At Home With The Homeless
By Ian Jamison

Like millions of other Americans, my first exposure to the Holy Apostles’ Soup Kitchen in New York City was through The Daily Show, where John Stewart and Aasif Mandvi used it in a satirical piece to underscore the effects of the sequester. Little did I know that just six weeks later I would be spending a transformative day inside the walls of the Big Apple’s finest soup kitchen, which provides over 1,200 meals to hundreds of guests in a city where over 50,000 Americans are homeless.

Immediately after entering Holy Apostles, our group was made to feel at home. A pair of volunteers welcomed us in and passed out aprons, hats, and the day's assignments. I reported to the garbage line, where I met volunteering veterans Tony and A.J. They easily accepted me into their group, and showed me the ropes in between stories about old Jets and Mets teams, and tips on where to find the city's best Italian food. Within minutes, people streamed through the doors. After some fits and starts, I got pretty fast at my routine, blazing around the dining area to bus tables and dump the trash. My last task was to carry the dishes back to the dishwashers—an older man who never failed to thank me when I dropped them off, and a curly-haired teen who other volunteers jokingly called “the fourth Jonas brother”.

Meanwhile, there were countless other things going on in other parts of Holy Apostles. A volunteer sat at a baby grand piano, playing Burt Bacharach and Beatles songs to the delight of the diners and volunteers alike. He was quickly joined by a homeless man, who, after finishing his meal, took out his harmonica to accompany the piano. Their haunting duet rang throughout the church until mealtime was over.

After eating, many of the guests headed back to the social services room, where they found counselors waiting to help them with issues ranging from drug and alcohol rehabilitation to legal aid, health care, and employment. Afterwards, they trickled back out onto the streets. Many turned around immediately to get another meal, others grabbed an apple for the road, while still others stayed to watch a matinee movie with the group after stopping to thank us for our work. They’ll be back—the diners and the volunteers both. As one volunteer put it, “I've been here for eight years. This is my family, these are my friends. It doesn't feel like volunteering when I come here. It feels like I'm coming home.”

The difference between Holy Apostles and other soup kitchens is that it’s not just set up to help the homeless survive; it aims to help them flourish. To some, Holy Apostles means a nutritious, much-needed meal before a return to life on the street. For others, it’s a place to get the resources they need to get their lives back on track, or to simply hear the sweet sound of piano music and feel the warmth of a friendly smile. To me, it was a reminder that although today's challenges are daunting, there are always selfless volunteers like Tony and A.J. rising to meet them. While Holy Apostles is many things to many people, it is above all a home, a social circle, a family of 1,200.