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FOCUS ON EDUCATION

Out with apathy, in with art

Parkdale PS students take on Queen West artists in creative battles

BY EMINA GAMULIN

Darren O'Donnell is at it again. Known by many for getting kids to cut adults' hair and arranging for grown-ups to slow dance with teachers, the Toronto-based artist and founder of experimental theatre group Mammalian Diving Reflex has started a battle between Queen West artists and the students of Parkdale Public School (78 Seaforth Ave.).

The innovative project has connected students with everything from chi-chi restaurant Coca (783 Queen St. W.), where the baking club designed and made a prix-fixe dinner, to a night at the Gladstone (1214 Queen St. W.), where the school's string orchestra played with local indie acts from the Blocks recording label.

"Kids are just fun to be around, to hang around with because they say what they think and they do what they want to do. They don't have as many filters and they're not so frightened," O'Donnell said, explaining his interest in working with young people.

O'Donnell describes his art as social acupuncture.

"The basis of it is trying to create atypical social configurations and creating atypical ways of being together," he said.

"In order to do that, the easiest way is to take two populations and create a way for them to be together that is outside of the patented, normal way that people hang out."

Given the high-speed encroachment of artsy-fartsy types into a community that was previously the turf of low-income immigrant families, the project seemed like an ideal way to get Parkdale neighbours talking.

The whole battle thing is "sort of a joke," O'Donnell said, adding that the project is more of a collaboration than a contest.

"I don't think there's any antagonism between those two [groups]—I just think there's an uninformed apathy."

"It's no secret that what the school is giving back to the community is a chance for the artists to get to know the residences and the kids"

—Joe Liebovitch, teacher, Parkdale PS

While the project is attempting to do away with this apathy and create stronger community ties, don't expect O'Donnell to say it's all about the children.

"When people compliment me on this project they just talk about how great it is for the kids, but I'm doing it as much for the benefit of the artists," he said.

Joe Liebovitch, the teacher at Parkdale PS coordinating the project, agreed.

"It's no secret that what the school is giving back to the community is a chance for the artists to get to know the residents and the kids," Liebovitch said. "And that brings a lot to their work."

He also described some of the perks students are enjoying.

"I love the fact that some of these kids are now walking into businesses they've walked by their whole lives. Not that they were made to feel un-

welcome, but they were never comfortable walking into an arts studio or the Gladstone or a fancy restaurant, and now they do."

Bob Wiseman participated in the music night at the Gladstone along with bands Kids On TV, The Phonemes, and Lal.

While there are differences when collaborating with younger musicians, "music making is music making and the difference between young people and adults is basically shoe size," he said.

Amber Dailey, 14, who was the emcee at the Gladstone event and took part in of some earlier projects, denied having learned much besides some DJing skills because "when those speakers were talking I wasn't really listening," she said.

The eighth-grader is mere weeks away from graduation and is perhaps feeling too cool for middle school, but still says the project was fun.

"It's a bunch of the kids from school, so I already know them, and we just fool around."

While the final battle of the series, a show-and-tell video featuring every kid in the school, should be finished by the end of summer, the project will continue.

Mammalian Diving Reflex got the principal's permission to be the school's artist (company) in-residence for the next five years.

Their aim is to build on what worked well in these initial activities in collaboration with interested students.

O'Donnell is curious to see if other artists will head in the same direction.

"It's an interesting angle to work on—no one I know of is doing that at all."