

A Night on the Route: Seeing the Changing Face of Hunger

By Sarah Murphy

Harlem Hospital

An estimated one in six New Yorkers don't know where they will find their next meal.

While our city is fortunate to have dozens of soup kitchens and food pantries, many men, women, and families with children cannot make the trek to them. Larry has spent much of the last seven years on the street and travels up to 200 blocks every day to find food. Others are not so lucky. The Coalition's Grand Central Food Program (GCFP) is unique in its ability to engage the hungry who aren't as mobile as Larry, including those who are ill, disabled, and with limited resources for transportation.

When the GCFP originated 25 years ago, the purpose was to bring sandwiches directly to homeless people where they lived: in the subways, train terminals, alleyways, and street corners. Over time, it emerged into one of the largest food programs in the city, delivering up to 1,000 nutritious meals every night on three routes throughout upper and lower Manhattan and the Bronx.

We rely on a dependable team of over 100 volunteers each week who drive our vans; help us greet the men, women, and children waiting in the line; and distribute food. Some volunteers are new; others have been with the Coalition for over 15 years. GCFP Director, Juan de la Cruz, pointed out that our ranks include bankers, business professionals, students, current and formerly homeless people, and many others. Courtney, one of our regular Thursday night volunteers, says, "This is my favorite day of the week. You get to interact with a mixed group of volunteers and clients. I like meeting new people and checking in on old clients to see how they are doing."

Over the years, the Coalition has seen our population change. At first, it was nearly all street homeless men. Later, we saw older women lining up, and fam-

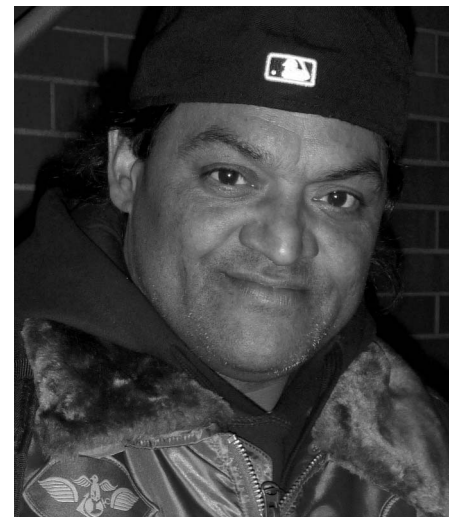


ilies just trying to keep their heads above water. Recently, we have seen a dramatic increase in the number people who have housing, but simply cannot afford food on top of their rent and living expenses.

The Uptown Route

On a chilly January night, we loaded into the van headed for the uptown route.

At 7:15 pm, we arrived at our first stop at West 51st and Broadway. There, I met Dave. Dave was familiar with the difficulties of the streets. Having been homeless for nearly 12 years, he spoke with regret of the troubles he faced. "I think programs like these help with crime. People get hungry and they get desperate and they do things they wouldn't normally do." For Dave, that is a thing of the past. He recently moved into a subsidized apartment and is starting to get back on his feet. I asked him why he returned to the van, and he replied that even with his new housing, it is impossible to get by on his own. He needs programs like GCFP to stay

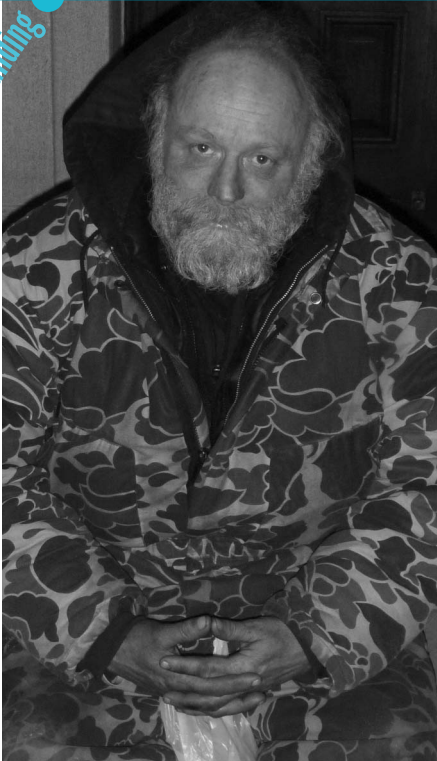


nourished and healthy.

At each of the following stops, we saw faces of every age and gender. Some ragged from years on the streets; others had just gotten off of work. I met Edith, an older woman in a wheelchair who waits diligently outside of her NYCHA apartment every night because her assistance check is not enough to cover food, medication, and rent; Jose, a young messenger, who hadn't eaten

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SONY Building



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—Dionne, GCFP client

anything all day; and Danny, a day worker who lives with a friend, who has been visiting the vans for about a year after construction work dried up. He is close to being forced onto the streets, but is hoping to hang on until the spring when there are more jobs.

At Cathedral Park, a volunteer eagerly introduced me to Rosa, a regular for years. She lives in a public housing unit nearby and has great difficulty getting around. She greeted each of us with a huge smile and a hug. They talked about the happenings of the past week, and we walked her back into her building. Without any close family or

5th Ave. and 55th Street



Citigroup Center

friends, the daily interaction she gets from our volunteers is truly the highlight of her day. She told us repeatedly how much she loves the volunteers.

At Harlem Hospital, a younger woman stood in line, dressed in bright colors and laughing. Dionne has a disability and lives in supportive housing, using soup kitchens and programs like ours for the past three years to help her cover expenses. I asked to talk to her, and she reminisced about the struggles she’s faced throughout her life, but smiled again, thankful of the generosity of others. “I remember every day to be grateful and stay positive. You have to be. I hope to one day give back and share my blessings.”

It was getting much colder as we turned onto East 60th and Park. The men sleeping on the steps of the 60th Street Baptist Church were bundled up with blankets, trying to keep warm in their boxes. I spoke to Mike, who after a brief stay in shelter, has been living on the streets for three years. He is thankful that groups like ours come to visit the church with food and warm clothes for him and the others huddled together. The Coalition reaches out to men like Mike, urging them to come in out of the cold for additional services, but they are often intimidated by the shelter

system either because of its complexity or the dangers they once faced in such close living conditions. It might sound strange, but Mike calls the church steps his home, and would prefer to stay there than risk the shelters.

Around 10:00 pm, we reached the end of our route. The crates full of soup and milk were gone. Tomorrow, another group of volunteers will run the same route and encounter many similar faces, some old, some new, all desperately looking for something warm to eat. This critical lifeline, at one time only for our homeless neighbors, now is a safety net for low income New Yorkers who have housing, but have fallen on hard times. Hunger no longer haunts just the man sitting on the subway platform surrounded by his belongings. It gnaws at the woman going to a minimum wage job trying to feed her children, the man on disability unable to return to the workforce, and countless others struggling to make ends meet.

To learn more about the Grand Central Food Program or the Coalition’s other direct service programs, go to www.coalitionforthehomeless.org. If you are interested in volunteering, please contact the Program Director, Juan de la Cruz, at volunteer@cft homeless.org.