



(559) 498-6988

www.poverellohouse.org



As Executive Director, I'm much more aware of Poverello's income and expenses, policies, and funding trends than I am the specific stories of the homeless people we serve. Because my job doesn't involve a lot of direct contact with our clients, I depend on Mike McGarvin and the staff to let me know what's happening on the streets.

Recently, Mike took some pictures of a motel near downtown that was closed down. I regularly pass this place on my way to work, and it has been an eyesore for years. I kept hoping that someone would condemn it, and that's apparently what happened.

However, one thing I didn't think about was who was living there. Mike told me that over the years, a whole lot of people who came to eat at Poverello House called this rundown motel their home.

What was blight to my eyes was housing to someone else. The shelter may be substandard; it may have plumbing problems, be uglier than sin, and have a lot of rough customers living in it. Nevertheless, such a place is often the only home that many poor people have.

Blighted motels, crumbling single room occupancy hotels, and abandoned buildings present a challenge to people who make decisions about rebuilding a city. On the one hand, such places create visual disorder, making an older area or a downtown appear dangerous, neglected and frightening. That perception discourages the will to invest in housing, businesses, and entertainment venues that are vital to redevelopment. The solution is often to tear down these ugly, unsanitary

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buildings and begin anew. However, because these shoddy edifices are sometimes the only affordable shelter for the poor, closing them up immediately creates a housing crisis for many people. The question then comes up, “What do we do with the poor and homeless?” This same question has been asked for centuries, and I reckon that nobody has come up with a satisfactory answer, or else we’d probably have heard it by now.

Over the years at Poverello, we’ve tried many different approaches, and a lot of them haven’t worked out. It would be nice if I could say that, through trial and error, we’ve figured it all out, but that would be a lie. However, our attempts are without a doubt helping some people.

The best and longest experiment is our Resident Program. When I first started here in 1990, it didn’t have much structure, and we didn’t see much success. A lot has changed since then. The program operates on the supposition that poverty and homelessness are often the result of people using drugs and alcohol compulsively, which repeatedly results in deprivation. Our solution is to give them a sober environment in which to learn practical spiritual tools for staying abstinent, living skills to help them function, and offer enough support to ease their transition back to productive living.

A more recent experiment is our Village of Hope and its extension. Some of the people who live in these sheds would probably otherwise be in the motels and abandoned buildings that I mentioned. We offer something simple: shelter and access to restrooms at night, in proximity to Poverello’s services. It’s an alternative, not an answer, to homelessness. However, it’s given several people a new start, and kept them safe while they tried to get their lives back on track.

I guess what I’m getting at is that the big, structural questions about homelessness, such as what a city should do with dilapidated buildings, may not ever have adequate or satisfactory answers. However, that doesn’t mean that no solutions exist. When Poverello uses its donated resources to help one homeless man or woman take the exit ramp off of their own highway to hell, it’s a solution on a much smaller scale; but add up enough of those smaller solutions, and you eventually have an impact on a big social dilemma. That’s because at the bottom of those big social problems are a lot of individual souls, and each of them matters greatly.

Left Behind

With increasing desperation, I want and need to know that he is OK. . .
—David Sheff, *Beautiful Boy*

At Poverello House, we see many homeless people, but what we are witnessing is merely the end result of a long, sad slide to the bottom. We see the broken, lonely, and often hopeless cases, but we are seldom privy to the circumstances that led a person to the streets. Nor are we able to fully grasp the concentric circles of pain, radiating outward from the homeless person, that traumatize his family, friends and community.

A book published last year gives us a glimpse into the nightmare world of the people who love addicts, and, by extension, those who love anyone who ends up homeless. *Beautiful Boy*, by David Sheff, is the true story of a father's agonizing experience with his addicted son. Sheff chronicles his helpless horror as he watches his talented, gentle and loving boy slowly descend into the insanity of meth addiction, and, ultimately, homelessness.

The book is powerful for many reasons, not the least of which is the author's skill in portraying his son as a uniquely personable and affectionate young man, someone anyone would cherish. Sheff is also brutally honest, laying bare his own shortcomings, which haunt him as his son worsens. He tortures himself with thoughts about his own deficiencies as a father as he struggles to understand what happened to his beautiful boy.

It's easy to observe tragedy in the homeless person lying in the park or by the curbside. Those of us who work with people of the street constantly see opportunity and talent squandered; we witness attempts at regaining sobriety or sanity, followed by heartbreaking relapses; and helplessly watch hope slowly receding as mental illness or addiction come roaring back to ravage the soul. However, for us, it isn't as personal as it is with a loved one. Sheff gives us a glimpse into the utter desolation of those who are left behind when a person turns to the street. In such circumstances, parents or spouses are consumed with anxiety and guilt that never seem to diminish; they fear hearing from the sufferer, and fear *not* hearing from him. Nights are sleepless ordeals, as they lie awake imagining scenes of horror: "Has he overdosed? Has

he been beaten to death? Has she been raped? Is he in jail? Is he lying in an alley somewhere, riddled with bullets? Should I call the hospital? The morgue? Where could he be? What did I do to make her this way?" Every waking moment is suffused with anguish and unbearable apprehension.

Occasionally, we hear from these parents or wives or husbands, and we get a taste of the agony they've endured. Upon learning that one of our staff members worked for Poverello House, a medical professional mentioned that his son had been here many times. With deep sadness and resignation, he said that the young man has schizophrenia, that they tried everything they could think of to help, and spent untold thousands of dollars. Yet, he remained on the streets. "I haven't heard from him in a long time," the man said, with great effort. "I don't know where he is." As his eyes welled with tears, he abruptly changed the subject.

A few years ago, a mother called our program director about her son, who had been in our rehab program, but was out on the streets drinking again. This young man was not yet thirty, but was already experiencing symptoms of cirrhosis. The mother wondered what she could do. The program director advised her that there probably wasn't much she *could* do. "But you don't understand," she replied tersely. "He's my son; I have to help him. I... HAVE.... TO... HELP HIM!"

Mental illness and addiction are baffling and terrifying. To see a destructive personality overtake a beloved son, daughter, or spouse, is a frightening experience that leaves people feeling overwhelmed, powerless, and unspeakably despondent. Family members often need as much aid as the person who is homeless.

If you know someone who has suffered by losing a loved one to the streets, remember that they have been through a very personal ordeal that is hard to understand if you yourself haven't experienced it. Part of the nightmare is the feeling of being alone in their torment. As with homeless people, family members crave small kindnesses, which actually can make their lives feel tolerable again. When they call here to Poverello House, we do whatever we can to help (which, sadly, is usually not a lot), with as much tenderness as possible. Hopefully, these battered souls can find gentle, loving people in the community who can do likewise.

Holiday Thanks

By Kathryn Weakland, Development Director

The Poverello House staff, Board of Directors, and those we serve would like to thank the following companies, groups and individuals for their generous donations over the holidays (Donations received after the printing deadline will be recognized in our next newsletter). Many thanks to: **California State Automobile Association—Turkeys on Tow Trucks; Apple Valley Farms; Ashwood Construction; Belmont Country Club; Bullard High School; Cal-Trans Turkey Bowl; Chukchansi Gold Resort; Clark Intermediate School; Costco; Duarce Atwater Packing Co.; California State University, Gibson Farm Market; Freedom Elementary School; Frito Lay; OK Produce; Nalchajian Orthodontics; PG & E; Pelco; Pronovost Construction; Art & Beth Renney; St. Anthony's School—Little Sisters; St. Helen's School; Save Mart Grocery; Saladino's; Sunnyside High School; Vons; and Winco.**

To all of the wonderful volunteers who shared their time, talent and treasures throughout the year, thank you so much. We couldn't do it without you.

Finally, a big-hearted thank you to our fabulous **Amici del Poverello Guild** for the successful events they put on throughout the year. This past December the Guild entertained over 400 children at the annual Children's Amici Christmas Party. They provided each child with a stocking filled with goodies, a picture with Santa, and time spent playing games and celebrating the holidays. The Guild also put on a wonderful Christmas party for the residents and staff of Poverello House on December 14, 2008; it was a great night, and truly magical. Thanks again for all you do.

Home of Hope

By Kathryn Weakland

On Saturday, October 11, 2008 Poverello House and seven other local non-profits agencies partnered with Granville Homes and the Waterford foundation for the third annual Home of Hope fundraiser.

This event was designed as a way of raising money to provide food, shelter, health care and education to those in need in our community. Granville Homes, along with the help of many local trade partners, donated a beautiful brand new home located in the La Ventana community in northwest Fresno.

Since the inception of the Home of Hope fundraiser three years ago, this event has raised over a million dollars for families located right here in our own community, and Poverello House has received over one hundred thousand dollars during the past two years thanks to Granville Homes and this generous community.

“We are extremely grateful to Darius Assemi, the Granville Family and entire staff for choosing Poverello House as the beneficiary for this extraordinary fundraiser,” said Jim Connell, Executive Director Poverello House. “This donation will help us to continue our mission of feeding the poor, hungry and homeless of the community. We’d also especially like to thank the people who supported this event by purchasing tickets.”

Beneficiaries for the 2008 Home of Hope were: Poverello House, Community Food Bank, Hinds Hospice, Assistance League, the Foundation for Fresno Schools, Foundation for Clovis Schools, Foundation for Central Schools, and Foundation for Sanger Schools.

Here’s some great news: Fresno Magazine selected Poverello House as the Best Local Charity for 2008 in their annual “Best of Fresno” edition! Poverello was recognized at the “Best of Fresno” gala awards banquet at the New Exhibit Hall in downtown Fresno. Members of the community voted for their Fresno favorites in a variety of areas. Many thanks to all of you who sent in a vote of support.

Wish List

Disposable razors * Deodorant
Coffee * Eggs

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.

