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About New York

Tracking Shadows Under the Snow and Cardboard

By DAN BARRY

SNOW an inch high and climbing covered the mound of beaten luggage that leaned against the church's door like some forgotten late-night delivery. Only the steady descent of white flakes broke the city stillness.

Then a flap of cloth flipped up from somewhere within the mound, releasing a puff of perfume and revealing the face of a woman, lined and with hair like gray straw: the night's Madonna of the Elements, huddled at the stone hem of St. Monica's Roman Catholic Church on East 79th Street, a stumble step or two from First Avenue.

"Leave me alone," she called out from the mound. "I'm fine, I'm fine."

She was, in a way. The two men from the Bowery Residents' Committee, an outreach program, wished her well and moved on to the next person sleeping outside on a cold and snowy Monday night in February, with intimations of a blizzard in the wind. In New York City, there is always a next person; just look.

The weather forecast had been so dire that the Department of Homeless Services postponed its annual "homeless street count," in which 2,000 volunteers were to try to quantify the unquantifiable: the number of people in this city's five boroughs who live on the streets — who rock to fitful sleep on subways, who linger in Penn Station, who find subterranean refuge.

Last year the count was 2,694, a figure that did not include Queens or the Bronx.

That the weather might be too foul for the city to count those living in its February foulness seems absurd at first. But Linda Gibbs, the commissioner of homeless services, explained that she had to consider the safety of the volunteers. The city will try to count again, on March 7.

The postponement did not change anything on the street Monday night. The men and women of the pavement



Photographs by Micheal Nagle for The New York Times

Offering assistance on the steps of St. Jean Baptiste Church yesterday were Andrew Apicella, left, and Jason Tarnowski. Muzzy Rosenblatt, lower right, talked with a man in a makeshift bed on Fifth Avenue.

continued to huddle beneath idiosyncratic castles of cardboard and tarp, and the men and women of the outreach — on contract with the city — continued to offer help in finding warmth, counseling, a better way.

To that end, a blue Bowery Residents' Committee van prowled Manhattan's slushy streets, its passengers peering through fogged windows to spot scaffolding and doorways that might give shelter.

Andrew Apicella, the director of the agency's outreach program, drove. Muzzy Rosenblatt, the executive director, sat in the back. And Jason Tarnowski, an outreach worker, tapped data about every encounter into a laptop computer, which helps the agency to track general trends and specific histories.

There is plenty to type. Just before



meeting the gray-haired woman in her church-step cocoon, they had answered a 311 call about "someone in a box" in front of the Church of St. Stephen of Hungary on East 82nd Street, beneath a stone inscription, "Venite Adoremus Dominum."

That someone, a man, declined help with a choice epithet. Mr. Apicella and Mr. Tarnowski said good night, having assured themselves that, if nothing else, the man's shelter — rigged with green tarp, cardboard and a bungee cord attached to the church's door handle — reflected experience with sleeping in the wet and

cold.

"You can tell a lot by the designs," Mr. Apicella said.

There are other things that Mr. Apicella knows, after more than a decade of outreach work. That many of the mentally ill tend to congregate on the quieter East Side, where they think they will be let alone, while panhandlers prefer the busier West Side. That the best times to encourage someone to seek treatment are in the early evening hours, before bedtime, and around dawn, when they wake and pack up. That once ensconced for the night, they want to be let alone.

This proved the case with Victor, buried in snow and sleeping bags on the steps of St. Monica's, a dozen feet from that woman. When told that someone might be checking on him later in the night, he said, "If I'm asleep, don't wake me."

The van stopped in front of St. Jean Baptiste Church, at the corner of Lexington Avenue and East 76th Street, to check on a coffin-sized shelter that included plastic wrapping and a green umbrella. The voice of a woman rose up to say that she was fine, fine.

The van continued south on Fifth Avenue, as men shoveled in front of luxurious apartment buildings where they work opening doors, as orange curtains billowed in Central Park, as a radio broadcaster announced that

it was "31 degrees and snowing in New York."

In front of the Petrossian restaurant stood a large man holding an umbrella and wearing an unzipped coat not much thicker than a windbreaker.

Snow had transformed half his face and most of his black hair into a mask of white. "I'm O.K., man," he said, with a hint of menace. "I'm O.K."

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With the 3 to 11 shift drawing to a close, the van headed to the agency's outreach base on the Bowery. A few minutes later the van headed back into the night, this time with members of the 11 to 7 shift, Gabriel Carter and Michelle Washington.

They stopped in front of the Paul Smith men's fashion store on Fifth Avenue and West 16th Street, where another of life's odd juxtapositions was taking place. A man inside the store was working on a window display, separated by a pane of glass from a man who had made his bed on

the sidewalk.

The man on the sidewalk said that his name was Kerry, that he was 40, that he had been sleeping in this spot for a month, that he was "certifiable," and that he could never forgive his mother. Mr. Rosenblatt sat by his side, nodding, listening and gently urging him to get help.

"This is about you, not your mother," Mr. Rosenblatt said.

After a discussion that gave Kerry an opportunity to vent, he promised to consider visiting the agency's office. "Lafayette Street, huh?" he said, as Mr. Rosenblatt rose to leave.

The van continued on, as did the snow. Well after midnight, the outreach workers stopped in front of a clump of a man outside the Duane Reade store on Eighth Avenue in Chelsea.

He sat on a wet cardboard box marked Little Bunnies diapers, with a bottle under his overcoat and a five-dollar bill clutched in his freezing right hand. The outreach team concluded that he was at risk.

After a circular conversation in which the man insisted he was fine, Mr. Carter called 911. Two police cars and a Fire Department ambulance arrived a few minutes later, but not before the man had gotten to his feet and walked north toward Penn Station, a silhouette in snow, and then, nothing.