day to the next day it's never the same. The only constant is that we go to morning meeting and then we have a break. Like, 5/10-minute break. Get a cup of coffee, get a cookie, whatever, go to commissary, get some cereal. Then we go back to the Housing pod, and we have our morning meeting, where we go through everything for the day. I mean, we log hundreds and hundreds of calls a day. Everything from someone needs their house moved closer to shade, to someone's trailer is leaking, someone's box isn't there. You know, it's over 800 different kinds of living units that we manage!

It's 123 trailers, the additional management support trailers, 112 boxes, and then the same amount of LCs—which are two unit living containers. Then we also end up

doing support for the office boxes. So, like, if it's an office container and the AC goes out on that? We handle that.

A few years ago, we had really bad rains. Power was out. It was this huge thing! Power lines were arching from the ground: that day is unlike any other day! Except, for us, there is no normal. That's what has made my crew amazing, because it's not normal. No day is normal! Every day is different! There's nothing to count on. You're not a fork operator—and no slack to Heat, that is a hard ass job—but it's like, you're working forks. You know exactly what you're doing. You're moving shit with a forklift. You might be on a call for 10 hours, but your job is that. Every person in housing, including myself, runs the gamut.

When it was raining in Gerlach last year and all the power in the trailer park was dying, and everything is going to shit, I am sitting there, in the rain, drenched, working with the head of Power—working with Easy Going. Him and I are trying to troubleshoot electrical on the fly, at 1 o'clock in the morning. This is why we do what we do! Everybody in housing wants that. They're bored and they want their days to be crazy, and weird, and stressful. Oh my god, people are so weird. [...] That's the hilarious thing with the fleet. It's not like, “Oh, here is your perfectly working trailer!” Everything has AC. But, ok, you might have a fully working kitchen with propane and the whole nine yards, but you might not have a working toilet. You have running water, but you don't have propane. So, it's all these crazy [services that we provide]. [...] I'm amazed I have a job sometimes. I created all of this.

So, for me, every year is a new year. Some years are really shitty. Last year was really shitty. You don't feel



Photo credit: TheBlight.net, 2014.

like you make any traction at all. It's hard! It's a huge organization! And I am old school: I am loud, I am brash, and I am a lot to deal with.

Some years I feel like I'm rolling the boulder uphill two ways. And some years I feel like I do really good work. Has there been improvement? Sure. I mean, there's a department now. I obviously filled a need. I don't measure it in bottom lines. I measure it in my crew; I measure it in the friendships. For me, my crew are my babies. I'm older and they're younger, and they're my babies. I'm 43: I'm not that old at all! But my crew is young. My crew is in their 20s and 30s. I'm their mom. I make sure they have snacks! [laughs]

A good year for me is watching the faces of my crew. A good year for me is all of us sitting at the housing pod, in Gerlach, at the end of the event,

sharing a drink, having pina coladas and laughing. You know? That's the good year. I don't care how many Amber reports I get that are good or bad. That's not why I do this. [...]

So, the people who run Death Guild Thunderdome, I have known since I was 17. Old school friends. Old school friends! So, I started MCing at Thunderdome before I was in DPW. Because I am who I am out here, I knew a lot of people. When they would do friends and family night, which was basically geared towards DPW—but open to all event staff—they asked, “Can you do this?” Totally. In 1 or 2 years, I joined DPW and it became The Thing. The only reason I am here right now is because I couldn't let friends and family happen without me. It's my art! I always joke that I kind of go to a totally other place

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with it. Yeah! Like, I step into the dome, and I announce Marisa, which is an honor, because she is one of my oldest friends and an amazing opera singer. I'm surrounded with people I have known for 20 years and surrounded by a DPW family. So, something happens when I get the mic in my hand, and I go to another place. I don't know: I have a bottle of whiskey in my hand and a mic in the other. I just open up the Make-out Queen cannon and it just comes out! Nothing is sacred and no one is safe. It's more than just the show. It's this moment where everybody has worked so hard to this one thing. To make this thing for all these people! There's anxiety, and anger, and angst, and grudges, and fun matches, and, like... I check out. I don't even know what I say. I do not remember a goddamn thing. I just open my mouth and it comes into the thing, this comedy, this art...



Make-Out Queen MCing at the Thunderdome. Photo credit: Jude Hales, 2018.