Our visit to the Holy Apostle Soup Kitchen defined my experience in New York City. People came from all over the city to eat and to volunteer. Immediately upon entering the church you could feel an ambiance of hope and compassion. Approximately 1,200 meals are served every weekday at this church. It is a mission that sees no rest and powers through every struggle to operate day after day, as it has for 30 years.

New York City had a 21 percent poverty rate in 2012, the highest rate since 2005. (Rodriguez, Sept) Many of those living in poverty work one or two jobs, many full-time. Because of hard economic times, a full time position may not be enough to continue supporting a family. One guest told me stories of his domestic and international travels. He hit a rough patch, and now, as a 63-year-old man, is struggling to support himself in New York City. The realization that poverty can affect anyone was solidified by my experience at the soup kitchen, and stories like his.

The Holy Apostle enlists 50-60 volunteers daily to help serve this population. The man working the station next to me recalled that at times volunteers have even been turned away because there were simply too many. This overwhelming support for the Soup Kitchen and their mission to help feed even some of New York’s hungry is inspiring.

I was surrounded by amazing people while I volunteered, including a Norwegian student doing research and field experience for an anthropology degree and a Thai immigrant who saw a need years ago and has been lending a helping hand ever since. All servers were genuine, and all guests were grateful and friendly.

Our course instructor was in charge of greeting people at the entryway. Many times she saw guests give hugs and kisses to veteran volunteers. They said this was because the community at the kitchen was their family.

In keeping with New York’s poverty statistics, it was apparent that minorities were over-represented in the soup kitchen. As a benchmark, African American’s make up 13% of the general population but 28% of the population living in poverty. (Law and Economic Justice). Also, the people at the soup kitchen often looked very presentable. This was a reminder once again that poverty spares no demographics. The person walking past you on the sidewalk who appears to be on lunch break from work may be headed to the soup kitchen.

It was the realization that poverty spares nobody that made this such a powerful experience. The woman dropping her son off at school or the man reading the paper next to you on the subway could both be affected by poverty. And for this cause, 50-60 volunteers every single day, rally the forces and do what they can to put a dent in hunger.

Poverty in New York City is a huge problem that is still on the rise. After dropping between 2005 and 2008, poverty rates have been increasing ever since. Twelve people from UW Madison visited one soup kitchen for one day. This experience has excited all of us to make a bigger difference in the case of poverty and hunger. The whole world must be challenged to take a step in the right direction. No matter how small the effort, it will have a big effect.