

Witness

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Fraternite Notre Dame

Devotion and the Martial Arts

Photographs & Text

by

Richard Falco





A Sister unloads apples for their soup kitchen.

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 in France. Not one of them 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.



A man patiently waits at the front door for the kitchen to open.



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.

The hot meals are prepared in a kitchen at the back of the storefront by the nuns. Most of the bread, rolls, and pastry are donated by bakeries. The nuns have worked out a system of pick-up and delivery for these products. They personally pick up the donations themselves on a daily basis.





A busy day at the soup kitchen.



Sister Mary Chantel serves one of the kitchen's regulars. Sister Mary earned a black belt in judo before she joined the nun's order. She was eager to resume the sport and found the martial arts center. Ironi-

cally, the center was located in Hell's Kitchen. It was Sister Mary who got the other nuns interested in working out. She is just five feet tall and talks so quietly you can hardly hear her when she speaks.



The choir begins. (top) Patients are wheeled into the hospital's auditorium to hear the nuns sing. (right)

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 Fraternity also made a decision to give special care and attention for patients suffering from HIV/AIDS. They visit many patients throughout the city's hospitals and hospices, providing company and when asked, a blessing. These visits are done on a weekly basis and many of the patients look forward to their arrivals. Some have developed a close relationship that goes beyond service. A number of hospitals are trying to increase these visits because they have shown to be so positive to the patients and hospital staff.





A patient with HIV/AIDS is visited.



Sister Mary takes her workout quite seriously. Several of the others also work out regularly, though they would never use the arts to hurt someone. They are now studying Tae Kwon Dae, a form of Korean Martial Arts.





Sister Mary performs a flying sidekick.



Richard Falco

Richard Falco is President of Vision Project/Photographer/Filmmaker. For the past thirty years he has worked as a photographer, filmmaker, and journalist. He has had assignments on four continents in over thirty-five countries and has worked for many major magazines, including: *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Geo*, *Life Magazine*, *New York Times*, *U.S. News & World Report*, to name a few. There are two published books of Mr. Falco's work: *Medics: A Documentation of Paramedics in the Harlem Community* and *To Bear Witness/September 11*, and two eBooks: *Hunger and Rice in Asia* and *Witchcraft: Ancient Traditions Alive In Salem*. He is the director of the films *Crossroads: Rural Health Care In America* and *Holding Back The Surge*, and is the executive producer of *Josie: A Story About Williams Syndrome*.

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For further information contact:

Vision Project Inc.

www.visionproject.org

info@visionproject.org