

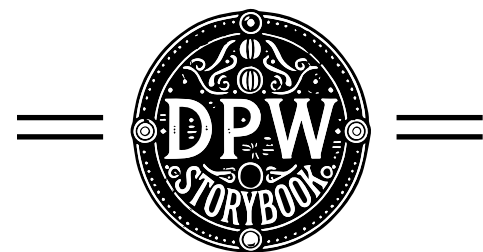
TPR/ NATHEN

Trailer Park Romeo (TPR), whose real name is Nathen, is a key member of the DPW. Originally nicknamed “Ponyboy” for his youthful blond appearance, he is of mixed heritage, with a Jicarilla Apache father and a Scandinavian mother. He joined the DPW in 1999 and served as Tony “Coyote’s” right-hand man for twelve years. With 20 years of surveying experience by 2005, he became the Spires manager, later moving to Transpo within the Heavy Equipment and Transportation (HEAT) team in 2009. In 2016, he took on the role of construction manager for the new Artery Everywhere pavilion.

This interview was conducted by “Flo”, Flore Muguet, a French anthropologist, in 2017. Most of Flo’s questions have been omitted to improve reading flow.



Photo credit: John Curley, 2012.



“This place gives you the chance to test yourself and to find your limits. Or find that you don’t have any limits[...]”

TPR So, my radio handle now—because I’ve had many—is Trailer Park Romeo. TPR. I think the first couple of years I started they used to call me Ponyboy. I was this blond kid with glasses surrounded by batshit crazy clowns with face tattoos and bicycle club gang members. All sorts of rough kids and was this 19-year-old blond kid. So, they called me Ponyboy a lot. Because... have you ever read the book *The Outsiders*? It’s this old American book from the ‘50s. There was this gang of greasers... this ‘50s style leather gang, and then there was the socs, and one of the characters was... well, we attribute ourselves a little more to the old 50s gang style, I guess.

I had been dating this young woman for a little less than a year. She had been to Burning Man a couple of times. I had not. But she told me the

stories and I got all hyped up. We had this epic break up. Everyone has at least one really epic break up. This was my first and it definitely was it. But I still wanted to go to Burning Man and I didn’t think I’d be able to. But my buddy comes up to this house that we had all kind of been squatting at. He’s like, “Yo, if we go out and

“We walk into this crime scene of a mobile home. [...] It has ‘Office’ on it.”

work, we can get tickets.” I was living in Reno at the time. “We’ll get tickets for free, we just have to go out there and work for a couple of weeks.” I was like, “Fuck it.” I threw a couple of guys into my ’72 VW Bug and rolled out there... I had lived in Reno for a long time, but I had never been up there to Black Rock—to the desert. And so, we drove up for the first time, and drove through Gerlach. In ’99, the event was off of the 3-mile exit. Drove out to the Playa, and I was just freaking out. I was like “where the hell am I? I’m in the middle of nowhere.” We couldn’t really see any encampments. We were just driving for a while. Then finally on the horizon, we saw this row of tents and really rough looking vehicles. There was one shipping container that had been turned into the shop. We had a mobile home... like, a single wide mobile home that was out there. So, I pull up to that. It has “Office” on it.

So... we get out and I’m like “What the fuck is going on?” We walk into this crime scene of a mobile home. Windows are kind of broken and walls are falling apart, and there’s this crazy Texan (Flynn Mauthe) on the other side of the desk with his sunglasses on and his hat, with a cigarette barely hanging onto his lip. After we walk in, he says, “come on in, boys! So, you want to join the DeePeeDeeW!” And he starts rifling around on his desk. He puts a pouch of tobacco down and puts a joint down. You know, the whole time he has this cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth. He’s just kind of small talking us. “Blah blah blah, where are you from, blah blah blah alright here’s your joint, here’s your patch of tobacco. I need you to sign this death waiver.” And... without knowing it, I leased my soul to Burning Man for a pouch of tobacco and a joint... in retrospect I probably should have held out for a pair of socks. Right after I signed

that he’s like “alright, I want you to go out to 5:30 and D.” Now, mind you, I’ve never been here, and I don’t even know what the city looks like.

I go out to 5:30 and D. He’s like, “I want you to meet up with Coyote. He’ll tell you what to do.” And... come out there and the first crew I was on was Coyote, Jason Norelli, Trey Harvey, and Adam Puliz. I’m best friends with almost all of them still. Yeah, there... we were putting in intersections. That’s how I came into it. I stayed out for a few weeks after. I had never been to the event. So, the buildup of—like so many people who are experiencing it this year—I didn’t know what to expect. I’d heard stories and I had an idea. But, once it happened, it was just so much more and crazier than I could have hoped for.

DPW gave me a chance to exorcize a lot of my demons and to find kindred spirits with a group of people who I might not have otherwise found. These are the people who kept me sane, and we all kind of kept each other alive. And then Burning Man really did... it just blew my eyes open. I didn’t know there was this vast array of creativity.

I mean, I had lived in Reno, and I grew up on cattle ranches in Colorado. I mean, I’m originally from the Rockies. We used to feed the cattle with Clydesdales and a sleigh in the winter when there was 12 feet of snow. I mean, that could have been 200 years ago for all that it really mattered. And then I moved to Reno, went to high school, and did that stuff here in town. Reno... was a pretty brutal place. I mean I’ve always been open minded and out of the norm and the flow of things with a lot of what Reno was. Especially back then. It was hyper red neck and very, very racist. It was a rough town. Then to find this—to find

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Burning Man and have my mind blown open was... just the diversity of people and ideas, and to see how motivated and talented these people were... and the art... and... some of the craziest people I met were the most talented artists I met. After a time that became the norm for me. The more batshit crazy a friend was, the more talented they seemed to be. [...]

The city was so much smaller then, so you could get a really intimate experience of the entire city. DPW was like 40 people. We’re 600 people now. When I started there was 40 of us. [...]

Especially for DPW because we were out here for months, and we had no resources. We had no showers. You’d bring your own water. Like during the job day you only had water if you brought it. We didn’t have Fluffers. We didn’t have a resource for water on the playa. I remember our first commissary in ’99. It was this woman named Zena and this guy named Jeff. They had been cooks for a carnival. So, they thought they

“We’re 600 people now. When I started there was 40 of us”

could come out and cook for us. And... Jeff was a bit of a slob and a lazy pot head who’d lay around and yell at people. Zena was a really amazingly sweet woman who was very, very well endowed and would go without top most of the time. But they never really served us any good food. I mean for lunch it wouldn’t be much. It’d be hot dogs and pancakes. So, Zena would be serving you your food. Like I said, she was very well endowed, and she’d be leaning over your food. So, you’d be watching her make up your hot dog and pancake sandwich and there’d be breast sweat going into the food. The meal wasn’t appetizing in the first place, but then



Photo credit: Cristina “Bean” Cortez.

when you add that little bit of salt... [laughter] it made it even less so. But you ate it because you’re in the middle of nowhere and you’re going to eat whatever you can. Yeah. One thing happened back in the day, and it’s happened every year since. I didn’t just have my own eyes opened. I met people whose eyes were opened. And throughout the year—this is my 19th year doing this—every few years, especially in the early days, you’d become more and more jaded. It’s hard not to sometimes. Every time you’re passionate about something you get possessive. It can lead to... you know, strong feelings. But one of things that kept me going was that every year I’d always meet somebody where they’d come out here and their mind had been opened in a way they didn’t see. Not always in the positive. I definitely saw some people go through some intense grief and turmoil out here... but I’d always see them pull through. They’d find some perspective on it. I mean... this year you’ve experienced it yourself. The Playa doesn’t always give you the good times. Yeah. And...

I think that’s one of the reasons many of us come out here. We’re able to consolidate so much healing, and growth, and processing to such a very short and intense period of time. I mean... it’s a very strong reality. If I didn’t come out here and fight a lot of the demons that I’d inherited from my parents and growing up here, I probably wouldn’t be alive or the person I am today. Yeah. This place gives you the chance to test yourself and to find your limits. Or find that you don’t have any limits sometimes, which can be a very disconcerting thought.

Back in the day there weren’t so many defined positions. You’d bounce around amongst the crews a lot more because the crews were so much smaller. For the first 13 years, for a lot of the event, I was Tony’s right-hand man. He and I would go from survey to intersections to putting in the spires. Before Tony was more supervisor-y, he was much more hands on. All of us were “DA”, and

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all the kids when we first came in... and so... for the first 13 years it was all the infrastructure. Well, maybe even less than 13. Probably like the first 10 years was all infrastructure. I think it was in 2005 when I took over as Spire crew manager for a couple of years before Dillon came in. Dillon came in I think in 2007. Then, he ended up maneuvering very elegantly, like he does. I wasn’t really making much money in the position I was at.

To keep coming out here, I needed to offset a little bit of the real world. Then I was able to move from Spire manager to working with Heavy Equipment And Transpo. That’s when I started working with Heavy Equipment. I think I worked for Heavy Equipment for about 4 years driving truck. A pickup truck, pulling trailers, then flatbeds. I drove the semi-trucks on playa. I wasn’t class A, so I couldn’t drive them on the highway. But I could drive them on the playa... especially a lot of our older trucks. For pulling the fences. Things like that.

And then after, I worked with Wrench for a year as his construction manager for Black Ice. That’s when Wrench was still the Black Ice construction manager. And I was his assistant for a year. It was great. Having worked with a crew for so many years, and always being with a group of people, it gets very pack-like and very awesome. But, driving truck... yeah, I’m talking on the radio a lot and I have a crew that I come back to at the yard, but I’m basically by myself all the time. So, it was a really nice thing to come back to Black Ice and be part of the team again. But I did miss being in the shit show as far as driving and being a bit more involved in that. So, I went back to driving for about three more years.

And then this last year, I was... I had... you know, I’d driven enough. I hate to say it, but I feel like I kinda just phoned it in last year. I wanted a challenge. So, they had offered me a few different positions to move into. But they had really pushed Artery and the construction manager position at me. I really didn’t want it. I think I had mentioned that while we were talking when I had dropped off all the wood. Because... A.) I’d never been in the structure. B.) I knew a lot of the personalities involved would be strong and potentially chaotic. I just knew that it was going to be a bit of a problem. But they offered and offered and offered. I ended up interviewing for it, and right after I started the interview, I realized that I was probably going to end up taking the position because I was problem solving already. And it was fun. Getting a puzzle without a picture or any parts. Also, it was new. One of the reasons they wanted me to take this position is because I’ve been here so long, and they were starting a new DPW crew. What was it... Prince Eddie wanted me to bring the DPW ethos to the new team.

I think one of the nicer days was when we actually got the shade up for the first time. We had to put the trusses in, so I had a full crew working with Heavy Equipment. We were going to have three scissor lifts going. One on the outside of the structure on each side, and me in the middle to de-rig and guide the other two. We were going to have to set the trusses in with a VR. A variable reach lift suspending the trusses and bringing them down onto our 4x4. So, it was just nice beforehand getting everyone together, giving them a solid picture, and always giving them an opportunity to ask questions. And really emphasizing that they do ask questions.

“Just make sure that you give people a sense of ownership and pride in what they get to do.”

One of the things I find most important about management is having somebody explain something back to you. I know for myself that teaching somebody how to do something is what really solidifies a skill set in doing something for myself. So, if somebody can explain something back to you, that shows that they have at least a slight understanding. At least a conceptual understanding of what you are doing. That’s one of the nice things that you were involved with as well: having an active and open dialogue with the crew. I think everybody should feel comfortable asking a question or having a different point of view, because you never know when the better idea is going to come up. But that morning we had a really good Q and A. Everybody felt really motivated and kind of impassioned. When you get people in equipment, you’re doing a lot of yelling like “forklift up.” You know, a lot of yelling. So, it gets people really jazzed. It was just nice to see that I had two people out with ropes off of the trusses to keep them stable while they’re getting lifted. Everybody felt pretty confident in what they were doing.

To know that other than myself and two others were the only ones with real construction backgrounds, and

and I think three worked in I.T.... yeah. Just no background in that: but we got to see them really owning their position. And that was... I don't know if that's really what the question was. But, as far as a "solid day" it was just really nice to see a lot of people becoming empowered in something that they've never done before. And that's so much of what DPW is.

The first year I was the Spire crew manager it was my first management position. I had a crew. I had the Hard Times Bike Club or the Black Label Bike Club as most of my crew. They were all rowdy, rough kids. We had all been friends for some time, but now I'm supposed to tell them what to do. It was my first management position. I'm the type of person where if you're slacking off, I'm just going to work harder because I want to get the job done and I can. It had been a couple of days of me basically just doing most of the work, and one other person or two others helping me, then the rest of the crew just fucking off and being lazy. Taking their time. I was just getting really frustrated, and it was making the whole situation really worse.

I was sitting with my friend Miles, who was one of the kids working for me. We're sitting in the truck chatting it up, and he kind of just looks at me and says, "you know, if you're gonna do everything, we'll let you." He was talking about how I was basically just taking over. I was just frustrated, and I was worried because I was stressed on time, so I decided to just do all the stuff. I didn't give them any sense of ownership over the project. I didn't put it back on them to actually be a crew and for me to actually run around and get shit. And maybe, you know, get a twelve pack on ice instead of trying to get 12 spires ahead of them so they could try and catch up. And... I think

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in that moment, because I'd never managed before and I had no idea of how to do that. One of the things that I loved so much about working was taking that ownership. But if I don't give that back to the crew then they don't get that ownership as well. The next couple of days it took me some time to get it right. I put a lot of responsibility back on the crew. And then all of a sudden, they're getting in front of me. They're shooting the shit a little bit more. We were having the rapport of the crew come back up. Because otherwise... when I was doing everything, they're in the back talking shit and I'm grumbling under my voice. It just wasn't working. But... I think that empowerment of responsibility, that sense of pride and ownership in a project that they're part of was really what brought to the crew back together and made the crew work harder... because they're more engaged with it and it... basically took a friend of mine telling me that I was being an asshole to get that perspective. But that's something that we do for each other out here.[...]

That's one of the first things I tell anybody. Any of the new managers or any of the new crews I've worked with in the real world or here. Just make sure that you give people a sense of ownership and pride in what they get to do. If you just divvy up tiny bits of information to them and make them, feel like it's your project and they're just this little peon... that doesn't motivate people to work harder. They'll probably do the work, but they won't be happy, and the work will show that they're not happy. I think that's one thing that we kind of saw with the project that we had this year. I had a group of strangers that I had to keep motivated, and make it seem like I knew what I was doing. I was very, very vocal about how I didn't. I was like "I've never built this before. This is what I think it's going to look like. We're going to try." But, even with that sense that... that could have gone so awry if they had lost confidence in me. But I also put it back on them to be a part of that. We're solving a problem here.

^{FLO} Did you feel that feeling of DPW accepting burners evolve over the years? Because I have the feeling that maybe it was more territorial before.

^{TPR} That's why we call it the kinder, gentler DPW. We were not kind, gentle, or pleasant to be around. There were still maybe a hundred people in 2004, 2005. I mean, very very minimal. So, when there's such a small group of people out here for such a long period of time—and again, a lot of us were out here for two to three months—you develop sense of ownership. You have to get impassioned because it's the only thing that fuels you to get through the suck like “oh, I have to go swing a sledgehammer and my hands are bloody and my feet hurt and I haven't taken a shower.” The sense of pride and ownership of building the

city, that's what pulls you through. But when all the people show up, they don't know who you are. They just see this gruff asshole who is more feral at that point. You've seen it, you've been a part of it. When the shiny people come in and they're all clean and like “wooo!” we're like “grrr.” We're more... feral. And we're desert rats at that point.

Especially when there's so few of us. We were a lot more jaded and a lot more protective as far as who came in. We were a lot more protective because there's so few of us. Our interactions with this city resembled that. We played a lot harder. There were a few silly games like capture the flag that turned violent at times. It's a game where you'd steal other people's flags and you'd put the flag up above your structure. Then they try to steal your flag and get their flag back. You know, in context it should just be all good fun. It always goes south. It's like roughhousing in a bar. You know? It might be just a

couple of guys playing around at first. But then you bump somebody else and it turns into a shit show. And it always did. Like the DPW parade. The reason why there's redshirts now isn't just to keep people away from us. It's to keep us away from other people. Back in the day there was a lot of looting of camps. There was a lot more... more of a chance of “give us your beer” “give us anything.” What they didn't give we would often take. [...]

^{FLO} I've noticed that you never wear any logo anymore. You wear outfits that are usually kind of similar. A shirt. Jeans. A hat.

^{TPR} This is actually a new thing that I did this year. For the most part, as long as I've been coming out here, it's just been a pair of Carhartts rolled up or cut off and no shirt. Maybe a DPW hoodie and a face wrap. Then over the years people would always joke about how I never wore a shirt. Hardly ever. So, there was this whole

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Group photo Artery/Everywhere crew. Photo credit: Peter Lenhardt.

“I’m a very athletic person, so I have received a lot of attention when I don’t have my shirt on”

joke, “oh, TPR, where’s your shirt?” I’m a very athletic person, so I have received a lot of attention when I don’t have my shirt on. So, over the years I’ve kind of... there’s been some interesting situations that I was in. So the context of covering myself up as well inadvertently, in an anthropological sense, It became a weird social experiment that I didn’t really intend. But, it was interesting to see how people I’ve known for years interacted with me. Because for years I was not covered up. Yeah, it was really interesting. It was super funny and it actually messed some people up. It was funny. But in years past I definitely rocked the logo. This year it was definitely something a little different. You just kinda grow out of it.

^{FLO} And would you like to talk about the “work hard play hard” sentence that is going on here? That this is our motto? Work hard play hard? Does that resonate with you?

^{TPR} Oh for sure. I mean you have to blow off steam. There’s a balance. And this is the thing... you can work hard, you can play hard, but you have to pace yourself. A lot of the people out here... we are given carte blanche and plenty of opportunity to push as hard as you want, to drink as much as you want, to go work all day, to stay up all night. You can go to all of these levels and try to

actively break yourself, and many, many people do break themselves. But, it’s not sustainable. In years past, I’ve definitely been guilty of it. From 19 to 29, my motto was “Dead by 30.” I was actively trying. I mean I was coming out here like “where is my edge? How am I going to break myself?” and I never did. I just got stupid tough and found out that things hurt, you push through, you figure out a way. Not everybody figures that out. I figured out how to pace myself. I think the work hard play hard aspect gives people the freedom to go out and have a little more fun and to have a little more freedom than they usually feel on the daily. But people also have to figure out how to pace themselves.

One of the things that’s really hard, and I see it every year, is when people leave here. We’ve had a lot of suicides in our group. I mean, anytime you have a lot of artists in a community, you’re going to have suicides. Anytime you have passionate people or alternative people there’s going to be more suicides. But one of the things that happens after people leave here is an intense sense of melancholy or loneliness.

While we’re out here, you have absolutely zero choices that you have to make. You know what you’re doing when you wake up: you’re going to the meeting. You’re going to eat breakfast. It’s gonna be provided for you, and you don’t have to think too much about that. You’re going to go to work. Whatever it is you’re doing, somebody is gonna tell you what to do. It might be something new, but you’re basically going to do that. Then you’re gonna come home. You’re gonna eat. You’re gonna hang out with your friends: have a conversation, laugh, and then... repeat. You do that for months. You have these intensely intimate

experiences with people. You have these epic storms, and it’s all so grandiose and powerful. We’re in a position where we’re able to affect the community in such an intense way. Then you go home, and you go to a grocery store. You know. How many different types of lettuce are there? What kind of a restaurant am I going to go to? How many different types of food am I going to have? And then... these people, all these strangers. I’m surrounded by people, though none of them are my family. Where are the intimate interactions? There’s all these choices, and even if you’re surrounded by people, you’re still very alone. And... that juxtaposition when you go back to the world like this is really intense for some people. You know, that whole work hard play hard... they leave here broken from all that playing hard. And they go back to that... it’s a very hard place to try to heal. Work hard, play hard—but pace yourself. Don’t leave here broken. You don’t have to.

^{FLO} And is there any specific situation over the years where you were experiencing your limits or at least trying to? Is there anything specific that you’d like to share?

“that whole work hard play hard... they leave here broken from all that playing hard.”



22 year old Nathen/TPR stands in front of La Contessa Art Car. Photo credit: Snook.

^{TPR} I think it was 2004. It was actually the first year that we pounded in all five sides of the fence. Now, we didn’t actually complete the fence. We didn’t finish the fence in one day. What we did is we pounded in all five sides of the fence with the t-stakes. We started off the day, and there was one group pounding from point 1 to point 2. There was another group who ended up stopping pounding, and they started tying the fence. So there’s about 13 of us who just kept pounding. It was a grueling hot day and we had all of the t-stakes out. It just became this death march for all of us. It got very, very intense. I ended up writing “penance” on my t-stake pounder. All of us went to this place. Like when I say I actively burned my demons out here, there were days like this. It was sweltering.

Nobody told us that we had to keep going, but we did. We were doing it for our own reasons. Half the group was ex-military. A lot of us have some pretty intense backgrounds, myself included. A few of the other people... we have some pretty colorful backgrounds.

So for a lot of it there was this sense of suffering for a healing reason. It hurt. It was brutal. All of us went to this point of breaking. Half the time I was in a state of delirium. We didn’t have water for shit. So, we’re all sunfucked and dehydrated. I think we were all smoking pot and drinking more than we were drinking water. But when we finally had pounded in the last stake, we looked back on what we had done and we all survived. We’d all gone to

this very, very intense, primal, and archetypal place. None of us were broken. All of us seemed to be more empowered. That’s one of the things that I found out here: especially when you have a group to do it with and you’re able to have that freedom to go to a very intense and powerful place... in all regards, you should be broken and it should take you out. But in the end when you’ve completed it, and you’ve completed it with a group, and get whatever you’re looking for out of it, you feel empowered. Yeah, your hands are bloody. You have a monkey fist for the rest of the time you’re out here. Your muscles are sore. It’s brutal. All those things. But, you got a smile on your face and you can still hold your beer. You have this sense of comradery that offsets the



19 year old Nathen/TPR. Photo credit: Flynn Mauthe.

“So for a lot of it there was this sense of suffering for a healing reason..”

and teamwork. You’ve felt it. That’s one of the reasons we keep coming out: the intense sense of family that we get out here. It’s healing.

^{FLO} So it’s actually interesting. The DPW usually refer to their people as family, and the burners relate to Burning Man or Black Rock City as a home. I guess it’s two different things. Would you like to talk about that?

^{TPR} Oh, it’s an interesting concept. I think with us, we... what do you have in a home? You have the people who probably inhabit it with you that you hopefully think are your family. A lot of the people who are coming here, they’re coming back to a home and a sense of community. A home should be the most pleasant place in the world for you. When they’re leaving a life in their day to day to come out here, and this is the most pleasant place in the world for them, that is the definition of home for the participants and the burners to come out here for. But for us... we already know coming out here that this is our home. And we’re not just inhabiting a home, we’re building a home for others to come into.

So, I think that gives us more of a sense of family and brotherhood and sisterhood. So every time you suffer with somebody for long periods of time, it definitely feels like family. [...]

So, we didn’t have the support network like we do now. And we also... especially with the old ethos of radical self-reliance... we were forces of nature. We got off on the thought that water is the enemy of work. Shade is the enemy of work. These are the old adages. DPW = Deep Penetrating Whoopass. You know? Drunk people working. It was definitely a lot more dangerous.

Ok, a lot of us are damned lucky, but we’re also very, very skilled with what we are doing. We used to play bumper cars with our actual vehicles at high speeds sometimes. What I used to do is I would be on the tops of the vehicles when one car would hit another. I would jump from one car to another. So, this car would hit this one, and I’d jump from that one to this one.... I never missed a jump. I never got crushed. I was very good at what I was doing. We would do high speed. I would jump. At high speed across the playa when the White whale and the Contessa were out there, we boarded the Contessa while we were doing 40 miles an hour across the playa, jumping onto this art car. We were much more dangerous, but we were taking our own lives into our own hands. We were responsible for our own lives in our own context. Now there are so many of us that not everybody has that ability. Not everybody has the skill set or the capacity to do that... or the dumb luck. Once you have certain numbers involved, then the likelihood of something really going wrong is higher.

^{FLO} So with all these safety protocols and stuff... do you still feel like it’s possible to experience this intensity of working past your limits?

^{TPR} No. I don’t, actually. It’s something that I... for me, I’ve had to come to terms with a lot of things that I feel very passionate about and a lot of

“We used to play bumper cars with our actual vehicles at high speeds sometimes. What I used to do is I would be on the tops of the vehicles when one car would hit another. I would jump from one car to another. So, this car would hit this one, and I’d jump from that one to this one....

I never missed a jump.”

things that I fell in love with about DPW going to the wind in that context. The freedom that we had to test our limits and go to the edge—actively go to the edge—would oftentimes be hard for some people. There were a lot more breakdowns, a lot more meltdowns. A meltdown nowadays... it happens, but it’s not commonplace. Back in the day it was more about when it was going to be your turn and how many turns you’d get. Because we were pushing so hard! It was just so raw. I’ve noticed, especially over the last few years, and especially as our DPW numbers have gotten bigger... because of our numbers you don’t have to work as hard. Because of our numbers you’re encouraged to monitor each other more: “make sure you drink water every two hours! Make sure you take five minutes off!” I’m responsible for that in the very same context. A lot of it is I’m actively trying to keep people from breaking themselves because I need to get a job done as a

manager. But then at the same time I see all these new people coming out and that have that itch. You can’t look into the desert and not say, “oh, I wonder how far I could go.” It’s the same itch as when you walk to the edge of a building and go, “I wonder what would happen if I just jumped.” It’s this chance to explore that void and that unknown. Because of the safety protocols that we have and because of how many people we have now... no. People can’t go there anymore.

I mean, to some extent with drug use during the event, or if you don’t want to sleep, that’s still an option. But even that! There’s so many people around here keeping an eye on you. Rangers, and even just the normal community outside of that. Even all the self-policing that we do for ourselves, because that’s how we stay around. It’s sustainable. [sighs] It’s unfortunate that I don’t think people have that option anymore. The days of us trudging the death march and writing “penance” on our t-stake pounders has gone. Mind you, I miss that option.

But I don’t miss that level of suck that we had to go through? Nor do I miss the lack of resources that we have? No. Do I miss getting giardia and food poisoning? No. [laughs] I mean... after 13 hours of projectile vomiting, you do look really hot though! 13 hours of ab exercises, you just got all your water weight out, you slimmed down a little bit, you probably lost 10 pounds! That’s the one silver lining of food poisoning. [chuckles] But, it’s... not that place anymore. And neither is this city. I mean, we don’t have the drive by shooting range anymore. We don’t have the witches anymore. I mean, there was a coven of witches that was actively doing animal sacrifice. I mean... and this was back in the day. The city itself. I’ve watched it go

“after 13 hours of projectile vomiting, you do look really hot though!”

from the mythical Greek to the Wild West to the industrial era to when it was the American Dream.

What we had—kind of as far as watching the micro-verse of what DPW and Burning Man grow into—it very much has caught up to where we are in the present day. As far as the politics that we were dealing with, the infrastructure that we were dealing with, the resources, the amount of, you know... at that point we had Google mapping out here! Google did their beta testing for Google Maps at Burning Man! Yeah. Serge and Rod Garret who used to be the city designer until he passed. He and Serge were friends and they actually did the first beta testing for google mapping on Black Rock City. And... I know that because for the survey, when we were doing the survey, we had to have our survey within three degrees of the layout of what the satellite was projecting for the mapping to actually work. We were within 1.5 degrees—and that’s using an old railroad transit and chains. To see it go from Google mapping and back in the day talking about “if there’s ever cell phones out here, we’ll break them!” to active cell phone usage... what we have now is only functional because we’ve changed in those ways. I mean, we couldn’t do the real-time purchasing like we do in the world we had before because we didn’t have internet on the playa. The resources we had are medical. The resources we have with



“there’s reasons why we have a lot of safety situations and how we’ve become the “kinder, gentler.”

security and everything... we only have that because we’ve changed. [...]

^{FLO} Do you know who actually initiated the DPW parade? Was it already going on when you arrived in 1999?

^{TPR} I think it was the second year [In 1999]... or it might have been the first year of the parade. It was a shit show. There’s a lot of reasons why we have the red shirts now. There’s a lot of reasons why we don’t have heavy equipment in the parade. I mean, I saw a very good friend of mine get run over by a heister in one of the parades. Luckily it didn’t kill him. But it damn near should have. We were coming around on the golf cart, and he was on the side of the golf cart and then comes around this heister doing a turn. The wheel catches him in the chest. The thing that saved him... well, two things: when he went back he brought his arms up in front of his face and his eyes rolled back in his head. But, the tire only rolled over his leg, and because his arms were in front of him, it didn’t catch one of them and pull him underneath, which would have run over the rest of the upper body and would have killed him. But the playa was also pretty soft

that year, so when it ran over his body it just did a bunch of soft tissue damage. It didn’t actually crush his leg as far as the bone goes. But that’s why we don’t have heavy equipment in the parade anymore.

Yeah... there’s reasons why we have a lot of safety situations and how we’ve become the “kinder, gentler.” The surly isn’t sustainable. It wasn’t pleasant either. I don’t wanna be an asshole. I don’t like yelling at people that way. But when you’re fueled off of piss and vinegar you get surly. And... that’s... I think it was about 7 years into it when I was talking to a good friend of mine about the jaded factor. We were talking about being surly. We had actually made an active point to take off all of the DPW stuff and actually go out into the city and go into places that we don’t usually go to, and actually hang out with the participants. Oh yeah. Nothing was DPW anything. No laminates, no anything, no shirts. We just put on some burner style... whatever our burner stuff was. For me that’s just a pair of jeans or my cargos.

^{FLO} Ok. My last question will be about all those DPW rituals or activities, or whatever you wanna call what we have here: such as the 4:20 spires, or the Early Man, or... Trash burn?

^{TPR} Actually, all of those just started from necessity. [laughs] That’s how so many rituals do start. That’s the thing. The point of a ritual in the initial context is “I need to get something to happen.” Like the first 4:20 spire [...]

I think Jason Norelli had actually suggested that we put it at 4:20 (in ’99). There was five of us on the spire crew. We put it in just like “ah, let’s put it in!” I don’t think we even put it in at an angle, we actually just left it at a slight angle. It was just a spire. It was just a pink, twisted spire. It

didn’t even have the 4:20 thing on it or anything like that. It’s still the same spire, but it just does not look the same at all. It has become this total Frankenstein of whatever it is now. The first year it didn’t even have a lighter. It was the second year that I was like, “aw shit, let’s put a lighter on!” the fins actually create just enough air that no matter how windy it is, if you get in between the fins of the spire you can still light a bowl. That was the thought. So, we attached a lighter to it and we had it going down and... you know, it was just the 4:20 spire for several years. Then slowly more and more people were showing up.

Then in 2005 we decided to put the octagon around the 4:20 spire. Because the same crew that does survey was most of what spire crew was. They’re like “let’s put the octagon around it!” because we were trying to make it our space. The 4:20 was our DPW connection to the city. And then... it steamrolled. Shade put something in there the next year, and now it’s the shit show that the 4:20 spire is known for. Slowly, over the last 8 years, everybody has wanted to put something into the 4:20 spire. It’s all of our examples.

And... the Early Man is the same exact thing. ’99 was the first Early Man. We just needed a reference point to know where the center of the city was. And so, they made this 4 by 8 man and put this gold, reflective tape over it. We had this little man over the center of it. And it was about a week before the event started, and we just started piling up all the hay that was going to be at the center of the man base that year. So, we’re like “well fuck! What are we going to do with this?” It’s like, “Fucking burn it! YEAH!!” So, the first Early Man, we built a bunch of rash around that thing. We’re all shooting guns into it... we were still

very armed back in the day. We’re shooting into it and... one of my friends, Danny Grant, drove his truck over the fire. He drove over the fire a couple of times. At one point he got high-centered on the fire and was shooting a rooster tail of coals and embers. We thought that truck was gonna blow up. It didn’t! Came pretty damn close. Then the next year we did a little effigy of something.

Then Man base, for the first six years of Burning Man... they were the only ones that actually built an effigy. Each year it would be something different. Then when it was 2006/2007, David Best brought down an effigy that he wanted to burn as well. So there was our burn and then there was the David Best effigy. It probably wasn’t until 2012 when the other departments got involved. Now everybody has an option to bring something down for it. Again, that transition from it being functional initially and then being our thing. Early Man was just our thing. It was our last thing. It was very DPW. It was the last time that the city was ours, and now it’s opened up. It’s just DPW who’s here early. We have the Rangers, we have the ESD. We have the Placers. There’s a lot of people who are earlier now. So, we have to acknowledge that. Some artists as well.

So, yeah. I think in so much of the ceremony that we have for DPW and so much of the ceremonies here, they came from function. Then they became a place to express and to take ownership in what it is we do out here. And then later on it became something that we’re able to share with the rest of the groups out here so they can share and take ownership in that ceremony as well. [...]

It’s actually a lot earlier than that now. But it’s that symbol: “the last

night that the city is ours.” So that’s what a lot of people say. Or it’s that last night before we can stop it. All of our projects are damned near done. Weather’s not gonna stop us, there’s no shit show that’s likely to take our projects out, this thing’s about to happen! It’s that turning of keys over to the rest of the departments. At this point there’s a ton of strangers out here. By the time Early Man comes around there’s probably 15,000 people out here now. That was the size of Burning Man in ’99.

^{FLO} And to finish, is there any favorite ritual or activity that you like between all those things that we have? [...]

^{TPR} What I have for myself as far as the ritual I do, is I actually smudge the entire city. I smudge sage. I’m part Native American. My father is Jicarilla Apache and my mother is Swedish. Blond hair. [chuckles] But... one of the things that I’ve done as long as I’ve done survey is that I’ll smudge the man site as long as we’re doing survey, and then I’ll smudge the entire city. I have the option to be able to drive the perimeter like that. There’s years that I’ve had other people come with me, but yeah, it’s the one thing that I do for the city.

Oh, I think I waxed the man in 2001/2002. Stuff like that. I think... I think it gives people, again, that sense of ownership and participation. For a lot of the DPW people—and especially the first timers, because a lot of first timers are out here—I send my whole crew down there. Yeah! I sent my whole crew down there. I had done it before. I didn’t need to get ahead of my crew, and it was actually great having my crew go away for about an hour. But, giving them that sense of participation. You know, like “the man stands because I pulled on this rope!” That sense is one of the things most powerful

about this ceremony: it’s giving you an active sense of participation in your environment and the world around you. [...]

^{FLO} Do you feel—since you’ve seen many Burning Man themes and infrastructure builds—that this annual theme [Rituals] is actually influencing the DPW? Or not?

^{TPR} I think this is one of the first years I’ve seen influence the DPW. But, also, how it re-visited something that we had lost in the city. The interpersonal aspect. We went to the giant Man, 100 ft. tall and massive beyond scope! And it’s hard to relate to that. How intimate the Man base was this year was beautiful. How engaged people were with the Man base this year was great. The fact that we raised him by hand, the fact that. [...]

Influence is a wide term. I think it brought more attention to the ceremonies that we have, and there was a lot more talking like what we’re doing now about the ceremonies that we have. Which is great. Because there was so little attention on us and what we’ve done in the past. [...]

But the themes? DPW’s got one theme: get it up and get it gone. Absolutely.



“DPW’s got one theme: get it up and get it gone.”