Homelessness in New York City is a serious issue that has been on the rise from the last couple of years. According to the Coalition for the Homeless, the nation’s oldest service to the homeless people, they have found out that in New York City, around November 2017, there were 63,169 homeless people, including 15,712 homeless families with 23,694 homeless children. Those numbers are the highest rates since the Great Depression in the 1930s. There are many factors that go into this such as: eviction; doubled-up or severely overcrowded housing; domestic violence; job loss; and hazardous housing conditions. To be frank, gentrification has been growing rampant in New York City for almost a decade, especially in the borough of Brooklyn. Many people, who are mainly African-Americans, West Indian and Hispanic people, who lived in Brooklyn for several decades were either kicked out or bought out due to rent rising from $800 to $1,300 a month. Even in a November 2014 report issued by the city’s Independent Budget Office. They found that from 2002 to 2012, families entering homeless shelters came in the largest numbers from three neighborhoods in Brooklyn: Northern Crown Heights, East New York and Stuyvesant Heights. While at the other hand of gentrification’s construction of a new Brooklyn, millennial college-students started to move in areas like Bedford-Stuyvesant, Flatbush, and Downtown Brooklyn. Areas that were considered dangerous 20 years ago, is culturally different and sane, even as I walk down those streets, it feels that the Brooklyn that I grew up around is gone. Now the people who created the culture of Brooklyn are now sitting on the steps of 35th street, just trying to survive the dead winter of New York City.

Enter in Aaron Jackson and William Braxton, two ELT members of SAAB have noticed the rise of homelessness in New York City and they set out a goal to be a help towards the cause. On December 23rd, two days before Christmas, they spread some holiday joy by creating the Brown Paper Bag Project which stemmed from Aaron’s personal project he did when he was in High School. They stuffed in sandwiches, personal hygiene kits and other donations people gave in. Throughout the interview you will read the process, the challenges and the satisfaction that these two brothers took the time out from their lives, just to make someone smile and feel loved during the holidays.

So tell me from whose idea that started the Paper Brown Bag Project?

Aaron: It was my idea. So basically, it was a project that I had somewhat did similarly during high school. And I also did it while I was at another school, previously, before I was here. So I really just wanted to bring that to campus, and a lot of other organizations do it, as well. But I just wanted to see if we could do it for SAAB and to see what kind of impact we would have on the community. And that's the reason why.

When did you wanting to make it real?

Aaron: I wanted to make it real-- I was always thinking about it because I feel like reaching out to the homeless is, or to those less fortunate, is always something that we should be doing,
especially with stuff that was happening with all the hurricanes that happened this previous year in 2017. A lot of organizations on campus were doing a lot of efforts to aid people in Puerto Rico, and Texas, and Florida. So around that time -- I would say around after Thanksgiving when I was like, "Yo, we should do a community service project." Brought it to the table at one of the meetings [the following week]. They were like, "Oh, just plan it out. See how it go." And then it was really on from there.

William, when was you brought into this project and what was your vision when you heard that Aaron wanted you in the project?

William: Aaron brought me into it early on. He messaged me about it, and I thought it was a good idea. And of course, it's giving to the homeless, and I just thought it would be just something nice you just execute no matter the time.

So the plan in process, now it is official. How did the planning process go?

Aaron: The planning process went, I would say, pretty smoothly. For the most part, I had got people to donate some stuff. Durron Newman from the Campus Recreational Center, he donated some hygiene kits. I had some other people donate also. I brought some stuff from my house that I wasn't using. I had some people donate some clothes. So it was really easy to get people onboard to do stuff. It was just really finding the time that was good enough, and really trying to execute the vision that I had. So once I got everything in place, it was kind of just figuring out a day, time when we could do it, and then doing what we had to do.

William: As for making the sandwiches, that's something that's real easy to do. You just go out to the store and buy a whole bunch of bread, jelly and peanut butter. I was surprised at the price it even came up to. I think it was about 12 to 15 dollars all together. So we made the sandwiches, wrap them up, and we were good to go.

What would you say the challenges of planning the Brown Paper Bag Project?

Aaron: In all honesty, it was trying to get people involved. It was a tough time when we were trying to plan it, especially because people were either just finishing finals or trying to transition going back home. Like myself, I had finished finals that Friday before. For me it was an attitude of, "All right. It's no big deal for me." Getting other people to be on board who wanted to do it was difficult. But it wasn't really about the people [by] that point. It was about the people that we were trying to reach. So if even though we didn't get the turn out we wanted to get from people to come out, we still went that day with our goal in mind. We did what we had to do, and we touched some people. Because a lot of people around that time get forgotten about. Or the people feel that's the only time they're thought about is when the holiday season comes. At end of the day, as long as we do what we set out to do, that's really all that matters.

Let's move on to December 23rd, the day that it happened. It also happened on the day before Christmas Eve. How did that go?

William: It went well. We were down at Penn Station. And at first, we had got our stuff together, figured out where we were going to go, coordinate what we had between each other, and kind of
consolidated it into the bags that Aaron had brought. Then, we just went around and outside of Penn Station, just keeping an eye out. We went to the people, told them what's in the bag, and whatnot. Talking with them, too. Sometimes people would come up and be like, "Oh. Are you guys handing out bags? Do you think you could spare one?" And stuff like that. It went really well. It's not a hard thing to, necessarily, do. It's not too complicated. It's a very easy, manageable thing that I honestly think, after having done it, we should be doing more.

*What was your favorite moments of the Brown Paper Bag Project?*

Aaron: The biggest highlight for me? We were almost done, actually. Maybe we were down to our last two bags. We ran into this guy while we were walking back, and we stopped him. We asked him, "Oh, do you need anything? We got some stuff. Do you need something?" And he was like, "Yeah." And so we gave him it. After we did that, we had a small conversation with him. He basically told us, it's not about what you say, it's about what you do.

For me, it hit home. Especially when we were doing the project. We're out here doing something for them, and just for him to give those words, "I appreciate you for doing." I mean, everybody definitely-- they probably appreciated it, but he was one of those people that definitely said, "I appreciate ya'll for what ya'll are doing today." He even said a lot of people don't even want to come up to him and talk to him. And to the simple fact that we did that, it warmed my heart, in all honesty, because we did that for him. When we parted, I left a little emotional because I'm like, "That could be anybody. That could be anybody I know. That could be myself. That could be somebody I'm close to." So the fact that I'm in the position to give back to someone else, it really just did it for me.

William: One of my favorite things about doing the project was that it was very humbling. We have a lot to be thankful for. We don't think about it too often. Many of us are very lucky to have what we have. While we're handing out stuff, Aaron had brought a whole bunch of-- he had a bag of sweatshirts, right. Sometimes we'd go to say, "Hey, do you need a sweatshirt or anything?" Sometimes they'll say, "Oh, no. Give it to someone else who need it more than me." Or it's all just the little stuff that people say like, "Oh, I'm good. Give it to someone else." It's just very humbling. Where sometimes these people, despite having so little, they want to make sure there's stuff for others who may also be in the same situation they are. And it's very humbling.

*Those are two empowering stories. So just to wrap this up, I know you said that this is something that you look forward to do next time. Would you want to do this on a larger scale? Or you want to do more of a humbling approach? So that way there are people coming out, but the heart is still there?*

William: Honestly, I would just want to just do it on a small scale because once it becomes large, in my opinion, becomes hard to plan, hard to manage, and whatnot.

Aaron: Especially as a college student.
William: Yeah. But if it's small, we can be like, "Alright. Let's go out on this day." or "Alright, we went out on this day. When's the next time we want to do it again?" Easy to coordinate with just a few people. And if you can make it out, good. If you can't, understandable. But it keeps that goal in mind.

Aaron: Yeah. I would definitely wouldn't mind doing it again. I would like to make the group a little larger. For some people, they might not really realize the effect of giving back to somebody because, they may not really gotten that chance to. They might grew up living a certain type of way, but it makes you realize that we are all people at the end of the day. So I think, if we can just get that and get back on the ball rolling again, then I'm definitely with it. Then we'll just see what happens after that.

References:
