

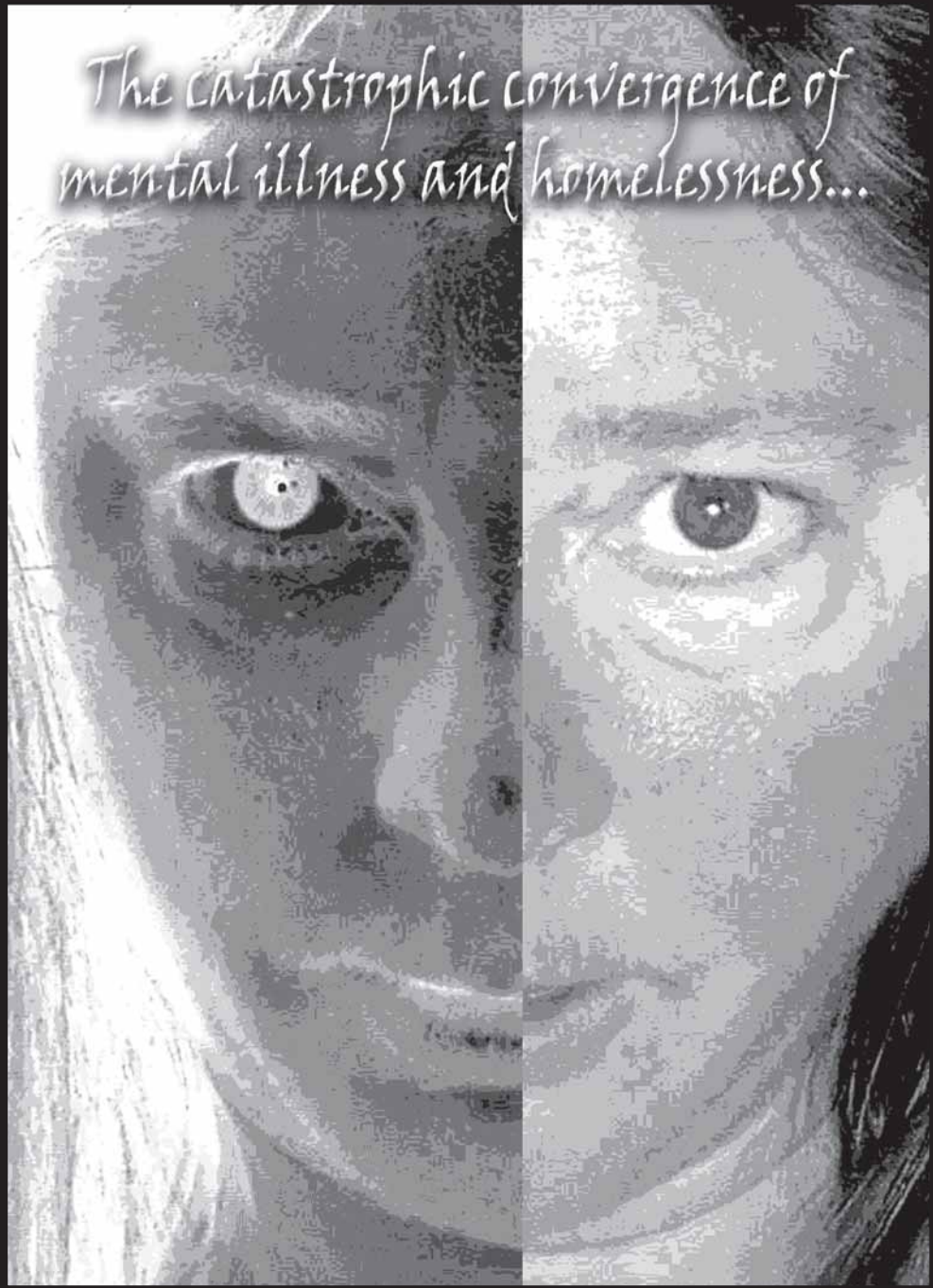
# Poverello News

July 2008 (559) 498-6988

[www.poverellohouse.org](http://www.poverellohouse.org)



*The catastrophic convergence of  
mental illness and homelessness...*





Before working at Poverello House, there were some things that I hadn't been exposed to very much. One of them was mental illness.

Interestingly, I got a close-up view of mental illness, not only from Poverello clients, but also from strangers calling Poverello, seeking help for family members with mental illnesses. Sometimes I've attempted to intervene in some of these situations, but have felt frustrated that there

was really little I could do to make the things better. I'm the kind of person who likes to see problems solved, and I've come to realize that when it comes to mental illness, there sometimes is no real solution.

In many of these cases, the afflicted family members would be homeless if their loved ones weren't supporting them. The financial strain of keeping mentally ill children, siblings, or parents sheltered, giving them adequate medical and psychiatric care, and providing the basic necessities of life, is huge, even for a well-to-do family. Perhaps even worse is the devastating experience of helplessly watching someone they love spiral downward into a state of despair, irrational thinking, and seemingly uncontrollable behavior.

When I think about these folks, who, for the most part, have given their sick loved ones incredible support and opportunity, it's hard not to feel kind of hopeless about the mentally ill clients we see at Poverello. Unlike the ill people who have caring families, psychotic Poverello clients really have little or no help. They have either exhausted the goodwill and resources of their relatives, or their families are too dysfunctional to aid them. Most of them are truly alone on the streets,

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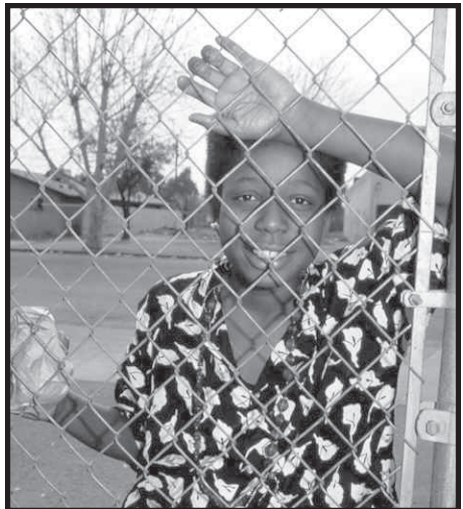
and once someone with a mental illness becomes homeless, there's precious little chance for stability.

The lifeline for these folks is the county's mental health network, but we all know the story of state and county funding problems, resulting in budget cuts and reduced services. Many of these services, such as counseling and dispensing psychiatric medications, keep some people functioning enough to take care of themselves. However, the nature of mental illness is such that logical thinking tends to go out the window, and many homeless mentally ill people don't take the medication they need to function, even though it would be in their best interest to do so.

In the past, all we could do was to provide the mentally ill with basic food, hygiene and medical services, and when needed, refer or transport them to mental health providers. However, about the time we expanded our Village of Hope with the City of Fresno, we received some onsite help.

We now have a portable trailer on our property, and county social workers and a counselor from King's View are available to meet with homeless clients to connect them to the larger social service network. It isn't a complete answer, but it's a step in the right direction.

Part of our job, as we see it, is simply getting to know some of these hurting clients. Because they have no one else to help them, we can intervene, for instance, when we notice someone is "off his meds" and behaving strangely. When that happens, we talk to him, find out what's going on, and get him to the Holy Cross Clinic or to the county mental health office. In this sense, maybe one of the most valuable services we can offer the mentally ill is what author Marvin Olasky calls "association": getting to know their personalities and illnesses well enough so that we can find ways to support them, when they have nobody else.



# Suffering Compounded

There is no denying that one of the major reasons for homelessness is mental illness. Most of us, however, don't know specifically what that means. What kind of mental disorders do these people have, and why isn't someone taking care of them?

The two predominant mental illnesses that afflict homeless people are bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), "Bipolar disorder, or manic depression, is a medical illness that causes extreme shifts in mood, energy, and functioning... Over 10 million people in America have bipolar disorder... Bipolar disorder is a chronic and generally life-long condition with recurring episodes of mania and depression that can last from days to months that often begin in adolescence or early adulthood, and occasionally even in children."

NAMI defines schizophrenia as "... a serious and challenging medical illness, an illness that affects well over 2 million American adults... Schizophrenia often interferes with a person's ability to think clearly, to distinguish reality from fantasy, to manage emotions, make decisions, and relate to others... Most people with schizophrenia contend with the illness chronically or episodically throughout their lives, and are often stigmatized by lack of public understanding about the disease... The World Health Organization has identified schizophrenia as one of the ten most debilitating diseases affecting human beings."

In the 1990s, breakthrough studies and advanced imaging techniques confirmed what many had suspected for years: that bipolar disorder and schizophrenia are primarily physical, rather than psychological, illnesses. Both can be set into motion by environmental "triggers," such as stress or trauma, and both have psychiatric symptoms, but they appear to be genetically inherited predispositions that produce profound brain changes, which cause the symptoms.

These disorders change the sufferer's perception of reality, alter his ability to organize thought, and create substantial obstacles to achieving success in relationships, school or work. Schizophrenia, and, to a lesser extent, bipolar disorder, are accompanied by hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that don't exist) or delusions (fixed, erroneous ideas), which are not only frightening but also debilitating. Many

suffering from schizophrenia or bipolar disorder have no recourse but to live on the streets, because they have ceased functioning in normative society.

In the past, mentally ill people would have been housed in institutions. That changed, beginning in the 1960s, with a movement called “deinstitutionalization.” The idea behind deinstitutionalization was to mainstream the mentally ill, thanks largely to the discovery of drugs that stabilized the symptoms of major mental disorders. Because treatment at institutions was often substandard or worse, deinstitutionalization was viewed as a humane alternative. Advocates envisioned community mental health centers that would dispense medications and attend to the needs of the mentally ill as they made the transition back to a self-supporting existence.

That vision fell apart due to a complex combination of funding shortfalls, politics, and the stubborn reality of mental illness. Many afflicted people wouldn’t take their medications because of paranoia, a distaste for the unpleasant side effects, or because they were self-medicating with alcohol and illicit drugs. The community mental health centers didn’t materialize. As the lives of the mentally ill disintegrated, they ended up being homeless in greater and greater numbers. By the mid-1970s to early 1980s, they were a common and pathetic sight in urban areas.

Sometimes, people with mental illnesses grasp the fact that they need help, and by availing themselves of what help there is available, are able to step away from the madness of street life. We’ve seen this happen a few times.

However, with mental illness, there are seldom fairy tale endings. The disorder changes a person’s aspirations permanently, but that doesn’t mean that someone so afflicted can’t fight the symptoms and lead a good life. With proper medical and psychiatric help, a lot of prayer and emotional support, people can emerge from a hellish existence and find contentment and useful purpose in their lives.

The next time you hear someone growl, “If those homeless people would just get off their duffs and get jobs, the problem would be solved,” you might want to gently inform the speaker about the the devastating effects of mental illness. Or, maybe you could invite him to come volunteer at Poverello House, so that he could personally witness the catastrophic convergence of mental illness and homelessness.

# Amici + Fireworks = A Great Fourth

There's still time to visit the Amici del Poverello Fireworks stand and get ready for Independence Day! But come quickly, because inventory is moving!

All proceeds from the sales will benefit Poverello House. The stand will be located on the **southeast corner of Blackstone and Gettysburg** in the Fresno Ag parking lot, and will be open

from **June 28, 2008 to July 4, 2008** from **10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m.**

If you plan to celebrate our nation's birth with fireworks, come to the Amici fireworks booth and help the Poverello mission with your purchase of some patriotic pyrotechnics! Thanks for your support.



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## Granville Home of Hope

Granville Homes is proud to present the 2008 Home of Hope fund-raiser, which benefits Poverello House and seven other local nonprofit organizations. A 2,029 square foot, three bedroom, two-and-a-half bath, three car garage Pastiempo home will be built in Granville Homes La Ventana community, located in northwest Fresno. This home will be built in collaboration with various partners as the prize for a raffle to be held Saturday, October 11, 2008. Opportunity tickets



are available for a \$100 donation. Last year, the Home of Hope event raised \$42,180 for Poverello House. Since its inception in 2006, the Home of Hope fund-raiser has raised nearly \$1 million for valley nonprofits.

For more information, visit [www.gvhomeofhope.com](http://www.gvhomeofhope.com).



# The Day Hunger Got Stamped

On Saturday, May 10, 2008,  
52,757 pounds of non-perishable food

were collected and donated to Poverello House, thanks once again to the efforts of the National Association of Letter Carriers' *Stamp Out Hunger Drive*. We are grateful for this tremendous effort, and special thanks go not only to the National Association of Letter Carriers, but also to Fresno postal workers, Mayflower transit, ABC 30, The Fresno Bee, the Fresno community for their donations of non-perishable items, and Poverello House volunteers, all of whom made the event a great success.



## *Wish List*

Men's jeans \* Men's underwear \* Socks  
Summer clothes (shorts, tee shirts)  
Books (especially children's books)

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

***To donate online, visit our website at [www.poverellohouse.org](http://www.poverellohouse.org)***

## Poverello House

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### RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

**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  
United Way Organization