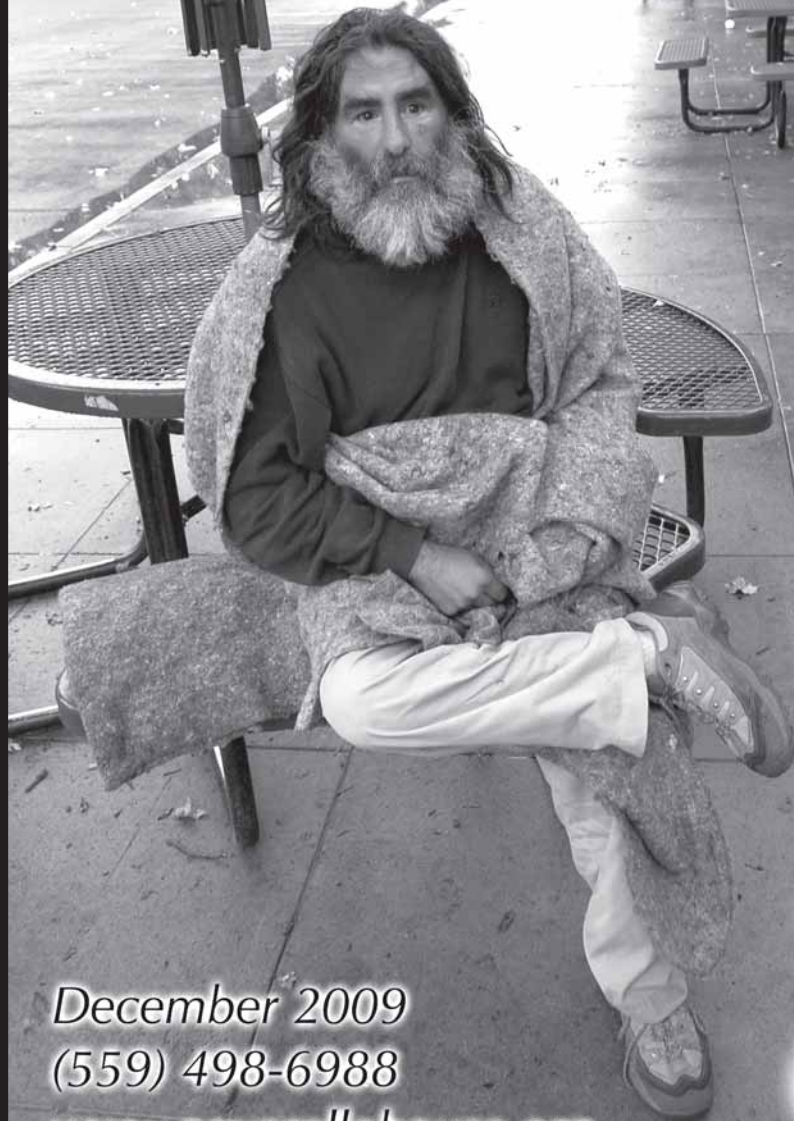


Poverello News



December 2009

(559) 498-6988

www.poverellohouse.org





I can now count myself as one of the unfortunates who caught the dreaded swine flu. It was in late September, and I was just starting to get myself geared up for the holidays. I was down with it for two weeks, and it was as awful as I could have imagined. Upset stomach, bad respiratory problems, horrible headaches and racking joint and body aches; it was a miserable

couple of weeks. To add insult to injury, I developed pneumonia right after the flu symptoms subsided. I know I'm really sick when I lose interest in eating.

Considering that the flu was probably made worse by my weight, my diabetes, and my blood pressure and cholesterol problems, I guess I'm lucky to be counted among the living. After I had recovered somewhat, people at Poverello told me, "Your skin isn't gray anymore; you must be feeling better." I think I ought to get a tee-shirt that reads, "I survived the swine flu! Oink, oink!"

As we enter the coldest part of the year, and the season when influenza runs rampant, I'm mindful of the people living on the streets. During my bout with swine flu, I was being cared for by excellent medical professionals, had a warm home and plenty of food and liquids, and there were family and friends to watch over me. Despite these blessings, I still wanted to cry, "Mama!" for the entire two weeks. I have to admit that I felt pretty sorry for myself.

Some of my self-pity subsided when I felt well enough to contemplate how much more awful it would be to have the flu, pneumonia, or

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even a bad cold, if I was living in a tent on a street corner. Even as this is being written, the first winter storm is moving in, and I'm ensconced snugly in my office at Poverello with heat radiating from the vents. I can only imagine the wretchedness a homeless sick person has to endure, exposed to the winter weather, living in conditions of appallingly poor hygiene, and having to walk through the rain or fog to get food at Poverello House. It's a wonder that more homeless people don't succumb to the elements. As it is, usually each year around Christmas, someone on the streets dies from either hypothermia or complications from flu or pneumonia, and many more end up at the hospital.

I'll never forget, many years ago, a schizophrenic man who was huddled on the streets. One of the regular Poverello clients told us about him. We investigated, and found the man to be in terrible condition. He was sitting on the sidewalk near the Rescue Mission, shivering under a frost-covered blanket. Fortunately, he was compliant and gentle, and raised no objection when we decided to take him to the emergency room. The doctor that treated him told us that he had an advanced case of pneumonia, and said that we had gotten him there in the nick of time.

Homeless people have to constantly worry about violence, but in all likelihood, the weather is even harder on them. Winter's icy winds and summer's relentless sun probably exact a greater toll than all the muggings and fights that take place weekly.

Christmas is an especially hard time for these people. As they contemplate spending a significant family holiday all alone and ill, many become morbidly depressed, and as a result, they drink and use drugs more. Physically, it's also one of the toughest times of the year. The dreary Fresno winters make for a blue Christmas when you're in poor health and out on the street. That also leads to greater alcohol and drug consumption as they try to numb both emotions and physical discomfort.

Sometimes, I think that the greatest gift that Poverello gives the homeless on Christmas Day is not the special Christmas meal, or even the presents. I think instead it is the opportunity to get off the street and into a warm building, welcomed by merry volunteers. It's no substitute for being home for the holidays, but it sure beats spending the holiday coughing and wheezing in a cheerless, penetrating fog outside.

Mike

Why Should We Care?

“Ted” has a bad heart, and has to take nitroglycerin to keep from having a heart attack. He comes into the Holy Cross Clinic occasionally, but is very inconsistent in taking care of himself. He continues to drink, which is the root cause of his health problems, and the drinking exacerbates his fragile condition

“Damian” was in the Poverello Resident Program many years ago. He had mental health issues, and ended up on disability. Mike recently saw him, and found out that Damian is dying of throat cancer. He chews tobacco and smokes a lot of marijuana, both of which contributed to the cancer.

Health care is one of the biggest topics of the day in politics and news. Whatever the outcome of the health care debate, it will probably not affect the lives of people such as Ted and Damian. Their fate is sealed, both by the choices they made long ago, and by the choices they continue to make.

Many of the homeless are victims of themselves. They engage in “lifestyle choices” (a euphemism for destructive behavior) that almost guarantee poverty, poor health, and ultimately, miserable death. Many would assess this situation and ask the question: When people are actively pursuing their own demise, why should any effort be made on their behalf? Why should anybody care?

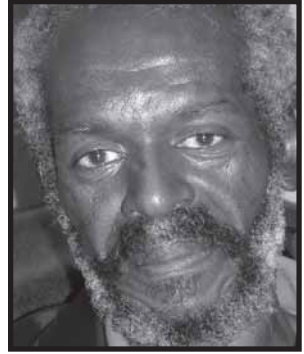
That immortal Christmas character, Ebenezer Scrooge, voices similar sentiments in Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, when he is approached by two men seeking a charitable contribution for poor relief. After Scrooge rebuffs them, telling the men, in essence, that his taxes support the prisons and workhouses, and that he does not wish to contribute to “making idle people merry,” one of the solicitors responds that many would rather die than go to the workhouses.

Scrooge then utters an unforgettable retort: “If they would rather die, they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population.” That one sentence epitomized Scrooge’s flinty, selfish and mean-spirited nature before he was visited by



the Ghosts of Christmas past, present and future.

More than summarizing Scrooge's views, however, Dickens put those words in the mouth of his most famous character for another reason. A social reformer and champion of the poor, Dickens was alarmed at what he saw as a growing trend in intellectual circles: a hard-bitten attitude toward the poor that was influenced by the economist Thomas Malthus. Malthus' pessimistic predictions of widespread catastrophes due to overpopulation led later disciples to view the lower classes with fear and resentment. In Dickens' time, many believed firmly in the sentiments expressed by Scrooge: let them die and decrease the surplus population. Charity was seen as hampering this natural process of survival of the fittest.



It is one thing to debate the merits of different approaches to helping the poor; it is an entirely different thing to say that the poor are not worth the debate, let alone any assistance. Yet, there are those even today who would say that the homeless, or the elderly, or the mentally disabled serve no useful purpose in society, and should therefore not be helped. This attitude is actually a common temptation in a culture that is increasingly secular in its approach to life.

Without a belief that a divine spark resides within each person, it's easy to view others solely in terms of their utility. Those who seem to have no role serving the collective thus become expendable. After all, they brought it on themselves, didn't they?

It's true that many people are self-destructive to the point of being beyond help. However, at Poverello, we believe that God should be the judge, not us. That person beyond medical help may be very open to spiritual help. Likewise, even a seemingly hopeless medical case may be nothing of the sort; we've seen people recover from what appeared to be terminal medical conditions.

During the Christmas season, it's good to be mindful of the fact that all of us, at some time, need help. Like Ebenezer Scrooge after his Christmas visitations, we sometimes find the spiritual help we ourselves need by opening our hearts to people others consider hopeless.

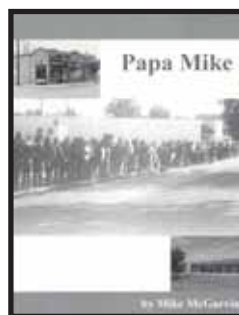
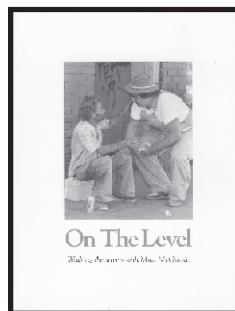
Books Available

For many years, people would tell Founder Mike McGarvin that he ought to do something with all the pictures he had taken of the homeless. In 1993, St. Agnes Medical Center helped him put some of his best photographs together, and the result was a book entitled *On the Level: Walking the Streets with Mike McGarvin*.

Later on, the wife of one of Mike's friends thought that the countless colorful stories of his early life and Poverello's past would make a great nonfiction book. The fruit of this idea was *Papa Mike*, his autobiography and the history of Poverello House, published in 2003.

The books are available for \$20 each. Each book would make an excellent Christmas gift.

If you would like to order a book, you can call Poverello at (559) 498-6988, or fill out the form below and send it with your check, money order or credit card information. We'll happily pay the postage.



Please send me ____ copy(ies) of Mike McGarvin's book, *On the Level* (\$20 per copy).

Please send me ____ copy(ies) of Mike McGarvin's book, *Papa Mike* (\$20 per copy).

METHOD OF PAYMENT:

- Check/Money Order enclosed (Make checks payable to Poverello House)
- Credit Card

TYPE OF CARD (VISA, MASTERCARD)

ACCOUNT NUMBER / EXPIRATION DATE

CARDHOLDER SIGNATURE

CARDHOLDER TELEPHONE #

Send to Poverello House, P.O. Box 12225, Fresno, CA 93777-2225

Amici Christmas Parties

Amici del Poverello Guild knows how to throw a party! In this case, two parties. As they have done for many years, the Guild is hosting a Christmas party on December 5, 2009 for families here at Poverello House, and another party for the men in our Resident Program on December 6, 2009, at Pardini's.

The family party will include refreshments, holiday crafts, pictures with Santa, and gifts for each child; the resident party is a chance for drug addicts to relax and feel a little bit human again. Both parties are by now an Amici tradition.

Amici is always looking for new volunteers and contributors. If you'd like to get involved, call us at (559) 498-6988, and we'll connect you with an Amici member.

Visions of Sugarplums...

Well, most kids don't expect sugarplums under the tree these days, but there are thousands of poor kids in the Central Valley that come to Pov for Christmas because their parents can't afford gifts. You can make their Christmas more joyful by contributing new or gently-used toys. We also pass out scarves, knit caps, and gloves to adults, so we need many donations of these items. Call us at (559) 498-6988 to find out where to drop off your contributions, and have a Merry Christmas!

Wish List

TURKEYS!!! HAMS!!!

New or gently-used toys

Scarves, knit caps, gloves, coats, sweaters

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

412 F Street
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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