

Poverello News

March 2011
(559) 498-6988



www.poverellohouse.org



As I was sitting in the Dayroom, doing my usual maître d' duties, a middle-aged woman approached me and introduced herself. She proudly stated, "Today I'm a year clean!"

I congratulated her, and then her eyes moistened up. "I just wanted you to know that you saved my life," she said. "If not for Poverello, Naomi's House, and Holy Cross Center, I wouldn't be here."

Apparently, she had been down and out due to drug use, and had no recourse but to eat at Poverello, sleep at Naomi's House, and spend her days at Holy Cross Center for Women. In the midst of her misery, something clicked and she made a decision to live differently. She made a special trip down to specifically thank us all.

Many of us, at some period in our lives, get caught up in trying to be successful. Some achieve material success, but nevertheless still feel empty. Others strive but never quite live up to their own expectations. My guess is that only a few people achieve worldly success and also remain content.

At various times of my life, I was plagued with an almost neurotic drive to be a success. Coming from a horribly dysfunctional family, and being a man of extremes, that drive didn't do me much good. When I fell short, I drank or drugged my disappointment away. It wasn't until I hit bottom and met Father Simon that my view of success started to change.

I've learned a few things over the years at Poverello. One thing is that success is a little different down here than in the rest of the world.

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In other parts of the city, the trappings of success might be a big house, a luxury car, a fat bank account and a portfolio of nicely-performing stocks. At Poverello, on the other hand, success might be going a day without lighting up a crack pipe; or maybe eating a good meal in our dining room instead of scrounging in a dumpster for dinner.

Sometimes, those small successes add up to bigger ones, such as those of the woman I described above. These are the little daily steps that, when put together, result in a better life.

There used to be a man named Dave who would come and run A.A. meetings here. He died a few years ago. Looking at him superficially, you wouldn't call him a success. He lived in a trailer park; he had just enough money to get by; he smoked incessantly, which ultimately led to serious health problems that contributed to his death.

But Dave was an enormous success. Incarcerated for crimes related to his drinking, he was introduced to God and A.A. in prison. The change it wrought in his life was enormous.

When he was released, he had nothing but an A.A. sponsor and a list of meetings. One difficult day at a time, Dave stayed sober. He helped other alcoholics. He went to the places where people were the most hopeless: Poverello, detox, mental hospitals. He eventually put together close to forty years of sobriety, all the time being a friend to countless friendless drunks and addicts. He never achieved anything like financial success, but he was one of the happiest men I ever met. There are probably dozens, if not hundreds, of sober men with jobs and families who would have died in indigent hospital beds or on skid row if not for Dave.

So, I rejoice when someone here tells me that he has an apartment, or she is sober for a day, a week or a year. When someone says "Thank you" for a meal, I'm happy; when our clinic sews up someone's cut, those stitches tell me that we've done our job; when a man comes out of our clothing room wearing a donated coat, it warms me up a little, too.

These folks are successes if they can get through a day a little better than they did the day before. And me? I'm a success as long as I wake up, get up, and do my little part to keep the Pov running. At this point in my life, that's all God is asking of me, and, quite frankly, that takes away a lot of pressure.



Between Bad and Horrible

“I am not so stupid as to be happy. Life is a choice — not between good and bad but between bad and horrible. Life now is bad-normal.”

—Edouard Kuznetsov, former prisoner of the Soviet Gulag

Words such as those above might very well shock the sensibilities of some people. How, they might ask, could someone have such a grim view of life? What could possibly have led him to such a pessimistic, depressing outlook?

When you examine the man’s life, however, the explanation becomes clear. Kuznetsov was imprisoned in a heartless system that incarcerated 27 million people, killed 2.7 million of them, and left many of the rest physically crippled or mentally and spiritually broken. Most were political prisoners, having committed such “crimes” as saying the wrong thing at the wrong time (perhaps the most famous prisoner of the system was Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, who earned eleven years in the Gulag for making derogatory comments about Stalin in a letter to a friend).

The same fatalistic outlook can be found among many homeless people. Some have lived lives of secret horror, growing up in households where their parents were addicted to drugs and terribly abusive. Some have lived through awful tragedies brought about by the vicissitudes of life, or by their own addictions and mental illnesses. These are people who can identify with the statement, “Life is a choice— not between good and bad but between bad and horrible.”



Is it possible to help someone whose world view is indelibly stamped with despair, cynicism and deep foreboding? Obviously, to even *begin* to assist such a person, one would first have to have a dogged commitment to stay the course, no matter the outcome.

Our experiences at Poverello House have shown us that sometimes, people are so emotionally damaged that they can never be healed. Into this category would fall some who are mentally ill with profound brain disorders, as well as addicts who have tried and failed at recovery numerous times.

Some of the stories of such people are heartbreaking. Sam, a crusty Texan who showed up many years ago, had been living a fairly normal life until the day of the phone call. When he picked up the receiver, he heard that his wife and children had been killed in an automobile accident. He walked out of the house, hit the streets, and never got back on his feet.

Big Tom was a Marine in Vietnam. He covered up the horrifying war memories with alcohol. Tom did well when he was in a program, but he couldn't survive out on his own. Inevitably, he'd start drinking again. He died here in our program, sober because he was surrounded by the structure he so desperately needed.



And then there's Peggy, a schizophrenic woman who has been around Poverello House for many years. She apparently has no family, or has lost touch with them. She shuttles herself between Naomi's House and Poverello, talking to people who no one else can see, angrily gesticulating and sometimes yelling. As the years go by, she shows no sign of getting any better.

Yet, despair and surrender are not options for Poverello House. We are here for the long haul, and our purpose has never been to see that people become "successful". If we can help facilitate positive changes for people, it is very gratifying, but those occurrences are rare. The majority of the people coming to us for help are locked into a pattern of existence that ensures their lives are simply a choice between bad and horrible.

Logically, then, what's the point? The point is actually not logical, but spiritual. Mother Theresa once wrote, "We may wonder, whom

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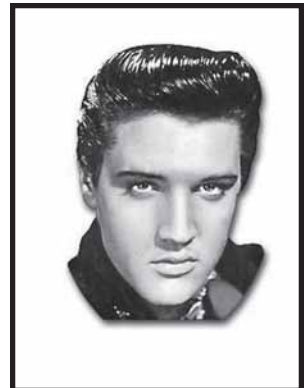
can I love and serve? Where is the face of God to whom I can pray? The answer is simple. That naked one. That lonely one. That unwanted one is my brother and my sister. If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.”

That is a nice summation of “Poverello logic”, a logic that is not in the slightest way utilitarian. We don’t produce something useful that contributes to improving the economy. Poverello logic dictates that effort on our part often equates to frustration rather than success. Although we do whatever we can to help people succeed and go to a better station in life, that is not the driving force behind our mission.

We’re here because life is a gift from God, and we believe that the purpose of our lives is to love and serve. Poverello is just one venue for that to happen; there are thousands of others. Let’s just say that we’ve specialized in loving and serving the unwanted, and that means that we make no distinctions between those who possess the hope of recovery and those who don’t. As we’ve said before, we don’t believe that we have the right to decide whose life will be a choice between good and bad, or bad and horrible.

Heartbreak Hotel in Fresno

Is it possible that he’s back already? The Amici del Poverello Guild’s annual **Brunch With Elvis** will be here before we know it! Featuring the FABULOUS Jeremy Pearce, Brunch With Elvis is an annual fundraiser that benefits the mission of Poverello House and is underwritten this year by Wells Fargo Bank. It will be held on Saturday, May 14, 2011 from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. at Grand Occasions, located at 4584 West Jacquelyn Avenue in Fresno. This is an event not to be missed! Tickets may be purchased by calling Mary Lou Cancio (291-8375) or Carol Maul (229-7709). Tickets are \$25.00. Watch next month’s newsletter for more information.



Poverello Turns Irish On March 17th



Yep, that's Founder/Fellowship Director Mike McGarvin getting ready to let out his inner Irishman in preparation for his favorite holiday, St. Patrick's Day. As is our custom, we'll be serving the homeless corned beef and cabbage, prepared in the traditional Irish way. If you'd like to help with the meal, donations of corned beef, potatoes and fresh heads of cabbage would be greatly appreciated.

March Wish List

Olive oil * Punch concentrate
Corned beef * Cabbage * Potatoes
Coffee * Sugar * Nondairy creamer
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

Poverello House

412 F Street
P.O. Box 12225
Fresno, CA 93777-2225
(559) 498-6988

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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
Member Organization