

Poverello News

September 2008

(559) 498-6988



www.poverellohouse.org



To help my daughter out, I've been taking my grandson to school in the mornings. Now, it's been a long time since I was in any kind of school, and I don't have the most pleasant memories about my scholastic years. However, it's been interesting to watch Tyler's school routine.

Every morning, he watches Sponge Bob before getting ready. Then, about 8:00, he does a few chores to help me out, gets his little backpack together, and off we go. When we arrive at the school, it's always crowded with kids arriving and parents dropping them off. I wave goodbye to him and watch as he disappears into the building.

Unlike his grandpa, Tyler is a good student. He does his homework, and seems to have the same quick grasp of subjects that my daughter always had. He's had his share of obstacles to overcome, but he's doing well because my daughter, a teacher, values education and communicates that value to him.

I recently read an article about a boy Tyler's age who is not doing so well. He lives with a single mother, his father is in prison, and his home life is a veritable bedlam. His mother depends on welfare and frequently moves the family from motels to Section Eight housing, back to motels. His peers value gang life, drug dealing and violence over achievement, and he has adopted their values. He doesn't do homework, skips class, causes disruptions, and refuses to try. At ten years old, he is still illiterate.

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This little scenario is repeated hundreds of thousands of times in schools across the nation. Occasionally, a news program will report a story about kid who overcomes the odds of deprivation and advances academically, but those children are rare.

Reading that article was familiar territory to me, because I've seen similar situations for many years at Poverello House. Drugs, gangs, widespread single-parent families, and criminal role models make today's urban poverty a monster that sucks the hopes and dreams out of kids. I watch the families come in to eat at Poverello, and I wonder what chance, if any, these children have in life. Their parents are usually drug addicts; they skip more school than they attend; most of them don't know if they'll be sleeping in a car or in a motel on any given night; and many of them have a series of their mothers' dangerous boyfriends passing through their lives. With constant upheavals in their families, the last thing on their minds is doing well in school, and yet academic achievement is one of the very few tickets to a better life available to them. What can possibly be done?

Years ago, we had a student intern from Fresno State doing his field placement at Poverello. He had grown up in a Fresno housing project. All of his siblings were drug addicts or in prison, yet, here he was, working on a human services degree. After graduating, he got married and became a campus minister at a university in the Midwest. How did he escape the fate of his brothers and sisters?

What happened was that someone cared. Some volunteers ran a "Sidewalk Sunday School" at his housing project when he was a little boy, and through them he found God and a greater purpose for his life. He set goals, worked hard at school, and became an adult who helped countless other people.

In whatever circumstances we're in, every one of us can lend a hand to people that no one else can help. Maybe we feel as though our efforts don't matter, but they do. Like those anonymous volunteers who ran the Sidewalk Sunday School, our choices to aid others will have a lifelong impact. We may never see the fruit of our labors, but I have to believe that God sees it and will honor those efforts in His own time.



Children of Chaos

Children growing up in poverty, and particularly homeless children, often have a great deal of freedom. However, the kind of freedom they experience is utterly destructive. It's the freedom of neglect, of running the streets, and of following the destructive examples that surround them. Such freedom teaches savagery, self-centeredness, and an incapability of developing responsible living skills.

In the 1960s, "middle class values," known in other eras as "bourgeoisie values," fell out of favor. Up until that time, many of the poor strove to emulate the middle class, indeed, to move up the socioeconomic ladder and become a part of it. For example, a lot of people who grew up during the Great Depression were materially far poorer than those who are today defined as impoverished. However, that older generation largely went on to become successful, contributing members of society, because they embraced middle class values and sought to make better lives for themselves and their families. So many of today's poor haven't even the rudiments of what is needed to leave poverty behind.

What were these values? Certainly hard work, honesty, respect for others, fair play, and pursuing the American Dream were among the most prominent. Also prominent, but perhaps less overt, was conformity. Middle America in the early-to-mid 20th century was a conformist culture, where deviation from the norm brought disapproval or punishment. More than anything, perhaps, it was conformity against which young people in the 1960s rebelled.

The decade of the sixties brought a tectonic shift in cultural attitudes. For vast numbers of citizens, radical individualism, with its concomitant pursuit of personal pleasure, became valued over conformity. Being responsible and planning ahead came to be seen as boring, or worse, as "selling out." Bohemian counter-cultural behavior, once confined to only the fringes of society, exerted a widespread influence.

Part of that counter-cultural individualism involved experimentation with drugs, and the rest, as they say, is history. Ideas have consequences, and when societies cast aside long-held beliefs and habits, it is most often the poor who pay the steepest price. Radical individualism, of which drug use is one symptom, is an idea that has not only ruined

many middle-class families, but has also devastated and marginalized poor people.

Those who suffer the most, as always, are children. A good example of this presented itself at Poverello House recently.

It was during that horrendous heat wave in the early part of July. A family consisting of a grandmother, a father, and two small boys came to Mike McGarvin for help. They had lost their housing through what appeared to be a series of bad decisions. They were living in a tent off of H Street while the temperatures hovered between 106 and 112 degrees.



They asked for housing assistance for four days, until a place opened up at the Fresno Rescue Mission Family Shelter. Mike occasionally helps families in such situations, but his rule is that the person requesting the aid must pass a drug test. After years of dealing with the homeless, he has discovered that giving special assistance to someone who is actively using drugs is a terrible waste of resources. When Mike told the father that he would have to do a drug test, the man balked. He admitted that he had “puffed once” on a marijuana cigarette a few days earlier.

Mike thought it over, and for the sake of the two boys, decided to give the man the test anyway. Luckily for this hapless dad, he was apparently telling the truth about the one “puff,” because the drug test showed no indication of marijuana use. Mike told the man that he would help him, but also lectured him about being a better father and putting his kids before his own desire to use drugs and booze.

When he announced to the dad that the drug test was negative, one of his boys piped up and exclaimed, “Daddy, I’m so proud of you for passing that drug test! Now we won’t have to sweat in a tent tonight.” The subtext of this statement is that the boy felt relief and pride, not because his dad had done something worthwhile, but rather because passing a drug test was an unusual accomplishment for his father.

From this little vignette, it is easy to see that these young boys were not suffering due to random fate; they were suffering because of the choices and actions of adults in their lives. Drug use is not only selfish

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and narcissistic, but it also has created a huge new class of paupers in our country. In the past, the poor had families and communities they could depend on, and they helped each other through hard times. Radical individualism, an abandonment of lasting values, and the mad pursuit of pleasure shattered those old bulwarks against despair. Countless poor families today are chaotic and dysfunctional, and neighborhood communities have become dangerous wildernesses, rife with addiction, prostitution, vicious cruelty, and ignoble death.

This is indeed a new freedom: the freedom to follow your whims and do what you want, no matter the cost. However, the dark reality is that such “freedom” is bondage. It is license without responsibility, a kind of slavery to pleasurable cravings, but at another’s expense. And rather than this freedom bringing about paradise, it has instead ushered in a hell on earth for untold millions of destitute people.

Granville Home of Hope

Granville Homes is proud to present the 2008 Home of Hope fund-raiser, which benefits Poverello House and seven other local nonprofit organizations. A 2,029 square-foot Pasatiempo home with three bedrooms, two-and-a-half baths, and a three-car garage will be built in Granville Homes La Ventana community, located in northwest Fresno. The home will be built in collaboration with various partners as the prize for a raffle to be held Saturday, October 11, 2008. Opportunity tickets are available for a \$100 donation. Last year, the Home of Hope event raised \$42,180 for Poverello House. Since its inception in 2006, the Home of Hope fund-raiser has raised nearly \$1 million for valley nonprofits.



For more information, visit www.gvhomeofhope.com.

Poverello Ponderings...

A 2005 study by the Brookings Institute entitled *Katrina's Window: Confronting Concentrated Poverty Across America*, concluded that Fresno, California had the highest concentrated urban poverty rate of any city in the nation. The study defines the concentrated poverty rate as reflecting "...the proportion of all poor people citywide who lived in extreme poverty areas... Extreme poverty areas had more than 40 percent of their residents living below the federal poverty threshold in 2000."

According to the Institute for Children and Poverty's "*Fact Sheet on Family Homelessness*," "Homeless children have less of a chance of succeeding in school. One-half of homeless children attend three different schools in one year; 75% of homeless children perform below grade level in reading... Homeless families are more likely to experience violence. One-half of homeless women and children fled domestic violence. 92% of homeless mothers were physically or sexually assaulted."

Wish List

Books (especially Bibles & children's books)

Men's socks & underwear

8 1/2" x 11" copy paper

Disposable razors * Toothbrushes & toothpaste

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

To donate online, visit our website at www.poverellohouse.org

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

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United Way of Fresno County
United Way Organization

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.