

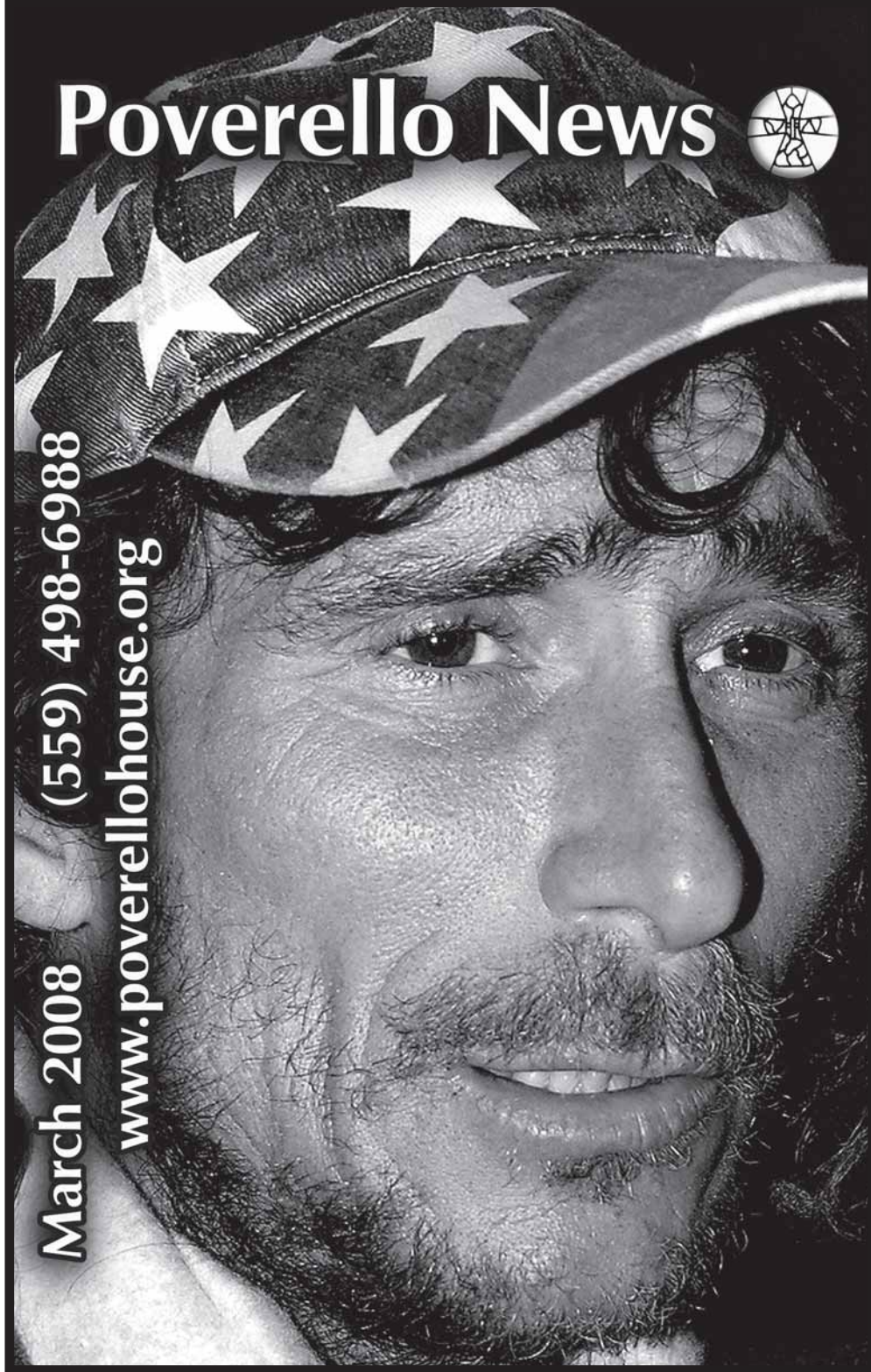
Poverello News



(559) 498-6988

March 2008

www.poverellohouse.org





A few months ago, I read in the paper that some government officials had set a goal of ending homelessness in ten years. It is a very commendable ambition, but I think it's a little naïve.

Twenty-first century people can be excused for a little naiveté, because we're so used to problems being solved. Diseases that scared our parents out of their wits, such as polio, have virtually disappeared, thanks to medical science and researchers' humanitarian dedication to the cause. As a baby boomer, I've seen the modest lifestyles of the post-World War II era explode into unprecedented wealth and comfort, prompted by economic growth and technology. We are very much accustomed to things getting better.

Why, then, do I think it's unreasonable to imagine a time when, thanks to planning and resource investment, homelessness will disappear? Mainly it's because homelessness isn't primarily a problem of unfair resource allocation or poor planning; it's a problem of the human heart. It's because of the nature of people that we won't ever be able to create a heaven on earth.

History is littered with the awful wreckage of utopian ideas. Many thinkers have tried to create perfect societies, eliminating pain, unfairness or greed, only to have the projects collapse disastrously. It's like when someone plans the perfect party, with all the food catered, the band hired, and the event scheduled out to the minute. It's all going great until Uncle Hank arrives drunk, makes an unannounced, profanity-laden speech, starts a fight, and then passes out on the entrée table.

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Party planners and utopian social dreamers often don't take into account the human factor, or the law of unintended consequences.

God made us in His image and gave us free will, which many of us use to make poor or even evil choices. I can cite my own life as a sad example of such choices. I had plenty of people who tried very hard to steer me in the right direction, but in my youth, I was bound and determined to do things *my way*, and that's what I did, much to my regret. I chose booze, drugs, and violence, all of which almost destroyed me.

I doubt the perfectibility of humankind because I know myself. I was a raging, sinful young buck who had to be spiritually and emotionally beaten down before I would change. When I walked into the Poverello in San Francisco, it was God's timing, because I was sick of my self-indulgent life. I was ready for a divine extreme makeover.

Sometimes planners forget that homeless people are *people*: they are not numbers to be crunched, nor rats in a maze. They embody all the qualities, both good and bad, that make us human. They often don't do what is in their own, or society's, best interests. Like me, they can be selfish, stubborn, and fairly impervious to wonderful schemes for their improvement.

I think that all of us should labor to make a better world, because that's just part of doing God's work. Whenever we encounter suffering, if it is within our power to relieve it, then it's our sacred duty to do so. However, we should go about such work with a degree of humility. To expect that our human effort or ingenuity, divorced from spiritual help, will eradicate a huge social problem (or even a small personal one), is to deny the insidious human capacity for mischief, and set ourselves up for disappointment. Some of the bitterest cynics I have known were once idealists. When unpleasant reality socked them in the face, they retreated into inaction, pessimism, and, ultimately, despair.

After thirty-five years at Poverello House, I don't expect homelessness to disappear someday. However, I do expect that the good Lord wants me to keep doing my best to see that the homeless are fed, clothed, treated with dignity, and presented with opportunities to lead better lives. So, I guess you could say that my philosophy is this: Do what's right and compassionate, but don't expect too much. At the same time, don't count anyone out, either, because even though human efforts may fail, somebody bigger than us is in charge, and He often has surprises up His sleeve.

Mike

The Return of the Chefs

A few years ago, Poverello launched a program called “Chefs of Fresno,” which brought together local chefs to cook meals at Poverello House. It was a fantastic experience for the chefs, our staff, and the homeless.

It had been quite awhile since we’d had chefs volunteering, so we were very excited when, last December, culinary artists came and cooked a meal for about 400 people. Chef Vatche Moukhtarian from the Cracked Pepper, Chef Pino Borelli from GiGi’s Cucina Italiana, Chef Mike Shackelford from Trelío, and Chef Varouj Kachichian from Bistro Rustico all contributed their talents to create a memorable meal of turkey, gravy, carrots, broccoli, butternut squash soup, penne with tomato sauce and pumpkin pies.

Not only did the chefs contribute their time and skill, but also dozens of others helped the effort: Chris Shackelford of Trelío initiated and coordinated the event; companies in the food industry around the valley donated money and provisions; some of the restaurants’ customers donated turkeys; and KJZN, Smooth Jazz 105.5, publicized the meal and collected donations. It was truly a great example of community-driven compassion, and we are very grateful to the chefs and all the behind-the-scenes people who brought this meal into being.



Café People

Papa Mike's Café, the once-a-month restaurant-style meal conceived by Food Service Director Tito Olazabal, has moved from innovation to a regular part of our food program. On the second Thursday of each month, clients are seated, offered a menu, and have their orders taken by waiters and waitresses. Tito now offers a selection of four to six different entrées, along with salad, bread and a choice of desserts. It's a lot of work, and it takes a little longer to serve, but the monthly joy it brings is worth the effort.

As the Café has developed, so has the cadre of volunteers who help make it happen. Doris Van volunteers at Poverello often, and has so for many years, but she makes a special effort to be assist at every Café night, simply because she saw there was a need for extra help. A group from Temple Beth Israel has made Papa Mike's Café their regular time for volunteering. It's definitely more labor-intensive than serving on a "normal" night, but the fast pace and the extra interaction with our guests make it a fun evening for the group.

Constantly evaluating and improving our services to the homeless is an ongoing job at Poverello House, and Papa Mike's Café is one of those improvements. However, as has always been the case, we could never upgrade our services, let alone simply function, without the wonderful people of the community who sacrifice their time to help us. The tasks we have them do are often tedious and unglamorous, but those tasks keep us in business, and the volunteers always seem to perform them with smiles.



Top to bottom: A typical Café menu; Doris Van; Temple Beth Israel group

A Little Slice of Heaven on F Street

The customer is a man who eats regularly at Poverello House. The pharmacist explains that the medication should be taken three times a day, with meals. The customer shakes his head, indicating that he didn't quite understand; could the pharmacist please repeat that? Patiently, and with a calm voice, the druggist in the white coat clarifies the dosage again.

This little scene repeats itself daily, sometimes hourly, at Renge Pharmacy, located on F Street in Chinatown, just a few blocks north of Poverello House. The man in the white coat is Mel Renge, pharmacist and business owner, who also just happens to be a member of the Poverello House board of directors.



Over the years, Poverello has been the thankful beneficiary of Mel's generosity. Donations to special projects, providing medicine for patients of the Holy Cross Clinic, or treating Poverello staff members to stress-relieving meals are just a few of the many benevolent contributions Mel has made to the organization.

Walk into Mel's pharmacy and you immediately take a trip into the past. It's an old-fashioned drug store, chock full of medical devices, ointments, and over-the-counter medications, as well as candy, televisions, radios, and knick-knacks. It's the quintessential mom and pop business: small, friendly and helpful. Mel and his staff know their customers by name, know each one's ailments, and take the time to ensure that they not only receive pharmaceutical advice that is understandable, but also dispensed with kindness.

Mel's father started the business many years ago, and Mel followed in his footsteps. There has always been the temptation to move to a better, perhaps more prosperous location, but Mel has stayed. Why? Primarily because he loves what he does, and he loves the people who come in. Mel's pharmacy is not a ministry, but it often fulfills the role of one by offering a warm, trustworthy sanctuary where customers feel valued, because they *are* valued. Whether homeless, poor, a longtime Westside resident or a transient Chinatown hotel

dweller, they all know that when they walk into Renge Pharmacy, they will be greeted with smiles that are genuine.

We don't think that it's a coincidence that Mel became a board member at Poverello House. The principles that drive Poverello are the same ones embraced by Mel's business: service, dignity, and gentle thoughtfulness for all who come through the door. Poverello House is not only privileged to have Mel for a neighbor, but also very blessed to have his presence on our board of directors.

He's Back!

He wears sequined jumpsuits, sports a pompadour, has killer dance moves and makes women swoon when he sings. Yes, The King must be back in town! Or, to be exact, Jeremy Pearce, Elvis impersonator extraordinaire!

Once again, the Amici Del Poverello Guild will present "Brunch with Elvis," on Saturday, May 3, 2008 from 10:00 a.m. until 1:00 p.m. It will take place at Grand Occasions, 4584 W. Jacquelyn Avenue. Tickets are \$25 each, and all proceeds benefit Poverello House.

You'll need to RSVP by April 22nd, so get your tickets early! For more information, please call (559) 229-7709.

Please note: If you did not receive an end-of-the-year statement last year and need one this year, give Laurie Contor Duval a call at (559) 498-6988.

Wish List

Hams for Easter * Corned beef for St. Patrick's Day
Towels * Razors
Ballpoint pens * Spiral notebooks

Remember, we now take credit card donations. Please see the enclosed envelope for instructions.

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
United Way Organization