



HART OF DARKNESS... LIGHT OF HOPE

Against the harsh, cold winds of a late March morning, they stand in single file – silent, stoic and patient – much like a beleaguered military unit at ease. This crowd of men and teenage boys wear several layers of tattered clothing as protection against the last phase of a bitter New York City winter. To a man, they are robed in “hoody” sweatshirts, a garment increasingly common in this underground world of uncertainty where a daily meal is never certain and a day’s work does not always mean a day’s pay.

These undocumented immigrants, who do not speak English and have no family members in the United States, gather in this section of Queens on a daily basis in the hope of finding work as day laborers. Among their ranks are painters, brick layers, masonry workers, electricians and skilled construction workers. Yet because they lack citizenship and documentation, they are barred from union jobs that would otherwise provide an income for themselves and support for their family members. Unwilling to beg on the streets or engage in illegal activities, they offer their services to the highest bidder. Every day, industrial trucks from local construction companies patrol these streets looking for men who are willing to unload building materials, perform moving tasks, sweep up garbage and carry out any other tasks that are asked of them. Offering their services at or below the minimum wage level, they often engage, albeit reluctantly, in the practice of under bidding against one another. If one man is willing to work for \$7.00 an hour, two others will hawk their services for \$6.50. In many instances, at the end of a day that can extend anywhere from 8 to 12 hours, and provides no benefits or even lunch breaks, these laborers often receive less than half of the agreed upon wages. In some cases, employers do not pay them at all. Without citizenship or legal rights, they have no choice but to begin this bleak cycle again the following day. Yet one morning a week, when this ragged band of hungry men and boys see a lumbering white van, they

tense up with a remarkable speed and attentiveness. This shared agility, matched by equal measures of desperation, hunger and hope, plays out every Tuesday in Hart Park, located at 68th Street and 37th Avenue in the Jackson Heights section of Queens.

This area of Queens, only eight subway stops away from the high profile affluence of Forest Hills, is a universe removed from that neighborhood’s upscale shops and elegant mansions. Only a block away from the ever-rumbling Brooklyn/Queens Expressway and surrounded by nondescript apartment buildings and attached houses, Hart Park is at once a testament to human endurance and at the same time a soul-shattering example of indifference elevated to the level of urban policy. Yet in spite of the inherent bleakness associated with this Dante-like circle of Hell, there is hope in the form of St. John’s Bread and Life.

With a 27-year history of service to the poor and homeless, this nonprofit, the largest provider of emergency food in Brooklyn, reaches out to the most impoverished residents of Queens through their Mobile Soup Kitchen (MSK) program. Every Tuesday morning, their 37-foot Winnebago van pulls up to Hart Park, and for the briefest of moments, miracles unfold on behalf of the poorest of the poor.

The vehicle is fully equipped with kitchen facilities and a social service office. MSK staff members and volunteers greet each man who comes by for a hot meal. Operating under the direction of Sister Kathleen Byrnes S.C. (Sisters of Charity) these men receive plastic containers filled with hot food. For many, this will be their only meal for the day. Moving slowly through the crowd, Sister Kathleen smiles and warmly greets each man individually as she passes out flyers containing information about other soup kitchens and social service options in the vicinity. Speaking

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AROUND
TOWN



through an interpreter, one man, who only gives his first name as Mario, said, "I really love Sister Kathleen. Every Tuesday she comes here with food. No matter what happens, we can depend on her." Over the course of the past winter, his observations concerning her devotion were underscored in a quietly dramatic way. Speaking in a matter of fact manner, Sister Kathleen explains his observation. "During a blizzard we had a couple of months ago, the snow made driving so bad we were delayed for over an hour in getting out here. I really thought that by the time we arrived we'd only see about a dozen people that day; yet when we finally did pull up there were several hundred men standing in the snow and cold, waiting for food. That's when you know how vital your services are."

As two hundred men, described as a "light" turn out by MSK staffers wait patiently in line for a helping of food, volunteers and staff members inside the MSK van maintain an assembly line level of efficiency as they prepare and serve vital food rations. Danny Velez, the van's lead driver and self-designated "chief cook and bottle washer," puts out his hand to fellow workers Carlos Perez and Henry Torani, who give him plastic containers. Danny quickly fills each one with a generous serving of macaroni and tuna fish and then hands it out of a side window to a hungry teenage boy who has waited hours for this meal. Sister Virginia Blend, (S.C. Halifax) working as a volunteer on the van, busies herself cutting generous chunks of Italian bread, which she promptly deposits into large cardboard boxes for later distribution. Once the men have their food allotment, they move quietly into the park and sit in groups as they quickly eat. Food is never wasted here; a fact that was amply demonstrated by one man who dropped a piece of bread on the well-worn ground but promptly picked it up and ate it without hesitation.

The men sit in small knots on the park benches and discuss their employment prospects for the day. There is a quiet, almost subliminal sense of brotherhood among them. Men approach one another and firmly bump clenched fists together as an unspoken sign of unity. It is a gesture easily understood, one that conveys more than words could ever impart. Contrary to many canards about the sanitary habits of "street people," these men are always careful to clean up after themselves. MSK volunteers put up large plastic bags throughout the park for disposal of food trays and eating utensils. The bags are always filled.

Once the men are through eating, Sister Kathleen and Sister Virginia, along with other MSK staff members and volunteers who are fluent in Spanish, engage the men in conversation. Men who want access to social services are

invited into the back of the van, which is fully equipped with a computer, fax machine and telephone. Depending on their specific situations, clients get health referrals, AIDS counseling, information on lawyers who handle immigration issues, and guidance on applying for food stamps. "Because so many of the men we meet are from South American countries, such as the men here, who are from Ecuador, I give them information about the Latin America's Workers Union," states Sister Virginia. "They supply follow up support to our guys during the period when we are not here."

The Mobile Soup Kitchen initiative in Jackson Heights is part of a much larger social service network provided by St. John's Bread and Life. On a Monday through Friday basis, the MSK van also visits impoverished sites in Brooklyn at Williamsburg, East New York, Brownsville and Coney Island.



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*— Mario, an Ecuadorian day laborer
in Jackson Heights, Queens*

At each location, the same degree of concern, compassion and respect are clearly evident. On a yearly average, the Mobile Soup Kitchen dispenses more than 98,000 meals to those most in need. Based on the current downward economic climate, rising unemployment and the upward spiral of food prices, this is a number MSK staffers anticipate exceeding by the end of the current calendar year.

With a stated mission of "Feeding, Body, Mind and Spirit," St. John's also operates an in house soup kitchen at their Lexington Avenue base of operations in Brooklyn. Here guests receive medical/legal referrals, access to substance abuse intervention programs, bereavement counseling, assistance with housing, food stamps and information concerning employment opportunities. St. John's also operates specific food programs geared to the needs of senior citizens and mothers with young children and infants. Beginning in June of 2008, St. John's Bread and Life became the only soup kitchen in New York City to offer clients the opportunity to choose food products for themselves

and their family members through their innovative touch screen computer program, an initiative that has met with more than anticipated success. Operating under the auspices of St. John's University, St. John's Bread and Life dedicates itself to the Vincentian ethos of "seeing Christ within each person." Anthony Butler, the Executive Director for St. John's Bread and Life, states, "Our goal is simple, bring food to the poor and accompany them on their journey to wholeness by providing necessary services."

For those who wish to learn more about the Mobile Soup Kitchen program and other outreach projects provided by St. John's Bread and Life, please visit their website at: www.breadandlife.org