

ROXY AND GILESS

Roxy: Roxy first attended Burning Man in 2005. She officially joined the workforce in 2012, initially with the Gate team before transitioning to the Department of Public Works (DPW) in 2014. By 2016, she became the manager of the BRC Storage Program, overseeing the logistics of transporting and placing containers for both domestic and international camps.

Giless: With a construction background, Giless joined the DPW at the Ranch in 2016 as the Container Build Manager. He was responsible for building essential facilities and housing for various departments. His first year marked a significant shift, moving from traditional shipping containers to custom wooden structures, enhancing both utility and design.

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



“Before you see Greeters, before you come into Burning Man [...] you see a lot of people in black...”



Photo credit: Slim. Year unknown.



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ROXY:

I started going to Burning Man in 2005. I skipped 2007, 2009, 2011. I worked different departments. I started working for Burning Man in 2012. I started working for Gate in 2012, I was on the tech team and then I worked doing Logistics for the Black Hole. I was spending a lot of time with DPW: I met some managers, and I was hanging out, but I was always Gate.

One of the things I really like about Gate is you have a schedule, you have hours that you work and hours that you don't work. With DPW, if the sun is up, you're probably working. With Gate, it's 6-hour shifts, they do a 24-hour schedule. With Logistics it was a little different, more like, we have things to do, you have to do them, get them done in a timely fashion.

But on DPW, as a manager, which is what I do now, I am working. If the sun is up and there is work to do you are doing it and if you don't get it done, you are working into the night. So, it's different.

Gate is really interesting—they are the boundaries, the borders, especially if you are interested in ritual [talking to me].

I really appreciate Gate and working for Gate, spiritually and esoterically. They are the veil and the barrier between Burning Man and this world, they are the controllers and protectors of that liminal space and I think that is very interesting. They are the first people you see, before you see Greeters, and before you come into Burning Man and this whole other realm. You see a lot of people in black, often wearing bones and skulls and they have opinions,

and they have a very important job.

Gate is bigger than DPW but not everyone camps there, because there is a 24 schedule with shifts, they have over 500 people working for Gate. There are people working Perimeter, there's people working the Lanes: it's a really big crew. So, I was dealing with everyone who was camping there, probably about half of the crew camps. I was dealing with the logistics of the camping area, the spider boxes for electricity, and making sure everyone was camped where they needed to be. I was an assistant to the Mayor, as they call it. Then that job kind of evaporated. I was in France when I called to see if I still had a job or if I should stay in France, and I didn't have a job anymore.

Then I was like, wait a second, I want a job, so I called Logan, the DPW



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Labor Manager, and I was like, “Do you have a job for me?”

He said, hold on, and 15 minutes’ worth of text messages from the South of France to San Francisco later, I had a job as an assistant manager of the program I work for now. The next year the person I was working for left and I became the manager. So, now I am manager of the BRC Storage Program. I have a great team, it’s small but we work really well together. Our job is a little different because we work a lot with participants, with most of DPW, when the event happens, they put their hammers down and they are done. With my position we are working with participants during the event: they own the containers. We move about 200 containers from the Ranch to the event site, playa.

It’s kind of special. I like it personally because it cuts down on cost and fuel

consumption. Otherwise, people have a storage unit in Reno or Tahoe. We deal a lot with international camps and camps that come from the other side of the country.

Some of the container owners are based out of Boston, New York, England, Australia. A lot of international camps that want to store stuff in an environmentally sound manner and avoid the high cost of trans-Atlantic or trans-national trucking transportation. It is a two-lane road to the event site and if we can cut even a marginal portion of that traffic and hauling down it is a benefit to all.

So, I arrive in July, and I start collecting information. I am in communication with the camps in the pre-season, and they start sending in their maps once they have gotten Placement. I collect the maps of the theme camps and they show me where they want the containers

to go. The containers weigh almost 15,000 kilos and are 6 meters tall by 2.5 meters wide. We need flatbeds, “trains,” and forklifts to move them around. I work very closely with Heavy Equipment And Transpo, also known as HEAT. Ideally, I get a very accurate map of the camp and where things need to go.

Sometimes people arrive and they are like, “Well, I didn’t know so I was going to be here and now they want to camp over here and there’s a box in the way.” We have to ask if they can camp somewhere else in the camp because it can be very dangerous to move the containers once the City is open. There’s thousands of people, on bikes, wandering, not paying attention, and big machines moving big boxes can be very dangerous. We try to place all the containers exactly where the need to go before anyone arrives. I arrive early to print out the maps and get things organized and start making the plan of how we are

going to make this happen; logistics.

Shortly after Fence goes up, Placement starts flagging camps and we are hot on their tails flagging where our containers will go in those camps. No shade. There’s nothing out there. We have maps and vehicles, and we are out in the nothing placing flags where the containers will go. It is a fun job. We get to work alone a lot. We’re very autonomous.

A lot of DPW, I feel, works together and with other crews to make things happen. We’re dependent on Placement but my crew works under me, and I work under Fireball, the Ranch Manager, because my containers live on the Ranch. For the most part, my team just gets to work together and do our thing. It is always changing, that is one thing I appreciate about Burning Man, it is always evolving. I find it very fascinating since it doesn’t have anything to model after, it is

its own unique thing. There are events that are running longer, such as the Oregon Country Fair. When Burning Man was starting, they asked the OCF a lot of questions, but it is totally different there.

This is an example I like to use of the innovation of Burning Man, because it is the only thing that exists where it happens and the size and capacity that it happens. So, in the Fluffer Vans, they drilled holes in the floors of the vans so that when they are driving along they can drain the coolers of melted ice through the holes in the floor and it helps keep the dust down. They had to figure that out. That is trial by fire. It’s a very, “how do we make it work?” mentality, and that is one of the things that makes the event so unique. It is constantly trying to be better, figuring out what that means and how to execute that.



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Roxy and Logan. Photo credit: Emperor Norton, 2015.

GILESS:

I worked at Burning Man pre-season. This was my first year: 2016. I used to work with a group of artists that would go to Burning Man, but I never went. As far back as 1998 or 1999, I had plenty of opportunities to go but I just never went for various reasons. But this year, a close friend of mine who has been going since 1996 or 1997, and has been working with DPW for many years, invited me and I interviewed. I had been working in Texas working in construction already. So, I went to the Ranch and became the manager for container build.

Container build is responsible for building buildings, housing, or offices, for different departments. We built an office for Fuel, for the Airport for their ticket sales, for Artica, First Camp wanted a shower house and we built that. Offices and housing. This year was special because we made a transition to boxes, there was a lot of debate about that because it is different. From shipping containers to wooden boxes. Made with natural wood instead of containers or other materials, that is what we built. It was a lot of overseeing the design and overseeing the work and working with a crew, about 10 people. Not everyone had strong construction skills, and you have to find out what they can do and help them learn and do what they can do best. Also managing people, it is difficult managing people in that environment, there's different stresses, different problems, challenges, and you're coaching and helping people.

Early on, there's the living containers and that's where Autoshop lives, where container crew lives and where the Ranch crew lives. Those are the only three groups that are on the Ranch and we were the largest group. But at that point in time, there's only



Giless at the Ranch. Photo credit: Ken Holmes. Year unknown.

30 people: that's it. To go to town, to buy cigarettes or beer, you can go to Bruno's or you can go to Fernly or Reno. It's a three-hour drive. You're really isolated and there's only 30 people, so it's very different than during the event. It's very much you have this group, and you have this little family. It is important to make sure everybody is ok.

During the day, my biggest job is construction and, even if it's built poorly, they don't care. They just want it built. Sometimes rats get into them in the winter, and so we tried to create a new design that would last longer and work better. There's problems with the containers, so we were trying something different and they put me into that position. So, here's change happening.

Beyond the construction aspect there's the group dynamic: keeping people happy keeping things copacetic. You need to keep a dynamic in the group where people want to be around each other because you work together and then you're together at night. When there's only 30 people. So, there were two groups. There was a group who played video games: a lot of the Ranch crew and some of the Autoshop. Then there was our group who played dice and backgammon all night. So that was an interesting dynamic. Keeping people happy. Small problems occur; we were together for three months.

The food was better. You are having breakfast and lunch and dinner together. There's only a dozen tables, and you see everybody every

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day and you are sharing the same space. You really get to know these people very closely. There's only two showers. You figure it out. Not everyone showers every day, and some people shower twice a day. It is closer and more communal. There's drinking and drugs but it's less and it's different. When other people get out there, later, they like to say, “It's not a sprint; it's a marathon,” and they are only out there for 5 weeks!

Most of the people who are working on the Ranch, kind of hide away in their houses when other people come to work on the Ranch. They aren't coming out as much. Most of the Ranch crew when all these other people are out and partying, they're like, “No, we're going to go read a book.” But during the week, we would all hang out, [there is] a lot of camaraderie and a very close-knit group. Then once everyone starts showing up and we transfer

to Gerlach—what I noticed once everyone else started showing up, I think—the culture starts to deteriorate. I was much less engaged by the DPW culture that I saw preparing for the event than what I saw at the Ranch. It is a pretty big difference.

The Ranch is different, it is extreme climate [with] its own special conditions. Then there's this huge laundry list of buildings that you have to build. Everybody is out there working a job, but they aren't working the job for money. But when you're managing a group of people you have to understand what it is that they are there for. The money isn't a priority, and everyone has their own reasons.



Giless and Roxy in their RV on Playa. Photo credit: Flore Muguet, 2018.