

VORP Update: Where Is He Now?

by Ron Claassen

Do you ever wonder what happens to the offenders after we report a wonderful reconciliation VORP meeting in a newsletter? In September 1988 Michael told his own story. A few weeks ago, I called Michael to ask him how things are going and to ask if he would be willing to talk to a reporter about his VORP experience and its impact on his life. I hadn't talked to Michael since he had moved to Colorado several years ago.

Michael would have been considered by some as hopeless. It was 1987. Michael was 28 and according to his report, he had been incarcerated eight of those 28 years in

juvenile halls, state juvenile lock-up facilities, and finally in state prison.

When he left state prison, he found his way to Fresno Pacific College. He had been a student there for about 1-1/2 years and had been doing quite well. Then, because of a number of things like a bad grade on a paper and an argument with his college work supervisor, it happened. In Michael's words, "In one angry, confused moment I slipped back into the life I had known for 28 years. I violated the trust the school had placed in me. I entered the school one night and took a computer from the school without permission (burglary). The police ended up with

the computer and a witness stating I had taken the equipment from the school.

"At that point in my life I would rather have died than return to prison. For once in my life I had made some positive progress but now, because of one stupid mistake, I would lose everything and once again return to prison for at least four to six years. The events that followed surprised me. I wasn't contacted by police, but rather one of my instructors. He informed me that the police had the computer and knew I had taken it. What the school intended to do was to work with me through an agency called VORP.... Praise God, I felt for once in my life there were actually people who loved me enough to forgive me and help me through my problems."

Michael and a group of faculty and administrators agreed to meet try to: (1) recognize the injustice; (2) restore equity (usually through a combination of restitution and grace); and (3) clarify individual and relational intentions and work on an accountability plan.

The meeting was difficult and wonderful. The agreement for the future was long and complex and included a mentor, counseling, work, community service, etc. At the end of the meeting, one person said that if this would really work out we should have a celebration. He offered to bring the pie and someone else offered to bring the ice cream. This was added to the written agreement with a date set for the celebration.

It wasn't always easy. The level of accountability almost seemed too much at times. There were times Michael wanted to run. But he didn't. Everyone kept the agreements they had made (with some minor adjustments) and we did have the celebration.

Michael graduated from college with a degree in social work. He married a woman he met at college. He was employed in an adjacent county for a number of years and then moved to Colorado where he was again employed by a social service agency.

When I called him I had anxieties. I remembered he had said, "The school and VORP changed my life. They showed me that there are people like those I had read about in the Bible, people who care about you, and love you, and are willing to forgive you. I had terrible bitterness and hatred toward society and the criminal justice system, but they

(See "VORP Update," page 2.)

VORP serves as 'healing aid' for victim, offender

by Linda Curtis, Volunteer VORP Mediator
with Ron Claassen

Anthony is a friendly, yet shy 13 year old who lives with his father in a low income section of town. While at school one day he took Maria's book bag, just for fun. Maria has had a hearing problem since birth, and one of her hearing aids was in the bag. He threw it away, for no particular reason, not realizing what was inside. He was subsequently caught, cited, and placed on probation for the offense. His probation officer referred Anthony to VORP.

A meeting was set with Anthony and his father. Since his father did not speak English fluently, an interpreter was invited. This "set" meeting was postponed several times because of schedule conflicts and misunderstandings. Finally, we did have the meeting. Anthony admitted to taking the backpack and throwing it away. He and his father agreed to participate in the VORP process.

Next I met with Maria and her mother. This took place at their home and both were very gracious. The backgrounds of both parties were Mexican and low income. Maria's mother was very understanding. She related a story of how she had once taken something that did not belong to her and said she could relate to what Anthony had done.

The loss was over \$400, but Maria's mother had already received compensation for most of it. She thought that the balance would be an appropriate restitution request. Maria said that Anthony had already apologized and she believed he was sincere.

The joint meeting took even longer to arrange. Again there were scheduling conflicts and misunderstandings. At the meeting, the most difficult obstacle was the language barrier, primarily for me. I was the only one who did not speak Spanish. The interpreter had to translate for me!

After the apology by Anthony was confirmed, much of the conversation was between the parents. Both parties began talking about Mexico, their backgrounds, and how they wanted to make things right. Anthony's father was sorry for what had happened. Maria's mother understood how he felt and was grateful for whatever he could afford to pay. It was agreed that restitution would be paid on or before August 1. In fact, Anthony and his father wanted to deliver the money personally to Maria and her mother.

As follow up, in late August I called the friend who had interpreted. She said Anthony and his father were in Mexico, and she did not know if the money had been paid. Upon contacting mother, she confirmed that the restitution had been made. She said Maria's mother wanted to express how grateful she was for VORP's efforts and the outstanding program that allowed victims to experience justice.

In spite of the numerous delays, the overall frustration was more than compensated for by the final outcome of the case.

Thanks Linda.

"Love is Patient and Kind...."

"Blessed are the Peacemakers"

VORP relies on your contributions!

VORP relies on your contributions and will for a long time. More cases will be handled as more support is received.

In appreciation for your generous contributions, for every \$100 contributed in 1996, you will receive a Sponsorship Certificate good for a three-hour training.

Topics include Conflict and Peacemaking in the Family, Conflict and Peacemaking in the Workplace, and others. Call Laura at 291-1120 for details.

We strongly encourage you to give on a regular monthly basis. When your contributions add to \$100, you will receive a certificate. Please let your friends know that they can give to support a very needed service in our community and at the same time receive a certificate for valuable training.

VORP Update: *'Ever since then I have stayed out of trouble'*

(Continued from page 1.)

taught me to forgive simply by forgiving me. They set an example for me to live by through their loving, peaceful, forgiving attitude, and my life will never be the same."

I found his number and dialed it. I waited... and then a very young voice said hello. I asked if I could speak to Michael. Then I heard the young voice call loudly but with respect and care, "Daddy." It was like wonder music to me. Then Michael came on and we had a great conversation. He is still employed in the social service agency. He thought that the timing of my call was great because he had recently been talking to some people about starting a VORP in his community. Things are going well for him and his wife and four children. They are contributing members in their church, community and extended family.

When I asked him if he would be willing to talk to a reporter about the impact VORP had on his life he said he would be glad to do that.

The article including some quotes from Michael appeared in the Sacramento Bee, where they are considering starting a VORP.

Following are a few of his quotes.

"When you break into someone's house what you steal is an object." "But when you sit at a table and you look into your victim's eyes and they tell you how you betrayed them and how you hurt them...it's real, not abstract." "Ever since then I have stayed out of trouble."

I think this is a good example of how a Restorative Justice System could work. There was cooperation between the police, victim, offender and VORP. If the offender would not have been cooperative there were backup coercive systems available. The problem, as I see it, is that we usually don't even attempt to utilize the cooperative process. In overlooking the cooperation option, we miss the opportunity for long term change and safety.

There is no question that the VORP process saved the community and the state a lot of money. But that is not the most important part. Victim and offender were restored through the efforts of many people. But it probably wouldn't have happened if the structure of VORP was not available. Those of you who contribute to VORP make it possible. Without you it would not exist.

You may request a copy of the Sept 1988 newsletter in which Michael told the whole story to that point in his own words.

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May we have your attention please!

Due to an increase in case referrals, there is an immediate need for mediators. If you have been trained in the past and would like a refresher course, please call Julius or Nestor. If you have been putting off attending a training, now is a good time to do it. If you know of someone who you think would make a good mediator, please let them know they are needed.

The dates for the next training events are March 22 & 23; April 16, 23 & 30; and May 23, 30 & June 6.

The cost is \$20 for those who plan to take at least three cases, \$100 for those who just want the training for use in other settings.

**Call Laura, Nestor, or Julius
at 291-1120 to register.**

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