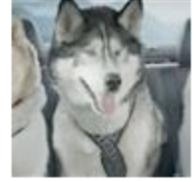




# THE VANCOUVER SUN

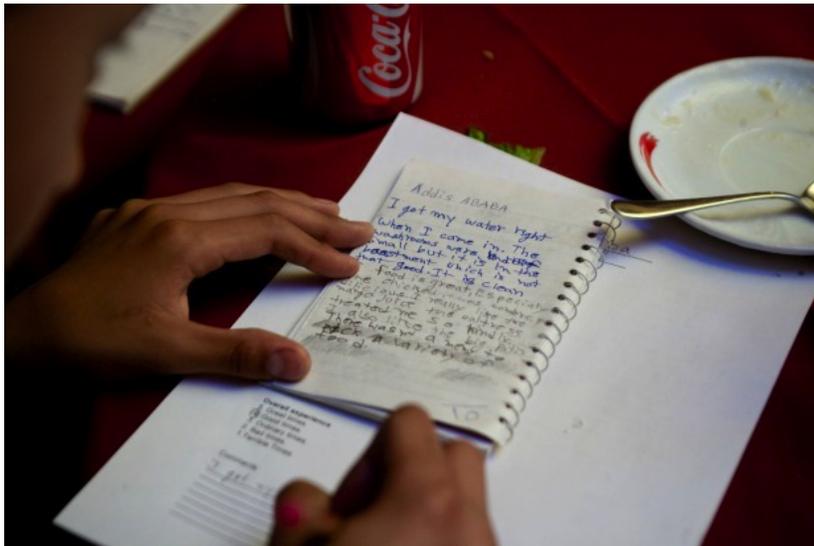


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## CULTURE SEEN

### [Darren O'Donnell: Challenging Stranger Danger With a Meal](#)

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As a performance, *Eat the Street* is unlike anything else at the [PuSh Festival](#). It's a planned encounter over a meal between a group of adults and children who don't know each other. No one has any lines or characters to play other than themselves.

It's an example of what [Darren O'Donnell](#), the work's creator, calls "stealth pedagogy."

"For us, the most significant aspect is that young people and adults are getting to know one another," O'Donnell said.

"There is so much stranger danger right now and we want to point out, that actually it's not that dangerous out there. In the right circumstances, young people really like to spend time with adults and adults really like to spend time with young people."

Given that 93 per cent of abuse comes within the family, according to O'Donnell, fear of strangers as a source of danger is misplaced.

O'Donnell calls *Eat the Street* social acupuncture: the application of pressure at congestion points in the social body to create more openness and generosity.

"Strangers aren't really the dangerous things out there – it's dad, uncle and brother who are the problem."

During PuSh, *Eat the Street* takes place at nine Vancouver restaurants starting this evening – Wednesday, Jan. 25. Following a session with a professional chef, 10 and 11-year-old students from grades five and six at Bridgeview Elementary in Surrey will evaluate the food, service and décor. They'll keep notes, write a blog ([eatdastreet.blogspot.com](http://eatdastreet.blogspot.com)) and record on video whatever catches their interest.

Members of the public will be able to book seats and have dinner with the students and O'Donnell. Everyone orders what they want and pays for their own food — just as they normally would in a restaurant.

O'Donnell, the artistic and research director of [Mammalian Diving Reflex](#), said the biggest creative challenge he faces is making sure the children don't sit with their friends and ignore the adults.

"We sit everyone among each other," he said. "I'll try to be the host and bring your attention to interesting things: it's fun, for example, to watch kids shoot their first oyster. I challenge them to get off eating fries and burgers."

Rather than educating the youngsters about how to act in a restaurant, *Eat the Street* is meant to educate the adults and the restaurant about how to deal with young people.

"It's trying to create that vibe of a family dinner at holiday time when kids are running amok and everyone is having a good time," he said.

With children around, surprises can occur. At one restaurant in Toronto, O'Donnell said, they served rabbit. Restaurant staff seemed totally unaware of the effect it might have on their young diners. Some of the youngsters stared at it with what O'Donnell called "depressed disbelief" — as if Peter Cottontail had been cooked and was on the plate in front of them. Others had no qualms at all and just dove right in.

One of the things the young food critics like to do is evaluate bathrooms for cleanliness and smell.

"This was a family restaurant in a neighbourhood and it never occurred to the owner that the red light might scare kids," O'Donnell said in a phone interview from Toronto.

At the end of *Eat the Street*, the novice food critics will be holding an awards ceremony at The Roundhouse with special performances and videos that could cover everything from the dirtiest washrooms to the coolest chefs.

In another restaurant in Toronto, they all went down en masse to the bathroom only to discover that there was a red light bulb at the bottom of the stairs.

Four years ago, O'Donnell brought his *Haircuts by Children* to the PuSh Festival. In that staged interaction, a group of Grade 7 students from Bridgeview cut the hair of adults in a salon on Commercial Drive.

I was among the adults who volunteered to let Ron Baniaga, 12, and Jeetpal Grewel, 11, cut my hair. They initially wanted to shave me bald but we negotiated a reasonable settlement: a very short buzz cut died purple.

As O'Donnell said, what *Haircuts by Children* did was create a great deal of generosity between adults and children. I know I had a great time and everyone else looked they were having a good time too — including my novice barbers. I suspect the same kind of atmosphere will exist for *Eat the Street*.