

Poverello News



February 2010

(559) 498-6988

www.poverellohouse.org



It seems as though peace and goodwill take frequent vacations around here. Last November, just before the holidays, we had a crisis trifecta: we had to call 911 three times for life-threatening incidents. In one case, someone in a nearby homeless camp was attacked and got his throat cut; another man had a seizure and fell violently, splitting open his head; and I can't even

remember the third call because there was so much happening with the first two.

As much as we'd like to be a peaceful presence in a strife-torn neighborhood, the chaos from the streets often interrupts our best intentions. When people are desperate, high on drugs, or mentally ill, sometimes things just happen that are beyond our capabilities to handle, and we end up calling law enforcement to deal with the problems.

Coming of age in the sixties, and being involved back then in illegal activities, I had a fear and resentment toward police. From my perspective, they existed to spoil my fun, and, being rebellious, I didn't much like the authority they represented. My, how one's attitude can change with time.

Today, I'm very grateful for the men and women that form the "thin blue line," a line that safeguards us from criminal tyranny. In the past thirty-seven years, I've encountered countless cops, and their presence is often a godsend. For example, I was confronted by an angry, gun-toting pimp one time, and thought I was going to get shot. A patrol car pulled up across the street, and I told the thug that if he didn't leave, I'd

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start yelling for the police, nodding in the direction of the car. He turned and glanced at the black and white unit, and beat a path out of there.

When I was feeding people pretty much by myself, I got a small taste of what the police have to go through every day. I was a



young hothead, and, quite frankly, I would have made a lousy cop—there would have been too many complaints about me using excessive force. The average person has no clue how hard it is to keep your cool when someone drunk or high is screaming curses at you, swinging a fist at your nose, or coming at you with a weapon.

I've lost my temper more than once on the streets, but I've watched police patiently endure abuse from out-of-control homeless people that I never could have tolerated without punching back. For instance, many years ago we called the cops about a street fight. When they arrived, an officer who was an old-timer on the Chinatown beat, was the first out of his car. Just as he stepped out, a drunk threw a bottle intended for someone else. It hit the policeman in the jaw and sliced him open. There was a flash of anger in his eyes, but then, amazingly, he regained his self-control, pulled out a handkerchief to stanch the bleeding, and calmly but firmly motioned for the offender to come over to the car. He quietly arrested the man, who was so chagrined that he gave no resistance.

Nowadays, it seems as though we call the police almost daily. Of course, some cops are better than others; that almost goes without saying with any group of people. However, their job is among the most thankless on the planet, and most of them do it for the right reasons: to protect you and me from dangerous people, and to make a better community.

Needless to say, I'm no longer the defiant, ungrateful hippie who hates the police; maturity and some real-life experience go a long way toward correcting youthful stupidity. Today, I'm very thankful for the men and women in blue, because they play a vital but often unappreciated role in making Poverello a safe haven for the homeless.

Mike

The Danger of Good Intentions

Compassion is a tricky word. Many acts that seem like kind-hearted responses to a problem can, in fact, fall prey to the law of unintended consequences, with tragedy as the end result. Often the failure is one of vision; the charitable reformer sometimes fails, or refuses, to see the larger picture, until it is too late.

There are plenty of historical examples to illustrate this truth. With regard to the problem of homelessness, here are just two:

The Lanterman-Petris-Short Act (abbreviated to “LPS”) of 1972 was a well-intentioned law passed in California which set a precedent for mental health policy throughout the United States. Its purpose was compassionate; it sought to limit or eliminate involuntary commitments of people who were mentally impaired. Logically and emotionally, this would seem to be a good thing. However, one of the consequences of the act was to deinstitutionalize the mentally ill, essentially throwing them to the mercy of the unmerciful streets. Unstable and untrusting, without supervision needed to maintain the regimen of psychotropic medications necessary to function, these poor people have become miserable fixtures in homeless shelters and skid rows across the country, where they go untreated for months, years or a lifetime.

Another example of good intentions gone awry is what happened in Los Angeles in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Advocates for the homeless believed that jailing chronic skid row alcoholics for public intoxication was an affront to human dignity. They worked through the legal system, and were able to decriminalize public drunkenness. In 1978, a judicial ruling changed the law and prevented police from arresting public inebriates. According to a 1983 *Los Angeles Times* article, assaults on skid row rose 47 percent, and deaths rose 142 percent following the ruling. The victims were predominantly alcoholics who had previously been housed in jails on a fairly regular basis. They were now out on the streets, ripe for the picking for criminals looking for an easy mark.

Here in Fresno, people have worked to prevent law enforcement from removing homeless encampments. On the surface, allowing homeless people the freedom to congregate where they want seems compassionate. Upon closer inspection, however, the creation of semi-

permanent encampments creates problems on many levels. Whenever a tent city is allowed to grow, it festers with increased drug dealing, prostitution, and violence. Garbage and human waste accumulate, attracting rats and creating a health hazard. In the end, it becomes a dangerous place for the homeless themselves, and adds blight and chaos to wherever it is located.

Misguided efforts to help people take place on a large and small scale, from the federal government all the way down to the state, the municipality, or the individual. *Primum non nocere* is a Latin phrase that means, “First, do no harm.” It is a guiding principle in medicine, and the idea is incorporated into the Hippocratic Oath. It should also be the first thought when someone considers “solutions” to homelessness. Giving that dollar to the panhandler in the intersection median may make you feel good, and may seem like a generous act, but when you consider that he uses your dollar to help feed his slow suicide by drug addiction, the glow of giving fades a bit. When planners or reformers devise wonderful strategies to address the homeless problem, it would be better if they were able to think through the possible long-term effects of their ideas. It might also be good to have a realistic grasp of human nature, and some experience in dealing with homeless people.

Sometimes when an approach has negative consequences, the end result is ignored. Perhaps people or agencies have an emotional or economic investment in making their ideas work, and thereby deny the empirical evidence that their efforts are hurting the very people they wish to help. For whatever reason, once a “solution” is in place, it is difficult to change course and acknowledge the problem.

We certainly don't have all the answers at Poverello House, but over the years, our Board of Directors has served us well by guiding our growth slowly, deliberately, and with much discussion. We have learned from our failures as well as our successes, and have gained insight from our struggles. At times, we have tried things that turned out to be unhelpful, and the Board has had the wisdom to lead us in a different direction. This is the value of historical memory. Innovation, detached from real-life experience, divorced from what has already been learned, can have negative or even catastrophic results. Our hope is that we will always be cognizant of the fact that any charitable activity can be a two-edged sword; and our prayer is that in serving the homeless, we follow the path of prudence and honesty.

New Faces



Lorena Villa

The term, “new faces,” is very relative in this case. One “new face” has already been here a year; we just were slow getting around to mentioning it. Lorena Villa came to us in February, 2009, and has been our receptionist in the Contact Office. She handles our incoming calls, directs volunteers and community service workers, and provides services to homeless clients.

Sam Saunders has been at Poverello for a several years now, but in August took on a new challenge when he accepted the Program Director position. He is now supervising the Resident Program, doing intake interviews, leading addiction recovery groups, and further developing the program.



Sam Saunders



Will Perales

Will Perales is another familiar face at Pov. He has been volunteering for many months, and has been hired and moved into Sam’s old position as Grounds Supervisor. He not only oversees all the grounds maintenance, but also handles clothing sorting and distribution, and occasionally serves as a driver.

Marcia Sanders arrived in August as our new Development Associate. She worked with a donation database program at Nancy Hinds Hospice, and has brought her skills to do likewise here, tracking contributions and handling much of our correspondence. Fortunately for all of us, we use the same program that she worked with at the hospice.

We’re grateful for each one of these staff members, and appreciate the talent and enthusiasm they bring to Poverello House.



Marcia Sanders

The ACF Chefs Association of the San Joaquin Valley

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Poverello Ponderings...

...As is so often the case with social problems, the precise nature and location of the alleged injustice, inequity and indifference to suffering become unclear when things are looked at close rather than through the lens of generalizations...

—Theodore Dalrymple

Wish List

Olive oil * Canned food items

Coffee * Coffee creamer * Sugar

8 1/2" x 11" Copy paper * Disposable razors

***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