

Victim Offender Reconciliation Program

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We have had several new experiences during the last months. One was opening ourselves to publicity on television. Channel 30 asked if they could do a spot for the program "360". Channel 24 asked for an interview for the program "Perspectives". The two were very different experiences. The segment for "360" was put together by interviewing a victim, an offender, the offender's mother, and the volunteer who worked with the case, Tim Petty. The taping included about 45 minutes of interview and action showing the work the offender did for restitution. That was condensed to a 3 minute segment. It was a good segment. I wish that I could have copies of all of the tape. The offender and victim were very candid about their experience and if I could have (I didn't) written a script for them it could not have been more in line with what we hope will happen in the VORP process. The segment for "Perspectives" was a live 15 minute interview with me. That was a new experience and one that I was very nervous about. My interviewer was very kind in her questions and it wasn't as bad as I thought it might be. It went quite well.

Through the media attention, general presentations, and more cases, more and more people are hearing about us. This is positive and at the same time presents new situations. I hadn't completed more than the first five lines when I received a phone call. I typed a brief summary of that call in order to record it for future reference.

I was just interrupted by a call from a victim of rape. She said that she had

heard that the rapist was being sentenced to approximately 20 years in prison.

He is still a teenager and she doesn't think that is going to solve his problem.

She was wondering if VORP could suggest something more constructive. She said,

"I'm a strong person and I'm going on with my life. I want to see this boy helped to change his life. I can't imagine that all that time in prison is going to help."

I suggested that she talk with a person from a local agency to see if they can suggest an alternative sentence that would include VORP if that is something she would like. She agreed and is now talking to their staff. After extensive processing that agency has decided not to work with the case due to the seriousness of the offense and the history of the offender. VORP may explore the possibility of becoming involved at a later date if the victim wishes to pursue it. We would need to do extensive research and preparation before bringing them to a meeting.

The reason I have had the time to follow up on the television requests and other things that I hadn't been able to get to is because Gail Boldt, the Mennonite Voluntary Service worker who arrived in February, is a fast learner and a very competent person. She has assumed the role of Case Manager and has been mediating a significant number of cases herself. I asked her to share one of her recent VORP experiences. Following is a recap of that experience.

This month I had the opportunity to work with two adult offenders both of whom came to us through the Alternative Sentencing Program. We were asked to work with the victims and offenders to come up with restitution plans which would be submitted, along with other proposals from Alternative Sentencing, as alternatives to jail sentences. In both cases the judges accepted the proposals and the men did not have to go to jail. In one case, the offender is doing several hours of volunteer work for the victim for restitution. It could lead to a job for the offender. In the other case, the offender has entered a job training program and will pay restitution from money earned in the program. He is very glad and relieved as his young wife is soon to have their first child and he now feels hope that he will be able to support them.

Both of these cases were very satisfying to me. As adults, both men understood the idea of accepting responsibility for their actions and both wanted to do this very much. In the first case, the offender was recently converted to Christianity, and he was very anxious to face his victim with the truth. He wanted to be reconciled to the victim as part of his reconciliation to God. In the second case, the offender was genuinely sorry for his act and wanted to make it right as a step toward assuming responsibility as an adult with a new wife, child, and job.

If you know of anyone who would like to be trained to be a VORP mediator please let us know so that we can inform them of the next training sessions. Many of the skills learned have carry over into family, work, church, and other experiences.

We occasionally have some feedback from people who have been touched by VORP and it seems to come at times when we are asking whether it is really worth the effort? does it really make a difference? is it really appropriate to ask you to support VORP? Last week a person who was a victim in a case called and asked if we would be open to a small financial contribution from his company. He wanted to recommend VORP because it had both helped him to work through some of the trauma of being a victim and, after nearly an hour conversation, said that he believes he is a "better person because of VORP". Shalom, Ron Claassen