Antonia Hernandez’s neighbors call her abuela, grandma in Spanish. Her age and her weight are in total harmony: 87. She is originally from the Dominican Republic, from San Pedro de Macorís, “where the good baseball players come from,” she said.

She smokes cigarettes in the lobby of her Washington Heights building and keeps an old wooden baseball bat by the door of her apartment, just in case.

Preston Hale is a New Yorker, born and raised, a humble 60-year-old with stories to tell about the years he spent as a merchant seaman and as a Manhattan cabdriver.

In a city of 8,143,197, Mrs. Hernandez and Mr. Hale might have been just two more strangers. But they have come to know and depend on each other through the simplest of things. The kind of thing often taken for granted by the healthy, the rich and the young: a hot meal.

Mr. Hale regularly brings food to Mrs. Hernandez’s door. She has trouble cooking because her hands do not work like they once did; her husband died years ago, and her son did, too. Whenever she greets Mr. Hale, she blesses him and asks the Lord to watch over him.

Mr. Hale does not speak Spanish, but he said that did not really matter. “Sign language, mostly,” he said of how they communicate.

By the end of his brief visits, amid the blessings and the kiss on the cheek and the aroma of beef stew or roast turkey, it is unclear just who has nourished whom.

“She makes my day,” Mr. Hale said. “If I don’t see Mama, I’m a bit out of it.”

Mr. Hale and Mrs. Hernandez have Citymeals-on-Wheels to thank for their social and culinary bond.

Citymeals, a nonprofit group that finances the preparation and delivery of meals to homebound and elderly New Yorkers, provides 2.5 million free meals each year to Mrs. Hernandez and more than 17,500 others.

On weekends, holidays and whenever there is a citywide emergency like a snowstorm or blackout, the food is delivered by centers for the elderly and other groups. The city’s Department for the Aging oversees the weekday deliveries.

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg is scheduled to deliver Citymeals’ estimated 34 millionth meal in Queens on Christmas Day, the 25th anniversary of the campaign that led to the creation of the organization.
It all started on a November morning in 1981, when Gael Greene read a story in The New York Times about elderly people who received weekday meals from the city but none on weekends and holidays.

“I said, ‘This can’t be,’ ” said Ms. Greene, then the restaurant critic for New York magazine. So she called James Beard, the legendary food writer, and they rallied their friends in the food world, raising enough money to feed 6,000 people that Christmas.

The organization has since expanded, financing some weekday deliveries and other programs. Citymeals survives for the most part on donations, and Ms. Greene is chairwoman of the board of directors.

About 300,000 of the nearly one million New Yorkers 65 and older live alone. A survey by Citymeals and Cornell University, which is soon to be released, illustrated the vulnerability of the organization’s clients. About half had difficulty walking most of the time, the survey said. About 40 percent said they rarely or never left their homes. Fourteen percent relied solely on the food provided by Citymeals. Seventy-three percent of those surveyed lived alone.

“It’s the nutrition, and the human company,” Marcia Stein, the executive director of Citymeals, said of the group’s mission.

To spend an afternoon on food runs for the homebound is to see a hidden New York, a lonely city where old men live in cubicle-size rooms. There is the elderly gentleman in 6A with emphysema, unable to leave his apartment for two weeks because of a broken elevator. There are men and women too frail to walk to the grocery or to stand for very long at the kitchen stove, and they have family too far away to visit regularly or no family at all.

Yet the hundreds of New Yorkers who deliver the meals see the other side of aging as well — the quiet majesty of a life well lived. Were the deliverers ever to collect the tales they have been told over the years in a book, it would read like a history of the city itself. “Every meal is a story,” Mrs. Stein said. “Every deliverer, every driver.”

In one apartment lives the man who designed a regulation leather jacket for the New York Police Department. In another one, the first black musician to play with the Metropolitan Opera. In yet another, one of the veteran shoemakers of Drago Shoe Repair shops.

James Peoples, 80, cannot make out the faces of the people who deliver meals to his Upper Manhattan apartment because of his failing eyesight, but he can describe to them what it was like singing at the Apollo Theater in Harlem.

Alice Mitchell, 92, likes to sit in her rocking chair in her apartment on West 102nd Street and talk about her life in Hungary, coming to America and the framed photo she keeps of her favorite physicist, Albert Einstein. “It’s a blessing,” she said of the meals. “I wouldn’t be able to cook because I cannot stand in the kitchen for 10 minutes.”

One recent morning, a blue van navigated the streets of Washington Heights, stocked with the day’s meals and beverages, prepared and delivered by the ARC XVI Fort Washington Senior Center.

William Johnson, 65, stood in the back, overseeing the morning’s deliveries with sweat on his brow and a
newspaper in his back pocket. His crew, which included Mr. Hale, was an eclectic bunch. The meals on this day were being carried up long flights of stairs and hand-delivered in the rain by young and old, male and female.

Mr. Johnson, who has lived in New York for decades but has held on to his Virginia Beach accent, said it was hard work, but well worth the trouble.

“I don’t mind it,” he said. “Maybe someday someone will do it for me.”