

POVERELLO NEWS



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(559) 498-6988

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I've heard hundreds of jokes about getting old, many beginning with the phrase, "I've fallen and I can't get up!" The themes of these jokes always have something to do with being surprised at the physical decline and indignities that accompany advancing age.

A couple of months back, I *became* one of those jokes. One morning, about four a.m., I started to get out of bed to go to the bathroom.

The mattress had shifted during the night, and somehow that made me lose my balance. I fell, and it wasn't a light fall. A guy as big as me has some serious mass accelerating downward when he drops, and I ended up on all fours, hitting the wood floor with a sickening thud.

Now, I already have a bum knee, originally from a dislocation in judo, and more recently from ripping and tearing the ligaments in a tumble down some stairs about twenty years ago. I landed smack on that knee, and I had a queasy feeling that something was messed up badly.

Mary couldn't budge me, so I told her to call Paul, our operations director who is on call twenty-four hours a day. I told her to ask Paul to send over the biggest, baddest, strongest drug-program residents from Poverello to help me get up.

Paul is a fellow Irishman, and he has a wicked sense of humor. I don't know if what followed was his idea of a joke, or if it just

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played out this way, but the guys who came over were a far cry from big and bad. I needed some weight lifters, and he sent me guys that looked like diminutive librarians. They couldn't get me up, so Mary called 911 and I had the wonderful experience of being put in an ambulance and driven to the hospital.

I was surprised and grateful to find out that there was no serious damage, except to my ego. Nevertheless, I was sore for days, and I now move even more cautiously than before this incident.

At age seventy-two, life's vistas have narrowed considerably. These days, I seem to be constantly trying to adjust myself to yet another new limitation.

I've had a tremendous amount of freedom my entire life, so all of this has been a hard adjustment. The silver lining, if there is one, is that I think I can empathize more with homeless people now.

Some people imagine that homelessness is the ultimate expression of freedom. Actually, it's a terribly constricted way of life. It's true that hitting the streets generally correlates with not taking responsibility for things like jobs and families; however, homeless people find that they are subject to all kinds of other forces that limit their life choices.

To survive, you must eat, and for a homeless person, that means standing in line at a soup kitchen. You must also have some kind of shelter, and again, that will entail waiting for a bed to open up in an emergency shelter, or sleeping on the street with one eye open, lest someone try to roll you for your meager possessions.

Your daily life becomes a routine of traveling by foot to sources of food, shelter and social services, interspersed with resting at places where you won't get chased away. You develop geographical boundaries, because you have to stay close to certain places for survival, and to get too far away means missing a meal or a chance for a bed.

For many, the monetary impoverishment of homelessness is nothing compared to the social, emotional and spiritual impoverishment. If you're on the streets because of addictions, your higher power is your drug dealer, and your life revolves around pathetic efforts to beg, borrow or steal enough money for the next high. If

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mental illness has depleted you to the point of becoming homeless, that in itself is a prison wherein you are shackled by the depression, delusions or hallucinations that your mind imposes.

So, I guess the more my limitations, the more insight I have into how depressing it is to be homeless. At least, at the end of a day, for all my misery and loud complaining, I get to go to my house, have a home-cooked meal, watch TV in my own chair, and sink into my own bed. That is what separates me from the homeless who are all around me. Age imposes limits, but my limitations will never be as hard as those that street life imposes on the people waiting in line at the Poverello.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mike". The letters are stylized and slanted to the right.

A Rare Longitudinal Study

Since Poverello's beginning, untold thousands have passed through our doors. Most stop for awhile, and then move on into obscurity, their ultimate fates unknown to us.

Occasionally, we get to glimpse the long-term effects of homelessness, drug addiction, and trauma. Recently, we got the extended view of a man we'll call Darryl.

Darryl showed up at Poverello House back in the late 1980s. He was a young man then, too young to be on the streets, but there he was. He was big and muscular, incredibly manipulative, and had out-of-control problems with cheap wine, crack cocaine, and rage.

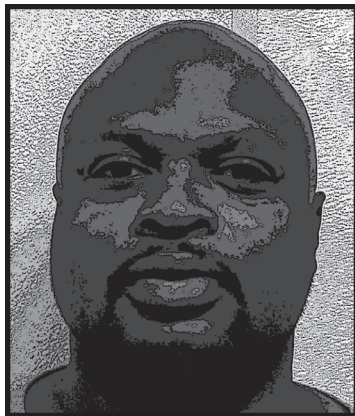
He quickly established himself as the biggest bully on the block. He liked to fight, and on more than one occasion, he smashed someone's face before Poverello staff could get to him and break up the altercation. He was also an instigator in one memorable melee, involving close to a dozen men beating each other right in front of our building.

Darryl's relationships were also out of control. He had a wife, although we don't know if the two of them were actually legally married. She was a prostitute, and he acted as both her husband and

pimp. At the time we knew them, they had already had seven babies together, all of whom were taken away by Child Protective Services, because they were all born addicted to cocaine.

In spite of being king of the hill, Darryl's brutal behavior had earned him the enmity of most Poverello regulars. Once, he bit off more than he could chew and got into a fight with a man who beat him up. The homeless clients made a big circle around the combatants, and loudly cheered when Darryl was severely pummeled.

The longer he stayed, the worse he became. Then one day, we read in the paper that one of his sons had been killed in foster care. Even though he'd had no contact with the boy, Darryl got a lawyer, sued the county, and won a substantial amount. He then disappeared for years.



Occasionally, he would drop back in. He still had a swagger, but drugs had worn him out, and he looked years older than he was. Now the swagger looked more pathetic than threatening.

More years went by, and we figured he was long gone, either dead or doing time somewhere. Then, a couple of months ago, he suddenly reappeared. He asked to speak to Mike McGarvin.

This time, no remnants of his old arrogance remained. Here was a man completely beaten down by life.

After getting the settlement for his son's death, he knew he was out of control, and would waste the money on drugs unless he did something. In a rare moment of wisdom, he got his lawyer to put it all into a trust that he couldn't access for many years. He then continued his downward spiral, ending up in prison. Once out of prison, a miracle happened: he got sober, and stayed sober.

He moved around, first to Los Angeles, and then to Las Vegas. Enough years had passed that he could now get to his money. He figured that with five years of sobriety, he could handle it. He was wrong.

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Money is often the downfall of addicts, and frequently leads straight back to the bottle, the needle or the pipe. In Darryl's case, it did not. He held onto his sobriety, but could not keep his money. While in Las Vegas, he developed a new addiction: gambling. He lost everything.

We long ago learned that addiction is a secondary symptom of something much deeper. It is a sign that there is a gaping hole in a person's inner being. People often forget that they are born with spiritual longings, and filling those longings with unfettered pleasures does not snuff them out; rather, it leads to abject misery. Darryl discovered that without a spiritual foundation, one addiction will simply be traded for another. Ruin and poverty follow in the wake of this frantic attempt to calm the inner anxiety and emptiness.

Now back in Fresno, destitute and broken, Darryl was asking Mike for transportation back to Las Vegas. Twenty-six years after he loudly strutted onto the Poverello scene, he was quietly begging for a bus ticket. For old time's sake, Mike got him his ticket.

Time tends to be the great leveler. We're glad that Darryl isn't the violent tyrant he used to be, but it really is sad to see someone brought so low. Darryl never filled that spiritual void with the right things, and the diversion-seeking mania came roaring back, just in a different form. Our prayer is that before his life is over, he might seek and find the true source of his being, and finally salve that gaping emotional wound that dooms him to repeat his insane, destructive behavior.

Farmers Support Poverello House

Hank Bennett, a farmer, and Mayo Ryan, a retired farmer, teamed up to buy a new wash sink for our kitchen. Oh, we should also mention that both men are members of Poverello's Board of Directors.

When you serve thousands of meals 365 days a year, stuff tends to wear out. Most people who refurbish their own kitchens discover just how expensive equipment is, so imagine how much more commercial kitchen equipment costs.

This, by the way, is not your mama's kitchen sink. The wash sink is a stainless steel monster that is about eight feet long. When you figure that, on average, our kitchen washes up

close to 800,000 trays and cups every year, that's pretty rough on even the toughest stainless steel.

We're so grateful for this wonderful gift, and also thankful that these two generous donors are members of our board and part of the Poverello family.



Hank Bennett and Poverello Executive Director Cruz Avila watch the new sink being unloaded

New Website!

Staying relevant and up-to-date is increasingly difficult in the fast-paced world of the internet. We have had a very good and serviceable website for several years now, but these days, several years is an eternity.

It was time for a new look with better functionality, and thanks to MJR Creative Group, who generously donated all the work on the website, we now have that look. At the end of June, we introduced our new website, and we encourage you to check it out at www.poverellohouse.org.

July Wish List

Letter-sized copy paper * Seasonal fruit

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

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

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.



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