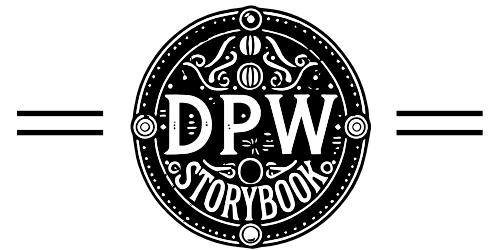


# VOTED BEST DAVE

Voted Best Dave first attended Burning Man in 2003 with a group of friends, bringing along a skateboard half-pipe. Over the next few years, their group evolved into a theme camp called “Voted Best Camp.” When he joined the Department of Public Works (DPW) in 2010, he was given the nickname “Voted Best Dave” as a nod to his camp. He served as a lead on the Shade Crew until 2017. Outside of Burning Man, he plays drums and sings for the band Vampirates.

*Update:* Voted Best Dave and his wife, Jennifer, welcomed a baby in 2022.

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



“The whole phrase is: ‘We work in the sun so you don’t have to.’”

I came to the event for the first time in 2003 with a handful of my friends. We brought out a skateboard halfpipe and didn’t really know what we were doing. We were on the edge of the city, and over the years we kept doing it. After two years we started a theme camp, which then became known as Voted Best Camp. So, in 2010, when I joined DPW, when I walked into the office, they said, “Ok, your name is Voted Best Dave.”

I play in a band called Vampirates: I’m the drummer/singer. So, on our first really large tour that we did, [A friend], she came along with us and was doing all of our merchandise. To do that tour, I had to move out of my house and quit my job of 6 years and give away all my things. So, I had nothing to come back to, even though I’d been coming to Burning Man for 8 years. I had no idea how I was gonna do it. [A friend] said, “Come work for DPW.” And there I was.

She’d worked Shade for years before that, and she said, “This is the group for you,” because of Quiet Earp. I joined in 2010 and immediately fell in love with how mechanical and tight the group was, and how rewarding the work is. Here I am on my 7th season with shade, and I love it. I’ve been here for every year since 2003, and I’ve been working DPW for every year since 2010.

I’m one of the crew leads for shade crew. Our day starts: we wake up and eat breakfast, and then we go to the meeting. Everybody meets up at our wood trailers. It’s near the depot, and it’s called trailer row. We have two trailers full of 4x4 and 2x6. So, during build season, we all meet there. We load up our trucks as tall as we can with lumber. The meeting is at 7:30, so we’re starting that hopefully by 8 o’clock. And then we go straight to work.



Voted Best Dave in the DPW Ghetto. Photo credit: JoeJoe Martin, 2016.

We have a handful of people that have done it before, and a handful of people who are new. Essentially for the first part of it, it’s a lot of training the new people, and the further along we get, we hit the stride and you don’t even have to say anything. Everyone is on the next step and going. We pump out about 170 shade structures in the season.

It’s definitely up to the manager. The manager has for months, before any of us arrive, been talking to the different departments to figure out when they’re gonna be there, what the necessity of having shade is. There are some crews like metal shop who

are working in full suits right there in the heat. They probably shouldn’t have to work in the sun, so we’ll put them closer in the beginning. So, yeah, it’s really a kind of day to day. You might talk about, during the night before, your essential game plan. It’s always changing. You have to figure it out as you go.

I believe [the shade cloth] is vinyl. We have a number of [them] because all of our stretchers, each base, is 20 ft. wide. A structure can be anywhere between 12 ft. by 12 ft. to, I think, our largest structure is 60 ft. by 60 ft. So, we have the cloth. It’s cut to the certain length, and then at the end of

the season, we wrap that up, we label it, and then that goes into a crate of other cloths that are the same size. Then the next year we bring them back out. Each of the cloths get several years of use, but given the amount of structures we build, we have to get a new cloth that comes in a big roll. Then we cut it to size and save that for however many years to come.

I think a lot of departments have a sense of pride. I think because it is such a different environment, and it is such hard work for everybody that it’s something different than what you’d do normally on a day-

to-day basis. It feels like you’ve accomplished something because you’re working so hard in this really harsh environment. So, I think that really pulls a crew together: really, such an accomplishment.

It is a hard job. The whole phrase is “We work in the sun so that you don’t have to.” It’s very much that: we’re in the sun all day. If we build a shade structure, we might enjoy it for a few minutes, but then it’s straight on to the next. There’s a lot of heavy lifting and swinging hammers. It’s hard work, and it’s hard work that not a lot of people are used to.

I consider myself DPW as well as just somebody who comes to Burning Man. I think most people on DPW kind of cringe when you say the word “Burner.” I think it conjures the thought of your standard issue person coming to Burning Man with the fur, or the blinkie lights, or hippies. You don’t want to identify as this thing that. I don’t know. I’ve done DPW long enough that if I come to the point where somebody comes up and asks me, “Are you DPW,” I say, “Yeah, of course.” I never change my shirt.

I first started in 2003. I didn’t know what DPW was until 2005, when it was the old school, less structured version of DPW. These people showed up in my camp and they were scary. They were doing very questionable things. A girl bit a guy’s nipple off at my camp. She’d been working DPW. She. Bit. His. Nipple. Off! Yeah. Completely off.

She bit it, and then spit it onto the skateboard halfpipe. It was just kind of more wild days on DPW, and people had been out here without as many resources as we have now, and people became feral to a certain degree. She was just having fun, wrestling around with this guy, and



she bit his nipple off. Lo and behold, there was a doctor at our camp and he just sewed it back on right there. So, she was comfortable enough to... bite someone's nipple off.... It was a different thing. I was impressed by the doctor sewing it back on.

So yeah, like I said, my first year was 2003, but I didn't see or know about DPW until 2005 when all these really scary, crazy people were coming to our camp. We knew they worked

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“A girl bit a guy’s nipple off at my camp...”

for the event. It's called Voted Best Camp and it's a punk rock camp, it has skateboarding, it has a bar. So, it kind of felt at home for these people. They weren't looking for big base, sound camps, and techno music. They wanted punk rock, alcohol, and skateboarding. We were there to provide it.

I was a little more perturbed by the [DPW] crew at that time. It sounded crazy to me, because at that time I had a very rigid 9-5 job, a steady house, and a steady life. Then in 2007, I believe it was, the bass player of my band, he joined DPW. We all thought he was crazy. We're like "Remember the nipple and the girl?" So, he joined, and we all started getting to know DPW a bit more personally. And we're like "Oh, ok, this is actually a really cool thing, and it's getting a bit more structured and not so scary."

And then, you know, on another side of that is that you have this community that attracts people that don't necessarily always have a solid lifestyle at home. They're just traveling people or whatever. You have this amazing thing that happens for two months, and then all of a sudden everybody goes home. But if you don't have a home, or even if you do, you kind of feel really lonely. So, there's been a history of, you know, a high suicide rate after DPW because people are kind of lost. They don't know. That's a part of the whole continually structured thing.

Now they're addressing that. There are people there to talk to you with all those resources, so now that's a nice thing to see. I know the last few years have been pretty rough, but it's nice to see that they have the resources. On playa, you can go to HR, and they can find you a counselor or whatever you need. Whatever you're looking for, and then, if it's a year-

round thing, they have a phone call thing. You can still call year-round and get that.

If Burning Man did anything that was year-round, or even rhymed with year-round, it'd be Disneyland. It loses all the buildup to do it. Everybody starts talking the month before. All of it is based around how temporary it is—which I guess is one of the 10 Principles. The impermanence of everything is a part of what makes it so special. It's like, "Why would you build a \$10,000 structure just to light it on fire?" Have you ever done that? It's something else just to put in so much work and then light it up. So, I don't think year round would be anything like what it is now.

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Dave and his band, the Vampirates, playing at the Gerlach DPW Black Rock Saloon. Photo credit: Flore Muguet, 2016.



Dave on top of his ladder, building a shade structure. Photo credit: Flore Muguet, 2016.