



The People We Meet: A Midnight Run reflection by Ronald Sopyla

I used to go on large group runs with the church and help out on clothing distribution. It can be a hectic job, several people at a time clamoring for a specific size or color. It's hard then to recognize or get to know individuals. The small "mini-runs" that we do now on a regular basis afford a chance to learn faces and names. Though the constraints of pandemic safety measures limit the chance for conversations, those barriers are beginning to break down a little too.

Our first stop was empty. After waiting about 10 minutes and taking the time to re-organize our supplies a "customer" showed up, Daryl, and we were able to help him, food, toiletries and a new hooded sweatshirt.

The stops can be a bit unpredictable. Dale at the Midnight Run office is very knowledgeable about where to find people and how many will be at any stop, but the populations fluctuate based on many factors. Weather, season, the removal of scaffolding from a building, other services being offered that night, and who knows what can affect the turn out.

Our second stop had a few more people, elderly speaking lightly accented English. Central European? Russian? They seemed to live in a nearby building. Not all of the people we serve are homeless, but all are in need. Just as we were packing up to leave a man came running down 11th Ave in our direction. He had gone to our first location and was told by someone that we had just left, so came looking for us at our second stop. He had run all the way. His first requests were for paper towel and water, to dry off his brow and replenish himself. The Run office notifies and network of people where we will be each night and at approximately what times. Many of the homeless have cell phones and then notify each other.

Our third stop, which often has only 1 or 2 people had at least 10 that came out of a local plaza. Mary Jane, who hates peanut butter and prefers turkey and cheese was there. She questioned me sharply to make sure the sandwich was what she requested. A man on a cell phone who phoned a colleague to let them know where we would be next. A tall, powerfully built guy we had not seen for a while was there. He's a reader and keeps books by his cardboard pallet. He seems to like Stieg Larsson.

All of the supply of sweatshirt we had were given out by now, except for the single 3XL. We were saving it for Junior, a regular client at a stop off Park Ave. Quote from Junior: "Security told us to leave, but I said you'll have to move me, I'm going to sleep." He's a big guy, and very friendly. This is the stop where Iorgo, our indispensable helper from the Midnight Run, begins to teach me bits of Spanish, the different words for "sheet" and "blanket". The weather is getting colder now and we have begun to bring sheets and blankets with us.

Next stop, a real NYC milieu of people, all nationalities, all accents, all the colors of the city Scandinavian, Irish, Spanish, White, Black. Mark, Yolanda and Jordan are often here. Jordan often greets us "Greetings and salutations." The Lady of the Umbrellas sleeps here too, using two one or two umbrellas to shield herself from the world. She always refuses what we offer, but a man who sleeps nearby her advised us to leave things anyway, she will take them when we are gone. He told us she was a victim of spousal abuse and doesn't trust people now. Iorgo and I got a glimpse of her once. She's beautiful.

Many people camp out at St, Bart's and Iorgo and I walk around the block looking for sleepers. One person had a barricade of luggage all around his camp, long hair and beard looking a bit like Jesus. There's a woman here who has a submarine like construction of cardboard boxes all written over with graffiti: Once a mother once a mom; Engels was here. (Friedrich Engels?) There's a man who refuses an extra bag of food, "Don't be greedy, give it to the needy!"

We ended the night looking for The Professor, a tall, casually dressed but oddly courtly man, he truly seems like a professor. He's been absent from his usual spot since they took the scaffolding down, but we did find Alex. Iorgo recognizes Alex as someone who used to frequent the same coffee shop as he did. Alex was gregarious and often had a crowd of friends at his table. Iorgo knows Alex recognizes him too, but neither says anything. Alex is usually watching something on his cell phone whenever we arrive.

Thanks for all of your contributions on behalf of Daryl, Junior, Mary Jane, Yolanda, Mark, Jordan, The Lady of the Umbrellas, the sweaty runner, the big reader, the Professor, the submarine lady who was once a mother, the guy who wouldn't be greedy, and the guy who looks like Jesus.

Special thanks too to Andy Larivee and Iorgo Papoutsas for doing the Run. It's always a team effort.

Ron Sopyla



Andy Larivee, prepping for a Midnight Run (in a pre-Covid image).