



## Stanford Goes to Burning Man, A Series of Interviews

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### Jenny Nova: Class of 2020



**Alexandra (Mac) Taylor:** Hi Jenny, thank you for joining me. Jenny Nova is a student here at Stanford, where she is a junior. Jenny, attended Burning Man this past summer. So, to get going, how did you first hear about Burning Man?

**Nova:** So, I don't remember when I first heard about the existence of Burning Man— I think it's been something that I've been aware of for a while— but I didn't really consider going until my brother, who's 30, started going maybe two or so years ago with his friends. They have a big group of people that go together and they actually have their own camp within Burning Man. So, that's how I

heard about it more closely. And then my dad had always wanted to go, apparently, and was trying to find any members of our family that he could recruit to go with him. So, I was the most willing. That's how I ended up going with him and kind of in-connection with my brother.

**Taylor:** When you went did you go with your brother and his group, or was it just with your dad, or was it kind of like a medley?

**Nova:** So, we were not technically like under the Burning Man structure of groups. We were not considered a part of their camp. We were just in the unattached camping area

with our car and our tent in the burning heat. Which was a disaster. But a very enjoyable one. So, we would go and visit him and see him, but we weren't a part of his official group.

**Taylor:** What was your first impression— being there, the whole experience?

**Nova:** I didn't expect it to be as structured as it was. It really is laid out like a city with streets and intersections— not stop lights and street lights, but there was so much more organization than I expected there to be. It was so much more elaborate than I think I ever could have predicted, and I purposely didn't look too much into it because I wanted to be surprised when I went. I really was shocking the amount of work that people put in to it and that was when one of my initial impressions.

**Taylor:** What was your most memorable experience?

**Nova:** I was out with my dad on the playa— the open area where all the big installations are— during the daytime because we wanted to go out and see it. It was before sunset. It was in the evening, so it was a little bit cooler and we had biked out there and I think we were just looking around and surveying the land. And there was a man that we saw approaching from far away who was also on his bike, biking directly towards us, and we assumed he was coming to say hello. He pulled up right next to us and said, “hello, would you like some fresh gazpacho? I have homemade organic gazpacho that I made and brought with me, and I wanted to know if you wanted any?” Initially, I almost didn't know what to say. Then I said “yes, of course.” He had a little cooler and he pulled out these two bottles that were pre-sealed full of homemade gazpacho and I think that it was the best thing I've ever eaten. So, we drank it on the playa and we took a picture of him with my disposable camera because I wanted to remember the moment... that was my most memorable time.

**Taylor:** That leads really well into another question I had: as you probably know, there are 10 guiding principles of Burning Man. What you mentioned seems like an example of one of them, which is gifting or giving. With that memory in mind, what was it like for you to be a participant in the 10 guiding principles that typically characterized the Burning Man experience?

**Nova:** So, I didn't know that much about them going. My dad and I had prepared—we knew about the idea of giving and not necessarily expecting to receive. We wanted to bring something with us, so we made necklaces with robot and flame charms on them and we handed them out to people. So, that was an instance where we gave him a necklace. But, I think that it was actually an aspect that wasn't as present as maybe I had had the impression it would be, but I think there was definitely a general spirit of acceptance and love and I'm not someone who typically hugs strangers or goes out of my way to at all... And there was just something about it that made me feel like I was so much more willing to because there were just lots of expressions of genuine care and compassion. People just talking. There were people that had come from all over the world, just talking about their experiences. So, it was interesting in that way to just get to know people I wouldn't have at all otherwise.

**Taylor:** You mentioned that you made necklaces to give out. When you think about these acts of creation, there are also amazing pieces of art that are created at and for Burning Man. So, can you tell me a little bit about the art you saw and your impression of it, which pieces you remember specifically, what you really liked and didn't like?

**Nova:** Absolutely. I remember seeing a mix of interactive art exhibits and then exhibits that were more stand-alone. Something that really struck me was, actually, the cars—the vehicles that so many people had built. There was one we saw that was entirely chrome, not actually in motion at night, but it was absolutely gorgeous and such an engineering feat. It was amazing, and that was something which absolutely floored me. I'm trying to remember some of the other ones that I really liked... there was lots of usage of LEDs and neon, and there was one specific installation that was a gigantic jellyfish that actually was still being built as we were there; I think they finished it on one of our last days. It was gorgeous. I don't even know what the material was... I think it was some type of shimmery paper or plastic that was wrapped around, and the actual tentacles moved, and it was huge. It was another one which was really breathtaking. I also liked the ones where you could actually participate with the art. I remember one that really stuck with me was this gigantic stack of old cars that someone had created, and there was a huge metal rod that extended through the middle—and these were not anchored in anyway, it was just supposed to be a climbing experience. So, you would walk by and see people dangling off of them. I remember walking by and thinking it was crazy, but also wonderful at the same time. It really aligned with a button that someone

gave us, which said, “keep burning man potentially fatal” on it. I liked that component of not necessarily rule abiding, and not so much concern for safety— I never felt unsafe, but it felt comfortable to pursue my own limits, not so much as in an “absolute adult” way, but more of a “camp” kind of way.

**Taylor:** In particular, you mentioned the jellyfish, which is called *Bloom* by Peter Hazel, and that’s a good example of art in combination with technology. So, when you think about the experience of being at Burning Man, and being around all of this art that is there and being created there, what were your impressions of art like *Bloom* that had technology involved within it, or tech’s overall involvement with the experience? Did it enhance it? Do you think it was weird that there was all this technology in the middle of the desert? What were your thoughts on that?

**Nova:** I think that it absolutely enhanced it; it was such a positive force. I feel like it also wouldn’t have had the same effect if people weren’t utilizing technology to the extent that they were because so many installations and works of art played off of color and light. So much of what there was to see, in terms of art at Burning Man, was isolated in the night time, and there was such a huge contrast between being in this dark, expansive desert and having so much sound and light and color all around you. I think that that general feeling was also something that stuck with me. I remember another really beautiful one that was some sort of projection that was up, horizontally with the ground. It was hanging above you, and you could lay beneath it and look up at the sky and see almost a kaleidoscope experience of images and pixels. I think that’s another absolutely beautiful experience of technology that was not something that would have fallen under the traditional scope of art you’d find in a museum, and was also one that was so enhanced by where we were— just the open sky and open land around us. I think that a lot of the art played really well off of its grounding in the Black Rock desert.

**Taylor:** Some of this art that is made at Burning Man is, and has been, collected by certain museums and galleries across America. Thinking about Burning Man as a distinct place that emerges and then disappears, what do you think about the idea of preserving Burning Man art beyond the festival itself?

**Nova:** I have no issue with it at all, though my opinion might be different than peoples’ who have gone for years and years because I went just this once. I feel like there is no

reason why other people shouldn't be able to see it. I don't know if it would be the same experience because— like that one example of the piece which hung against the sky, that one I don't know if it would translate as well—for me, it makes me very sad to think of them as not ever being seen by anyone else or existing in any other context. I feel like if it aligns with what the artist wants to do, there is no reason why they shouldn't be put in museums to give other people the experience who couldn't maybe go to Burning Man for a variety of reasons— like cost, mobility or lack of desire to go— to get that taste and just see what it could be like. It could also be a driver for a lot of people to want to experience the art in person. I am in full support.

**Taylor:** Wonderful. My last question for you is: if you could sum up Burning Man or the experience of being there in one word or phrase, what would it be?

**Nova:** That's a tough question. I think for me, if I am thinking of it in terms of two words, it was very gritty because of the way we were camping, and the amount of dust present, and the heat. It was absolutely a gritty experience, but such a breathtaking one. So, I would just say: gritty but breathtaking.

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