



Victim Offender Reconciliation Program

VORP of the Central Valley, Inc. News
September 1988

Is VORP helpful only for minor offenses or young, first time offenders? While our primary caseload deals with young people and with property offenses, we occasionally work with cases where there has been more serious violation or older offenders who have a long history of offenses.

Our VORP Experience this month is told by a person who participated in the process as an offender. The offense happened in the spring of 1987. Shortly after that a meeting was held where we discussed the offense and the violation, what would be needed to restore the equity, and what the future intentions were. A one year accountability agreement was signed calling for some work for the college, some counseling, monthly contacts with a professor, some community service, and some pie and ice cream at the end of the year. It wasn't without its difficult moments but the agreement was completed and celebrated this spring. Below is a very important perspective on what happened.

At 28 years old I found myself totally out of control and unable to stay out of prison. Of those 28 years, eight of them were spent in one institution or another. Between prison terms I sought help with no avail, and once again I found myself in prison facing a lengthy sentence.

One day while in the shower, the only privacy I had in prison, I fell down on my knees and began to cry. I raised my hands toward heaven as the water hit my chest and face, and I begged God to save me, help me, come into my life and show me what to do. He did come into my life, and I continued faithful to Him while in prison, witnessing for him and attending church regularly. He watched over me throughout my prison term and guided me to a christian college.

Upon my release I attended college for about a year and a half. I did well and served God. Then I began to drift from the college community and I moved off campus. I became disconnected with that fellowship I so desperately needed to maintain my faith. I got into an argument with a fellow I worked with on campus, I was angry with myself and the school. Having served most of my adult life in prison the new life I lived was very hard to adapt to. In one angry, confused moment I slipped back into the life I had known for 28 years. I violated the trust the school had placed in me. I entered the school one night and took a computer from the school without permission (Burglary).

The police ended up with the computer and a witness stating I had taken the equipment from the school. At that point in my life I would have rather died than return to prison. For once in my life I had made some positive progress, but now because of one stupid mistake I would lose everything once again and return to prison for probably 4 to 6 years. No longer would I be able to attend college, I would lose my wife to be, all my financial aid, all my friends, and humiliate my family once again.

The events that followed surprised me. I wasn't contacted by police, but rather one of my instructors. He informed me that the police had the computer and knew I had taken it. What the school intended to do was to work with me and an agency called VORP. They wanted to actually help me, not put me back in prison. They wanted to forgive me and help me forgive myself, to work with me and allow me in some way to repay them through service for what I'd done. Praise God, I felt for once in my life that there were actually people who loved me enough to forgive me and help me through my problems.

I could not believe the loving, forgiving attitude they treated me with. Nothing in my experience prepared me for the honest, open, forgiving love the school showed me through the use of the VORP program. I was so used to bullcrap and hostility, deceit and pettiness, evil and hatred; those things were my natural habitat. I saw them as natural and came to expect them as such. I had looked at the world through eyes that suspect, doubt, fear, hate, cheat, mock, and were selfish and vain. In Prison I'd look around that dirty, vile cell and think that I must truly belong in this dirty and dank place. Where else could I be? The college and VORP proved me wrong.

As a new christian I had read the New Testament. I read comforting stories of Jesus and his teachings. How if a man slaps your face you should offer him the other cheek. If a man takes your coat you should offer your cloak also. And if a man asks you to go a mile with him you should offer to go two miles with him. These stories got me through the violence of prison, but they didn't seem like reality to me, only nice little fairytales to help me escape the realities of prison and the real world. How could I believe people like that actually existed? I had never met anyone like that.

The faculty at the college made these scriptures real for me. I slapped their face and they turned the other cheek, I took their coat and they offered me their cloak also. I asked them to go a mile with me and they offered to go two. The school and VORP changed my life. They showed me that there are people like those I had read about in the Bible, people who care about you, and love you, and are willing to forgive you. I had terrible bitterness and hatred toward society and the criminal justice system, but they taught me to forgive simply by forgiving me. They set an example for me to live by through their loving, peaceful forgiving attitude, and my life will never be the same. Instead of returning me to prison and making me a burden to society, costing taxpayers about \$25,000 a year, the VORP program has made me a productive citizen. I am now married and have a beautiful christian wife with a newborn child due in November. Both my wife and I work and attend church. I've since done some volunteer work in the community. I will graduate from college in about one year with a BA in social work and look forward to a long life of helping people like myself, and serving God for many years to come.

In conclusion, I'd like to ask the question; by what principles do we have the right to make prisoners of the poor and the uneducated, the minorities, whose conditions move them routinely toward the prisons? How can we actually assume that causing the offender a certain amount of personal suffering will compensate another for the harm that was done? The real issue is not a matter of being hard or soft on crime, it is a matter of choosing effective means for encouraging a person to change directions for his life. Surely there are criminals who are dangerous and should be confined and there must be penalties for crime, but the vindictive elements in our punishments which have characterized our response to the criminal offender hurts everyone. Conversely, everyone is helped if our basic policy and programs are designed not to tear a man down but to provide a situation wherein he can build himself up.

Thank you for sharing!

The next volunteer training is scheduled for Sept 20 and 27 from 6 to 10pm each evening. For further information and registration call Gretchen or Shannon at 291-1120. We request that you be open to working with approximately one case per 2 months. It normally takes between 5 and 8 hours to work with one case.

VORP is funded only by donations. If you support the idea of offering assistance to victims and offenders to help them make things as right as possible between them, then you might want to either volunteer as a mediator or donate some financial assistance or both. No contribution is too small.

Shalom
Ron Claassen, Program Director

2529 Willow Avenue • Clovis, CA 93612

Victim Offender Reconciliation Program

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Carl Hansen, Carmel. Representing VORP of the Central Coast with programs in Monterey and San Luis Obispo Counties. Ongoing programs.

Sky and Ethel Aijian, Santa Barbara. Representing VORP in Santa Barbara County. First case in 1988.

Chere Montgomery and Marv Zietzke, San Jose. Representing VORP in Santa Clara County. Ongoing program.

Michael Neimeyer, Barbara Bunsold, Teresa Touney, and Cathy Vallejo. Representing VORP in Orange County. They are just about ready to receive their first referral.

Mary Carol Behrendt and Dolores Bray. Representing VORP in Ventura County. First case in 1988.

Connie Rydberg, Oakland. Representing VORP in Contra Costa County. First case in 1988.

Other counties where initial interest has been expressed include Madera, Kern, Sacramento, Los Angeles, Santa Cruz, and San Bernardino.

When I am involved with other programs at their development stages I am encouraging them to develop a good working relationship with the criminal justice system and to develop the program as a community based program sponsored and guided by the churches. Our mission statement now says that we see VORP as an organization which exists to help the "churches" in their mission to serve the needs of victims and offenders. Reconciliation is a primary purpose and restitution is part of the reconciliation process. VORP needs to be voluntary and the process needs to invite offenders to participate not only because of an externally imposed punishment but also because of an internal desire to "make things right" with the victim. I think that VORP should be responsible to the "faith community" because they are the only organized group that views reconciliation (with God, neighbor, self, the environment, and even enemies) as their primary purpose. I think that their encouragement will be needed to maintain a focus on reconciliation.

LOOKING AHEAD

The invitation is open to expand VORP both in terms of the numbers and range of cases within our county and to develop VORP programs in other counties. Perhaps the time will come when the first response with offenders will be to find out if they will respond to the extremely difficult task of accepting responsibility for their offense, "making it right" with the victim, and resolving to do things differently in the future.

Thanks again for your prayers and support. Let's continue to invite accepting responsibility, good communication efforts, restoration and reconciliation in all of our relationships.

Shalom, Ron Claassen

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Probation Department

Don Hogner
Chief Probation Officer

October 10, 1988

Ron Claassen
2529 Willow
Clovis, CA 93612

Dear Ron:

It struck me that I spend a great deal of time telling other people how wonderful the Victim Offender Reconciliation Program is but that I rarely share those thoughts directly with you.

I am amazed at the job you have done in developing VORP into one of the finest community based programs that I have ever worked with. Your volunteers are consistently well trained and capable of dealing with the difficult situations that we refer to them. The amount of restitution which you are able to collect for victims is exceptional. The most important part of your efforts, however, lie in the benefits of the face to face meetings between the offender and the victim and the degree of emotional healing which you are able to accomplish.

As you have heard me say on several occasions, my only regret regarding VORP is that it is not larger and able to provide services to more offenders and their victims.

I commend you for the outstanding job you have done in developing this program. As an individual, your ideas and your integrity level are second to none. Your program reflects those ideals and your integrity.

Please feel free to use this letter in any way that it will assist VORP in its efforts to raise funds and to recruit volunteers. If there are any individuals or groups who would like to personally speak to me regarding my feelings about the program, please do not hesitate to contact me directly. It will be my pleasure to tell them that both you and the program are unquestionably "the best."

Thanks for all of your efforts and your assistance. It continues to be my pleasure to work with you and your organization.

Yours truly,

Joe R. Walden, Sr.
Probation Division Director

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TULARE COUNTY VORP: Tulare County VORP is a program of VORP of the Central Valley, Inc. but operates with its own Board of Directors, program staff, and volunteers. They are also responsible for providing their own funding. They didn't do any case work this year. At the end of last year there was a budget deficit and the decision of the Board of Directors was to use the time needed to pay off the debts before accepting any further cases. Under the leadership of Ross Becker and Stan Isaac they have accomplished paying off the debt and are ready to accept cases again. Jerry Reimer has volunteered to serve as program coordinator 1/2 time. Jerry's willingness to serve is greatly appreciated. A limited number of referrals are now being accepted.

SERVICE EXPANSION: We received \$5,000 each from Kings View Corporation and Mennonite Central Committee, West Coast, for our Central Function to respond to inquiries from around the state. These funds covered expenses and employed me one day per week to provide some consultation and training to those who are expressing interest. The funds were also used to plan and facilitate the first ever California Gathering of VORP Programs. Our main speaker for the event was Howard Zehr from the Mennonite Central Committee Office of Criminal Justice. He is one of the founders and chief visionary of the VORP program. Below is a list of people and programs represented in addition to Fresno and Tulare County. I have had the opportunity of participating in some way in the development of these programs and, except for Contra Costa County, training their first volunteer mediators. In all cases a particular church or group has provided initial leadership and/or organizational support. Those include Friends Outside, Catholic, Mennonite, Presbyterian, and Episcopal.