

Poverello News



April 2008

(559) 498-6988

www.poverellohouse.org



April is a month that many of us dread. Tax season may be a happy time for accountants or those who are getting a refund, but for others it's very unpleasant. Few of us enjoy doing income taxes, but that may be because few of us enjoy dealing with budgeting or taking a detailed look at our spending habits.

I'm no different, even here at Poverello.

Ever since I came to work at Poverello House in 1990, I've worried about funding. I guess part of my job description as Executive Director is to fret over finances, but the fears haven't subsided over the years, even when things are going well.

Poverello House has grown far beyond the hand-to-mouth existence that made the early days so hard. We have a wonderfully generous donor base that provides monetary and in-kind contributions steadily, without which we wouldn't be able to stay open.

However, as the economy goes, often so goes Poverello House, and right now the economic outlook is uncertain. Our donations fluctuate with good and bad times in the nation and the Central Valley.

As Poverello has gotten bigger, so have the bills. I was sobered by the shocking realization that in 2007, Poverello spent more than \$100,000 on utilities. That's the price of operating facilities that feed thousands and provide a range of services 365 days a year. Although I encourage employees to conserve energy, we can't do much to change utility costs without curtailing services, which we want to avoid. Nor do we have any control over gasoline prices, or the rising costs of other needed items that are affected by skyrocketing transportation costs.

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None of this makes Poverello unique, of course. The financial struggles we have mirror the difficulties of everyday people, who are our donors. Yet, even though our donations rise and fall with the economy, they have never, in my tenure, reached a critically low level that has forced us to cut back on what we do for the poor. This is an extremely important fact. It tells me a lot about our donors.

Mainly it tells me that we have a solid foundation of people who are decent, hardworking and charitable. Many of them economize when things get tough, but almost all of our regular donors make sure they continue to donate to Poverello, even if they are struggling financially. Some give under almost impossible circumstances. I'll never forget, a few years ago, when we received one dollar and a note from a poor retiree. She said that it was all she could afford to give, and she was saddened that she didn't have more to contribute.

Sometimes people comment about what we do at Poverello House, indicating that they think working with the homeless is somehow noble or heroic. Personally, I think they've got it backwards. People who work hard to provide goods and services to all of us, then turn around and give to a place like Poverello, are the real heroes in my mind. I think about the police officers and firemen I've met who risk their lives each day for others, then volunteer here at Pov; the farmers and grocers who provide sustenance for the rest of us, and then donate every imaginable kind of food item to Poverello; construction workers who build houses during the week, but come down on a weekend and put on a barbeque for the homeless; or people in the retail industry, who come together to make monetary contributions. The list could go on and on, but you catch my drift. It's the people out in the community, working hard at what they would call "normal" jobs, who are the engines that drive Poverello House.

So, though we've expressed it many times, I think that it can't be said enough: Thank you. Even during tax season, even through recessions and economic downturns, it's been your practical compassion for the poor that has always enabled Poverello House to continue serving our needy brothers and sisters.



A Self-Constructed Prison

“%*\$# YOU, AND IF I EVER CATCH YOU OUTSIDE THE FENCE, I’LL BEAT YOUR \$**, YOU &*\$%\$#*\$%#@\$!!”

Threats such as this, punctuated with shockingly colorful language, are unfortunately all too common at Poverello House. At a training seminar for non-violent intervention, attended by Poverello staff, the instructor likened many of our clients to a can of soda that has been passed around a circle of people and repeatedly shaken. If some unknowing person opens the can, he becomes the victim of a small soda explosion. The instructor pointed out that we seldom know the stressors affecting other people, and, not unlike the shaken soda can, any person we meet at a place like Poverello House can be a boiling cauldron of emotion on the inside. An innocuous question or act from an unwitting person can be the trigger for a vile, or even violent, response from a perpetually-tense man or woman.



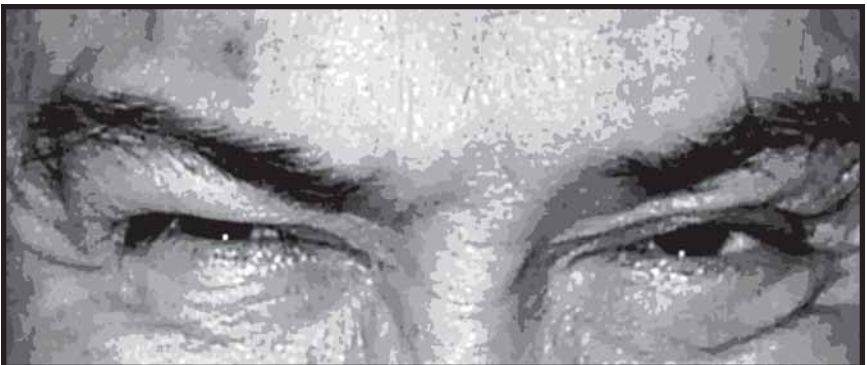
Theodore Dalrymple, a British psychiatrist who worked for over a decade in a slum hospital and a prison, noted that many of the poor he met carried within themselves rage, a constant sense of being wronged, and a fatalistic, frustrating belief that they could do nothing to better their condition. Adding to this misery was the inability to articulate their frustrations, because the constricting experience of slum living, coupled with poor performance at school, rendered them conversationally illiterate. All they had at their disposal was the language of unfettered wrath: screamed obscenities and strident threats.

There is much that is tragic about modern destitution, but surely this inability to communicate, save in quick-tempered profanity, is one of the sadder aspects of the poverty culture. Civilized behavior requires the

ability to sublimate passion, converse decently with others, and compromise. Such behavior leads to the creation of supportive friendship networks. We may not always agree with everyone, but we learn that we have to get along, and even when arguing a point, to do so politely.

Not so with someone who, because of deprivation or abuse, sees life through the prism of smoldering resentment and atavistic fury. Such people have difficulty establishing and maintaining friendships, or even close relationships with their families. There are countless such “powder keg” people represented among the homeless clients of Poverello House, and they are truly to be pitied. They bring down unpleasant consequences upon their own heads, and yet cannot see that they are responsible for doing so. Their sputtering, inchoate anger produces legal entanglements, physical violence, and desolate loneliness. Drugs and alcohol complicate matters even further: on the streets, anger is often quelled by drug and alcohol abuse, which does nothing but ultimately exacerbate the negative feelings, creating a terrible cycle of outbursts leading to dreadful consequences, which then add to the person’s already overwhelming pressure and rage.

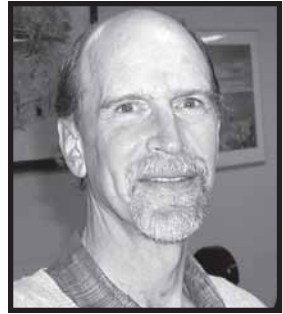
Occasionally, for the safety of others, we have to remove someone from our premises if he/she loses control in this manner. However, that is always our last resort. Our first priority is to help calm the situation, and, if we can, somehow solve the angry client’s problem to his or her satisfaction. Our ideal is to respect the dignity of even those who cannot, or will not, respect the dignity of others. However, against that ideal is the reality is that we must also protect all who use our services, which creates a constant tension for the Poverello staff. It is one of the great challenges of trying to love people whose behavior is unlovable.



Professor, Volunteer, Board Member

In what has become an annual trek, last winter Mike McGarvin and Jimmie Gamble, Founder and Resident Program Director, respectively, presented their views of Poverello House and the homeless problem at a CSU, Fresno class. The professor who invites them each year is Dr. Robert Levine.

Dr. Levine teaches social psychology at Fresno State, but he also has a connection to Poverello House: he is a past president and current member of the Poverello House Board of Directors. However, his involvement goes beyond board duties. Bob, as he prefers to be called around here, has introduced hundreds of people to Poverello.



He regularly sends students to volunteer, or brings them himself, and he educates students about homelessness by having Poverello staff members speak to his classes. He is a member of Temple Beth Israel, where he has encouraged dozens of people to help out. A group from the Temple now regularly volunteers each month at Papa Mike's Café.

Bob has also managed to interest colleagues in doing research on the homeless, the results of which have been used by Poverello to improve services. For example, one of Bob's fellow professors did a series of needs-assessment interviews with homeless clients. Something that came up over and over was the inability to find things to read at Poverello. From this information, we decided to open a lending library, stocked with donated books. The library is available seven days a week, and is popular with both adults and children.

Bob was also instrumental in assisting with the formation of our Village of Hope, helping establish the structure of the fledgling service. He devoted countless hours quietly listening to Village residents, helping them work through the growing pains of the new shelter, and advising Poverello staff about ways to proceed. Besides lending his professional expertise to the enterprise, he also wrote a research paper on the Village, which was presented at the United Nations. To say that Bob is knowledgeable about the work of Poverello House is an understatement. He is familiar not only with our policies, but with the clientele as well.

Nonprofit boards of directors can often become detached from the day-to-day work of an organization, which can sometimes lead to bad decision-making. Poverello House is fortunate to have involved board members such as Bob Levine, because such involvement lends itself to informed, thoughtful leadership.

The Clock is Ticking...

Once again, the Amici Del Poverello Guild will present “Brunch with Elvis,” on Saturday, May 3, 2008 from 10:00 a.m. until 1:00 p.m. It will take place at Grand Occasions, 4584 W. Jacquelyn Avenue. Tickets are \$25 each, and all proceeds benefit Poverello House.

Jeremy Pearce, Elvis impersonator extraordinaire, will once again provide an event full of songs and hip-twisting excitement. If you haven’t experienced this fun-filled fund-raiser, you’ll want to be first in line, and if you’ve seen it before, you’ll be rarin’ to go again! Additionally, there will be a drawing for the chance to win \$500!

Be aware that you’ll need to RSVP by **April 22nd**, so get your tickets early! For more information or ordering tickets, please call (559) 229-7709.

Please note: If you did not receive an end-of-the-year statement last year and need one this year, give Laurie Contor Duval a call at (559) 498-6988.

Wish List

Letter size copy paper * Razors * Cotton swabs
Fingernail & toenail clippers
Olive oil * Breakfast cereal * Eggs

Remember, we now take credit card donations. Please see the enclosed envelope for instructions.

Visit our website at www.poverellohouse.org

Poverello House

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Who Are We? A nonprofit, nondenominational organization that believes in the dignity of every human being. Our mission is to enrich the lives and spirits of all who pass our way, to feed the hungry, offer focused rehabilitation programs, temporary shelter, medical, dental and other basic services to the poor, the homeless, and the disadvantaged unconditionally, without regard to race, color, religion, national origin, age, sex or disability, through Providential and community support. We have been operating since 1973 and are governed by a Board of Directors, consisting of local volunteer business men and women.

Future Goals? To provide additional facilities for increased services.

How Are We Funded? Primarily through private donations from individuals, churches, businesses, and community organizations; and through United Way. Rules for acceptance and participation in the programs of Poverello House are the same for everyone, without regard to race, color, national origin, age, sex or disability.



United Way of Fresno County
Member Organization