



of the Central Valley, Inc.

August 1998

## Trust grows when agreements are made and kept

by Ron Claassen

Some commonly asked questions and/or frequently expressed concerns about VORP are: What if an offender is just participating in VORP because it looks like an easier way out? What if an offender says all the right things in the meeting, acts remorseful, and comes to an agreement with the victim but doesn't really intend to keep the agreement?

These are legitimate concerns and we have thought about them a lot. Following are some of our ideas and ways we work with these concerns.

Before we arrange for an offender to meet with a victim, our mediator meets with the offender and perhaps one or two of their support persons. In the course of that meeting, it is essential that the offender express a willingness to participate constructively in a meeting with the victim and to follow through with the agreements made in a meeting with the victim. This agreement with the mediator is an important first step. After that agreement, accountability and follow-up, on this and all subsequent agreements, are the keys to restoration, reconciliation and trust building.

While it is great if their motivation is pure, it is not essential. It is impossible for a mediator to know an offenders motivation or if their intention is to keep the agreement or not. So we have decided to focus on what the person says and does rather than on their initial motivations that cause them to participate or any hidden intentions. If an offender says the "right" things, acts civilly, signs an agreement, and then continues acting appropriately by keeping the agreement, the person with whom the agreement was made will be satisfied. Often, in the course of the meeting and follow-up, as the offender continues to keep agreements, their perspective changes. The initial motivation or intentions become irrelevant.

"Trust grows when agreements are made and kept." If a victim and offender make a constructive agreement, trust will grow between them, at least a little. If the agreement is kept, trust will grow more. If the agreement calls for several payments, each time a payment is made, trust grows a little more. We have observed this in thousands of cases. We have also observed that trust goes down dramatically when people are unwilling to make agreements or when agreements are made and not kept.

Trust grows when agreements are made and kept. Trust goes down when people are unwilling to make agree-

ments or when agreements are made and not kept. I believe this is true in all relationships, not just in victim offender relationships. When I am invited to work with a business, church, family or other group where one of the concerns is that "we don't trust each other," I usually find one or all of the following: they have not made any constructive agreements for quite a while, agreements have been made but not written and therefore understood differently by different persons, or agreements have been made but not kept. If this group is willing to identify areas of confusion, negotiate fair and constructive agreements in these areas, and build in follow-up meetings for accountability, trust will grow. When the agreements are made and kept, trust grows. You can count on it.

## Learn to Be a Peacemaker

VORP has set its volunteer mediator training schedule for the remainder of 1998.

By taking the 9-hour seminar, you can gain valuable skills for serving the community and for strengthening relationships in your home, congregation, and work place.

- September 10, 17 & 24
- September 18 & 19
- October 19, 26 & November 2
- November 13 & 14

If you agree to mediate three VORP cases, the cost is only \$20; otherwise, the cost is \$100.

Call the VORP office at 209-291-1120 for information or to register.

## VORP offender shares struggles, successes

by Victoria Buksbazen  
with Ron Claassen

Our story this month is an interview with John Allen, a person who participated in VORP as an offender in 1996. The agreement was not completed until March 1998. In the mean time, Victoria stayed in contact with him, continually inviting him to keep his agreement. Victoria is the one who did this interview. Victoria Buksbazen is from New York and came to VORP through the Mennonite Voluntary Service Program. She has worked with VORP for two years and her term of service will be ending this month. Her responsibilities have included being a mediator, trainer, and coach for volunteer mediators. In addition she has been our bookkeeper, received our donations and paid our bills, along with many other tasks. But her primary job has been to work with the very important task of follow-up. For any offender who has not completed an agreement, she has at least monthly contact. She reminds them of the agreement(s) they made and invites/encourages them to complete their agreement. People who have come to Fresno for training on how to start and operate a VORP observe her in action as part of the training. They frequently comment on the courage and special spirit she brings to this very complex and difficult task. We are going to miss Victoria and wish her the best. Following is an example of an agreement that would not have been completed without her follow-up. John agreed to the use of his real name.

I have had contact with John on and off since I began restitution management work at VORP almost two years ago. John came to our program as an adult.

Before going through VORP or other programs, John had several addictions which led to a string of decisions that had some difficult and harmful consequences. Maroa Home, a 12-step organization assisting those with substance abuse, worked with John for ten months before VORP made contact regarding a residential burglary he had committed the previous year. An added element in this incident was that the house belonged to John's uncle. Both John and his uncle were willing to meet for a joint mediation and an agreement was made. However, this was not the end to John's story or involvement with VORP.

Several years passed before John completed the promises he made to his uncle through our program. Now that John is finished, we wanted to have an opportunity to share some of his struggles and successes. When I suggested an interview, John was more than willing to participate and to speak about the changes that have occurred in his life. The following are excerpts from our discussion.

**VORP:** What were your initial feelings about participating in VORP?

**John:** I was pretty excited to do it because I wanted to make amends, to have none of those harsh feelings between my uncle and me, and it's something I wanted and needed to do. I got a lot out of it.

**VORP:** The incident you were involved in was the burglary of your uncle's home. How much do you think VORP contributed to making it possible for you to take responsibility and to make amends?

Ex-offender credits VORP for positive change...

# VORP 'allowed me to pay back something'

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**John:** I say it contributed a lot because I wouldn't have been able to just go over there and do it myself. It helped me to put my foot in the door.

**VORP:** If you didn't have the opportunity with our program, your uncle might not have listened to you on your own?

**John:** Oh no. It would have taken years probably.

**VORP:** Can you tell us a little bit about your feelings during the VORP mediation you participated in March 1996?

**John:** I was kind of nervous going in there, but we got to talking and got stuff out on the table. I got to tell him that I had a problem. We ended up coming out hugging and good things, you know.

**VORP:** How did VORP affect your perspective on the burglary?

**John:** I knew what I did was wrong. It allowed me to pay back something. My

uncle said that I didn't have to pay him nothing, but I said that I wanted to pay back something, so we set it up and VORP sent me the payment notices every month.

**VORP:** Did the mediation help you understand more of your uncle's feelings as well?

**John:** Oh yeah, for sure.

**VORP:** You had an addiction at the time of the incident and Maroa Home was helping you go through the steps you needed to take to get your life in the order you wanted?

**John:** Yeah, when VORP came along I was like, "Cool man, I'm ready for this." By the time VORP came I was ready to make amends and was glad it happened.

**VORP:** What were your feelings toward yourself after you had met with your uncle and signed the agreement?

**John:** I felt good about myself because I finally got all that stuff behind me. Now I'm glad that I paid everything off; it's a relief. You see, I went to jail and I got back out of jail and there was a while I didn't pay.

**VORP:** You went to jail after you went to Maroa Home? How did that happen?

**John:** I just backslid and started doing my old stuff again, but then I went back to jail and I said, "this ain't the life for me," so I went back to Maroa Home for another three months. This time I went back on my own.

**VORP:** Were you surprised to hear from us again once you were out of jail?

**John:** Oh, yeah, sure! Well, I was kind of wondering you know, because I knew that I still had that agreement out there. I didn't expect to see anything and then I did. Glad I did, now I can get on with my life.

**VORP:** How are your relations with your family at this time?

**QUOTE** "As a recovery counselor, I value the VORP program as the ninth step of the 12-steps. Steps eight and nine are the steps for preparing to make amends and then to actually make amends. It is an absolutely important part of the recovery process and it is essential to the reconciliation process."

—Dave Purvis, LCSW

**John:** We talk and everything, at least I see them every now and then. There's no bitterness between any of us.

**VORP:** How are things at this point in your life?

**John:** Well, I garden every day at the Maroa Home—it's a business they helped me start. I also train the participants on work ethics type of stuff.

**VORP:** How does it feel to have your own business?

**John:** Feels good! It took a while, but I think I'm moving up.

**VORP:** Five years ago would you have guessed you would be here right now?

**John:** No way! I was gone.

**VORP:** So your life and habits have changed dramatically since then?

**John:** Yeah. I don't mess around with any of that old stuff, any of my old friends or anything. I just hang around the Home and serve whenever I can.

**VORP:** Overall, what has VORP's impact been on your life?

**John:** It has allowed me to move on with my life instead of staying stuck worrying about what my uncle would think and whatever. I know what he thinks because we went through the mediation. We got a lot behind us. It's been a good impact.

## VORP relies on your contributions!

VORP relies on your contributions! VORP could double or triple its case load if we had the finances to employ the necessary support staff. While we probably wouldn't turn down a real large contribution, we think that VORP is most stable when hundreds of churches and individuals contribute in varying amounts. VORP has the potential to influence how justice is done.

If you are supportive of Restorative Justice, please give what is appropriate for you. \$120 per year (\$10 per month) per individual receiving this newsletter would allow VORP to triple its case load. If you are not already contributing, please start this month.

**VORP**

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