

# Poverello News

May 2008

(559) 498-6988

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





I was in the Army Reserve from 1967 to 1973. I began in Military Intelligence (M.I.), but through a series of ironic twists that are now, in retrospect, almost comical, I ended up as the adjutant for the 828<sup>th</sup> Station Hospital in California. Because the M.I. school that I was supposed to attend was full, I was sent instead to a clerk-typist school. Later, at the station hospital, where I was a clerk-typist, the adjutant was

reassigned. When they discovered that they didn't have anyone qualified to fill the slot, I was promoted to his position because I had a college degree. My degree was in agriculture with some veterinary training thrown in, which apparently was good enough for the Army to put me in charge of the administration of a hospital.

I was lucky, because the 828<sup>th</sup> was originally a M.A.S.H. unit, but by the time I arrived, it was re-designated as a station hospital. Station hospitals usually don't get deployed to the front lines as do M.A.S.H. units, so I never ended up in Vietnam. However, I've met many people who did.

I've always considered it a blessing that fate spared me from going into combat. Nobody comes out of a war unchanged. Some people are strengthened by it; others are destroyed. At Poverello, we've seen a lot of homeless vets over the years, many of them traumatized by their war experiences.

Founder Mike McGarvin has a warm place in his heart for homeless vets. Mike was an Army cook who, like me, didn't end up in combat. In his case it was timing: the Vietnam War hadn't heated up

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yet when he was doing his stint. He knew plenty of people in the sixties who were drafted, many of whom went to war and never made it home.

Mike's deep sympathy for the vet on the street led him to set up our P.O.W./M.I.A. table a few years ago, which we've mentioned in previously in our newsletter. It honors all prisoners of war and those missing in action, and Mike watches over it like a hawk. Anyone who steals anything from the table or messes with it in any way has a steep price to pay. Homeless veterans really appreciate this small homage paid to their brothers who suffered as prisoners or who were probably killed but never found.

For many years we also hosted Operation Stand Down, a weekend of intensive services for veterans, and provided office space to Veterans Crisis, a nonprofit organization serving homeless vets. This was another nod to show support for these special folks that served.

I've heard some statistics that indicate up to twenty-five percent of the homeless are veterans. I'm not sure that's a percentage that anyone can prove, because it's hard to count a population that doesn't have addresses or phones. From our experience, though, there certainly seem to be a lot of veterans on the streets. Whether wartime emotional scars landed them there, or other problems that began before they went into the military, we seldom ever know. Self-reporting by the homeless is notoriously unreliable. However, sorting out the combat vets from those who never saw the front lines would be about as useful to us as separating flyspecks from pepper. When someone's on the streets, he needs help, no matter how he got there.

Memorial Day honors those who have fallen defending the country, but at Poverello, we extend that honor to all veterans, both dead and living. Here on F Street, it's a good day to remember that some of those homeless guys might be here because of the aftereffects of war.

In that context, we are very much in debt to some of the shabby-looking men on the corner. The dirty man with three days' stubble may appear disreputable, but sometimes looks can deceive. For all we know, he might have once been a proud soldier who threw himself into the breach for our sakes.



# Serving Them All

“People sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf.” —George Orwell

Orwell knew what he was talking about. Although a socialist, Orwell had a hatred of totalitarianism, fiercely opposing both Stalinist communism and fascism in any form. He himself fought as a soldier against the fascists in Spain. Despite the pacifism of his socialist contemporaries, Orwell saw clearly that military force was the only thing that saved Western Europe from the horrors of Nazi control and protected it from the expansionist ambitions of totalitarian communism.

The “rough men,” of the American military are the focus of Memorial Day. Whether their motives were to oppose tyranny, simply do their duty, or save their buddies and the folks back home, they entered into battle and fought against sometimes overwhelming odds. Memorial Day is an official effort to ensure that we never forget those who made the ultimate sacrifice, to pause and be grateful for the gift of liberty that came at such a terrible price.

Over the years, we’ve all heard stories of homeless veterans who came back from wars, particularly Vietnam, completely undone by post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). “Rough men” once, they now lived pitiful lives on the streets, drinking and drugging away memories of brutality witnessed in battle. Occasionally, we’ll see someone at an intersection or a freeway onramp with a sign that reads something like, “Homeless Vietnam vet, please help.” Most people naturally feel a great deal of sympathy for these haggard ex-soldiers.

However, not everyone on the streets who says he’s a homeless veteran is what he claims to be. B. G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley published a controversial book in 1998 called *Stolen Valor*. Burkett, a Vietnam veteran, was motivated to write the book by his memories of people who had fought in the Vietnam War, both those who died and those who returned. He was disturbed by the prevailing image of Vietnam vets as either brutal baby-killers, or permanently shattered people whose lives would forever be tragic. Seldom, if ever, did Burkett see the media portray what he considered to be the more truthful and complete story of the majority of Vietnam vets: that they

were more often than not stable and successful, and frequently leaders in their various fields of endeavor.

This led him to investigate the claims of veterans who were featured in newspapers, television and movies, many of whom were homeless. What he found, through the Freedom of Information Act, was both astonishing and disheartening. Time after time, he discovered charlatans who had embellished their military service or completely fabricated stories of combat in Vietnam. Most apparently did it for financial gain by milking the V. A. disability system. Armed with altered or forged documents and heroic but untrue stories, they cheated their way into receiving benefits that they didn't deserve. Others created elaborate lies for personal glory, or reasons known only to themselves.

We've seen this happen at Poverello House. For example, a few years ago, there was a man in our Resident Program who was a Vietnam veteran who said that the war had nothing to do with his addiction. He ridiculed men who had emotional problems stemming from the Vietnam conflict. Yet years later, when he discovered that there was money to be made from PTSD and Agent Orange disability payments, his story changed; he concluded that, unlike his previous assertions, his continuing failures were because of combat stress, and his breathing disorder was a result of Agent Orange, not his four decades of smoking.

Another time, we went out of our way to help a man who he said he was a Vietnam vet, who had hair-raising tales about jungle fighting. We discovered later, after he left town in the middle of the night, that he had lied concerning almost everything we knew about him. Although we had no way of proving whether or not his stories of combat were real, his habit of prevarication left much room for doubt about his accounts of military service in Vietnam.

Our conclusion is that there are undoubtedly shameless fakers on the streets; but there are also many broken heroes. On Memorial Day, we pay homage to the heroes. But *every* day at Poverello, we assist *everyone* who comes for help.

Christian author Philip Yancy wrote, "Those judged undesirable by everyone else—like the prodigal son—are infinitely desirable to God." Certainly frauds aren't high on the list of admired people, but Poverello welcomes equally the liars and the heroic "rough men," because our job isn't to figure out who's better than someone else. Our job is simply to accept and serve, no matter who it is that walks through our doors.

## Board Member Profile



Jeff Negrete is the Vice President and Marketing Manager of Clear Channel Radio in Fresno. Because he is on the Poverello Board of Directors, Founder Mike McGarvin approached him with an unusual request.

Mike had been talking with a homeless man named John, who complained that he was having trouble finding a job. Mike jokingly said, “Well, when that big one-million-dollar

donation comes in, I’ll start a radio station and name it ‘K-POV 412 AM.’ You can be my street DJ.”

The idea appealed to both Mike and the homeless man. However, the million dollars was not immediately forthcoming, so Mike did the next best thing. He held a contest, inviting participation from John, as well as a guy whose street name is “Cowboy,” and a fellow known affectionately as “Big Tim.” Mike gave them each five minutes to record a “radio show” on a portable tape recorder. He then asked Jeff Negrete to judge who was the best radio personality.

Five minutes is a long time to talk when you’re making up conversation on the fly (try it sometime). John had a little trouble filling in the gaps. Cowboy, known for his resonant singing voice, belted out a couple of country western songs, but ran out of steam before the time was up. However, Big Tim, who has a reputation as a tireless talker, took to the airwaves like a bluegill to a pond. After five minutes, he was still going strong. Tim was the obvious choice from our perspective, but we wanted to see what the professional radio executive would say.

After listening, Jeff concurred with our opinion, and deemed Big Tim the winner. He then offered to give Tim a tour of the station for being the best (and most long-winded) DJ on K-POV 412 AM.

If it seems unusual for a busy executive to take such an interest in a homeless man, that’s because it *is* unusual. However, Jeff has been involved in helping our community for a long time. While manager of another local station, he began offering monthly public service announcement spots to Poverello and other nonprofit organizations, which he has continued at Clear Channel. These spots run throughout the day,

during prime radio time, which, for a medium dependent on advertising minutes, is a very significant contribution.

Jeff also helped form an organization called Patty's Project, a food and recreation ministry for impoverished inner city kids, named after his late wife. Poverello has had the privilege of providing meals for this worthwhile endeavor.

Jeff is a very good fit at Poverello House. It is our great fortune to have this generous, involved man on our board.

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## Is It Too Late?

Well, it might be. The Amici Del Poverello Guild is again presenting "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.

Jeremy Pearce, Elvis impersonator extraordinaire, will once again provide a morning and afternoon full of songs and hip-twisting excitement. Additionally, there will be a drawing for the chance to win \$500!

Because this event sells out every year, it may be too late to get tickets. However, it never hurts to try, so call (559) 229-7709 to find out if there are any openings left.

### ***Wish List***

Letter size copy paper \* Spiral notebooks  
Razors \* Cotton swabs  
Fingernail & toenail clippers  
Men's tee shirts, socks & underwear  
Olive oil \* Canned vegetables

***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)***

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United Way of Fresno County  
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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.