

Art professor helps create 'Wall of Hope' mural

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On a cold and damp day during my first winter in Fresno, an article about a project to help some homeless people who were living on the streets caught my eye. After reading that shelter and safety were provided with tents placed on platforms and surrounded by a chain-link fence, I made a mental note of the name of the place: Poverello House.

In October 2004, Vida Samiian, dean of the College of Art and Humanities, invited me to attend a meeting of the self-governing "Village of Hope" community at Poverello House. Her intention was to offer the community a creative essay and journal writing workshop that would include skills such as writing resumes and essays. I remembered my mental note about Poverello House and I did have time on Thursday mornings so I decided to attend the weekly meetings and help to facilitate this process. Community members' poems and original essays were read in the small group that remained after those meetings and I was happy to be there.



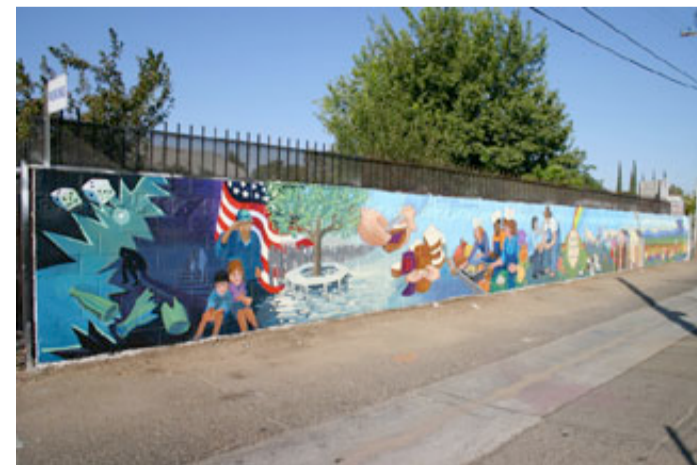
At first, a few people accepted my help to write letters, organize and create resumes. As time passed and trust developed, they shared some of their stories, their personal individual experiences. Hearing those stories impressed upon me just how fragile life can be and how any one of us could be faced with physical, mental, emotional or financial trauma leading to time on the streets. Then, I began to think about how I would feel in such a situation and how I would want to be treated.

What about you ... what would you want? Respect? Compassion? Food? A safe place to sleep at night? How about support and advice to get a job and a place to live?

The dedicated staff at Poverello works to offer just that kind of support to the homeless. They serve three meals a day, and that alone is an enormous undertaking. Medical and dental services are available. And, the Poverello board and staff continually work to improve and expand their list of services. Imagine, all of this began with one man who made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and distributed them to homeless people on the street during his lunch hour. "Papa Mike," Mike McGarvin, did this for seven years. Yes, he fed them, but he did more than that. He also listened to their stories and he photographed them and acknowledged their humanity.



Last April, Dr. Robert Levine, a Fresno State psychology professor and Poverello board member, said that members of the Village of Hope were interested in starting a mural project. In the weeks that followed, there were discussions about a possible mural site, and subject matter. Anticipating the project, Suzanne Henderson and I facilitated a workshop on drawing the human head.



During one weekly meeting, community members used crayons on large sheets of white paper to draw and write about what they think of when they hear the word "community" and what they would like to see in their mural. There was a palpable change in the atmosphere as they enthusiastically poured out their ideas. The discussion continued even after they had completed their work on paper. Later, I typed and printed the quotes, their words. The list that I gave them prompted even more reading, discussion, editing and additions. It became clear through this process that community members wanted their mural to illustrate the history of Poverello.

My preliminary sketches for the 6-by-72-foot wall opposite the Village of Hope took shape, the layout was approved by the staff and board, shared with the Village of Hope community and the project was launched!

Nothing prepared me for the outpouring of support that came from the people living on the streets beyond the gates of Poverello and the Village of Hope. These folks will also "live"

with the mural on a daily basis, and their comments deeply moved me.

This has been an awesome experience. Being at Poverello, where real life includes a wide range of shades, textures and colors and working daily on the mural, I became a part of it and the profound sense of peace that pervades the atmosphere— even as daily activities, dramas and duties continue.

This is an amazing place of service, learning and life — and I am grateful for the opportunity and for the experience of being a part of it.