



Homeless in Washington

Each weekend, the St. Paul's, K Street Grate Patrol distributes breakfast on the District's downtown streets

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The corridors of power look different before dawn.

The wind whips around Washington's gray federal buildings without pity, slicing across polished granite facades and lashing the large metal statues of heroes and horsemen.

Cold seeps up from the cement sidewalks, claws through the slats on park benches and gusts

into the doorways and alleys where the city's homeless huddle.

In the midwinter darkness, Mother Nature has the upper hand on the National Mall.

On this particular January morning, an ordinary white car appears in the empty streets.

A casual observer might not notice it at first, but if they looked long enough, they might

see something different.

The car's driver, a slender young woman in a short black coat, isn't in a hurry, as most people are when traveling the deserted downtown streets in the darkness.

She's crawling along in a low gear, looking left and right. Her husband is perched in the back seat with Styrofoam trays of hot coffee balanced in his lap.

They are Charlene Mui and Michael Welch, parishioners of St. Paul's, K Street, and a dog-eared sign in the car's back window identifies their mission: Grate Patrol.

Soup and sympathy

Grate Patrol was born 24 years ago, when a St. Paul's parishioner who worked at the American Red Cross offices on

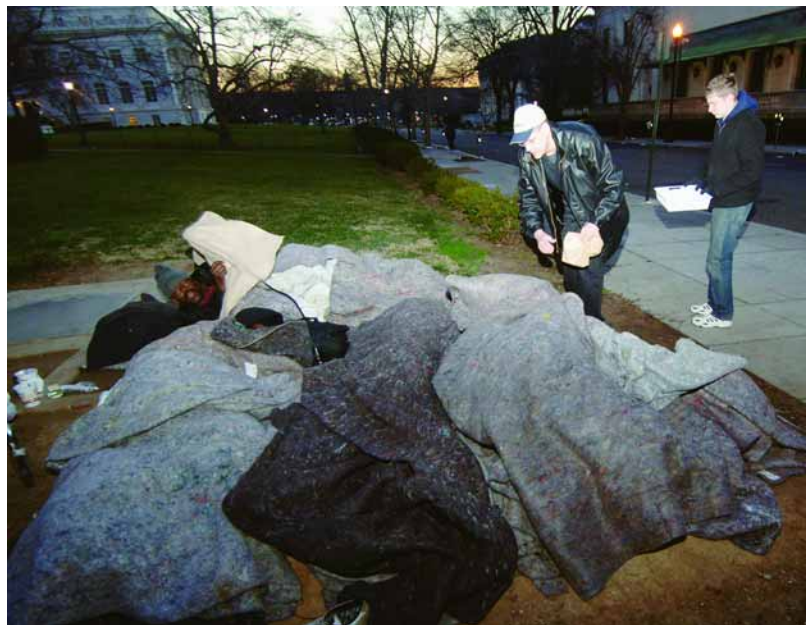
K Street began to bring a flask of soup to share with the homeless people huddled on the grate outside the building.

Before long, St. Paul's curate, the Rev. Robert Waggener, joined him and the two gradually ventured further, seeking out people sleeping in the rising steam.

"We started the Grate Patrol in

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BEFORE DAYBREAK

Shawn Shafer, Robert Eikel, Brian Siebeking, Todd Webb and Tina Mallett pause for a prayer in the St. Paul's, K Street parking lot before heading out on Grate Patrol (bottom left, opposite). Each Saturday and Sunday morning, volunteers deliver coffee and almost 400 meals to homeless people sleeping rough in Georgetown and on the National Mall. The early morning start makes it easier to find people, who begin to move around once the sun comes up. "The whole effort got its name from those big steam grates," said Tina Mallett, the program's main leader since the 1980s. "That was quite a common sight, to see people in the middle of all of this steam." Fewer people sleep on the grates these days, she said, as the vapors are "pretty noxious, and while you're warm while you're sitting on it, you get dripping wet."

How many people are homeless?

On any given day in 2006, more than 12,000 people in the Washington metropolitan area were literally homeless, according to the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments Homeless Enumeration Report.

This classification means they had no shelter at all, were in emergency shelters or transitional housing temporarily or were in precarious housing and at imminent risk of losing it.

Nationwide, a 2004 study conducted by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty estimates that approximately 3.5 million people, 1.35 million of them children, are likely to experience homelessness in a given year.

According to the National Coalition for Homelessness, "homelessness is impossible to measure with 100 percent accuracy. More important than knowing the precise number of people who experience homelessness is our progress in ending it."

The Grate Patrol

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a very small way," said Tina Mallett, an organizer and volunteer for the program since its inception. "In the beginning, one person or two would buy the food, prepare it, take it out."

Now the program, which operates on weekend mornings, distributes breakfast to close to 400 people a week and costs the parish around \$20,000 a year.

Volunteers gather in the Parish Hall on Friday afternoons to make sandwiches - tuna or pimento cheese for Saturday distribution and peanut butter and jelly for Sunday - and to pack brown paper bags with a hard boiled egg, a banana, condiments and a slip of paper inscribed with the church's address, a "good morning" greeting and a Bible verse.

"Some people say they do hold onto the prayer," Mallett said. "People on the route have shown me their collection. We've had complaints when we

don't change the verse."

Tina Mallett's map

Tina Mallett's map of the Mall is not like the ones used by tourists. And Mallett is not your typical cartographer, with an eye for unchanging topography.

This gentle woman, who wears a knitted orange headband and an equally warm smile, maintains an ever-evolving guide for the Grate Patrol team.

There are no monuments on her map, no museums or attractions. Just markings that indicate the spots where the destitute are usually to be found.

Mallett gathers her updates on the streets - "mainly from one person saying, 'There's someone else over there.'"

Marks are erased if someone isn't in a particular spot for a month or so, and new ones chart the ebb and flow of those struggling to survive in the parks, alleys and wide avenues of the nation's capital city.

Can you help?

Grate patrol volunteers meet in the St. Paul's, K Street Parish Hall to make sandwiches for weekend delivery from 3 to 5 p.m. each Friday afternoon.

Delivery volunteers meet in the church parking lot at 5:30 a.m. each Saturday and Sunday, returning to the church between 8:30 and 9 a.m.

"We welcome help," organizer Tina Mallett said. "Any portion of it, we're really happy to have help."

For more information about volunteering, e-mail admin@gratepatrol.org. To contribute money, write a check to the parish with Grate Patrol in the memo line, and mail it to St. Paul's Church, 2430 K Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20037-1797.



Hitting the streets

Map in hand, two first-time grate patrollers, Kate Bittinger, in earth shoes, and Jeanne Smith, in a red beret, load Smith's Subaru Outback in the cold church parking lot.

"Kate and I are here on a project for our catechumen class," Smith said, spreading plastic bags in her trunk to catch coffee spills. "We're not normal grate patrollers."

"I said how about Friday afternoon when they make the sandwiches and Kate - she works - said how about Sunday morning at 5 o'clock? So we're here!"

Inside, Mui and Welch, who have been driving the Mall route every three weeks for the last year, are pouring coffee from a large silver urn into multiple paper cups.

When the two vehicles are loaded, Mallett, who has arrived, smiling, in an orange jacket, leads the group in prayer. The volunteers cross themselves, then head off in different direc-

tions - Bittinger, Smith and Mallett to Georgetown and Mui and Welch to the Mall.

Creeping through the dark streets, Mui and Welch scan grates, doorways and benches, conferring quietly about the route.



At the Corcoran College of Art and Design they spot a huddle of blankets on a bench, and Welch jumps out to place a bag and cup into a hooded man's

outstretched hand.

Outside the American Institute of Architects, a man is snoring under a pile of blankets next to a shopping cart. Mui pulls over and flips on her hazard lights while Welch places a cup and bag on the sidewalk near the

man's head and leaps back into the car.

There's no one in the first small park they come to, but in the sharp cold "they're all over





IN THE ST. PAUL'S PARISH HALL, Tina Mallett (inset) and the other volunteers load boxes of food to take down to the waiting cars for distribution. The food is prepared on Friday afternoons by a team of volunteers and stored in two giant white Igloo coolers.



this side by the grates," Mui said, pointing to the other side of the street.

"Look at them waiting for us. They know we're coming."

Peering through the gloom and steam, they crawl past the American Foreign Service Association, the Department of the Navy, the National Academy of Sciences, the State Department and the Department of Housing and Urban Development, taking turns to "run," traversing parks and ducking into alleys to deliver breakfast.

Lost in the city

In a small park near George Washington University, a woman in blankets refuses the food Welch offers.

"She said she was waiting for her embassy," he reports, returning to the car. "She said her embassy would take care of her."

It's a theme with which Mallett is well familiar.

"I think Washington has always been a Mecca for people who are deluded in some way," she said. "They want to present their case to the FBI; the President is here. People come here with an agenda."

She sighs. She has heard incoherent accounts of injustices; has put out calls to try to track down officials and agencies that don't exist.

"There's almost no way that they're going to get their story - if it's even true - to the proper magistrates or whatever," she said. "Also [the legal process] takes a lot of energy for people with all their faculties and all their financial and other resources."

She looks at her hands, quiet for a moment.

"I do think if you're with it enough, you can survive pretty well on the streets," she said, pointing out that there are several hundred agencies in the area dedicated to helping people in dire straits. "But if you're mentally ill, you're really pretty lost."

- a snowy Epiphany in 1984 when St. Paul's opened its dining room to people sleeping rough.

After another stroke killed him, St. Paul's claimed his body, she said, brushing away sudden tears. He is now interred in the church's columbarium.



Singing the blues

Noras Ross was a regular presence at the parish during the 1980s.

A homeless African American pursuing obscure grievances, he would stand on K Street outside St. Paul's and preach to the apartments opposite until he got hoarse, Mallett said.

He had an affable persona, a stream-of-consciousness delivery and a voice like Louis Armstrong.

Then he had a stroke.

"We got him into a hospital and then into a nursing home," she said, explaining that until then, he had only spent one night indoors in recent memory

"I used to pass by these buildings all the time and didn't notice [the homeless]. Or I did notice, but I didn't know what to do."

She points out the fashionable restaurants favored by lobbyists where she books her boss for lunch as she hands out coffee

of train yourself to tune it out," Bittinger said, mulling over the experience in a coffee shop near her Capitol Hill office. "When you do the Grate Patrol, you have to kind of tune yourself back in."

Struggling to see

This heightened awareness is "very powerful," Bittinger said.

"Right afterward, I looked more carefully," she said. "It was hard. ... I work on Capitol Hill. I see them - I see it - every day. I see them. I think about it. I pray for them, but, you know... I kind of wish more people would do Grate Patrol."

Driving past McPherson Square, Bittinger recalls, she Smith and Mallett didn't see anyone but a backpacker.

"We just started to circle around," she said. "And then we parked and got out, and people just started coming to us. I don't really know where they were coming from, but they just sort of came."

"A lot of them know Tina. If it was me and I gave them coffee they'd probably just say thank you or something. But with Tina it was, 'Tina I want to tell you about my diabetes; Tina I want to tell you what happened to me last week.'"

Returning to St. Paul's for Sunday Mass after all the meals have been given out, tired and cold, Mui and Welch wonder if they've done enough.

"We can't catch everybody," Mui said. "We don't have enough food for everybody, either."

But passing McPherson Square, they take heart.

"They've all got their bags," Welch said. "You know Tina was here."

"On the Grate Patrol we've been able to bury several people," she said. "We've been able to help people who needed medical help."

In December, one of the regulars on the route died, and the church is now in the process of claiming his body for burial, as no one else has come forward.

"Last week, someone died," she said. She hears about these events - death, illness - on the streets each week.

Two worlds

"I used to work at the World Bank," Mui said, rolling to a stop outside the entrance. "So the first time I saw it [on Grate Patrol], I cried.

and extra packets of sugar on the sidewalk outside.

As dawn breaks and cirrus clouds ripple over the dome of the Capitol, Welch remarks on "the poverty and the homeless people right in front of the buildings that run our country."

Returning from the Georgetown route, Smith describes her morning amid the historic neighborhood's upscale shops as "sobering."

"I didn't realize how many homeless were tucked away in how many nooks and crannies," she said. "I was surprised at how much homelessness there was in a very high-priced area."

"In your life, you kind of walk the streets of D.C. and you kind