

Poverello News

January 2010 (559) 498-6988

www.poverellohouse.org





Recently, when I was doing my maître d' of the Poverello dining room, a woman came in and yelled, "Hey, stupid!" Immediately, at least five guys turned toward her in response. I'm somewhat embarrassed to say that I was one of them.

That little incident made me chuckle. The rest of the day, I told the story to everyone I ran into, but later, as I gave it more thought, I realized that there was something poignant about it. If someone yells, "Hey, stupid!" and someone else responds, that means that the responder is doing what comes naturally; in other words, the response is conditioned by past experience. He turns his head because he's accustomed to being called stupid, or thinks of himself as stupid.

At the heart of Poverello's many services is a little word that carries a lot of meaning: dignity. We know that there are plenty of people who come to us who think they're stupid, worthless, unlovable, or repulsive. In many cases, these attitudes started when they were children, when they experienced abuse or neglect. What we try to do is treat such people with dignity in all that we do.

Monday, January 18th is Martin Luther King Day. Dr. King fought and died for the right of African-Americans to be treated with dignity. A sense of dignity was ingrained in Dr. King by his father, a Baptist pastor. His father had for years hated the humiliation visited on fellow African-Americans by systematic racism, so prevalent in the South at the time. He bravely refused to be a victim of such treatment.

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In his autobiography, *Stride Toward Freedom*, Dr. King tells of an incident that was typical of his father. At the time, Dr. King was a young child:

I remember riding with him... when he accidentally drove past a stop sign. A policeman pulled up to the car and said:

“All right, boy, pull over and let me see your license.”

My father replied indignantly, “I’m no boy.” Then pointing to me, “This is a boy. I’m a man, and until you call me one, I will not listen to you.”

The policeman was so shocked that he wrote up the ticket nervously, and left the scene as quickly as possible.

That little vignette tells a great deal about the character of Dr. King’s father, and the heritage that shaped Dr. King himself. Neither one of these men would allow bigoted ignorance to define them. Their life’s work was the courageous campaign to break down racial barriers that prevented African-Americans from experiencing freedom, equality, and dignity.

Here at the Pov, we see daily how street life robs people of dignity. When a person has reached the bottom and is dirty, impoverished, and living an animal-like existence, not only do others regard him as less than human, but he also begins to regard himself in the same way. I remember when Kenny, a gentle old alcoholic, refused to let me put him up in a motel one rainy Christmas Eve. He shook his head and told me, “No thanks, Papa Mike. I’m a bum and I’m going to live like one.” Another time, I accidentally opened a door into the face of Angela, a sad, broken street prostitute. I felt terrible and apologized profusely. “It’s OK, Papa Mike,” she said. “I’m used to it.”

Our job is, of course, to feed, clothe, house and treat the illnesses of the homeless. However, more than that, I think our job is to show these people God’s love. Dr. King believed, and Poverello believes, that all people were created in God’s image, something that accords each person dignity. They may have done things they are ashamed of, but God created all of us, and, as the saying goes, “God don’t make no junk.” Sometimes, people need to be reminded of that, and in my thirty-seven years at Poverello House, I think that’s probably been my most important task.

Mike

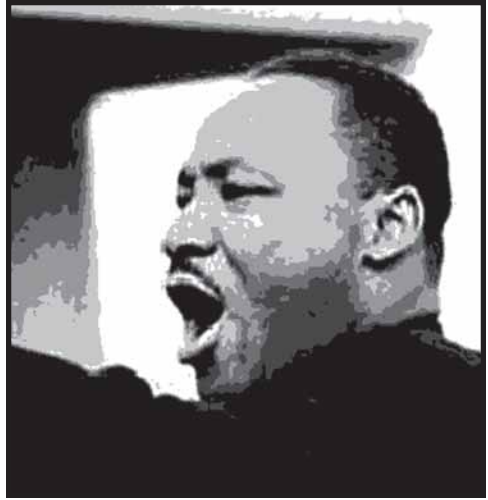
An Inclusive Dream

By Doreen Eley

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

This month we celebrate the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. - a man who dedicated his life to social justice and civil rights. Most people think of King as a crusader for the civil rights of African Americans but there is a much deeper meaning to his quest. To be sure, African Americans in the Deep South were the victims of unspeakable acts of horror – lynchings, police brutality on a daily basis – for the crime of desiring to participate fully in what it means to live and prosper in our great nation. But more than anything else, King fought for all to be treated with basic human dignity.



One can see in his speeches, a man not consumed with hatred for those who were the oppressor, but with love of all mankind. His words constantly ring of the dream, the hope ‘little black boys and little black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers’. King recognized the fact that the success and the greatness of America is inextricably tied to justice, freedom and dignity for every citizen – black, white, man, woman, young or old. He recognized that the inalienable rights spoken of in America’s Constitution were the blueprint for our humanity toward each other.

King was also very involved in the discussion of poverty in our nation. The famous “I Have A Dream” speech was made in Washing-

ton, D.C. during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Again, King is cognizant of the larger issues of the day – the intersection of poverty, peace and dignity. King spoke out about military spending that overshadowed spending on social programs that kept individuals in poverty and mired in despair.

Today, although our nation has come a very long way in realizing one of King’s dreams, upholding the rights and liberty of all citizens – we still have not realized the dream of dignity for all. Is our national sense of dignity upheld when any child in America goes to sleep hungry? When any family is unable to have a safe, affordable, stable place in which to lay their heads? When a living wage is not paid so that individuals and families can actually sustain themselves? In 2005 a national think tank named Fresno as having the highest concentration of poverty in the nation, ahead of post-Katrina New Orleans. Currently our community is fighting for water with which to grow crops, feed ourselves and the nation – in other words, to sustain life. Recently our community cleared one homeless encampment to see two other such camps form in the downtown area. Although the community receives federal dollars to ameliorate the issue, the demand greatly outpaces supply.

Here at Poverello House we do not pretend to have solutions to these pressing issues. But this we know for sure, dignity is the most important value we espouse and the most important thing one can show their fellow man. At the end of the day, it’s reason why we exist. Our founder believed that dignity demanded the hungry be fed, the naked clothed, the ill, and the medically indigent treated. Dignity demands that a kind word, a smile and a nonjudgmental attitude be afforded to all regardless of the circumstance that brought them to our doors. We understand that poverty is debilitating to all who experience it and while we do not seek to solve the problem, we do seek to enrich the souls of all who pass our way – with dignity.



Doreen Eley is the former Director of Naomi’s House and current Deputy Director of Poverello House.

Many Holiday Thanks

The holidays turned out to be wonderful here at Poverello House. As usual, the community came through for us, and we were able to serve untold hundreds at Thanksgiving and Christmas with plentiful food and volunteer help. Gifts for children, and winter clothes for all came pouring in, and we were able to bring great joy to many.

The past year has been devastating for the Central Valley, with the economy depressing the job market, and water issues forcing many farms out of production. Yet, in spite of hard times, friends of Poverello House have been incredibly generous, which has meant continuity in our services to the poor.

How can we thank all of you enough? Because of your generosity, shivering people were given warm coats, scarves, hats and gloves; sad, deprived children were treated to a real Christmas with treats and wrapped presents; and anybody in need was able to partake of glorious Thanksgiving and Christmas meals.

We are very grateful to the countless donors and volunteers who made all this possible. Thank you again, and have a wonderful, happy New Year!

The Central Valley Sikh community did a unique thing this last holiday season: they contributed money to pay for the meals served in November and December. Even though most of the food we use to make our meals is donated, there is still a substantial cost involved in transporting, storing, preparing and serving breakfast, lunch and dinner seven days a week. Additionally, we often have to purchase food or equipment that doesn't get donated, but is nevertheless necessary. The meal sponsorship from the Sikhs was a generous, welcome gift, and we extend our gratitude to them.

Although this was a large designated contribution, it is not without precedent. Many people have sponsored meals here, usually in memory of a loved one. It's a creative way of contributing to the Poverello House mission.

If you would like to sponsor a meal (or more than one meal) in honor of a loved one, or if you'd just like to do it because it seems like a great idea, give us a call at (559) 498-6988 for more information.

Poverello Ponderings...

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness.

I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant.

Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'

If we are to go forward, we must go back and rediscover those precious values - that all reality hinges on moral foundations and that all reality has spiritual control.

The first question which the priest and the Levite asked was: "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But... the Good Samaritan reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"

—All quotations from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Wish List

Long underwear * Coats * Sweaters * Sweatshirts
8 1/2" x 11" Copy paper
Coffee * Coffee creamer * Sugar

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