

Witness

an online magazine

Devotion and the Martial Arts

Photographs & Text
by
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Fraternite Notre Dame



The Sisters of Fraternity Notre Dame

In 1991, a group of French nuns arrived in New York to open a mission. All of them were from the Order of Fraternite Notre Dame. Not one spoke English. Their first plan was to establish a soup kitchen for the poorest of the poor. They chose a storefront in Spanish Harlem and started working.

Within a short period of time, they arranged to have food that was to be thrown out by bakeries and restaurants donated to the mission. Nothing was wrong with the food. It was just business policy to discard anything that was not sold or eaten by day's end. The nuns give it to the hungry or serve it to the visitors of their soup kitchen.

Poverty is a fact of life in Spanish Harlem. It is one of the reasons the nuns chose to open a soup kitchen here. Every day they offer free meals to anyone who comes in. The kitchen feeds -- on average -- three-hundred people a day.

The nuns have developed a warm and friendly relationship with the surrounding community. Their neighbors enjoy their presence on the block and seem to look out for them. They do not proselytize, preferring to let their work quietly speak for itself.



For many people, the ability of getting one free meal a day means that they can save money for other bills and needs. This is true for the working poor, as well as, the homeless or unemployed.

Above a man patiently waits at the front door for the kitchen to open. The nuns also make weekly visits to the Times Square area to dispense food to the homeless.



The hot meals are prepared in the back of the storefront by the nuns. Most of the bread, rolls and pastry are donated by bakeries.





Sister Mary Chantel serves one of the kitchen's regulars. Sister Mary earned a black belt in judo before entering the convent. She was eager to resume the sport and found a martial arts center to work out. Ironically, the center was located in Hell's Kitchen. It was Sister Mary who got the other nuns interested in studying the martial arts. She is just over five feet tall and talks so quietly you can hardly hear her when she speaks.



A number of the sisters studying the martial arts work out regularly. The thought of using it on the streets to protect themselves was not the reason they began training. It was purely for exercise and recreation. “Even though we study the martial arts, it does not in any way take away from our religious calling,” says Sister Marie Francesca. “Our commitment to make a difference to those in need always comes first.”





Sister Mary takes her work out quite seriously. Several of the others are also very good, though they would never use the arts to hurt someone.



The nun's larger order has a choir that performs for audiences around the world. They often visit hospitals and other facilities to perform for the sick and elderly. The music is rich and beautiful. The nuns also care for AIDS patients at nearby hospitals in New York City.





The nuns often attend Mass together.

This project is a production of

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Vision Project is an organization dedicated to the development of documentary photography and educational programming related to still photography.

The goal of Vision Project is to produce documentary material and educational programs that encourage understanding and awareness about a broad variety of social issues. This information and programming are made available to the general public with a particular focus on members of the younger generation.

Vision Project seeks to reinforce the social, cultural and historical contribution that visual documentary work contributes to society. To reach these goals, we have assembled a group of talented professionals with extensive expertise in photography, web technology, journalism, design, and education.

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