

Date While You Wait Brings Distraction, and Smiles, to Frazzled Subway Riders

By [Emily S. Rueb](#) July 6, 2015



Thomas C. Knox had a brief conversation with a woman at the Date While You Wait table at the 34th Street subway station in Manhattan. Todd Heisler/The New York Times

Wearing a bow tie of Scrabble pieces that spell "GREAT," a denim shirt, bluejeans and a brimmed hat, Thomas C. Knox waved to subway commuters one night last week while sitting at a table garnished with a sunflower in a Coca-Cola bottle and the game Connect Four.

Some grinned and walked swiftly past. Others paused long enough to lift camera phones. Some approached with trepidation.

"Is it free?" one man asked before sitting down.

Mr. Knox, 28, is the mind behind [Date While You Wait](#), a pop-up booth in which he engages strangers in conversation during a board game. He said his mission was born of a simple desire to bring some levity to the scowling, harried masses who brave the subways of New York City. There is no tip jar or open guitar case. The concept is street theater, using the Internet as a digital bullhorn.

Sara Hampt, a graphic designer who was on her way home to Bushwick, Brooklyn, said it was better than scrolling through her phone as she waited for a train.

"I just saw the game and I wanted to play," she said, but hadn't noticed the big sign that said it was a "date."

"Don't tell my husband," she joked.

Mr. Knox is, in fact, unattached, and he avoids dating apps like Tinder and other electronic means of connecting. But do not mistake him for a lonely Romeo — he travels with an entourage.

"I am not looking for love through this particular channel," he said.

Thursday night was Mr. Knox's third outing of what he hopes will become a regular event. At 5:40 p.m., he revealed the night's location on Twitter: "It's showtime!!! Headed to the downtown NQR 34th street stop!"

Mr. Knox tunneled down a staircase thick with shoppers, tourists and commuters into the 34th Street subway station with his team trailing

behind. Eric Bayuga, 33, carried a digital camera and two folding chairs. Leigh Hall, 29, carried a backpack stocked with bottled water and bags of candy for the three-hour session, along with ungainly poster boards she had decorated with hand-drawn hearts, social media symbols and the hashtag she coined: #datewhileyouwait.

By the time the group pulled up to the downtown N/Q/R platform, two journalists from Bangkok and a BBC reporter were waiting.

"I hate the term 'going viral,' " Ms. Hall said, "but I guess that's the word for it."

Tracee Carrasco, a reporter for CBS 2 News, with a cameraman in tow, looked anxious.

"I thought you were going to stand us up for our date," she said.

Three weeks into the project, there have been at least two #datewhileyouwait copycats, one [in Alexanderplatz in Berlin](#) and another by the performance actor Meir Kalmanson, who once enveloped himself in Bubble Wrap and walked around Bryant Park advertising "[Free Hugs.](#)"

Mr. Knox politely confronted Mr. Kalmanson by dropping in to be his first date ([and recording it on video](#)).

"I realized that I have integrity and some people don't," Mr. Knox said.

Mr. Kalmanson did not return requests for comment.

Growing up on Staten Island and in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, Mr. Knox was known, he said, as "the clown and the jokester." He now works in customer relations at a technology company in Manhattan, but has aspirations to formally start [a nonprofit to help minority youths connect with mentors](#), and

possibly to make Date While You Wait, or something like it, a full-time job.

"If I can capitalize on it in a positive way, and make a living, I would love to do it," Mr. Knox said.

He has already captured the attention of a former "Survivor" contestant, [Sabrina Thompson](#), whose production company specializes in social media and viral campaigns. Ms. Thompson [produced a reel](#) for Mr. Knox, free of charge, and is offering him advice about navigating branding and marketing, along with working with nonprofit companies.

At 8 p.m. on Thursday, the air was heavy and Mr. Knox's shirt was damp with sweat. He was self-conscious about his neckwear, which had been made by Tyrelle D. Shaw, an artist who killed himself last month after [attacking four Asian women](#). Mr. Knox had been an acquaintance of Mr. Shaw's.

"At one point I wasn't going to wear the bow tie because I didn't want to offend anyone," Mr. Knox said.

Ultimately, he decided to use the accessory "for something positive."

The group, which had chosen the location because of its Wi-Fi connection, was intensely tracking the number of likes on the photos and videos it was posting. The team was still giddy about the singer Nicki Minaj's shout out [on her Facebook page](#).

Mr. Knox has been invited to create similar events in Philadelphia, in Atlanta and in cities in the United Kingdom. The group is also scouting locations in New York for a five-borough tour and a "really big" Date While You Wait event in September. On Saturday, the group will be at a subway station to be announced on its Facebook, Twitter and Instagram feeds.

Many of the 15 or so participants on Thursday evening were members of the news media or Mr. Knox's friends, but several commuters stopped by, too.

Ivelisse Castro, who was on her way to Kmart, sat across from Mr. Knox and told him about her recent illness and her job stress.

"He has a beautiful soul," she said.

Even after winning most, if not all, of the Connect Four games, Mr. Knox punctuated each session with an enthusiastic high-five.

Demarrys Knight, 12, said it was "weird" to play Connect Four in the subway, but her father, Calvin Wilson, was intrigued.

"You see interesting things like this on the Internet," Mr. Wilson said, "but you never think you're actually going to get a chance to be a part of it."

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