

# The New York Times

BIG CITY

## A Warm, Safe Holiday for Homeless Youth



Piotr Redlinski for The New York Times  
Homeless teens opened presents at the Streetwork shelter in Harlem.



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Liza Zaretsky, 36, director of the Streetwork shelter, Prepared breakfast with other counselors in Harlem.

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It's hard to wake up teenagers in the morning. It's even harder to wake up homeless teenagers. They stay out late. They sleep poorly. They have bad dreams. And they may have nowhere to go.

The Overnight shelter in Harlem has a 9 a.m. deadline for its 18 guests, ages 16 to 21, to be up and out, and rousing them is one of the most stressful aspects of the job for her staff, said Liza Zaretsky, the director of the shelter, which is run by Streetwork, a division of the Safe Horizon victim assistance organization.

Then there is Christmas.

On Christmas, the shelter lets guests sleep as late as they like, in beds that are warm, clean and safe.

Yet by 8:30 a.m. Friday, a quiet, serious-looking 19-year-old in a sleeveless undershirt had wandered downstairs, yawning, joining five or six others around the shelter's long kitchen table, some of them in red sweatshirts; many, like him, in pajama bottoms. A

few had already had hot chocolate with big pastel marshmallows, served by staff members in Santa hats.

“I’m kind of excited,” admitted a baby-faced 20-year-old in red fleece, who said he was relieved to be spending Christmas in this relatively intimate, familial setting rather than the anonymity of Wards Island, a complex of shelters serving more than 800 people. The young man had passed too many nights there since leaving Indiana a year or so ago (he and his mother “couldn’t live under one roof,” he explained). “Most people think it’s the worst,” he said.

A coveted safe spot for homeless youth — “It’s the crème de la crème,” is how a guest described it — the Overnight shelter houses people for 30 days at a time, with the possibility of a 30-day extension. The staff tries to help guests find permanent housing, reunite with family, or get medical, mental-health or drug treatment. But if all they want is a safe place to get off the street for a few nights, the staff is happy to provide it.

“They’ve been abused by the very people who were supposed to help them, and they’ve had to survive the only way they can, so we try to meet them where they are,” said David Nish, vice president of [youth services for Safe Horizon](#).

“Just like we all have this idea that somewhere else people are having a perfect, ideal Christmas, they do, too,” added Mr. Nish, who invited a reporter for Christmas on the condition that guests not be named. “But while most of our families — although they may be quirky or dysfunctional — are basically fine, these young people have nothing.”

One young woman, wearing cowhide-print pajamas, said that had she not made it into the shelter, she probably would have spent Christmas Eve on the L train, where a conductor who comes on duty at 4:30 a.m. usually rouses her from underneath her blanket. Another woman, 18, said she usually killed time during the day at an Apple Store. “There’s the Internet,” she said. “Plus, it’s a nice place to be when you don’t have anything better to do.”

A slight young man wearing an oversize black suit jacket over a black sweatshirt met Christmas with mixed feelings. He sells his artwork on a corner in the East Village but lacks money for art supplies. He was glad to spend the holiday at the shelter, but nervous about the next day, his 21st birthday. He would be aging out of the Overnight,

so Christmas night would be his last at a place that “feels more like home than my own home ever did.”

Where he would spend the following night, or the following Christmas, he could not say. Rather than go to a large shelter for adults, he said, “I’ll ride the trains or sleep in a doorway.”

As for the 19-year-old in the sleeveless undershirt, he had sat, wordless, as the others belted out Christmas songs along with the radio or hugged one another or gossiped about in-house crushes. Just before 9 a.m., Ms. Zaretsky handed the young man a red-wrapped present: a gray T-shirt with a striking graphic, and an expensive-looking polo shirt. His face registered a small look of pleasure, or was it surprise?

“Thank you,” he said, looking directly at Ms. Zaretsky. Then he opened the card. He lingered over it, reading every one of the affectionate greetings and inside jokes that had been scrawled by the various staff members at the shelter. As he read it, and read it again, a smile finally crept across his face.

How had this year’s presents compared to those of years past? “Anything,” he said, “is better than nothing.”

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