

Poverello News



August 2010

(559) 498-6988

www.poverellohouse.org



I was sitting in my “Papa Mike” chair in our dayroom, watching over a lunch meal, when a man approached and started chatting with me. He told me that his trade was installing gutters, and that he had been out of work for three weeks. He was at the Pov with his wife and one of their three children. He didn’t want anything; he just wanted to thank us for the meals. He said that being able to come here and eat had really helped them out.

One of the kids he had wasn’t his own. He and his wife had taken on a disabled child as official or unofficial foster parents before he lost his job. So here he was, a blue collar worker, trying to do the right thing and help someone else while his world was collapsing.

When he went back to his seat, I checked my wallet. A donor had given me a gift card to a local grocery store, and it had been burning a hole in my pocket while I looked for someone to give it to. After speaking with him, I knew I’d found the right man for the card.

I walked over to his table, handed it to him, and said, “Just thought this might come in handy.” He looked at the card as if in shock, showed it to his wife and daughter, and then leaped up and hugged me; that was followed by the wife and daughter both giving me hugs.

It’s refreshing to help someone in an uncomplicated way, someone who doesn’t seem to have any hidden agendas. I’ve assisted hundreds

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of families over the years, and rarely do I find one that has a simple, clean, hard-luck story.

Back in the 1980s, when we began seeing large numbers of homeless families, homeless advocates promoted the idea that these were all victims of a bad economy. I believed that for a long time. In some cases, it's undoubtedly true. However, in my experience, people who come to Poverello for purely economic reasons soon get back on their feet and leave. Those who are chronically homeless have other problems.

For example: a long time ago, a couple came in with several very cute kids. They were in a bad way, they said, because the father had some serious health issues that had derailed his career and piled up medical costs. We helped this family quite a bit. They disappeared from the food line, which is usually a good sign.

Then they showed up again a few months later.

In what was to become a recurring pattern, they would get help, go away for awhile, and then end up back at Poverello, broke and desperate. I began to realize that there was more to the story than what they had told me, and that drugs were involved in their chronic poverty.

The hard thing about families in crisis is seeing kids suffer for adult follies. I sometimes get angry at moms and dads who put their drug habits before the welfare of their children, but I generally help them anyway because the kids are helpless to change the situation. Their parents might have some choices about altering their dilemma, but the children don't.

I used to think about homeless problems in terms of big, sweeping social changes. Years of experience have corrected my view. I now know that hitting bottom, becoming responsible and changing perspectives *will* radically alter the trajectory of someone's life. Ultimately, it's an inside job. However, until that inside job happens to homeless individuals or heads of families, Poverello still needs to be here to help pick up the pieces and give aid and comfort; especially when it comes to the kids.



By the Numbers

According to a recent *Fresno Magazine* article, there are 60,000 alcoholics in Fresno County, and a total of 27,620 people who abuse, or are addicted to, prescription drugs, cocaine, and heroin. The article also mentions that 45,000 Fresno County residents smoke marijuana and 3,400 use hallucinogens. These are staggering statistics. Just looking at the sheer numbers, it is easy to conclude that there is a substantial chemical abuse problem in our valley.

Most of those abusing alcohol or drugs will not go on to become homeless. However, among the homeless population of our city, alcoholics and drug addicts are overrepresented.

Skid rows have been a part of American life since the 19th century. Most of them developed when lodging, businesses and saloons were built to accommodate large numbers of single male laborers. Rough and unattached, they frequented bars and brothels, and many succumbed to dependency on alcohol.

In the 1980s, skid rows began to change. As drug use and addiction became widespread in the late 1970s, more women and families were seen in these isolated outposts. Mentally ill people, newly deinstitutionalized, also began to drift toward such areas.

Today, Poverello House is challenged by a diverse population of impoverished people that includes not only the “traditional” alcoholics, but addicts hooked on a every imaginable drug, families with children, single women, and people with severe mental problems. There is no one approach to addressing the totality of their needs.

The common denominator for all of them is that they are desperately poor and need very basic services: food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and hygiene. Beyond that, we try to do our best to provide individualized help, according to the problem. As much as we do, however, there is always more to be done, and we’re extremely grateful that the community continues to support our efforts after almost four decades of service to the destitute.

Empirical Compassion

Last May, groups from Northpark, The Quest, and Life Bridge churches put in a full day at Poverello House, showing up at 6:00 a.m. and leaving late in the afternoon. Christian bands performed for our clients out front and volunteers set up a hot and iced coffee bar, made sack lunches, provided the hamburgers, hotdogs and all the fixings for lunch. In addition, the volunteers left a lasting gift: they insulated and put up drywall in several of the sheds in the Village of Hope, making the shelters immensely more comfortable for both summer and winter.

Much love and sweat went into these various projects, and it made for a wonderful day. The homeless people who experienced it are grateful for the entertainment, the great food and beverages, and, for those at the Village, the weatherproofing job. It's always encouraging to see churches in our community tangibly showing God's love to the poor here at Poverello.



Summer Sizzle

The “dog days” of August are particularly awful southwest of downtown Fresno. The intensity of the summer heat combines with a parched landscape and increased air pollution to create a gritty, somewhat depressing tableau. Fortunately, we have the mountains and the coast within reasonable driving distance that allow us to escape the blistering city sun; but there is a whole subset of Fresno residents who are not able to escape. Many of these are homeless or reside in the area surrounding Poverello House.

Summer in this neighborhood just accentuates the bleakness of homelessness. More people are on the streets because it’s warm enough to sleep outside. With more people comes more drinking and drug use, which, combined with the ever-present heat, makes people’s patience short and their nerves raw. Violence erupts more often in summertime, and we spend a disproportionate amount of time breaking up fights or transporting victims to the hospital.

The hot weather and excessive drinking also lead to many cases of heat prostration. A cold beer may temporarily quench your thirst, but too much alcohol dehydrates the body and leads to a dangerous physical state in warm weather.

Poverello House undoubtedly prevents a higher rate of hospitalization and death among the homeless in the summer. It’s expensive to run the air conditioning all day in a large building like ours, but by doing so, we create a refuge from the heat. In the summertime, our dayroom is packed because the homeless have few other options for staying cool. We provide cold drinks and extra ice cream in the summer months to further help people deal with the heat.

Holy Cross Clinic also keeps busy when the mercury rises. The clinic sees many cases of dehydration or heat-related illnesses. There is a high rate of diabetes among the homeless population, and street life in the summer takes its toll on these sufferers. The clinic is able to evaluate, treat, and stabilize diabetics whose systems are compromised by a combination of heat and poor nutrition.

A visitor to this neighborhood in the summer might come away with a first impression of hopelessness. He would see dried-up empty lots with dead weeds, graffiti, trash strewn about, and ragged people hanging around with nowhere to go. However, first impressions are not always valid.

Inside Poverello's compound is a completely different picture: clean grounds with plenty of healthy green plants; shady enclaves under trees and patio umbrellas; showers and fresh clothing available; an air conditioned indoor haven; and medical care and food. It is our purpose to create a striking contrast to the streets on the outside of our fence line. Hopelessness may seem to reign out there, but we fight the summer scourge with welcoming services and warm kindness.

Amici Del Poverello Guild Update:

The Amici del Poverello Guild would like to invite you to come to their annual retreat. Please join the ladies of the guild on August 28, 2010 at St. Agnes from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. This get together is a way to gather information about both the Poverello House and the Amici del Poverello House Guild. A continental breakfast and cold lunch will be provided at the retreat. For more information or to make a reservation for the retreat, please contact Carole Petersen at (559) 434-5895.

August Wish List

#10 cans of vegetables & fruit

Fruit punch concentrate

Frozen orange juice * Ground beef * Olive oil

Bibles in Spanish and English

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

To donate online, 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