

# SALVATION COMES... SOUTH BRONX STYLE

The South Bronx appears to be delivering its young to the Army recruiters in numbers larger and with zest more wholehearted than Scarsdale has so far condescended to show. Give and it shall be returned to you tenfold, the Scriptures say; but America's most conspicuous gift to this South Bronx so ready to pay her back is Brook Avenue and 138th Street.

The New York State Division of Substance Abuse has parked one of its four Heart Project vans beside Brook Avenue's open-air drug bazaar through every afternoon this week. Salvation must start its slow workings where ruin runs its swift ones.

Robert Johnson, substance abuse counselor, spent the afternoon distributing



Brook Avenue's symbols of stability are its drug peddlers and its police patrol cars endlessly cruising and never interfering. It is a regular port of call for the addicted from blocks around, because the one fact of life they can trust is that the dealers will always be there.

condoms to passersby. The condom's primary official function is as a prophylactic against AIDS, which especially ravages intravenous drug users.

But now and then a student from the junior high school up the block would stop

to accept her condom. These were goods available to all who came to warn all customers not to buy "tango and cash," an immeasurably toxic mix of heroin and fentanyl conceived in the South Bronx and currently testing its market on Brook Avenue.

"We have to be careful about the message that's going out," Hilda Roman-Nay, the van program's director, sadly said. "We talk about this drug's 'potency' and about its 'tranquilizers' and these are just the words that attract the user. We have to tell them that this stuff can kill you."

At noon on Brook Avenue on Ash Wednesday, condoms were being handed out at state expense and the nearest library was still closed because official economies had forced a cut in its hours. The tools of safe sin were there for free and books were unavailable; and what respectable society was being told about the state's substance abuse division was that it was teaching the user to stick to the long-run killer and shun the short.

The sense was somehow arising that we, its fancied betters, could henceforth prescribe nothing for Brook Avenue except condoms and a consumer's guide to nonfatal drugs for those who would never be more than animals penned in their preserve.

And then a visitor turned to Hilda Roman-Nay and was surprised into hope. Along with its condoms, the Substance Abuse Heart Project van was passing out cards listing the emergency services it can provide, as the homeless junkie's only real estate broker.

The addict anxious for change and unable to cope comes to Hilda Roman-Nay's van and asks how he can find a

treatment program. No hospital will take him, since he has no means identification, sometimes because he has sold his Medicaid card in desperate want of any other marketable possessions. Hilda Roman-Nay starts him off anew with a registration questionnaire that lists 17 varieties of the drugs that have brought him low.

She has restored his ticket to the system, and he can use it in one of the hospitals where the substance abuse division has established special priorities for itself. "I don't think we've ever had a client who has had to wait longer than two weeks," Hilda Roman-Nay says.

Her pride is in rescues like those accomplished the Greenpoint therapeutic unit that has settled a third of its clients in steady jobs. Victory in one case out of every three is to her a prodigy; and she has helped win through to it by refusing to think of the victims on Brook Avenue as animals permanently lost to their better selves. It would take a thousand fold multiplication of public servants like her to redeem us; and, after all, bombs must be bought and stadiums refurbished, and public money cannot be loosely thrown about.



**Commentary By Murray Kempton**  
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