



Poverello News



June 2008

(559) 498-6988

www.poverellohouse.org



On a perfect Central California spring day, I stepped out in front of Poverello House about nine o'clock in the morning. The sky was clear and blue, and though it was warm, a gentle breeze kept the temperature from being too hot. Breakfast had gone well inside Poverello; there had been no fights, no loud cussing, and most of the clients quietly enjoyed the meal. I looked up to see a wondrous sight: seagulls circling and soaring as they searched for food on the ground. They often come in large numbers because homeless people throw pieces of leftover bread on the street for them. Could life get any better than this?

I glanced back down, and then noticed something white and drippy on my shoulder. One of those birds had nailed me.

Not far from Poverello, there's a mattress store. On the outside wall is a mural depicting different size mattresses, with prices painted beside the pictures. As I was driving home one evening, I saw a homeless man sleeping on the sidewalk, directly beneath the mattress painting.

Life is full of irony, but sometimes it seems as though we get an extra dose around Poverello House. That my perfect day in landlocked Fresno could be ruined by a seafaring bird, or that a homeless man would unconsciously choose to sleep rough beneath a picture of mattresses, shows that humorous or tragic irony is abundantly available to anyone who is observant.

We often hear people speak about homelessness in terms of outraged irony. That there should be homeless people in such a wealthy

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land as America, or hungry people in the Central Valley, the world's breadbasket, is seen as offensive to common decency.

It is definitely ironic that in this rich country, people sleep on sidewalks and eat at soup kitchens. However, just because two contradictory realities create irony doesn't mean that one caused the other. For example, I'm overweight, even though I live in a culture with endless diet plans and exercise options. Is it the indifference of the diet or fitness industries that cause me to pile on the pounds? I don't think so. Likewise, I've seen too much community generosity to believe that homelessness is caused by societal indifference.

As I've said countless times, homeless people are, for the most part (there are always exceptions), mentally ill or dependent on drugs. It's their afflictions, mingled with countless personal choices, that land them on the streets. Homelessness is a problem of both the soul and psyche, and only secondarily of economics.

That might sound harsh coming from someone the homeless call "Papa Mike," but I've been around this problem thirty-five years, and I long ago lost my naïveté. A homeless person is someone whose life is out of control and who needs help. It's heartbreaking that he's in this horrible situation, and the story of how he got here is always tragic. However, until he gets the right kind of help, he won't benefit from indiscriminate charity, whether that charity comes from a government check or from passersby giving him five-dollar bills. Money does nothing to alleviate his problem and may, in many cases, make things worse by helping him buy the drugs that keep him sick.

Perhaps the biggest irony of all concerning the homeless problem is that people on the streets need something that nobody initially wants to embrace: discipline, "other-centered" behaviors, and a purpose higher and better than self-indulgence. Come to think of it, that's pretty much what all of us need in order to live a good life.



Virtue and Poverty

Eight years ago, an author named Joel Schwartz published a book entitled, *Fighting Poverty with Virtue: Moral Reform and America's Urban Poor, 1825-2000*. Schwartz was looking at today's poverty through the prism of nineteenth-century reformers who were energetically involved in helping the poor climb out of destitution.

These reformers believed that societal structural reforms were necessary to help the impoverished. These men and women helped pave the way for labor laws, old-age pensions, unionization, and government intervention in providing low-income housing. At the same time, they saw that it was essential for poor people to embrace virtues such as diligence, sobriety, thrift and family responsibility in order to have any chance at all of becoming happy and economically self-sufficient.

Schwartz's thesis is that in today's discussion of poverty, at least at the political and media level, there is little conversation about promoting virtue as a viable way out of poverty. It is viewed as condescending, or even insensitive, to say that the poor need to develop certain moral behaviors in order to succeed. Yet clear, commonsense examples of this necessity abound.

Can there be any doubt that the slum-dwelling teenager who somehow is able to stay in school, study and earn good grades is going to have a much better chance to succeed than the teen who drops out and joins a gang? We can sadly, and often accurately, predict the grim economic future of the thirteen-year-old girl who gets pregnant; we can also predict fairly well that the girl from a poor neighborhood, who works her way through college and waits until she's married to have a baby, will improve her socioeconomic status. Likewise, isn't it obvious that an impoverished mother and father who drink and use drugs will greatly benefit both their family and their financial status if they manage to permanently abstain from using intoxicants?

Such examples are, of course, in abundance at a place like Poverello House. The men in our Resident Program are a case in point. Many are bright and talented, but their lives are dominated by drug use, which unfailingly leads to poverty, violence, family disruptions, crime, incarceration and despair. They've become slaves to their cravings.

We offer them structure and discipline. Our program is based both on the Twelve Step programs of A.A. and N.A., and on residential drug treatment models that have demonstrated success. Twelve Step programs are not magic; they work by introducing virtue as a means of overcoming alcoholic or drug-induced despair. An addict following these steps must admit that he needs help, turn his life over to a higher power, and go about righting wrongs he has done. He then must strive to help others, and continually practice rigorous honesty in everything he does. By habituating himself to virtue, he is able to overcome the temptation to drink or use drugs, and his life begins to get better.

Our program makes labor a part of the cure. The men have to contribute to their sobriety by helping Poverello help others. Thus, where once their lives centered around hanging out and getting high, it now centers around being part of a team that feeds the poor. Together, as a team, they attend meetings that reinforce the virtues of honesty, hard work, spiritual health, and responsibility, and they strive to become better sons, husbands and fathers.

Founder Mike McGarvin witnessed this process in action recently. Two men had become friends while in the Resident Program. One graduated and went back to work installing automobile stereos. Mike needed some new stereo speakers for his car, so he thought he'd give the former resident some business. He also took along the man's friend from the program so they could visit.

While he was awaiting the installation, Mike overheard their conversation. Rather than the usual depressing talk of male addicts, which typically consists of braggadocio about drugs, violence, drunkenness, jail adventures, and sexual conquests, these two men were discussing the spiritual growth they were experiencing in Narcotics Anonymous. There was genuine excitement in their voices as their talk centered on God, what they were learning at meetings, and the great progress they had made in their lives.

Because all of us have seen incredible technological advances in our lifetimes, we sometimes mistakenly think that human nature changes, too. However, the mortal capacity for virtue or vice is something that remains grimly constant. Habits that led to poverty in the nineteenth century can still do so today. Likewise, virtues that guided people to success and freedom back then are just as relevant in our modern world, and when we wish to help others, we should remember this.

Habits of Virtue Well-Learned

We received this touching note from one of our donors. We are printing it here, because it demonstrates how one person can be a living example of charity, and the impact his actions can have:

When I was a teenager, I remember my father pulling out the cutting board in our kitchen. He had two loaves of bread, a bunch of bologna and the same amount of cheese slices. He would line up the slices of bread, smear a little mustard on, and put a slice of bologna and cheese on each one, then cover it with another slice of bread. The sandwiches would go back in the plastic bags the bread had come in. The next day he would take the sandwiches to the Poverello House on his way to work. I don't remember if he did this weekly or once a month, but he did it regularly. His actions taught me to give, that you can always help those who are in need, and to remember that there is always someone worse off than me. This is the lesson I learned at my kitchen table watching Dr. Curtis Richardson making those sandwiches. My father has been dead for twenty years, but his loving and giving nature has not died; his example lives on.

—Amy Richardson

Amici Goes Out With a Bang!

The Amici Del Poverello Guild takes a well-earned break every summer, but this year, the busy Guild members will be working well into their seasonal vacation to help Poverello House. The Guild won a slot in the annual Fresno fireworks lottery, and will have a stand to sell fireworks.

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.

OPERATION BROWN BAG "NO LUNCH" EVENT JUNE 2008

For the past three years, we have held a successful community fund-raiser called Operation Brown Bag. Using volunteer help, we put together thousands of peanut butter and jelly sandwich lunches in brown bags and sold them for \$5.00 to people in the community.

We've made some changes this year. Although a great fund-raiser, Operation Brown Bag made our daily job of feeding the homeless difficult, because we had to shift enormous amounts of food in our walk-in refrigerators to create storage space for the lunches, and the event occupied a huge amount of staff time. Because we don't want to impact our services, we have decided that this year, Operation Brown Bag will be a "no lunch" event. Are you confused yet? Allow us to explain.

This year, we'll be asking you to make a donation to feed the hungry, but we won't be providing a lunch in exchange. Instead, for the entire month of June, we will be taking Operation Brown Bag donations. If you mail in a contribution, you can use our regular donation envelope and write in "Operation Brown Bag."

Every \$5.00 (formerly the price for an Operation Brown Bag lunch) will feed *seven hungry people*; a contribution of \$100 will provide a meal to *140 people*, based on our actual costs of food service.

And by the way, if you wish you were getting that lunch in exchange for your \$5.00, come on down and volunteer at lunchtime. We are always glad to feed our helpers!



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
United Way Organization