

RED BEARD

Red Beard, a plumbing enthusiast and water chemistry expert, attended his first burn in 1999. After serving in the Navy, he began returning to the Playa annually in 2008, spending some years as a member of the theme camp Lost Penguins. In 2015, he joined the DPW's Plumbing Department.

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.



“Dude, I love plumbing! I do water chemistry.”

So, 2015 was my first year on DPW. It was an odd year. 2015 was my first year on DPW. Though, my first burn was 2009. Not 2009! 1999. Because I was 19. I went in '99, and then my next burn was '08 because I was in the navy in-between. Then I did every year, and then every other year for a little bit. I just wanted something a little more.

[In 2015], our theme camp, the Lost Penguin Café, had just had their area-head phone call. I had been the hospitality head the year before, so I had to turn over because I was not planning on coming out. I said, “but, I think I might try to



Photo credit: Noelle Stransky, 2015.

volunteer.” Because I'd never had the opportunity before. I'd always had work. I had never been able to come out here for more than the event. So, there I am, 24 hours later, in my bar, talking to Kimba. She was like, “oh, well, I actually know a little bit about that.” I was like, “oh my god! Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?” So, we talked for a little bit. She gives me her email.

After four hours of talking, [...], she's like, “look, you have the skillset. It seems a shame to go out there and roust. They actually need people who can do things. How do you feel about plumbing?” I'm like, “Dude, I love plumbing! I do water chemistry. That's what I do.” [...] So, she put me in contact with Joe the Builder. He gave me a call. A couple of weeks later, I was in DPW.

In 2008, I separated from the navy after being overseas for most of a

decade. I get back to Seattle and I start calling people. I'm like, “hey, man. You wanna go hang out? I'm back.” They're like, “oh, dude, we'd love to but like... in two weeks, because we're going to Burning Man.” I go, “oh, dude, hang on. Lemme call you back.” And I hang up. I buy an open, late ticket from Seattle to San Francisco to Reno.

No plan whatsoever. I was basically doing it totally wrong. I go into a storefront location on Haight and buy a ticket. So, if you wanna talk about how much the event has changed: in 2008 I walked into a store and purchased a ticket with cash, and they handed me a piece of paper, a week before the event. [Once on the playa] my super light, 5lb, one-person mountaineering tent, in the middle of the night, blew the fuck away. So, there I am with no tent, minimal food, and minimal water... it was a great event!

That was the year I discovered the Lost Penguins. So, the very next year, I became a member of the Lost Penguins because I knew a couple of people over there, sort of. So, I just hung out with them and realized, “oh, I need to do this more.” [...] So, yeah. I kept going every year until 10. I took off '11 and '13. I was doing every other year because I got a little burned out. I got a little like, “oh, I know exactly what this is going to be like.” That's why I wanted to do DPW. I wanted to do the next thing. When I did, in 2015, I discovered that this is the burn I was always looking for. I absolutely love it. I love coming out here and working.

My second year on DPW, I knew the exact moment that I felt like I'd come into my own. Hamburgler was supposed to be the captain of one of the kickball teams. No! That's right: Darby! He's such a shitshow.

Darby is supposed to be kickball captain, and he doesn't show up to the morning meeting where we're supposed to be talking about it. So, I meet him and talk him into making our team. He's like, “alright, well I guess Flip will be—” and I'm like, “No! No! I'm here for Darby. Darby is not here, but I am his representative. We are here.” And Flip was like, “What the hell man? I was gonna fill in.” I'm like, “no. We're not giving up our team.”

So, Flip makes an unofficial fifth team, and that team is titled “Team Fuck Red Beard.” They come out with t-shirts that are spray painted to say, “Fuck Red Beard” and signs. They come out on the field. This was my second year. So, 2016. We're out there, and I'm trying to run the bases, being all squirrely, and I just hear Flip, who's got the whole crowd chanting: “Fuck Red Beard!”

And, you know what? Other people in other places might be offended by that. But, DPW, in that moment, I was like “I'm fucking infamous, which is as good as being famous.” [...] That's the moment. That's the moment when I was like, “I've come into my own.” People know my goddamn name. Yeah. And I love it. I've learned a lot.

I am part of the plumbing group. We are a service group for the service groups. Which is to say all of those things that you really care about: showers, the commissary, the ghetto bar. Those all go through a ton of water. We are the people who build the infrastructure and provide the water to them.

So, we do the grey water collection and pure water supply for org related camps and for the DPW infrastructure. We have a lot of work vehicles and trucks. Waterworks and plumbing are basically co groups. Plumbing does all the physical infrastructure: we do the tanks, we do the pumps, we do the pipes and the hoses. But, water works actually does a lot of the fills.

We do a lot of pumping then. We do the sanitation of all the pumps every year, which is a big deal. You gotta make sure that people don't get sick. The state of Nevada is very, very thorough about making sure that you're not making people sick. This year I am the plumber. Last year I was in petrol, so I was actually in a different group. Two years ago I was the manager of this group. I was the plumbing manager. Clutch was the assistant manager.

This year, plumbing has no manager, because we had two managers quit on us. I don't know if you saw our anarchy sign/flag. We put out an anarchy flag because we decided that we are an anarchist, free-range

plumbing group. So, right now we have no meetings. We just have a general list of what needs to get done, and people have just been doing it!

Its good work. I like it. I like getting wet, I like being with the water people. I like putting tools on things.

I like that we have big ol' 4 ton trucks to drive around with 66 tons of water on it, and honk at people, and be mean to participants. Oh, and the water cannon! We have the water cannon that we built. We bring it to the 4:20 spire and the Bologna Hole Blitz. Yup. Kickball. Everything. We have so much fun. Then, of course, we have the parts washer. So, there's all sorts of little benefits in plumbing. I'm definitely a burner, but I'm also definitely a member of DPW.

Plumbing, electrical, and heavy equipment all move onto playa the day after fence. We are the first people out here. Heat is out here after us. We are the second to last group to move off of playa.

I love it. I love watching the city get built around me. I love coming out here when there's only a couple of people and walking over the three mans, having a beer, and looking at the emptiness... feeling like you're an integral part of this thing that gets built. And it's great.

When our theme camp needs stuff placed, and they need someone out here super early, even though I haven't camped with them in three years, I still consider myself a penguin. We camped with them for a very long time. We still hang out with them a ton. They still call us. Like, “hey, man, we need our trailer dropped. Can you go survey our site so that Willie can do it?” I'm like, fuck yeah.