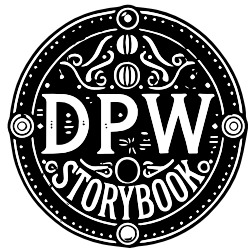


SYLKIA

Sylkia is the Gerlach and on-playa Commissary manager at Burning Man. Her first Burn was in 2006, a surprise organized by her friend Dave during a backpacking trip from Los Angeles to Toronto. In 2008, she began working with the DPW as a cook at the Ranch. Over the years, she transitioned to the role of Resto cook and eventually became the Commissary manager. Her typical workday involves managing breakfast from 6 to 8:30 AM, lunch from 11 AM to 2 PM, and dinner from 5 to 8 PM.

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.



“I came to Burning Man as a surprise: my good friend Dave bought me a ticket. ”

Twenty years ago, my good friend Dave—at the time we worked at Disney together—was going to go back to Toronto to get his PhD. We decided to do a backpacking/camping trip from Los Angeles to Toronto, hitting as many national parks as we could along the way. I came to Burning Man as a surprise: He bought me a ticket, and one of the first stops we made was Burning



Sylkia at the DPW Parade. Photo credit: Ashley Kaempf, 2015.

Man. That was 20 years ago. This is my 20th burn.

So, we showed up at midnight during Pepe’s Opera, and I was asleep when we went through the Gate. I don’t remember going through the Gate or anything, and when I woke up it was a bunch of people dancing around, painted, and there was this opera going on. So, it was a surprise. I had heard of it, but I never thought I was going to come. It’s one of those things. The Man was on hay bales, they would burn the man on the ground. This was before they knew how to protect the Playa and all that. Center Camp was also made of

hay bales. There was a shuttle from Center camp to the hot springs. It was quite different.

So, in 2008, I was working on the Ranch as ranch cook. So, that’s how I got started [with DPW]. That same season, Quinn was running the ranch. Once everyone moves to the Playa and starts eating on the Playa, they need a fluffer to take food up to the ranch. So, I was taking food from the commissary and taking it up to the Ranch for the people who were working up there. I didn’t work during the season. They asked me to work for First camp, and I declined, because I had already bought a ticket

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to the event, and I already had plans with my camp mates. So, I didn’t work during the event, but post event, they asked me to cook for Resto.

So, back then when people got here, they would eat at Bruno’s. Then they would eat on Playa. Then they would eat at Bruno’s, then the Resto kitchen would cook for them for the last bit of it. It was super crowded. We outgrew them. Then, I cooked in the Saloon for eight, nine years? And then this year, when Spectrum came on and I got rehired, I took last year off. I didn’t work during the event last year.

When we first started cooking for Resto, we would take hot lunches out to the line. Yeah, we took hot lunches out. We set up tables. Like six tables, and then set up all the food, and then people would do 8, 4 lines. It was very quick. When I first started Resto, it was probably about 70 people, and then every year it kind of



Temple kitchen crew. Photo credit: Mike Garlington, 2009.



“Back then when people got here, they would eat at Bruno’s. Then they would eat on Playa..”

grew 10, 15 people. It’s kept growing, growing, growing. And this year, we’re supposed to have 200 more or less. Today for breakfast, we did 136.

I would have to drive to Reno once a week. Me and two crew members. We would get stuff from Costco. Whole Foods for specialty items or people that had dietary needs. And then... Trader Joes. And if we did specials like Asian night, I would go to the Asian market to get things. We used Bonanza products and produce, and at some point, I was like “can you guys deliver stuff?” And they actually will deliver to us now.

They’re a produce company based out of Reno. First camp uses them, and a lot of larger camps that have kitchens will use Bonanza. They will deliver to the Playa, so they deliver to the Saloon for us, which was really nice. They also gave me a vendor called Calvada, who does a lot of meats. A lot of our meat products came from them. I would order from Calvada, they would deliver to Bonanza, which is two blocks away from them. And then Bonanza would just drive everything up in a refrigerated truck for us. And then we would just go into town and get shopping.



Sylkia building the Commissary Tent. Photo credit: unknown, 2014.



“I think what really kept me here was the people, and the fact that everyone is very similar and very different. ”

Bonanza, I used until last year. It didn’t start until two years after I started doing Resto kitchen. And now it’s all Spectrum. So, Spectrum, this year, our first meal was July 18th. We had a couple of days of overlap from when we were moving from town onto the Playa, which is, I think three meals that we did. We

were serving simultaneously in town and on Playa for the people who were still moving, which was really new. It was a new thing we were going to try, and I felt a little understaffed, so it was stressful. But it worked out. Like it does. Everything works together.

I’m the Gerlach and on-playa Commissary manager now. A typical day at work would be breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Breakfast is from 6 to 8:30, lunch is from 11-2, and dinner is from 5-8. Generally, I’m just there to help troubleshoot. So, people who come in and they don’t have credentials, and a lot of the managers are very strict about who on their crew can eat and who cannot eat. So, I have to contact the managers and make sure they’re approved to eat. So, just checking to make sure people should actually be there.

DPW is pretty straightforward. They used to, on the back of our I.D.’s, have “Eat It All, Pre or Post.” It was very obvious who should be eating. But when people who had pre or post got hired to do a job during the event, they only had this pre and post on the back of their card. So, you always had to go “hey, Logan, I got this person here, should they be eating? Did they work for you to earn it?” And they’d be like “Yes, they’re going to be eating all week.” So, just keeping everyone’s credentials up to date and checking in with managers to make sure people on their crews are supposed to be eating. Also, projections...

So, before I even get on the Playa, I get hired in June to work with the managers where we take all the actual meals that are eaten by each department, and then we work on this year’s projections of

what they think their crew is going to eat this year. If people are going way over their projections or way under their projections, we have to make adjustments. So, it’s talking to managers and keeping on top of that. There are 47 departments I have to do that with. So, it’s pretty time consuming. It’s a lot of work, yeah! We got 100 on our [health inspection], which is really hard in the real world, let alone on the playa. People just think, “Oh, you sit there and you count people.” No, that’s not all I do. [laughs]

Also, part of my job is to protect [Spectrum and our crew] because people don’t realize that they [Spectrum] get up every day, and don’t have one day off. They get up at 4:30 every morning to start cooking breakfast for everybody, and they have a 30-minute break after lunch before they start dinner. Dinner ends, and when they’re done with cleaning and everything, they’re done by 10 PM. So, from 4:30 in the morning to 10 PM, they’re working every day. No days off. So, when people are like “why can’t I get a meal? I see them with the food and they’re throwing it away.” When you get up at 4:30 in the morning and you get off at 10 at night, then you can talk to me. They’re done. They need to move on and move to the rest of their job: I can’t hold them up because you’re late for dinner, or breakfast, or lunch. A lot of people don’t understand that. They’re like “well, I worked 10 hours today.” Well, great. Good story. They worked a lot longer than you did today, and they’re still here and working and feeding everybody. I don’t think a lot of people realize just how late they work, and how important it is to not be late for meals.

We’re not out there building structures in the sun in that sense, but we’re giving you the tools to make sure your job can happen and happen

safely. Because if you’re underfed, and you’re undernourished, you’re not going to do a good job. The accident rates are going to go up way higher. If you’re being taken care of, your body, and you’re taking care of yourself. And let’s face it: we’re at Burning Man! People are out here and they’re partying until 3 o’clock in the morning, they’re sleeping, they’re getting up, going to the morning meeting, eating food.

You need the food; you need the fuel. Your body needs it. You’re burning up so many calories out there. This place where we’re building this event is trying to kill you every day. It’s not a natural place for us to be living, or hanging out in. But here we are doing this festival. We’re all parts of the cogs. You know, we’re all a cog in the big machine in the big thing that gets everything done. And we have to work together to make that happen.

I think what really kept me here was the people, and the fact that everyone is very similar and very different. Does that make sense? You know, like there’s a bunch of introvert/extroverts. Everybody’s a little shy and awkward, but everyone’s like, “Hey, we’re kind of the same, let’s hang out.” So, there’s a lot of that. And so many smart and creative and talented people. You’re blown away when you sit down with somebody, and you actually talk to them. Like, “wow, I had no idea your job actually entails all of this” or whatever. I feel like I’m always surprised by somebody or something, or a situation or something.

That and the beauty of the desert. It’s gorgeous out here. You have the hot springs, even a dust storm, the sunsets, the sunrise. The sky! All the stars you can see at night! It’s everything.