MIDNIGHT
SOCIAL CHANGE
MANHATTAN
A few stray garbage wrappers tumble down Lexington Avenue, the brisk night wind whipping them towards the corner of 54th Street. It’s a chilly evening in Manhattan, and Eddie stands huddled near the subway entrance, cold and hungry. Like nearly 50,000 other New Yorkers, Eddie is part of the city’s homeless population, unsure of where he’ll sleep or eat on any given night. But he knows that at least once a week, students from St. John’s University will stop by to provide food, clothing and — most importantly — friendship.
“This is a blessing,” Eddie says, as a St. John’s Campus Ministry van pulls up and parks at the corner. Ten students hop out and unload clothes, jackets, blankets, coffee, soup and freshly-made sandwiches, ready to distribute them to those living on the streets.

It’s the first of four stops on that night’s Midnight Run, a weekly program that brings students into Manhattan to provide unsheltered individuals with food and supplies.

“There are still people in this world who care,” Eddie says, walking up to the students and exchanging hellos. “No matter how many people might kick you while you’re down, there’s always someone there to pick you up.”

It’s precisely this type of interaction — a warm, friendly exchange of both goods and conversation — that has made Midnight Run one of the most popular service initiatives at St. John’s. More than 30 runs are held each semester, with around 10 students attending each of them.

On this particular run, Erin Kennedy ’13C serves as the Campus Ministry Student Assistant (CMSA), helping to arrange and coordinate the logistics behind the trip. As the students continue to distribute soup and coffee, she takes a minute to reflect on how the program has transformed her life.

“My name is Erin Kennedy ’13C,” she says, “because I don’t think about them as homeless. I think about them as my friends.”

Established in 1984, Midnight Run is a volunteer organization seeking to provide basic necessities to those living on the streets of New York City. At the same time, it establishes a common ground between the housed and the homeless, forging a bond based in mutual caring and understanding.

Today, a variety of churches, colleges and companies throughout New York participate in Midnight Run, and, for the last decade, St. John’s students have been some of the strongest contributors.

“We first did a Midnight Run in November of 2003,” said Angela Seegel ’98Ed, ’04GEd, a Campus Minister at St. John’s who initially coordinated the program on the Queens campus. “It was a transformational experience, and it really got our students talking. By the following semester, we were hosting a handful of runs, each one filled to capacity with student volunteers. That’s when we knew we had something big on our hands.”

A typical Midnight Run starts at 8 p.m. when a group of students meet on the second floor of O’Connor Hall in the Residence Village. They prepare 60 sandwiches — ham, turkey and peanut-butter-and-jelly — and load them, along
8:05 PM
Student participants assemble in O’Connor to make 50 sandwiches, packing them with juice and snacks.

9:12 PM
All of the supplies are loaded into a St. John’s Campus Ministry van as the students head into Manhattan.
“This is a blessing. There are still people in this world who care. No matter how many people might kick you while you’re down, there’s always someone there to pick you up.” – Eddie
with stacks of donated clothing, onto a Campus Ministry van. Then they hit the streets, driving into Manhattan and stopping at a number of locations provided to them by the Midnight Run organization.

At each stop, the students meet and interact with homeless individuals, resulting in the program’s most inspirational moments. “Simply being with people and building a community with one another — that’s how lives are changed,” Seegel added. “Those are the moments that transform our students, coming face-to-face with those in need.”

By around 1 a.m., the students have made the necessary stops and have usually distributed all of the sandwiches and clothing. On the ride back to campus, they chat with one another about what they saw, the people they met and the conversations they had.

According to Pamela G. Shea-Byrnes, Ed.D. ’86SVC, ’90G, Vice President for University Ministry and University Events, this moment of reflection is what makes the program so unique. “Without question, that’s what makes the experience distinctively Vincentian,” she explained, “getting students to think about the ‘why’ behind what they do. By reflecting on what they saw and sharing their ideas with one another, they realize that it’s not just about helping people — it’s about seeing the face of God in those they serve. The meaning behind service is just as important as the service itself, and that’s how you bring about systemic change.”

And, as Shea-Byrnes is quick to point out, the program has a very real impact on the students who participate, as evidenced by a staggering number of recent graduates. From altering their career ambitions to simply strengthening their faith, Midnight Run’s influence on students is far and wide, serving as a true testament to the way Vincentian service can transform young men and women.

“It changes your entire way of thinking,” Shea-Byrnes said. “Alumni always come back and tell me how Midnight Run allowed them to find meaning in their own lives through the good that they have done.”

Indeed, alumni stories are as varied as they are many. Annemarie Harr ’10C, ’12G, for example, served on Midnight Run her entire time at St. John’s, working as both a CMSA and a Graduate Assistant in Campus Ministry. Ultimately, that experience inspired her to pursue a law degree with a concentration in child homelessness, hoping to one day work within the legal system to eliminate this dire epidemic.

Michael Yurik ’09C, ’10G, meanwhile, frequently references Midnight Run as one of the driving forces in his decision to lead a life dedicated to service. Today, he is studying at a seminary to become a pastor, a role that will allow him to further pursue his faith and Vincentian charity.

And then there’s Kevin Whelan ’10CPS, a young alumnus who never made service a top priority in his life until he started getting involved in Midnight Run. During his freshman year, he decided to participate in the program on a whim and now, six years later, he finds that outreach initiatives are a major part of his life.

He looks back on one moment in particular as having sparked that transformation. “It was during one of the first runs I went on,” Whelan recalled. “We had no more jackets left to distribute, and a homeless man came up to us in need of warmth. So, another freshman literally took the sweatshirt off of his own back and gave it to the man, telling him, ‘You need this a lot more than I do.’”

But, as Whelan remembers, it’s what happened next that left the greatest impression. “Another homeless man had seen what just happened,” Whelan continued. “That man walked up to the student and said, ‘One day,
you’ll be in Heaven for what you did, and when you meet Jesus, He’ll ask you: do you remember when you gave me that sweatshirt?”

Whelan smiles as he retells the story.

“That’s what brought it all together for me,” he said. “That’s the moment I’ll remember for the rest of my life.”

Midnight Run is a transformative program, but it’s certainly not the only service initiative bringing St. John’s students onto the streets of Manhattan. Project HOPE (Homeless Outreach Population Estimate) takes a similar approach, but strives to effect measurable governmental change.

Created by the NYC Department of Homeless Services (DHS), HOPE takes place on one night each year, sending thousands of volunteers across the five boroughs to conduct a street survey of New York’s unsheltered population. This survey is necessary to help ensure funding for homeless services, and hundreds of St. John’s students sign up each year to do their part.

Typically, the census takes place on a frigid night in January, from around midnight to 5 a.m. Groups of volunteers scour every neighborhood throughout the city, speaking with homeless individuals that they encounter and recording a variety of information for the DHS.

“The city’s high-need areas change from year to year,” said Natalie Maio ‘02PD, Associate Director of Leadership Development in the Office of Student Life. “Our students understand that it’s a freezing and difficult night, but it allows them to put a face to the number, to see what homelessness truly looks like. They realize that poverty is so much more than just a statistic.”

Nearly 300 St. John’s students signed up to participate in the 2013 Project HOPE, and many of them have called the experience nothing short of life-changing.

“One of the questions we’d ask the homeless men and women was whether they were veterans,” said Sean Brooks ‘13C, whose group was tasked with surveying the area around Penn Station in Midtown Manhattan. “I was flat-out amazed at how many veterans we found — proud people who, due to unfortunate circumstances, were forced to live on the streets.”

Brooks remembers one homeless veteran in particular whose story moved him.

“It was heartbreaking,” Brooks recalled, “absolutely heartbreaking. This man was so kind and so upbeat — it was like talking to a family member or a friend — and here he was living on the curb. Afterwards, my group and I discussed how meeting people like him really shattered our preconceived notions about homelessness.”

The same can be said for Chris Porcelli ‘13C, who walked away from Project HOPE with a completely altered perspective on the city he calls home.

“You’d be surprised how different New York looks at 2 a.m. on a freezing night in January,” he said. “During the day, these are areas where most of us go shopping or go to the theater. But, 12 hours later, we see a staggering amount of homeless individuals. To seek them out for a change — to show them kindness and consideration — was a really unique and rewarding experience.”

But what makes Project HOPE so meaningful are its results, the tangible proof that it is effectively reducing homelessness in New York. Since the very first street survey in 2005, the census numbers show that the number of
homeless individuals living in public places has decreased by 26%, meaning there are approximately 1,133 fewer New Yorkers sleeping on streets, in parks or in subways.

St. John’s students typically represent one of the largest contingents of hoPE volunteers, and, in recognition of this, DHS Commissioner Seth Diamond came to campus this past year on the night of the event to deliver a pep talk and even accompany some students on their journey through their assigned neighborhoods.

It’s all part of the University’s longstanding and strong relationship with the city of New York, one that Kathryn Hutchinson, Ph.D. ’92G, Vice President for Student Affairs, notes is mutually beneficial.

“New York is part of the St. John’s experience,” she explained. “It’s a microcosm right in our backyard, and our students use it like a laboratory. When they see tangible results, like with HOPE, it emboldens them. By making a real difference in this community, it makes them more inclined to serve after graduation and throughout their lives.”

According to Victoria Santangelo ’98C, ’01GEd, ’11G, Executive Director of Campus Ministry, opportunities like hoPE — moments of direct interaction with the underserved here in New York — ultimately have worldwide ramifications, instilling a strong sense of social justice in students that extends well beyond their four years at the University.

“It’s a bit of a cliché, but I always refer to the phrase, ‘Think globally, act locally,’” she noted. “Students take their experiences here and, after they graduate, seek similar initiatives later in life through their job, their community or their parish. They bring that zest for service with them to their communities near and far, making a difference literally all across the world.”

It’s now 12:30 a.m., and the Campus Ministry van is heading towards its final stop of the night. At the previous destination — St. Bart’s on Park Avenue — students distributed sandwiches to a handful of homeless individuals, including a grandmotherly woman named Peaches, a Midnight Run regular. Peaches had stood on the curb, bundled in her winter coat, hood pulled tightly around her head, as students scooped her warm soup and chatted with her about local news, politics and the weather.

As the van rolls down 5th Avenue, the students discuss some of the heartbreaking stories they’ve encountered on tonight’s run.

“It’s so true,” says Lauren Ippolito ’16Ed. “The people we serve give us more than we could ever give them.”

An Education major, Ippolito hopes to one day integrate Vincentian service into elementary and high school education, and tonight’s run has only strengthened her resolve.

“St. Vincent was a humble man,” she tells the other students, “someone who lived for others. That’s what we need to do — build a community of understanding with everyone.”

Kennedy sits in the passenger seat and nods in approval. As a CMSA, she attended runs for years and was profoundly impacted by service at St. John’s. She graduated in May 2013 and now dreams of becoming a public servant in order to make a direct, legislative impact on homelessness.

“Can you imagine how you’d feel if 90% of the day, no one spoke to you? To be practically invisible to the average New Yorker? There’s something very wrong with that.”

The van turns onto 52nd Street and approaches the final stop. But before the students can hop out and once again enter the cold city air, Kennedy looks back and reminds them of one of her favorite Midnight Run expressions: “We may run out of food, we may run out of clothes, but we will never run out of conversation.”

And, with that, the students exit the van, ready for another stop on another Midnight Run, armed only with sandwiches, clothing, soup and a wealth of compassion.

The second stop, directly in front of St. Bartholomew’s Church on Park Avenue, is so busy that the students nearly run out of supplies.

“‘We had no more jackets left to distribute, and a homeless man came up to us in need of warmth. So, another freshman literally took the sweatshirt off of his own back and gave it to the man, telling him, ‘You need this a lot more than I do.’’” — Kevin Whelan ’10CPS