

SANSA ASYLUM

Sansa Asylum is a multifaceted performer and clairvoyant who first attended Burning Man in 1997 after her father filmed a documentary about the event in 1996. Renowned for her vibrant stage presence and psychic abilities, she also plays a key role at the event, leading the Department of Public Works (DPW) Highway Cleanup Crew. This team is responsible for collecting trash along the roads surrounding the Burning Man site during Playa Restoration, dealing with debris that may have been discarded intentionally or unintentionally, including items like mattresses or other objects blown off vehicles.

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.



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SANSA My legal name is Sansa and my playa name is Sansa Asylum. It’s also my stage name because I’m mostly a performer. I first came to Burning Man in 1997 because of my dad. My dad came to Burning Man in ’96.

I’m 35. My dad first came in ’96 and made a movie about it. He was a

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filmmaker. He came home, and I was still just a little pre-teen or teenager. Or something. He was like “oh, you gotta go to Burning Man!” This was back when tickets were \$30, and there was very little infrastructure. DPW was the craziest, most... yeah. You’ve heard the stories. DPW was very different. You were still allowed to have guns and like... you know, there was no DMV. You could still drive around and shoot guns and blow up whatever you wanted. So my dad came back like “you gotta check out Burning Man! It’s the coolest thing!” I was like “dad, I don’t want to do anything you do because it must not be cool.” But then the next year I ended up coming. My time then—I was just a 17 year old punk rock kid—was so magical. There was also obviously a lot less people, so you could really feel the magic of the desert and the stars. So, I just felt so at home there, and I felt real magic. I kept coming back. I remember seeing DPW in Thunderdome—they were more of the same people back then—and just going like “wow, they’re so cool.”

I only run a trash crew and pick up trash all day when I’m at Burning Man. It’s a special, special job that I really care about doing at Burning Man. The rest of the year I’m a performer and psychic reader. I do full clairvoyant. You know, I’ve been a performer all my life, so one day I made myself a costume that looks like a vintage, turn of the century,



Photo credit: John Curley, 2016.

carnival style fortune teller. So, I have a three-and-a-half-foot-tall feathered turban with rhinestones on it, and a beautiful costume, and I get paid \$100 an hour, plus tip, to do psychic readings at events with a crystal ball. And I don’t usually use cards. I just look at people and I read them. My readings, mostly I get messages that those people need to hear, so with every reading there’s a message for them—like a moral to the story. Something that is gonna help them to connect back to their highest path in life and what’s going to be best for them. Sometimes I’m doing damage control.

Like with my trash pick-up crew: I do a prayer every day before we roll

out. Everyday. For sure. I call on my highest gods, and my highest powers. My first prayer is always to keep us safe because it is a very, very dangerous job as far as Burning Man jobs go. ... I run a crew that takes out about 3 trucks with 12 people, including me. We go up and down the highways and clean the trash, and there are semis whizzing by. All kinds of bio hazards. Broken glass. Sorry to say this, but human feces. So, my prayer is always to keep us safe, and then to keep us happy. And I think I do a pretty good job at both of those things. Nobody’s been hurt yet, and I think most of the people who come to work with us have been pretty happy about it.

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On the second day this year we were all rolling out to start our workday and I was doing my morning prayer. And... I connected to my highest powers. I wasn’t really thinking about it too much when I was doing my prayer on this one day that I’m talking about. I started doing the prayer and I was just asking for protection. I started doing my prayer, and then I got this very deep-seated feeling that “hey, you guys need extra protection today. You should pray some more.”

Hours later, we’re out on the road and Evelina, who’s one of the other drivers—one of my few best friends—she had what we call in DPW a “near miss.” She was very, very close to being hit by a car. She looked both ways before she crossed the road, but there was a dip in the road, so she couldn’t see that there was a car there, and she was distracted. Also it was hot. You know, we get distracted. She came just feet between losing her life [in a collision] days ago. I think that’s why I got that feeling that we needed extra protection that day. So, I feel really lucky that I had the ability to feel that we just needed more protection. I don’t know if that’s true, and I don’t know if that made a difference, but as somebody who does psychic readings as a living I’ve just learned to trust that.

Most people that have done DPW have done a lot of different departments. I actually got really lucky. I’ve only done two departments, and I’ll tell

you why. I did Commissary that year and I liked it. I got free food and I got to stay for the festival. I was already friends with Sylkia. So the next year I asked Sylkia if I could come back next year as a volunteer. She was like “sure.” I got my ticket and I came. I was working Commissary. I used to build my own doll house out here to live in. So, that first year I was doing Commissary I built my own doll house.

So, my second year—this would have been four or five years ago—I woke up one day in my doll house and I had a Commissary shift to go to. I was trying to brush my hair, and it’s really dusty out here, so the brush got stuck in my hair. And I was sitting in my doll house with the brush stuck in my hair like “oh, god, what do I do now?” And all of a sudden I got this psychic feeling in my stomach. And it said, “you need to jump out of your doll house right now! Something is going to happen!” And it’s perfectly quiet outside. And I thought “but I have a brush stuck in my hair, I’m going to look like an idiot... but I need to follow this gut feeling anyway.”

So, I jumped out of my house, and standing above me was my friend, Mike Garlington, who used to run Highway cleanup—of which I’m now the manager. But at the time I was just a little volunteer at Commissary. I was like “Hey, Mike, what’s up?” He was like, “Hey, we need extra drivers today, and I love you, and I know you’ll do a great job. Do you want to get paid and be an assistant manager for Highway cleanup?” And I was like “Yeah! I do!” He said, “Cool, you’re an assistant manager now.” Yeah. So, I went and carefully covered all my shifts at Commissary and made sure that was squared away.

I got a big crew truck. I was so happy, and I did my first year of Highway



Photo credit: Ninjalina, 2016.

cleanup. And I did a really, really good job, so next year Mike wanted to leave and he was like “hey, you should hire Sansa. She’d be a really good manager.” And so that was... four years now. That’s how I became manager. Had I not jumped out of my doll house at that moment, he would have found somebody else. But, I had that psychic, gut-feeling, “jump out right now” because he was just traipsing through my camp looking for a driver. It could have been anybody. And it was me! And I learned from him and how he does it. Mike Garlington’s big thing about Highway cleanup was... he’s kind of a rock star kind of guy, so he made it like “Sure, we’re going to go to dirty work, but we have these great trucks, and a great crew, and it’s going to be really fun!”

[How it works now is that] my contract is a week. We roll out for five days, but there’s a few days before of getting the volunteers together and getting all the supplies together that we need. It’s actually a lot. The hardest part of my job is getting

volunteers and supplies ready, and then once we actually get out there it’s about strategy and safety.

FLO Did [working trash] actually have an impact on you in some way? Do you actually focus on any ecological action in your regular life, or Leave No Trace? Is Highway cleanup like you’re doing here... are you bringing it into your everyday life? Or is it just a Burning Man thing?

SANSA It’s actually the opposite for me. Rather than bringing Burning Man and my Highway cleanup working Burning Man to my life, I bring my life and my love for nature and the spirits of our environment... I bring myself to my job. I was actually meditating right before I came out, and I saw cleaning up, and taking all that plastic and toxic material out of the environment really, really resonates with me and does make a difference. I can feel nature, and I can feel how it feels different when I show up and there’s a bunch of Burner trash there: a bunch of plastic and gnarly things.

“I can feel how different it is... when there’s a bunch of Burner trash there.”

FLO Do you think that it could be possible to improve it in terms of recycling and sorting out the things that we pick up?

SANSA We’ve actually been questioning that on highway pickup for a while. Most of the things we pick up on highway cleanup do go into a landfill dumpster. For the amount of trash that my crew has to pick up, we cannot clean nature. We cannot clean up the environment and sort the trash at the same time. It’s too much for the amount of crew we have. I have talked to people about hiring a separate crew to sort our trash. But, we wouldn’t be able to do it. So, in the future we might be able to do that. The most important thing for me is to just get it out of the countryside so that the families and kids and old people that have to see that trash when they go home... DPW is a giant group of really smart, very, very creative... fun people, who are extremely capable. That’s the word we always use. I mean, you never know who you’re gonna run into out here. I just met a DPW guy who is, I think he works power, and he looks just like the rest of us. He’s out going to all the DPW parties. But, he’s a genius. He’s a

technological, robotic genius. I don’t even know how to describe what he makes. You know, a lot of us are ex-punk kids who haven’t had the easiest lives. A lot of us have a very rough edge, or at least we come off that way, but are very, very dedicated to our jobs. That’s what makes the infrastructure work is that we’re all very capable and dedicated to what we do. That’s what’s very beautiful is that I’m still in awe by the fact that it’s so beautiful that all of us weirdos can come together and make it work smoothly.

The most bonding community-wise here, for me, is playing music with my friends. Because I also have a lot of really old friends on DPW who are musicians, and we play music together. So, I guess for me it would be friend-wise: hanging out with my friends. But then what keeps me coming back, what keeps me coming back to Burning Man and bonding to it as a festival... if I didn’t work here, I probably wouldn’t come back.

“Its so beautiful that all of us weirdos can come together and make it work smoothly.”



Photo credit: Michael Garlington. Year: unknown.



Photo credit: unknown, 2016.