

# Poverello News



July 2009

(559) 498-6988



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



By now, Susan Boyle, a once obscure Scottish spinster, is a household name. It seems as though every pundit in America has written about her amazing performance on the show, “Britain’s Got Talent,” so I’m chiming in kind of late in the game.

If you haven’t seen Ms. Boyle’s performance on TV or YouTube, here’s what happened. Forty-seven years old, never married, and with a very plain appearance, Ms. Boyle had grown up in an impoverished village. She is a faithful Christian who took care of her elderly parents until they passed away. Children and teenagers tormented her because of her looks, both when she was a child and as an adult. However, she has a glorious singing voice, and using her immense talent, she for many years performed in neighborhood churches and at karaoke sessions in local pubs.

Her opportunity to go on this show, a spin-off of American Idol, seemed particularly ill-fated. Described by many as “frumpy,” this unlikely candidate strode onto the stage to the cruel laughter of both the judges and audience. She seemed confident, but embarrassingly awkward, and the judges smirked as she described her goal of one day becoming a professional singer. To say that they didn’t take her seriously is a huge understatement.

And then, she opened her mouth and sang.

A stunned panel of judges gazed, shocked and unbelieving, as the voice of an angel took command of the stage. The audience’s mockery turned to wild adulation; Susan Boyles’ magnificent contralto voice did

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not match their preconceived ideas of her. Her choice of songs, “I Dreamed a Dream” from the Broadway musical, *Les Misérables*, emotionally complimented her exquisite artistry. To a society that grossly overvalues physical attractiveness and wrongly equates it with goodness, talent, and prestige, Ms. Boyle stood as a refreshing rebuke.

Jesus said that the last shall be first, and the meek shall inherit the earth. Susan Boyle pretty much inherited the civilized, wired world that night as her performance spread like wildfire on the Internet.

The Susan Boyle phenomenon took me back to an experience I had in San Francisco many years ago, which I described in my book, *Papa Mike*. I was helping Brother Kurt minister at a rest home. We were holding a church service, and it came time to pass the peace of Christ. The woman in front of me turned to clasp my hand, and I was horrified at her appearance. She had, if not the same disease, a similar one to that of John Merrick, the so-called “Elephant Man.” I had never seen someone so grotesquely disfigured. As I swallowed my revulsion and looked up at her face, I was struck by the fact that she had the most beautiful smile I had ever seen. As she passed the peace of Christ, she also *radiated* the peace of Christ. It’s an experience I’ve never forgotten.

Susan Boyle and the woman in San Francisco are just two examples of why we as individuals and we as a culture are always wrong in writing someone off as flawed or defective. All of us have defects and sins; some people are beautiful on the outside, but bitter, nasty and twisted on the inside; others lack physical beauty but have great souls or hidden gifts that can bless untold numbers of people.

We don’t see a lot of physical attractiveness on the streets here at the Pov; but if there’s a lesson in Susan Boyle’s astonishing performance and the show’s dazzled judges, it’s that we cannot afford to dismiss people as unworthy or useless. God sees the whole person, and He sees beauty where, in our frailty and prejudice, we see none. I’ve always believed that He wants us to start viewing people with His vision of them. Our fallen human tendency is to label those who don’t meet our culture’s exacting standards as worthless; however, seeing someone through God’s eyes allows us to be open to many surprises, as well as many blessings that we otherwise would have missed.

Mike

## Returning the Favor

William had made many bad choices in his life. An early bad decision had been to use drugs. He became addicted, and his drug-influenced thoughts led him to further terrible judgment in many instances. One of those bad decisions was allowing someone to use his garage for manufacturing meth; it cost him four months in jail.

While serving his time, he found out about the Poverello House Resident Program, which was offered as an alternative to serving his entire sentence in jail. He was accepted into the program, but more or less went through the motions for the first month here. Then, something began to change.

William had never been in a drug program before, and maybe some sustained sobriety began to help him change the way he thought. He began making good decisions for the first time in years. He opened himself up to what the program had to teach him. He began actually participating in, instead of just “taking up space” at, N.A. and A.A. meetings.

William graduated from the program almost a year ago, about the time the economy took a turn for the worse. After finishing, he got back together with his wife, but he couldn't find work. However, instead of sitting around thinking dark thoughts and feeling sorry for himself, he decided to do something with his spare time. He started volunteering at Poverello.

“I do it to give back,” he said recently. “Pov helped me—it gave me my life back. It makes me feel better helping and giving back. Being here is like a (N.A.) meeting for me. I see these people, and it reminds me that if I use drugs again, I'll be on the other side of that line. I don't want to end up there.”

William continues to look for work in the warehouse and forklift-driving field, but while he's unemployed, he comes every week to help at Poverello. He also keeps in touch with about eight men who went through the program with him, all of whom are continuing to go to A.A. or N.A. meetings. Every week, he shows up at one of the A.A. meetings that the Resident Program participants attend, mainly to encourage them, but also to reconnect with where he started his new journey of sober living.

Life is tough for addicts, both before and after achieving sobriety. However, perseverance when times are tough pays huge dividends, which William is discovering. He is also finding that part of staying sane means getting out of himself and helping others in whatever way he can. It's a great new way to live that he's learning day by day.

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## Letter Carriers Help the Hungry

Last May, the Association of Letter Carriers again held their “Stamp Out Hunger” food drive, which locally benefited Poverello House. They collected 55,000 pounds of nonperishable food and donated it to Poverello House to help the poor and homeless.

Volunteers worked in shifts all weekend to unload and sort the food collected. We are so grateful to the Association of Letter Carriers, our volunteers, and all the people in the community who contributed to this food drive's great success.



*Above, left and right: The food arrives!  
Below, left: A spill, easily taken care of  
by dozens of volunteers.  
Below, right: Hard-working volunteers  
take a break to pose for pictures*



## Freedom Isn't Free

*Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom, must, like men, undergo the fatigues of supporting it.*

—Thomas Paine, *The American Crisis*, No. 4, September 11, 1777

As we approach another Independence Day, this quotation from Founding Father Thomas Paine reminds us that the freedom we enjoy as Americans is an inheritance that can be squandered. We were born into it, and often we take it for granted, thinking that it will always be there.

“Inheritance” is an apt metaphor. Take, for instance, the common story of someone who has worked his way out of poverty, amassed a fortune through innovation and discipline, and then bequeathed the fruit of his labors to a profligate son. The son, ungrateful, and with a sense of entitlement, proceeds to waste his legacy, thinking it will always be there to cushion his fall. At some point, however, he wakes up and realizes that that he has foolishly thrown away all that was earned by his father’s efforts.

Freedom is something that also can disappear, seemingly overnight, if not properly understood, appreciated, and guarded. Many would say that our modern, consumer society has perhaps forgotten this truth that was so well understood by our Founders.

What is true for society as a whole is often also true for individuals. Many don’t grasp that freedom also entails responsibility. When popular culture begins to foster narcissistic pleasure seeking as the highest good, people in that culture are affected. They mistakenly believe that the pursuit of happiness is nothing more than embracing, and being enveloped by, material accumulation and sensual pleasure. That’s how drug habituation becomes a huge social problem.

Most of the men in Poverello’s drug program began using alcohol or street drugs out of curiosity, or experimented to escape the miseries of poverty and abuse. As they grew more dependent on drugs, their view of freedom changed radically. Freedom came to mean unencumbered opportunities to get high, and anything that got in the way—job responsibilities, relationships, laws—was jettisoned. They continued on

this course until something traumatic, such as homelessness or incarceration, forced them to rethink their lives.

For those addicts who decide to follow a life of abstinence from drugs, the meaning of freedom again changes dramatically. They begin to see that freedom from chemical bondage is the new central goal of their lives, which requires, among other things, gratitude, hard work, and never taking their new liberty for granted. The day they stop using drugs becomes their own personal “Independence Day,” which they celebrate and revere much as Americans do July Fourth. They eventually discover that “the fatigues of supporting” their newfound freedom are as nothing compared with immense inner peace that sobriety presents to them. It is then that they have embraced true freedom.

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## Immediate Clothing Need

Sam Saunders, our Grounds Supervisor who also is in charge of our clothing distribution, recently told us that the men’s clothing room is the barest he has ever seen it. Normally, we have plenty of donations coming in. However, whether it’s the economy or a combination of other unknown factors affecting giving, donations of men’s clothing have dropped to almost nothing.

If you have any extra men’s clothes lying around, the Poverello staff and the homeless men we serve would be really appreciate a contribution of pants, shirts, socks, underwear, or shoes. You can drop off donations seven days a week. For more information, please call (559) 498-6988.

### *Wish List*

Men’s clothing

Disposable razors \* Deodorant

8 1/2” x 11” Copy paper

***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  
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