VORP NEWS
of the Central Valley, Inc.
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Changes on horizon for VORP as movement toward Restorative Justice continues

by Ron Claassen

Some significant changes are happening at VORP. If you have concerns about any of these changes we invite you to discuss them with us. In order to provide a context I will start with some background.

VORP worked with its first case in 1983 and has grown slowly and steadily. VORP mediators now work with approximately 600 cases per year. VORP has been entirely supported (with the exception of a City of Fresno grant in 1995) by individual, church, and other private donations.

VORP trains volunteer mediators to assist willing victims, offenders, and their support people to recognize the injustice, search for ways to repair the damage as much as possible, and decide on ways to prevent it from happening again. Agreements are written and signed, and accountability is arranged. Most include a follow-up meeting to make adjustments as needed or, more likely, to celebrate keeping the agreement.

A typical VORP case is a juvenile offender, a property offense, and a private individual, school, or business victim. The case is generally referred to VORP by the juvenile probation department as part of an informal probation.

However, VORP also works with adult offenders and more serious juvenile cases referred at a variety of places in the judicial process and some self referrals.

There are two significant changes in process: (1) a new, additional referral point with substantially increased legal and community significance, and (2) possible funding for increasing VORP services.

The new referral point is very significant in that the court is deciding to share its power in this way with the community. Phil Erdman from the probation department and I worked on the concept. Phil convened a meeting of Judge Hoff, Superior Court–Presiding Juvenile Judge; Worthington Vogel, Lead District Attorney–Juvenile Division, Cynthia Calvert, Lead Public Defender–Juvenile Division, and me to discuss the concept. After several more drafts and meetings, the plan was approved with March 10, 1997, as the starting date.

The new referral point and a slightly modified process is now in its initial stages. Ten juvenile nonviolent property felonies per month will be referred by agreement of the district attorney and public defender. VORP will convene a Restorative Justice Conference comprised of offender and extended family, victim and support people, school and faith community representatives, police and probation representatives, and others as deemed helpful by victim or offender. The task of the Restorative Justice Conference will be to recognize the injustice and decide by consensus on a plan to restore the damage as much as possible and to create a safer and better future for everyone. If the group comes to an agreement, that agreement will be submitted to the court and will serve as an alternative to the adjudication and disposition hearings. If the group does not arrive at an agreement, the case will be returned to the court.

The agreement will include an accountability/encouragement/support plan designed and carried out by an accountability group. VORP will follow up with the accountability group and reconvene the Restorative Justice Conference if the plan is not working and/or to celebrate its success.

A similar legislated process in New Zealand, in which all juvenile cases first enter a similar process before going to court, has reduced the number of court cases by 80 percent and the number of juvenile incarceration facilities from 23 to three.

While the referral plan has started, the funding changes are still just possibilities. VORP is being asked to provide more services, and in recognition that this will add costs, VORP has been invited to join with several agencies in applying for funds from a variety of sources. We are also discussing the possibility of contracting on a fee for service basis for cases.

Our board of directors has decided to go ahead and make some applications and see what develops. We do so only after considerable thought and prayer. Our greatest concern is that we continue to be accountable to you individuals and churches in the community who support VORP and have made VORP possible. We know that you support VORP because of your vision for reconciliation and restoration. While we intend to seek some matching funds to assist VORP in offering more services, we are viewing this as a way to multiply your donations.

We believe this is a very significant decision that must be done carefully because we believe that there is a tendency to become more like the funding source and we want to continue to move in the direction of being more and more focused on restoration and reconciliation. That is why our need for your vision and your donations is greater now than ever. Please continue to watch and let us know how we are doing.

Reconciliation and restoration, the vision, are not changing. Your financial contributions will continue to provide the basis, and perhaps the total support for the program (the supplemental options are still just possibilities). And, these are important changes we wanted to share with you. We also want to assure you that volunteer mediators will continue to work with the 50 to 60 cases per month, like the one in this month's story, that you have made possible. Reconciliation and restoration is significant regardless of the process used or the source of the referrals. Please pray for our volunteer mediators, board of directors, and staff as we all make the necessary adjustments while staying focused on the vision.

VORP meeting overcomes darkness with light of reconciliation

by Sean Peifer
with Ron Claassen

Our story this month is from Sean Peifer, a student at Fresno Pacific University.

I had waited a long time to reach this point. On this night I would embark on my first VORP mediation meeting. I had worked on two cases previously. In my first case, the offender was ready to meet and take responsibility, but the victim was nowhere to be found. In my second case, I met with both the offender and the victim, but it was decided by both parties that things had already been made right between them.

In this case, the individual meetings had already been completed by Julius. I was invited to lead the victim-offender meeting. I went to the VORP office and Julius briefed me on the case. Julius included that he figured I was capable to lead the meeting because of my training. I wasn't quite so sure at this

See 'Gas station…' on page 2

Gas station parking lot illuminated by victim-offender reconciliation

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point. I had done separate victim and offender meetings, but had no experience in the final mediation. I wondered if I was prepared for what might be a long and difficult meeting.

Julius, who is far more experienced in the art of mediating, claimed that the final mediation was often the easiest of all the meetings. It seemed to me as if it would be the most difficult. After all, this was the time when victim and offender would meet. The feelings could resurface and fists could fly.

As we drove to the meeting place, Julius, in his calm way posed a question I had not thought about. He asked, "What if the meeting takes place in a room with no table or not enough chairs?" We discussed it and agreed on a strategy. We finally arrived at the scene of the actual crime—a gas station.

We pulled into the parking lot and parked about the same time some people got out of the car next to us. Julius introduced me to the offender and his mother and girlfriend. He seemed like a real nice guy.

As we walked toward the station, the owner/victim walked over to us and I was introduced to him. He was a nice guy too. I wondered, how and why did this all happen? Here we were, at the scene of the original incident, getting ready to discuss it.

We walked inside the building. My first thought was, "It doesn't look like there's a place to hold a meeting in here. Julius asked if there was a room where we could meet and sure enough there was none. This didn't look good. Not only were we tableless and chairless, we were roomless. Surely the meeting could not go on.

Julius suggested meeting outside. I hadn't quite prepared for this. We were going to attempt to have a VORP meeting in the dark.

The meeting started as we introduced ourselves, trying to make our voices heard over the nearby traffic. I went over the ground rules, which included allowing me to lead the meeting, but before I could get around to the next step, the offender started telling the story. I went into a panic. I thought, "This is not how it happened on the video they showed us." The offender was telling the victim about the many fluorescent lights and other things he broke that night, that he was drunk, and about how sorry he was. But I was thinking, "Oh great, now I have lost control."

I remembered that they had agreed to let me lead, so I took them up on the offer. They agreed and we proceeded with the meeting. They seemed to respect the order, yet I wondered if formalities were important here? They knew what they came here to do and they wanted to do it as quickly and as hassle-free as possible.

Both parties were very cooperative. When it came time for restitution, the offender started pulling out money. They had quickly agreed on an amount. I thought at first that he was eager to part with his money. No, I realized, he was eager to make things right! The victim was happy too, but not just because of the money. He was glad that somebody would have the guts to confess their wrongdoing, pay for the damage, and promise not to do it again. The victim said more than once, "It makes me feel very good that you are willing to come back, take responsibly, and pay for the damage."

The VORP mediation magic was happening! Only it wasn't magic. It was that thing inside all of us that desires shalom. It was alive in this dark parking lot. Above the noise of the traffic passing by, it was screaming to be heard—this overwhelming desire for peace. And I was there, a mere mediator, a party who was not touched by the offense, yet I could not help but be touched by this reconciliation.

As Julius and I started back to the VORP office, he brought up the situation—it felt like anarchy to me—which occurred at the beginning of the meeting. He pointed out that human beings seem to naturally work the way VORP does: to admit wrongdoing, to offer restitution, and to repent. That was exactly what the offender was doing. VORP works because people are really seeking reconciliation.

I saw reconciliation happen. I witnessed a relationship being healed in the same location where a crime occurred and the relationship was severed. I witnessed shalom as it impacted the lives of a few people who were hungering for it. I witnessed a light of hope and peace shining in the darkness of a parking lot.

Thanks Sean!

Blessed are the Peacemakers!

Volunteer VORP Mediators Needed!

VORP mediators learn and practice peacemaking skills they can use in the home, workplace, and congregation.

The next VORP mediator trainings are scheduled on April 18 & 19; and May 29, June 5 & 12.

For details, call Julius or Victoria at 291-1120.

VORP Relies On You!

VORP can only grow if financial support grows. If you aren't actively supporting VORP, we pray that this will be the month you start.

By sending $20 a month, you will make a big difference to victims, offenders, and a community in need of restoration and reconciliation.

This is a great opportunity. Please send your first check today!

VORP
VICTIM OFFENDER RECONCILIATION PROGRAM
2529 Willow Avenue • Clovis, CA 93612 • (209) 291-1120

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