



Poverello News



(559) 498-6988 **March 2010**

www.poverellohouse.org



There are some lyrics I like from an old Paul Simon album: “One man’s ceiling is another man’s floor.” I sometimes think about that phrase when I’m dealing with the homeless people around here.

Mario (not his real name) has been a mainstay around Poverello for years. Twice in our rehab program, he could never seem to get a handle on his drinking, and has been on and off the streets for almost as long as I can remember.

Last winter, he was warming himself in a tent, and (here I’m not entirely clear on the story) either the tent caught fire or he fell into a fire. The end result was feet that were badly burned, and he was taken to the hospital.

Mario was immediately transferred to the burn unit. Now, in my way of thinking, the burn unit has got to be one of the most hellish places on earth, simply because if you end up there, you’re in pretty bad shape. Few things are as excruciatingly painful, and difficult to heal, as serious burns.

Thus, when he came back, I was expecting nightmarish stories about his stay there. I was wrong. When I asked him about it, he said, “Oh, it was wonderful. They treated me so nice, and the nurses were all young and pretty.”

One man’s ceiling is another man’s floor.

It then occurred to me how far removed I am from a homeless person’s perspective. Something that I would find simply horrific was a pleasant diversion for Mario. How could that be?

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The more I thought about Mario, the more sense it made to me. Here's a man in his late fifties or early sixties, who has spent the majority of his adult life in and out of jail. Alcoholism has ruined his health, his ability to provide for himself or his family, and his self-respect. For about a decade, he's been homeless, living either on the sidewalk or in makeshift tent shelters, existing only to get the next drink. Small wonder, then, that his stint in the burn unit seemed like a nice vacation compared to his everyday life.

Many other homeless people I've met have the same perspective. Their lives are so barren that a stay in the hospital or the local detox facility is considered a treat.

So why doesn't Mario stop drinking? If his life is so miserable that a trip to the burn unit is like going to a day spa, why doesn't he quit booze and try to have a better life?

What we know about addiction explains part of the mystery. Once the body has acclimated itself to a substance, it physically craves it to feel normal. The mind follows the body; rationalization sets in, and a young addict is on his way to becoming an old addict.

But I'm not sure that theories of addiction explain all. Deep in the human heart, all of us have a need to find purpose and love. From my perspective, God made us that way so we would always search for Him. For many reasons, some people can't find Him, and without a spiritual foundation, they give up on life itself. For an alcoholic, sobering up is a terrifying prospect, because sobriety would force him to face the meaninglessness of his life without the mediating effects of beer, wine or vodka. In his warped way of thinking, sobriety doesn't promise sanity, but terror and despair. To be dependent on a substance is to cling to it utterly, no matter the consequences, because that step toward clean living seems like stepping off a dreadfully high precipice.

The reality, of course, is different. Sobriety affords someone a chance to find love and ultimate meaning, a way to encounter God, and the opportunity to live a useful life. That more homeless don't see this is a testimony to the power of addiction, because for every addict or alkie who turns his life around, there are hundreds who don't. Those odds don't matter so much to me, though, because the Good Shepherd has always gone to great lengths to find the one lost sheep out of a hundred, a thousand, or a million.



The Limits of Helping

The debate about separating the “deserving poor” from those undeserving of charity has been going on for centuries. It was codified in the English Poor Laws, which prescribed different treatment for different categories of the impoverished, with “able-bodied vagrants” often receiving harsh punishment. The idea of the deserving poor certainly colors people’s perceptions of the homeless today. Looking around, it’s easy to understand why.

Here at Poverello House, we’ve been deceived many times by sad stories that turned out to be deviations from the truth. For example, once someone gave us a hard-luck tale, and we helped him with a motel room, only to learn later that he was actually down on his luck because of his drug use, and that he stole a television from the motel where we housed him. Too many instances like this, and a person starts to get a little leery of sob stories.

Occasionally, though, there is an indisputable case of someone being in the category of “deserving poor.” We had one last winter.

An eighty-year-old, wheelchair-bound woman showed up with her fortyish, developmentally disabled son. They were from Minnesota, and, through what could only be called a foolishly impulsive desire to leave behind the cold climate, came to California. They ended up in Bakersfield, and from there, the Highway Patrol gave them a ride to Fresno. At the time, it was cold enough to make even a Minnesotan shiver, so they were taken to a warming center, and eventually found their way to Poverello.

Both mother and son received monthly Social Security checks, but in their poor planning had run out of money. We took them to a motel and paid for their room until their checks arrived.

Ultimately, they decided that the cold of Minnesota wasn’t as daunting as the poverty and insecurity of California, so they headed back, hopefully to a more stable environment.

One could look at this incident and say, “Her poor planning got her into this situation; she doesn’t deserve our help.” However, one of the realities of the streets is that they are full of people who don’t think logically, due to mental illness, chemically-altered brains, or chaotic upbringings.

So what was accomplished by putting an impulsive eighty-year-old and her needy son in a motel? In some ways, not much; she wasted a lot of money and time to end up back where she started. However, there is a good chance that had we not done this, she might not have survived. A wheelchair-bound octogenarian is not a good candidate for street life, and as problematic as her life is, she is nevertheless the only caretaker of a son who would have little chance in the world by himself.

Were this woman and her son “deserving?” Obviously, that is a more complicated question than it appears on the surface. Implicit in the debate about the deserving poor is the expectation that to qualify, they must be utterly victimized, have had no character flaws or foolish behavior that have led to their destitution, and that helping them will somehow get them back on their feet. The truth is that it is sometimes hard to find a situation at Poverello House without “baggage” of some sort. Perhaps, as in this instance, a “deserving” person acts in a less-than-deserving manner; or perhaps an “undeserving” person finds himself in dire need that is unrelated to his poor choices.

Often, what we do to help doesn’t change lives much, but simply keeps people alive another day. That is the nature of the problem we’re confronted with week after week. Sometimes, just doing what we can, even if it doesn’t radically alter the situation, is the best that anyone, anywhere, could do.

The Community Steps Up Again

Last Christmas, the line for toys just kept going down the block. The numbers are in: when it was all over, Poverello House had distributed over 2,500 toys, according to Deputy Director of Operations Paul Stack. We were able to provide this many gifts because we had a huge outpouring of gifts from the community, and to all the individuals, groups and businesses that donated toys, we thank you on behalf of over 2,000 happy children.



Children and Charity

Cami Cheney is an eleven-year-old girl who is very special to all of us at Poverello House. After coming to visit Poverello, Cami sent us a letter. It explains, much better than we can, all she has done for the homeless here:



Cami & her family

Dear Poverello House,

My name is Cami Cheney and I want to tell you about my fund raiser I did.

After hearing about the Poverello House and the work they do, I wanted to help. I started by setting aside some of the money I got as gifts for my birthday and Christmas. I did this and saved money for over a year. Then I read about raising money through read-a-thons. I decided to do my own read-a-thon. I set a goal of reading books totaling 1,500 pages and called friends and family to sponsor me. It took me two months to meet my reading goal. I had lots of fun and read some really good books.

After collecting the money I raised in the read-a-thon and adding it to the money that I had saved from gifts, I found that I had \$313.00 to give. I decided that I wanted to go down and see the Poverello House in person. On Saturday December 5th my mom, dad, brother and I volunteered to work at Poverello House and to make the donation in person. We made a lot of sandwiches and helped serve breakfast. My favorite part was going in the back and making lunches. Everyone that was working there was really nice.

I had a lot of fun and I was very happy to raise the money and help out that day.

Cami Cheney

When a child has this kind of loving heart that overflows with charitable action, it's very humbling to the adults working here. We have been blessed over the years with the contributions of thoughtful, mature children such as Cami. We are grateful for her and for her parents, who obviously have done a wonderful job in raising her.

The ACF Chefs Association of the San Joaquin Valley

PRESENTS

The 21st ANNUAL PASTA FESTIVAL

Featuring saucers prepared by local chefs!

Monday, March 15, 2010

5:00PM until 8:00PM

at the Clovis Veteran's Memorial Hall,

808 4th Street, Clovis, CA 93612

GRAND DOOR PRIZES

Plus numerous Raffle Prizes

Cost: Adults \$12.00 Children under 5yrs: \$8.00

Tickets available at the door: 50% of the
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"An extravaganza pasta buffet plus beverages and dessert"

For more information, log onto www.sanjoaquinchefs.org

Wish List

Olive oil * Coffee * Sugar

Non-dairy coffee creamer

#10 cans of vegetables & fruit

Men's jeans * Socks * Men's underwear

8 1/2" x 11" Copy paper * Ballpoint pens

Disposable razors * Toothbrushes

*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