



The Bowery Mission Braces for Winter

By [ANNA SANDERS](#)



Skilled, unemployed, homeless, on The Bowery.

Michelle Rick

At exactly 4:45 a.m. everyday, Albert Alston flicks on the lights to rouse the men asleep on what passes for a dormitory annex at the Bowery Mission—its chapel floor and pews. “I do it the same way I did it as a platoon sergeant,” he said. “I know I just have to get them up.”

Sometimes the men wake weary-eyed and waspish, but not usually. “Sergeant” Alston’s gruff voice and wide grin are part of a routine they’ve come to expect when sleeping at the Mission this winter, as temperatures drop and it’s become too cold to stay outside.

They turn to the [Mission](#) for shelter in extreme weather-induced emergencies, too, as we saw last month, when it became a refuge for many neighborhood residents without power during Hurricane Sandy, as well as when the Nor’easter dropped that thick coat of snow soon after. But even before the storms, the staff was braced for its annual winter increase in homeless patrons, which can mean up to 50 percent more than the usual 700 meals to serve, and twice as many men to lodge.

“The elements can kill them,” Matt Krivich explained. He’s the mission’s director of operations. “We’ve lost a couple of our guests before to hypothermia. That’s why we open up our chapel.” Krivich and the Mission’s other staff—many once homeless themselves—have an open-door policy for anyone seeking shelter from the cold.

When temperatures drop below 40 degrees, the Mission provides regular shelter to 80 men in its residential recovery program and emergency shelter to up to 80 more, making room for 30 in the dining room in addition to the 50-plus it can handle in the chapel. During some snowy weeks last winter, the Mission even allowed community members to sleep in the serving line near the kitchen.

“How can you turn somebody away when you’ve got space?” Krivich said. “If it’s just up on stage, if it’s in the serving line?”

As the chapel usher, Alston helps organize the emergency housing guests, part of the group known here as the “community.” Though other staff caution that the community can be “rough,” Alston gets along with them.

“That’s only because I give them the same respect they give me,” he said.

It might also be because the 56-year-old Alston, soft-spoken with bright eyes, is down on his luck, too. He lost his job at a Canarsie metal yard in September because “they decided to keep all them younger guys.” Shortly after, Alston’s landlord decided to sell his apartment building in Brooklyn. Not wanting to burden his mother, Alston went to a veteran’s organization in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn looking for a place to live. The organization connected him with the Mission, which had a spot free in their residency program.

Alston’s been here for two months, living in the actual dorm above the chapel. As part of his new job, he shepherds the community into pews for service three times a day before the kitchen opens.

Some patrons use the chapel service as an opportunity to sleep with heat. During the Nor’easter in New York Nov. 8, Alston woke a man laying down who was taking up two spots on the bench. “You get up or you get out,” Alston warned him. After grumbling a bit, the man slid over, letting another take a seat.

Later that night, the same man glanced around, looking out for Alston and other Mission staff. The coast clear, he reached into his pants and pulled out a flask hidden in his pants, down near the crotch. Grinning at the other community members around him, the man took a deep swig.

The staff didn’t notice. They were busy corralling a more conspicuous community member who was arguing with everyone and everything around him. When a staff member took the rowdy patron outside—the snow stuck thick against the sidewalk—some of the community members chuckled. “Now he gonna feel that cold,” one man said, another adding, “That will sure wake him up.”

At service on another cold night, Alston wandered up the chapel aisle, scanning the community while a minister sang hymns. He stopped at one man slumped over and whispered to him. Without protest, Alston led the man outside. It was the first time Alston had to kick someone out. The man was drinking—against the Mission’s rules. “They could come in after drinking all day,” said Alston. “But we have to keep things in control once they’re here.”

“They don’t take no crap,” said an older community member on the Mission staff, who goes by Barry and declines to give his last name. He has stayed at the Mission on-and-off for three years, sometimes in emergency housing. He said he obeys the rules, but Barry found three empty beer bottles and a flask of vodka in the public bathroom one night. He’s also seen a few fights between community members. Occasionally, the Mission has to call the police. “Every place has rules,” he said.

To keep the peace, Alston and other staff pat-down and search community members for drugs, alcohol, and weapons before they sleep overnight.

Other resident staff members downplayed the danger—saying the pat-down search was primarily for drugs and alcohol, but not Alston. “It has to be under severe circumstances that they’re coming here,” he said. “You really don’t know what they’ve been through.”

Krivich and other staff admit conditions aren’t perfect at the Mission, but many homeless men still prefer it to city streets, which can be cold and dangerous. “My first winter here, I saw kids who were obviously from another neighborhood coming to party, abusing a guy on the street—they were kicking a homeless guy,” Krivich said.

Emergency shelter guests doubled during the first night of Hurricane Sandy, with 160 men sleeping in the Mission. Alston said the Mission was crowded, but not too hectic. “The community is used to disruptions,” he said. “They took it with a grain of salt.”

Though the Mission lost power for four days, the organization saw a surge in donations when the lights came back on. But now, a month after the storm, the hype over Sandy has receded. Some food supplies used to cook in-house meals at the Mission are running low again. As James Winan, the Mission’s director of development, explained, “We just want to remind people that there’s a daily emergency called homelessness and we’re responding to that emergency every day.”

The Bowery Mission describes its mission as compassion. Though maintaining order is difficult when the chapel is packed with winter refugees, staff consider the community to be guests in their own home. “There’s a lot of different moods, different characters, but they all want to be treated with respect,” said Alston.

Just under 30 degrees outside one night, a man stood in the middle of the Mission chapel with his eyes twitching rapidly, shifting his head back-and-forth, looking up-and-down the pews. Alston approached him. ““Scuse me sir, there’s some space up front for you if you’d like,” he said.

Bewildered, the man went down the aisle. Seconds later, he turned around and shoved past Alston, whose eyebrows met in frustration for an instant. Passing through the Mission’s old red doors, the man disappeared into the wind-whipped night. Alston sighed and went back to work.