

---

December 12, 2010

<http://detnews.com/article/20101212/OPINION03/12120309>

# Don't try this at home: Flirting with fire is a 'way of life'

*DONNA TEREK*

*Detroit* —Every Monday night on the fifth floor of the Russell Industrial Center, a group of urban pyrophiles flirt with fire.

The Detroit Fire Guild is a group of youngish adults who haven't quite grown up — nor want to. They call their fire-performance tools "toys." And when they invite the public to their weekly practices they say "Come play with us."

They laugh a lot. They literally giggle as they watch one another fire up torches or poi (Kevlar balls attached by chains). They ooh and aah appreciatively.

They're in love with fire, and they can't get enough.

The practices are a kind of wacky, busy hive that looks chaotic on first sight with hoops being hula-ed, staffs being juggled, and poi being spun. But it doesn't take long to see there is organization and an obsessive concern with safety.

"There's nothing like the heat and light and that slight element of danger you get when there's fire," says Eric Miller, 36, of Plymouth, a co-director who has been with the group since its inception in 2008.

Performers may spend weeks, months, or even years practicing with an instrument before attempting their moves with toy ablaze. Participants spend most of their time fine-tuning their chops and perfecting juggling and balancing skills. Only when they're completely confident with their tool do they add liquid fuel and ignition.

The guild members are professional, insured performers who produce their own events like the Motor City Vaudeville Review or may take the stage at a MOCAD fundraiser, Theatre Bizarre or Detroit's recent Noel Night.

"Every experience when I spin fire is extraordinary in every way," says Peter Walker, 21, of Ferndale, a self-described "math nerd" who performs under the name "Kanyon" and sees fire performance as an art form.

"It's a release, it's my way of expressing myself. It's a way of life now."

The Detroit Fire Guild grew out of a former group called Fire Fabulon that existed in Detroit from 2002-06.

Evan Bradish and Jessica Rabbit Grasso, who has since moved out of state, started the Detroit Fire and Circus Guild in 2008.

Their home base has moved several times, from the Magic Stick to Theatre Bizarre to Motor City Blight Busters and, now, to the Russell.

The founders, and many current members, developed their interest in fire arts as part of the Burning

Man community, an annual art festival in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada that attracts about 50,000.

"It's performers, it's artists, it's people who participate through costumes who all get together discovering community — and lighting things on fire," says Miller.

It's also the kinship.

"We're all a family," says Chrissie Bingham, 21, of Ferndale. "We're all in this together trying to create this beautiful vision of a professional fire troupe in Detroit."

Bingham says that while many people credit the West Coast with having the most innovative art and fire performance scenes, the Detroit Fire Guild is out to give the Californians a run for their money, says Bingham.

The Detroit Fire Guild holds practices that are open to the public every Monday from 8 p.m. to midnight at the Russell Industrial Center. A \$5 donation is appreciated but not required. The guild encourages anyone who is interested in learning fire or circus arts to attend.

---

© Copyright 2011 The Detroit News. All rights reserved.