

VORP News

Victim Offender Reconciliation Program
of the Central Valley, Inc.

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From the Administrator

As we enter the season of Advent our thoughts turn naturally to the coming of the Prince of Peace, the mediator who broke down the dividing wall separating people from God. VORP's mission from the beginning has been to assist community volunteers in breaking down the dividing wall separating victims and offenders. Our particular gift to the community has been mobilizing the churches for this ministry. Those of us who have been working at this task for two decades or more are delighted that forty-four Fresno area churches have agreed to be Sustaining Friends with VORP. At the same time we feel inadequate to the task since only ten percent of Fresno area churches are in this group, and not all our Sustaining Friends are as active as they might be.

Is your church a Sustaining Friend with VORP? Sustaining Friends agree to support VORP with prayer, meeting space, volunteers and money, all as they are able. If you aren't sure about your church, give us a call. We would like very much to work with you in helping your church look at the idea of joining us.

Blessings to all of you during this holiday season. I expect to spend the week before Christmas in Pakistan speaking at their first restorative justice conference, talking about how Islamic law supports the principles of restorative justice. VORP is part of an important movement for reconciliation in the world.

Duane Ruth-Heffelbower



A Miracle the VORP Way

By Cindy Sparks, a VORP Volunteer Mediator

"I don't want any of this 'feelings' stuff. I just want facts; that's all that matters." This was one of the several strong statements made by the victim during our initial meeting with him. He had graciously invited us into his home and was anxious to talk about the offense done to him, but he wasn't at all convinced that the "VORP Way" had any value or validity. *"All these kids are the same, and nothing is going to change them,"* our victim



Merry Christmas!

stated emphatically. After our attempts to educate him on the process, he said he was willing to give it a try, even though he made it clear he was convinced it wouldn't work. *"Who taught you this stuff?"* was his recurring question. As you can imagine, my partner and I left the victim meeting feeling slightly beat up and concerned about his ability to be constructive in a meeting with the young offender.

The earlier offender meeting, on the other hand, had been much more encouraging. My partner handled this meeting by herself and said that it went very well, with the offender and his mother willing to work with us to help make things right for the victim. The offender felt somewhat apprehensive, however, as the victim and offender had previously met in court and he could feel the victim's animosity. He and his mother were ready to face the victim once again, however, this time in a VORP meeting.

When we brought the two parties together, we were able to successfully guide the group meeting through the three-step mediation process.

The victim came with a predetermined solution for restitution—to have the offender work for him for a period of time. He is a contractor and felt that this restitution appropriately addressed the crime of vandalism in a house he had been remodeling. He behaved very appropriately through the process, and helped generate productive conversation with the offender. As the meeting progressed, my partner and I could see his attitude soften. He just needed to see that the offender accepted responsibility for his actions and was sorry, and once he was convinced of that, he became very paternal and supportive. At one point he even asked the offender, *"And how do you feel about that?"* (!) It was a heartwarming transformation.

The victim and of-



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Dates and expectations were discussed for the work, and both the victim and offender were pleased with the outcome. A miracle of reconciliation and restitution occurred through this process. This was a good example of why you don't want to ever give up!



VORP Workshop at the 10th Annual Restorative Justice Conference

By Megan Thompson

At the 10th Annual Restorative Justice Conference, held at the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary on November 14 and 15, our very own Johnny Phouthachack presented a workshop about our program and others like it in California. Johnny is VORP's Agreement Manager, which means he assists and supports offenders in keeping their agreements. Johnny and Connie White, from the Monterey County VORP, offered conference participants a chance to hear first hand accounts of the positive impact VORP can have on individuals and communities.

An offender, his mother, a victim and two mediators were invited to share their experiences with VORP. The offender talked about how he felt that he got more out of VORP than from his experience of going to court. The VORP process helped him understand that what he did was wrong. VORP offered him the opportunity to help restore justice to the victim, by performing community service and paying restitution.

VORP helped him gain maturity. He was then able to feel better about himself and move forward in life.

The offender's mother said that VORP helped to bring their family together. VORP provides support for families and encourages them to try to find the underlying causes of the offense. Parents are motivated to build better relationships with their children. The atmosphere in this offender's home was greatly improved as a result of the VORP process. Johnny believes strongly that kids will not complete their agreements without the constant support of a family member or other mentor.

Johnny says that the mediator is the key ingredient in the VORP process. Mediators give time to listen to offenders, victims and their families and make an effort to understand where they are coming from. A good mediator does the bulk of Johnny's work for him by helping the parties keep the agreement. With a workable agreement, all Johnny has to do is continue providing the support that the mediator offered at the first meeting.

Thank you to the victims, offenders, mediators and workshop participants who had the courage to share their stories. We can see from your testimonies the positive impact that VORP is having on our community.

Spring 2004
Volunteer Mediator Trainings

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|--------------------------|-----------|
| February 6-7 | March 5-6 |
| April 16-17 | June 4-5 |
| Friday 6:30pm - 9:30pm | |
| Saturday 8:30am - 3:30pm | |

Call our office to reserve dates: 455-9803.

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