

# NIPPS WILLIAMS

Nipps Williams, affectionately known as ‘Mama Nipps,’ has been a dedicated participant of Burning Man since 2000 and an active member of the DPW since 2004. Renowned for her compassion and commitment, Nipps has excelled as a ‘fluffer’ on the Playa. Her care for others led her to establish and lead the Fluffers department, which supports the DPW crews with water, snacks, and essential needs. Under her guidance, the department has grown significantly, starting with just one vehicle and expanding to six by her tenth year, reflecting the increasing importance and recognition of the support they provide to the crews.

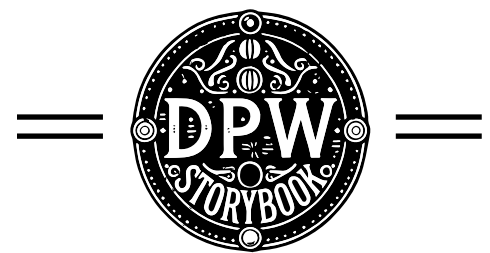
This interview was conducted by “Flo,” Flore Muguet, a French anthropologist, in 2016. Most of Flo’s questions have been omitted to improve reading flow.

P.S.: She had a wonderful daughter named Hazel in 2017 with Flip, also a DPW member. They all live year-round in Gerlach, Nevada.



Nipps stands in the doorway of her fluffer van designed by Michael Garlington. Photo credit: Aaron Muszalski, 2014.

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“I got here... and then I was told to go home!”

FLO Fluffer Nipps. So, Nipps is?

NIPPS N. I. P. P. S. With two “p’s” because I’m anatomically correct.

FLO That’s funny! Ok. Can you tell me how you got involved in Burning Man and DPW?

NIPPS Yeah, for Burning Man I started in the year 2000. I came with friends. One of my uncles. I had visited my uncle in Tahoe the year prior and had been driving out cross-county to visit them, and then he asked me if I was coming out that year.

I told him that I wanted to dance naked around a fire with Indians or something. And he was like, “oh, well you should go to Burning Man,” which was the first time I had ever heard about it, and so I immediately looked it up, told all my friends that I work with and... we went to Burning Man. And, while we were out there, we ended up finding friends from Philly—where we were from, where we just came from—who were there, so we wound up camping with them and then wound up building a camp and a theme camp with them for two, three, four years until... 2004,

when I had gone to a Regional in Delaware and met a woman, Seevie, who worked for DPW and told me all about it.

Well, she was partying with us and I was saying I loved Burning Man and wanted to be a part of it, and “how could I stay longer?” She overheard and said that she worked there and could totally get me in and get me that position. We kind of partied all weekend, had a great time, and kept in contact. She gave me a name and information. At that time it wasn’t Logan... it was someone else.

I came here. Drove cross country in my camp’s big dump truck with thousands of tons of equipment. It was the first time I drove a dump truck. It was very big. Cross country. It was great. And I got here... and then I was told to go home!

I said, “No. I sent an email, this is what you said: ‘come on out.’” He was like, “No, you misunderstood.” I’m like, “well, I’m here now. I’m not driving back to Philly. Let’s deal with that.” So, we came to the bar. That was in 2004. I came to the bar and I hung out at the bar that night

and drank and got drunk and met everybody and hung out with them and made out with them all. And in the morning I went back to him and he said... “I don’t know what you did, but I’m being told by everybody that I need to let you on crew.” He handed me my paperwork. It was great. I worked shade that year.

It was a great experience. Hard work. Met a lot of great friends and worked with Low Dog. So, we did a survey—yup. And I did a survey with him, so I drove around in his vehicle and one of the main things was I was



## “I started giving people baby wipes.”

constantly asking him around 10 o'clock in the morning if we could get water, because I ran out of water. And... we would drive around all day long looking for water because it was the hardest thing to find. It was either filled with beer or used as a cooler or it was brown water filled with Playa or it was empty or it was something you didn't want to drink. It was really hard to find water, and I mean, literally I became an alcoholic because the only thing available was beer and Red Bull. I can't really drink caffeine, so beer was water and water was beer.

That's the logo, the thing we had back then... “Water is beer, beer is water.” That's what it was because that was what was more available: more so than water. It was something we needed to drink, and it was really crazy. I ended up bringing extra snacks for my friends on crew. When I would eat, they would eat, because everyone needed snacks during the middle of the day after all their lunch was done, so I would bring that. Then the next year I was working on the Ranch. Coyote and Trailer Park pulled up to me and asked me if I knew how to cook. And I said, “Yes.” They asked me if I knew how to cook brains. And I was like, “Yes?” And they asked if you knew how to cook baby's brains. And I was like, “sheesh, do you like garlic? What do you want?!”



Photo credit: unknown, 2009.

He was like, “alright, you're perfect. You have your own vehicle. We need someone to take care of us during survey. We lost the guy who was doing it before, and he had his own vehicle and... you know, you have all the qualifications.” And so I did it.... It was related to cooking because during survey a small crew with no vehicles was just out walking, so they needed someone to continually drive to them and bring them water and snacks because they couldn't hold all that stuff walking miles in the sun all day. They had to have tools. So, they had to be brought these things to be able to survive. They called it a fluffer.

Nipps: [During] my first year I was working towards Collexodus. As soon as I got to that point I realized that I need to start saving things so that I could have some type of stock because whatever change I had they always offered it to—you know, told me I could keep it. But, what I did was bought snacks, so that if anyone asked I always had extra snacks to give out. And so they were just feeding themselves because I'd put it back. And so, that's how it happened, and then the next year I came and then it was... I did resto that year, and it was the first year that there was anybody that had water. It was 2005. I had been fluffing all these people but not officially: just as my own person.

Coyote was in charge of me but technically I wasn't part of his crew because I was doing all these other things. It was very odd. The next year, I was staying with my van and I ended up getting hurt because I was lugging igloos—that are 50 pounds—I was doing it by myself. I had one spout

here, so I was constantly in a hurry and doing 20 things at one time. So, I got hurt and they gave me someone. It was the first time I had someone to help me. So, she drove and I laid in the back of my van in my bed with the bullhorn, on tons of medicine to relax my body, helping these people and telling them what to do. It was basically the start of it.

And at that time it was the managers' responsibility to purchase an igloo and bring it on-site with the crew and have it for them. But most of the time the managers were so... at that time it was so crazy and busy they were more worried about making sure they had the right tools to actually get the job done then thinking about water and snacks and all these other things that the crew also needed to work. Coyote really, you know, went hands down for me saying how much the crew needed me, and how much more we were getting done, and happier, and the moral, just safety and everything in general. And so, that led to me actually becoming my own department. ... I would say it was probably 2007.

In 2008, we had Mike Garlington, who is an artist, who came onsite and was volunteering and just fell in love with us. Took photos of us every year, and wound up with what he did for his art. He photo-ed his personal vehicle and put photos of what he took, you know, all around his van. Specific art. It was beautiful! So, he did that to the vans. I mean, I have photos of when they were original. Gorgeous! Absolutely gorgeous.

<sup>FLO</sup> So that was in 2008. How many vans did you have at the time? One?



NIPPS My first year I was alone. The next year it went from I was alone and then got her and then had one—the driver. My personal driver. And then the next year it went to three, starting with three, ending with four. The next year starting with six. And I can't remember how many I had... I can't remember if I had more after that. But I know that at the end of the season, I got another vehicle. Last year was the first... Last year, in my 10th year, I got a new vehicle—the 6th one.

So, it's taken me that long to continue to get vehicles and the only way I was able to get vehicles—one year I actually got a vehicle because the greeters wanted fluffing and I had explained to her that physically we couldn't go that far because we didn't have the time. It took half an hour out of our day and we just didn't have the time because we had too many crews. We just couldn't do it. I wanted to. We'd meet ya halfway! But, I physically can't make it out there! And it told her if she knew anyone to make that happen, to talk to her people. And she did. Within days I was approached by the higher-up, Playground, at the time, and told me that whatever I needed she was gonna get me and I could definitely have a new vehicle next year. And so that was one year. How I definitely got a vehicle was by greeters and Playground.

FLO That's impressive, because from the time you started in 2000 I'd have to guess there were like 20,000 people?

NIPPS Yeah, it was way smaller, and the crews were smaller. We didn't have fifty crews. Yeah. We had three crews



Photo credit: Erin Faith Johnson / Mile High, 2015.

that did everything. And there were just a few more people on each crew. So, it was easy to get around and then, you know, as the years went on they started separating into their specific teams and then more sites because then, you know, they had the living site and then the site where they're working on, which is usually different ones. And then, they have roving vehicles that travel around. So, that's three different places where

we're looking for them and fluffing them. Three different sites.

That was how the growth started where I had to break them down into the city by teams with one team doing one side then the other team would do the other side, and then we got another vehicle so we split it in the middle. The one team would do half of this side, the other half, and then one team would do the middle.

And then if we got four vehicles we had one van that only did the bottom and then we had one van that only center, this side, and then one van that did all of the top. Now we have 480 igloos.

We [used to] have this disease consistent throughout DPW over the years. It was called monkeypox. I don't know why they named it that. It had a name and it was a 24-78

hour... thing that would take people down. It'd be vomiting, diarrhea all at the same time. You couldn't eat, you had the shakes, you had the fevers. You know, you were sweating! It was the whole nine yards, and it was basically being unclean, it was being an alcoholic, it was not having the proper amount of snacks and sunscreen and being taken over... it was complete dehydration, overwork, alcoholism. All the things that DPW was in the earlier times in 2004, 2005, 2006, and 2007.

So, I started giving people baby wipes. I started collecting them at Collexodus so that they could clean themselves. And hand sanitizers. I started putting it in front of the commissary so that they can clean their hands before they go anywhere. I started donating these things to these places so that there was an option to clean... They were overworked, they weren't being taken care of. So, it was a lot of that just being taken care of on a daily basis: knowing somebody was there was part of what made them safer.

I'm from Philadelphia and it was... you know, I'm from a violent area. I'm used to being afraid, and living in fear, and looking behind my shoulder. And I came out here and it was the first time I didn't have that fear. Had none of it. I was confused at the fact that I did not have any fear. And then I came here and I had a group of people that were already doing fucked up shit, and they were encouraging: "come. Do this with us." And I did. And it was great. It was destructive. It was violent. It was exactly what I needed to vent and make myself up into what I am today: a better person. And to want

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to live and to want to...

I mean, I definitely did time with drugs and alcohol. I was definitely trying to kill myself for years, but in a fun way, with my friends. I've been sober now for five years, and I run a team that looks out for everybody and teaches them how to love, and share, and be good to each other: even though you don't know that person, you will soon.

DPW is definitely the biggest family I've been in, and been a part of, and wanted to be a part of even though it is one of the most difficult families to be a part of. That's for sure. [laughter] The best worst family in the world and it's ever-changing! Because you're my family now. You know? We're you're family now. I've never had more dead friends in my life, which is also very sad. And disturbing. But, I've also never had so many wonderful friends in my life: people that I can trust and depend on wherever. Wherever I am in any state or country, I know I could call and somebody would be there.