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## Victim Offender Reconciliation Program

VORP of the Central Valley, Inc. News  
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Reconciliation is hard to define. In spite of this we continue to say that reconciliation is the primary goal, the highest priority of VORP. We know that we cannot force it or even manipulate it. We do, however, often observe a transformation happen when people participate in the VORP process. People who are at least distrusting each other, perhaps angry or maybe even hostile leave a VORP meeting with less hostility, less anger, some degree of trust and sometimes this moves a fair distance in the direction of caring. We think of this transformation as reconciliation. The barriers between them are not as large and sometimes nearly gone. The role of the VORP facilitator in this is to provide a structure, leadership, and hope and caring.

Again this year I intend to share a VORP story with you each month. This month the case is one that Todd, Gretchen, and I worked on together. What caused us to decide to work together was that there were eight offenders and if the joint meeting would include all offenders and their parents the meeting would be quite large. I will be writing it from my perspective. Names and some details have been changed to protect identities.

The victim was Mary, a young girl, about 8 years old. There were eight offenders, ranging in age from 12 to 15. They had been throwing rocks and one had struck Mary just above the eye. The bleeding was profuse. Medical attention was required immediately as well as several trips to the doctor.

We decided to talk to Mary and her mother first because it seemed that they might not want to meet these boys face to face or at least not all of them at once. We found that Mary's mother was very anxious to meet these boys and she had several things in mind that she wanted to say. Mary was less anxious but agreeable provided she didn't have to say too much. Mary wanted her friend to come also since she had been with her and had been hit by one of the rocks in the back. We invited her friend to come also.

Each of the offenders agreed to meet and each of them thought it was a bit unfair since it wasn't his rock that hit her. Several parents felt very strong about this.

We decided to have the meeting at Mary's school. We needed a large room since we invite all parents of the victims and offenders when they are juveniles. We arranged the chairs in a circle with the victims and their parents, the offenders, and the mediators in the circle. We placed chairs behind the place where the offenders sat for their parents. We wanted the parent to be there and to give them a chance to participate but we wanted the offenders to take the primary responsibility.

We started the meeting with each of the boys sharing what they had done. Each of them talked of throwing rocks and even of throwing them in Mary's direction but none of them said it was "my" rock that hit you. Then it was Mary's turn to tell what happened to her. The thing she remembered most was all the blood on her dress and how frightening that was. She and her friend had been going to school and were getting close so they ran the rest of the way to school. Mary's mother had been called from work and was very scared. She told them how fearful it had been for her thinking that Mary might lose her sight in that eye. If it had hit less than an inch lower it would have hit her right in the eye. The boys told how bad they felt when they were told that it was "likely" she would lose her sight in that eye. They told how they had been pressured to admit that they were responsible for her eye. They each admitted that they had been throwing rocks or providing rocks for others but each was convinced that their rock didn't hit her. At this point several parents couldn't wait any longer. They needed to voice their concern for what their boys had gone through already.

We finally came to the point where we all agreed that a rock did hit her and it had to have come from those who were throwing rocks and that although it didn't seem fair in some ways, it was fair for Mary's medical expenses to be covered. We then talked about the time that Mary's mother had to take off work, about the trips to the doctor, and medication. Mary's mother then shared how she had lost a cash bonus that is given each month to those employees who have perfect attendance. At that point, one of the mothers who had been most vocal and reluctant asked Mary's mother if she worked at XYZ and it turned out that they worked at the same place. She vouched for the bonus process and suggested that they cover that also.

We then returned the focus to the boys and Mary. Mary was still scared each day as they walked to school. We asked each boy to tell her something that might help her with this. Did they plan to do it again? Each boy talked (with some encouragement) directly to her assuring her that she wouldn't have to worry about them throwing rocks again. We asked her after each of them if she thought she could believe this or if there was something more she needed to hear. After each she smiled and indicated with a nod when she was ready to hear from the next. She said she felt safer now.

We then worked on a contract with each offender and their parent(s) on how the amount would be paid. We then signed the contracts and dismissed the meeting. Many of the parents talked directly to Mary's mother as they left. They seemed to be caring about each other.

Since the meeting 5 have paid their amount and we are still expecting the other three. One of the boys returned the evaluation (its optional): Did the process help you to "make it right" with the victim? not at all 1 2 3 4 5 fully resolved. Was the agreement for restitution fair? not fair 1 2 3 4 5 very fair. One victim returned the evaluation: Was the restitution agreement satisfactory? very unsatisfactory 1 2 3 4 5 very satisfactory. Was the meeting helpful in resolving you feelings? no help 1 2 3 4 5 very helpful. Would you recommend a VORP meeting to a friend who was a victim of a similar crime? recommend against 1 2 3 4 5 highly recommend. She also added the following comment: "For the offender to face their victim is very helpful in my opinion. I think there would be a lot less mental stress for the victim and less fear if they can face the offender. Maybe there would be less violence if everyone was forced to face things."

A very significant time in the process was the discussion directly between Mary and the boys about the future. For Mary this seemed to be the most significant time. The transformation that I talked about in the opening paragraph happened. It is a remarkable experience to be part of this process and see this happen.

Our next training for volunteer mediators is March 3 and March 10. People who are interested in this process and would like to participate in the training are welcome. The training involves two 4 hour sessions, some reading, and on-the-job training as needed. Volunteers are requested to work with one case per month but this is flexible. If after the training a person thinks this is not for them that is OK. The training will most likely be useful in some other area of their life.

Please remember that we are supported only by your contributions. No contribution is too small. Several new people contributed this last month. Every one is an encouragement to us. If you can make VORP part of you monthly giving we would appreciate that. When we reach our budget for the year we will let you know.

The story above is made possible by the combined efforts of many people. Every day there are cases being worked on by community volunteers and staff.

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