

## The Burning Man Project

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Real estate developer and author Jennifer Raiser (MBA 1990) goes behind the scenes of the annual Burning Man gathering

*Hi, I'm Dan Morrell, host of Skydeck, and editor of the HBS Alumni Bulletin. Today's episode offers an inside look at Burning Man. One of the things you'll hear is that while the event celebrates principles like radical self-expression, it is also a carefully and thoughtfully organized pop up city of 70,000 people with a \$36 million budget. Jennifer Raiser, MBA class of 1990, is the woman who controls that budget, serving as Burning Man's treasure. And in this episode of Skydeck, Raiser talks to Julia Hanna, Associate Editor of the Bulletin, about balancing Burning Man's books, and what a day in the life of a burner really looks like.*

**Jennifer, I was realizing that Burning Man has been around now for about 30 years. You've been attending for about 10, I believe. And I wondered, for anyone who has not been to Burning Man, or possibly even knows what it is, how would you describe it to them?**

Well, the main Burning Man event is a one-week festival in the desert of Nevada. And it is a celebration of self-responsibility and creativity. So people bring everything they need to survive in very harsh desert conditions for a week, including all their food and water. There's no money. There's no electricity. But there are 70,000 people willing to share and have an amazing experience with you.

**And can you tell me, what is it about that experience that has made you interested in going back year after year? What do you like about it?**

It's really life as it could be lived. There are 400 pieces of large-scale art. There are 1,000 themed camps, where people are offering you experiences from yoga, and massage, to Ted talks, to bars, to movies, to crafts. Anything you can imagine doing at a grownup summer camp is offered there.

And it's all for free. And it's all an interactive, participatory experience. So if you immersed yourself in Burning Man for the whole week, you could perhaps see about a tenth of it. And that's what makes you want to go back, is there's so much more.

**What do you think is important to remember to bring to Burning Man for your first visit?**

The most important thing is an open mind. You will see things that blow you away. You will see people who live very different lives from you.

You will see naked bodies. You will see aerialists. You will see a flaming piano being thrown by a trebuchet.

And if your mind is closed and it's different from what you expected, you'll miss out. If you open your mind and just drink from the firehose, you will find that you'll learn a lot about yourself. And you'll expand your vision of the world in really powerful, and helpful and constructive ways.

**And I'm guessing sunscreen too, right?**



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Lots of sunscreen. Lots of hats with a chin strap for the wind. A gallon and a half of water a day. All the food you need, plus a little to share.

There's checklists all over the internet about what to bring to Burning Man, a headlamp. But you don't need as much as you think you need to survive for a week, actually. It's really surprising when you have to carry it all with you, how little you actually need to have to have a good time and a healthy and safe experience.

**Can you sort of take us through a day at Burning Man, particularly the day that the man actually burns?**

Burn day is really kind of our New Year's Eve. So people all throughout the day will greet you with happy burn day. And it's this Saturday, the last day of the event, before the temple burns on Sunday. And it's the culmination of the party, and the celebration, and the shared ethos of giving and taking responsibility.

Black Rock city is a 24-hour city. So you could say you could start at 12:01 AM. All over, there is music. There are lights. There are people dancing. There are parties.

And there's people trying to sleep, because they know that burn night is always a very, very late night. Throughout the day, people are preparing, putting on their best costumes, creating final installations with their camps or their friends, because the next day is really pack up day.

So there's a real feeling of things are about to be over. So let's be very present and immediate in the moment. Around dusk, people start preparing for the burn.

That means they put on some warm clothes, and usually a lot of lit up clothing. And they gather with their camps to make the procession towards the man. What happens is the man is at the center of this city that is sort of horseshoe-shaped.

And there is a beautiful procession to light the man with the lamplighters, and the people who have worked as fire spinners, and are involved in the community. And they walk from the center of Burning Man out to the man, and in a beautiful procession with drums and music. And then 30 different groups of fire spinners called the fire conclave perform in a ring around the man.

And there's drums, and dancing. And it's really extraordinary. And everyone sits down on the ground. Or they're in a circle behind the seated people in their art cars so they can have a look.

And then around 9:00 o'clock, there's a huge fireworks display. And the end of the fireworks ends with a big explosion. And that's the fire that actually lights the man. And then it all just goes off. It's like Times Square, times 20.

**Wow. So you mentioned another sort of artwork or edifice Burning Man, the temple, which is also burned on the last night. And so much of the art at Burning Man is ephemeral. I wondered why you need to burn the man, and burn the temple. Can you talk a little bit about that?**

Sure, Burning Man really started as a solstice celebration, where Larry Harvey, the founder, wanted to do a project with his son. And so they built a man. And then they dragged it down to the beach and burned it on the night of the summer solstice.





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And people gathered around, and started singing, and drumming. And they loved it so much they encouraged them to do it again the next year, and the next, and the next. And that's how Burning Man started.

We burn the man because it's a symbol of life, and how short it is, and how ephemeral it is. And we spend all week celebrating, and playing, and creating, and making art. And then, like life, at some point, it's over. So it's a reminder of us to live as fully as we can during the week, or during our lifetime, because at some point, the man has to burn.

**And what about that temple that you mentioned?**

The temple is sort of the yang to the man's yin. Early on Black Rock City was such a place of celebration that people who had lost or were mourning felt a little bit out of place. And David Best had just lost a dear friend of his who was helping him participate in building an art installation.

And so he decided to turn the art installation that they had worked on together into a tribute to his friend who died in a motorcycle accident. And what he found was once he created a memorial, a sacred space, other people brought their own memorials, and were relieved to have some place away that was a respite from all of the happy to be contemplative and to be respectful of the things in our life that are already gone.

And so ever since then, we have built a temple every year that's a counterpoint to the man. And while the man burns in a crazy celebration on Saturday night, the temple burns in silence on Sunday night. And it's a beautiful way to end Burning Man for the year, and also to remind ourselves that there's a place for honoring our past and honoring the things we've lost as well.

**Now, Burning Man is a nonprofit. But can you talk a little bit about the finances involved in making this happen every year?**

Burning Man has become a nonprofit in the past six years. And it's really a wonderful tribute to the founders, who began it and then ran it for years, carrying the liability themselves. So they formed a corporation originally for insurance purposes, but decided that since it has become a movement, and they wanted it to be shared in perpetuity, they donated their shares back to a nonprofit.

The money involved is pretty staggering. We sell tickets. They're \$400 each this year. That changes year to year.

And we have to lease the land it's on from the Bureau of Land Management. We also pay certain taxes and fees to Nevada, where Burning Man is hosted. We also provide infrastructure for the city.

There has to be emergency services. There's, obviously, porta potties. There's a health center. And there's also law enforcement that we have to provide to make sure that a gathering of this size is doing everything it's supposed to do.

So we have a budget of \$36 million. And every year, most of that goes to doing the Burning Man event in Nevada. But we also support 26 events around the world that have popped up as a result of people coming to Burning Man and wanting to do it in their own communities. So it's become a worldwide movement. And now we accept donations to help fund the worldwide movement and share the ethos, which has been a really wonderful part of becoming a nonprofit.

**Great, and why do you think Burning Man has been gaining so much momentum and popularity around the world in recent years? What is it about the event that appeals to us in this particular moment in time?**





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You know, we say Burning Man is an experiment in temporary community. And when people come to any Burning Man event, they know they're going to be included. They know that their best self is going to be celebrated.

They're allowed to be creative. They're allowed to be spontaneous. A lot of things that we're missing in our everyday life get to happen at Burning Man as a matter of course.

It's really wonderful to live without money for a week. It's actually amazing to learn you can live without electricity or running water for a week. So people come because it brings them back to who they are, or who they really wish they were.

And that's powerful. I think everyone's looking for meaning in their lives. And this is a jump start to get you back to square one and let you start where you want to start.

**And what role do you think art has to play in the whole experience, because art is such a big part of it, isn't it?**

Art is really at the center of Burning Man, because we encourage creativity in all its forms. And when you have a space as big as the Black Rock Desert, your only limitation is, how big can you build it? And how big can you imagine it?

And the remarkable thing is that there are thousands of volunteers who are willing to come and help you do it. So art transitions from being a solitary isolated experience where someone's painting something that's going to hang on the wall of a museum, or in a home, or an office, to this shared joyous interactive thing that takes on a life of its own. It's pretty incredible to see people who never thought they were artists suddenly doing work at Burning Man and realizing that they have an artistic temperament as well.

**Right, can you just try to describe a work of art from a past Burning Man that has really stayed with you?**

My first Burning Man in 2006, there was a piece called the Serpent Mother. And it was done by a group called the Flaming Lotus Girls who are based here in San Francisco. And they are a collective that is devoted to teaching skills of fire arts, and welding, and building, and leadership, in particular for women, but for anyone who wants to join in.

So what they built was a 60-foot long flame-throwing dragon who was surrounding an egg that had beautiful green, and blue, and orange propane inside it. And the piece was so staggering. It felt like it was alive.

And it was all done by people who were nameless. They were all just doing it to share. And to see something that amazing whose only purpose was to delight really was a revelation for me, and I think really speaks to what Burning Man is about.

**So I understand you have a book coming out in September that collects the art of past Burning Man.**

We have a second edition of *Burning Man Art on Fire*, which is a beautiful coffee table book with photographs from Scott London and Sydney Erthol, and I've written the text, that show some of the best of the best 12 years worth of art. And it's pretty mind blowing. It's an armchair visit without the dust.

**You often wear costumes at Burning Man. And I wondered if you could talk a little bit about some of your favorites. And what do you think people enjoy about dressing up?**





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Well, costumes create a sense of otherness. If you're wearing a navy blue suit, and flat shoes, and a white shirt, you feel kind of corporate. And if you're wearing butterfly wings and a tutu, you feel a lot more playful. And Burning Man is so much about playing, and expressing, and joy.

The costumes just add to that. Some people work all year long on their costumes. And some people choose to just put on something that they're comfortable in.

You don't have to wear a costume at Burning Man. You don't actually have to wear clothes at Burning Man, although most people do. But costumes make it a party.

And every year, we have an art theme. So a lot of times, people organize their costumes around the art. This year, the art theme is Leonardo da Vinci's workshop. So I will be in that period authentic Florentine Renaissance wear, little Lorenzo de' Medici meets Donatella Versace.

It is so much fun planning for Burning Man, organizing, thinking, scouring thrift shops. That's all part of the Burning Man experience. This idea of radical self-reliance means you don't buy a costume in a costume shop. It means you assemble something, or sew something, or cobble it together, or borrow something. And that's way more fun than just having it all presented to you.

**There are 10 principles underlying Burning Man, one of which is the principle of gifting, which I think people would find kind of intriguing. Can you talk a little bit about the principle of gifting?**

Gifting is so amazing. Gifting is the notion that gifts are given without expectation of return. So there's no barter at Burning Man. And there's no money at Burning Man.

What there is, is this super abundance of people sharing their talent, or a meal, or an experience with you purely for the sake of your enjoyment. But what we all know is when we give a gift, the giver feels amazing as well. It feels much more like a family.

You don't keep track of how many peanut butter sandwiches you've made for your kids over their lifetime. You just give it to them because it's what they need. And at Burning Man, it has that same family feeling where you share with people what you have to offer. And they share with you.

It's so incredible the lengths that people go to give gifts, some very elaborate jewelry that they've made, or a coat. Or sometimes it's just helping you put up your tent. And that's the biggest gift you can get in the middle of a windstorm.

**What do you think it is about not having money that frees people, or it changes the dynamic at Burning Man?**

Unfortunately, money has become all too much a measure of success, and of status in our society. It's easy because you can count it. And you can measure it.

But it doesn't always satisfy all of our deep needs for meaning, and spirit, and connection. So when you take money away, you have to rely on things that are essential to your nature, but maybe can't be monetized, or can't be measured in the same way. You have to give of your spirit.



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You have to be kind. You have to be generous in your judgments. And those things are harder to work with. But, ultimately, we need money to survive as a society over time.

But we also need these other things that get squelched. And so taking money away means we have to bring these other things to the fore. That's the biggest gift that Burning Man has given me, is a new way of looking at the world. It's a dusty pair of glasses, as it were.

It makes me much more generous to people in my judgment. It helps me know people from all walks of life and from different countries. So it gets me way out of my comfort zone.

It lets me think about ecological problems and environmental problems in a new way. When you've had to actually carry your water, you're much more sympathetic to people who do that on a daily basis. It just heightens your awareness about who we are as human beings, and what we have to do with our very short lives.

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