

"All the News
That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

New York: Today, becoming sunny. High 65. Tonight, increasing clouds, showers. Low 49. Tomorrow, mostly sunny, still mild. High 65. Yesterday, high 63, low 43. Details, page B16.

C O N N E C T I C U T

A New Mission on New, Mean Streets

Special to The New York Times

BRIDGEPORT, Conn., Dec. 29 — Two years ago, the Rev. Jim Watson was executive director of a mission in Fairmont, W. Va., that ran a soup kitchen, a 100-bed shelter and a 111-acre children's camp.

But now Mr. Watson, 41, a Baptist minister, is working on the streets of Bridgeport, running a shelter and feeding the homeless in the most dangerous sections of Connecticut's largest city.

"I wanted to come to a city that had horrible problems and a large homeless population with a desperate need for help," said Mr. Watson, who moved to the city in May 1993 with his wife, Tammy, and their three children. "I wanted to be in a place where people had hit rock bottom, but would be open to changing their lives. It didn't take me long to realize I had come to the right place."

With the support of the International Union of Gospel Missions, an advocacy group for the homeless, and 10 city and suburban churches, the Watsons set up the Bridgeport Rescue Mission, turning a former drug den on Harriet Street, in the city's notorious East End, into a 14-bed shelter.

People can stay for six months to a year if they are willing to work in the

we are meant to be."

Mr. Watson said his work and faith were paying off.

Raymond Nastu, 37, a drug addict who has been arrested more than 80 times for offenses ranging from possession of drugs to barroom brawling, spent six months in the shelter and is now living with his family in Bridgeport and working as a carpenter.

He credits Mr. Watson's no-nonsense approach and the mission's family atmosphere for giving him a chance at a new life. "I really should

three nights a week and on holidays.

On a recent night, the homeless lined up early. Men, women and children in torn jeans and dirty sneakers with holes large enough to reveal their toes waited eagerly in the parking lot of the city's welfare building for hot stew and a warm blanket.

David Ramus, 24, said he lost his apartment and had not eaten in days after being laid off from his job. "I just thank God there are people like this willing to stand out here and give people like me a hot meal," he said.

The rescue mission goes to places like Washington Park, one of the city's best-known drug dealing locations, and McLeary Park, another area frequented by drug dealers and prostitutes. The mission feeds several hundred people a week.

"Reverend Watson has a real knack with the street people," said the Rev. Stanley Alaby, pastor of Black Rock Congregational Church in neighboring Fairfield, who was among a group of area clergy who urged Mr. Watson to establish a mission in Bridgeport. "He seems to understand their pain and they trust him enough to share their pain with him. It's a tough assignment, but he's doing a magnificent job."

A minister turns a drug den into a shelter for needy.

have been dead so many times I can't even keep track anymore," Mr. Nastu said, "and I was pretty much ready to die until I found this place. I never had people care about me the way they did here, and that gave me the hope and courage to believe I could change."

Mr. Nastu is among the volunteers who deliver food to the homeless



The Rev. Jim Watson, center, talks with Ismael Rivera, left, and Sixto Baez, who both need a place to stay. Carl David Lubiano for The New York Times