

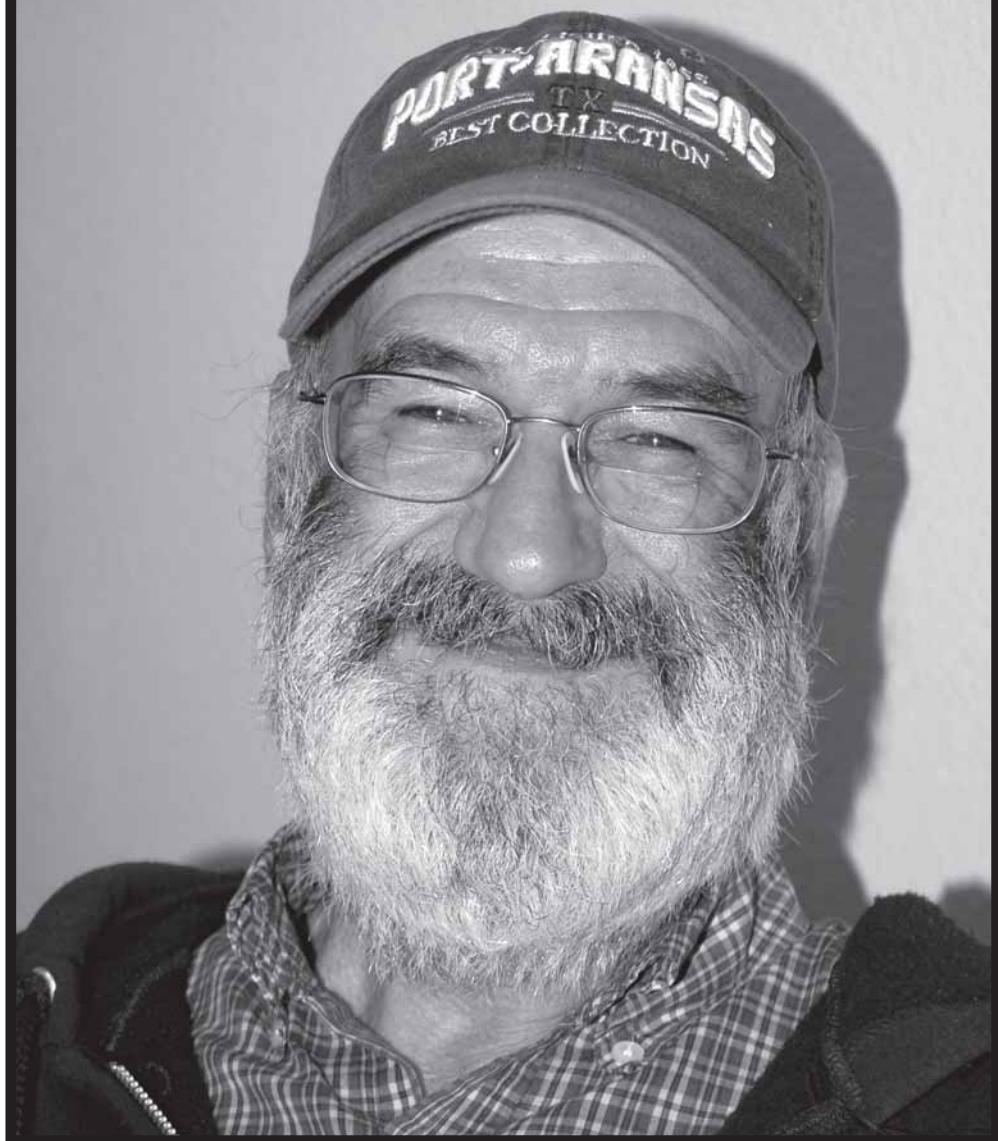
# Poverello News



June 2011

(559) 498-6988

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





I've said this before, but it remains true: the more things change, the more they stay the same. This little aphorism has impressed itself on me quite a bit lately.

For example, in all the years I've been dealing with the homeless, there have been encampments and little tent cities that have sprung up. Inevitably, these tight concentrations of homeless people drinking, doing drugs, and engaging in prostitution lead to chaos. After being here for so many years, you'd think that our efforts would have eliminated many of these camps. Yet, in the past several months, tents and lean-to shacks have become established on the streets to the north of Poverello, and the predictable violence has followed.

Recently, that violence spilled onto the grounds of Poverello. Two men were arguing over a woman, and got into a fight. Our security quickly broke it up. Our policy regarding fights is that both parties have to leave the premises. We escort one out the north gate, and the other out the southeast gate so they don't re-engage.

This time, however, one was determined to continue the brawl, and quickly came and found the other. It was then that things got ugly. One guy had a knife, and before the fight had progressed very far, he managed to slash his opponent's nose, chin, and shoulder. By the time the police arrived, an ugly crowd had gathered and threatened to escalate the bloodshed.

When I first started down here, it was like the Wild West. I was on my own with a just a few volunteers, and things often got out of

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hand. The above incident reminded me of another one that took place almost 30 years ago. Right in front of the Pov, two other guys were fighting over a woman. One pulled a knife, and before anyone could intervene, he slashed open the other man's belly. The victim lived and refused to press charges.

Then there was the case of mistaken identity. Recently a blind man came up to me and asked what "Poverello" meant. I told him that it means "Little Poor Man" in Italian.

"Italian?" he asked. "I thought it was Spanish. You're Mexican, aren't you?"

"Nope," I replied. "Just an old Irishman."

"Well, I'll be," he said shaking his head. "All this time I thought you were a fat Mexican."

A couple of decades ago, I was leaving my office at the old Vartanian House across the street, when Freddie, a man I knew, walked up to me. He wasn't blind, but he was blind drunk. I was locking the gate, and I had my back to him. When I turned around, I saw he had a six-shooter pointed right at me.

"You damn Chinaman," he slurred, "You stole my stuff."

I couldn't believe this was happening. Freddie thought I was Chinese, and I thought I was going to get shot.

"Freddie," I said, "Look at me. It's Papa Mike. I'm not Chinese, I'm *Irish*, for God's sake!" After giving me a glazed stare for long enough to make me even more frightened, I guess he believed me, because he put the gun away.

When people are subsisting in tents on the streets, doing drugs and drinking booze all day, emotions tend to get pretty raw. Jealousy, inebriation, misunderstandings, or poor judgment all play big roles in starting problems. Many times, there is no stopping the pure rage that erupts. The civilized restraints that we have tried to promote fall away, and brutal consequences result.

A big part of our job is simply cooling hot tempers. Back in the day, I'd tell people who were fighting that I wouldn't feed them anymore if they didn't stop, or, as with Freddie, I'd try to talk them down. We still use the same approaches.

As the summer approaches, we know that hot weather will make things worse. Violence always spikes in the summertime. It's frustrating

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to reflect on the reality that the more things change, the more they stay the same. It seems so futile that we've been dealing with the same issues all these years, and sometimes it feels as though we've made no progress.

However, I try to compare that dismal perspective to another one: How much more violence would there be if Pov wasn't here? No doubt, there would be even more injury, and probably more death. I think we do a lot to ease the city's violent crime by providing basic necessities, a safe place to rest, and understanding staff people who can bring calm to crazy situations.

*Mike*

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## Sometimes, Things Work Out

John (not his real name) worked for a winery back east in the early 1990s, when he was transferred to California. In 2000, he began having medical problems. At the time, he had a new wife and two stepchildren, and was taking care of a boy who was a friend of his stepsons.

In March 2002, he lost his job, and along with it, his medical insurance. The bills began piling up. At first the family got by on savings. When he wasn't able to get another job, the savings dwindled, and they began selling off possessions.

Soon there was no money to pay rent, and they were on the streets. For a while, the family made it on their own by camping on the grounds of a church that was sympathetic to their plight. Through word of mouth, they discovered Poverello, and came here to eat and spend the day in a safe place.

"The street has a way of grinding you down and chewing you up," said John. The hopeless lifestyle put a strain on their marriage, and his wife eventually disappeared. The kids ended up at a relative's house. The last time John saw his wife was in 2004.

In 2005, he learned that she had gone to Bakersfield, and had drowned in the Kern River. That's when his life sank to an all-time low.

Never one to drink or use drugs, John was nevertheless as demoralized as any alcoholic who hits bottom. With nowhere to go, and

nobody to turn to, he approached Paul Stack, our Deputy Director of Operations, about moving into the Village of Hope.

“I had to fill out a PDP (personal development plan),” John remembered. “I turned it in a week late. I pushed it in front of Paul—it was blank. He asked what was up with that. I told him I didn’t know what I was going to do today, let alone tomorrow or a year from now. I told him, ‘My wife’s dead, my family’s gone. I don’t care about anything now.’ Instead of denying me a bed, he said, ‘Well, we’ll work on your health first.’ So I moved into the Village, started seeing CeCe at the (Holy Cross) Clinic. I got comfortable, started making some friends, and the rest is history.

“I started working on getting my life back. In 2008, I went to stay with my daughter in Hawaii for about a month. Then I stayed with my brother in New York, got some medical issues resolved, and came back to California.

“I had lost my driver’s license because I couldn’t pay for the tickets, so I went to homeless court (at Poverello), and the judge gave me 100 hours of community service here at the Pov. I learned a lot while doing those hours.

“I turned 62 in 2008 and became eligible for Social Security. I saved every penny of my first check, and started doing some security work, also. Little by little, I saved enough to buy a little RV, and kept putting every penny I had in the bank.”

The Village of Hope worked out for John exactly as it was supposed to. He got back on his feet, was able to save money, and in 2009, he took his RV and began traveling, staying with relatives. At one point, he reunited with his brother in Texas, stayed for a long time and helped restore his brother’s house.

Recently, he came through Fresno just to thank Poverello for helping him climb out of the depths. “I made the decision to turn my life around,” he said, “but a large part of my success I owe to Mike, Paul and the Pov staff.

“It’s easy to give up and slide into a comfort zone on the street. I didn’t want that to happen to me. I wanted to get my old life back, the one I had before I lost my job and my wife—but I didn’t get my life back; I got a different life. It’s not the same one that disappeared when I lost my job and my family, but I’m very content with the life I have today. I’m a happy person.”

# The Demon's Victims

Lonnie (not his real name) uses a wheelchair because of multiple physical problems. He's been around for some time now, and has been in and out of Poverello House throughout the years. Sometimes, he has housing, and at other times, he has the street.

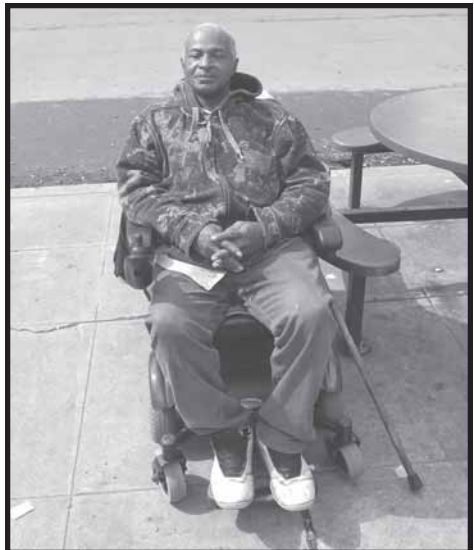
We were greatly surprised when recently, we learned something new about him. In 1965, he was an Edison High School track star and state champion in his event.

That could have meant a bright future for him. However, as we see in so many other situations, he started running with the wrong crowd, and alcohol and drugs took over his life. The door of opportunity closed, and Lonnie found himself destitute and on the streets. He's never quite found his way out.

It's staggering to think about the talent wasted, the chances squandered, or the youthful enthusiasm corrupted by this demonic disease called addiction. Here at Poverello House we've heard thousands of such stories over the years, and yet one never ceases to be saddened by the tragedies as they unfold.

Sadly, Poverello House sees only a tiny fraction of the broken souls who succumb to addiction. We are the end of the line; addicts only come to Poverello when they have nowhere else. However, the same brokenness affects all levels of society, and most never reach the depths that we see here. Addiction is the driving force behind countless criminal acts, divorces, child and spousal abuse, depressions, and suicides. It's horrifying influence is widespread, and the cost to individuals, families and communities is immense.

Usually, the only way that someone begins to overcome



addiction is to hit bottom: to exhaust all avenues of escape, to wring dry that final rationalization, and to be driven to utter despair. At that point, a person can become open to change, teachable, and humble. Most who have become addicted never reach that point.

Someone once said that you hit bottom when you stop digging the hole. Pray that those carrying the cross of addiction make the decision to stop digging long before they end up walking through Poverello's doors for their next meal.

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## **Poverello Ponderings...**

Every evil act tends to harden a man's heart, that is, to deaden it. Every good deed tends to soften it, to make it more alive. The more a man's heart hardens, the less freedom does he have to change, the more he is determined by a previous action. But there comes a point of no return when man's heart has become hardened and so deadened that he has lost the possibility of freedom.

—Eric Fromm

Boundless intemperance

In nature is a tyranny.

—Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

### *June Wish List*

Ground beef \* Breakfast cereal

Olive oil \* Sugar

T-shirts \* Men's shorts

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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## FORWARDING 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