



Victim Offender Reconciliation Program

VORP of the Central Valley, Inc. News
June 1989

Inmates at the State Prison in Vacaville, CA meet in a group called VORG (Victim Offender Reconciliation Group) to sensitize themselves to the pain felt by victims and to learn new ways to respond to things that in the past have triggered abusive and sometimes very violent responses. Richard Early, who works at the prison, brought a few inmates together to be the steering committee for an idea he heard about related to bringing victims together with offenders. They regularly invite representatives of victims' rights organizations and victims of many different offenses to share how the crime impacted them. Their goal is that the experience will lead toward healing and reconciliation for both the victim and themselves. They named themselves without being aware that anything like VORP even existed. Last Tuesday Duane Ruth-Heffelbower and I spent the afternoon with them. For the first two hours we met with the steering committee and shared information and encouraged each other. For the last two hours we were joined by about 50 other inmates. They said things like, "reconciliation is a spiritual experience, it can't be taken out of that context," "reconciliation must be voluntary, you can't force it," "when we get out, how can we get involved with VORP?" "Will you have groups we can get involved in for support and to help others not make the mistakes we made?" "I have learned for the first time how my actions affect another. It has changed my relationship with my wife and we can't wait now for me to get out. I used to abuse her." "Every prison needs a group like ours and connections to an outside group like VORP, how can we work together?" "We have read a little about Restorative Justice from Howard Zehr, let's talk about it." At least six asked if we could help them to meet with their victims when they get out. I can only begin to share here the positive, responsible tone of our meeting. I don't know where this will lead but it can't be ignored.

Bringing victims and offenders together to work at healing is changing lives. Not only does it change attitudes, understanding, and actions on the part of victims and offenders, it also has a major impact on the volunteer mediators. Jerry Reimer volunteered to work part-time with the Tulare County VORP from September 1988 through May 1989. He finished a bachelors degree and a year of Bible school and had applied to Medical Schools and was awaiting acceptance. He says, "I've learned many things this year while working with VORP, and one of these I'll share with you here. What I've learned is that conflict should not be avoided and that working through it has many rewards."

"My natural tendency is to view conflict as a disaster or breakdown. Through seeing the VORP model operate, I now feel very differently about it. The VORP meetings I mediated showed me all the good that can result from conflict being addressed directly, the best outcome being reconciliation. And reconciliation is worth the momentary discomfort involved in facing up to conflict. Well worth it."

"I now have a better 'eye' for the needs for reconciliation I see around me. I think I see these now more than before, partly from defining it better and partly from not denying what I see." Jerry also related the VORP model of reconciliation as a model for being reconciled with God.

Jerry is sharing one of his VORP experiences with us this month. Some of the names and details have been changed to protect identities.

Reading the word "extortion" on the referral form set off an alarm inside of me. My previous VORP cases (10 in all) had involved vandalism and auto theft. Then I met the extortionist. He turned out to be a slightly shy, blush cheeked eighth grader named Jason. As we sat together on his living room couch, he told me about what had happened. He first described his act with "I borrowed money for lunch." I noticed the word "borrowed," thinking how different a word it was from "extortion" and wondered if he was really getting the point. The amount was small but the small amount didn't seem to dull his sense of the wrong he committed. He said his mother had not been able to give him enough money each day to buy him lunch, so he had asked two seventh graders (the victims) for the money he needed. He added that he had

not intended to hurt the boys at all and didn't realize how threatened they felt until after his arrest. He seemed sorry about it and agreed to meet with his victims, Randy and Mike.

Later that week I met with first Randy, then Mike. I met them at their homes. Randy, who sat politely at the kitchen table with his mom, was a friendly boy with a kind face and few words. Over a 2-3 month period, maybe once or twice per week, he had "given" Jason a dollar when approached, totalling \$10-15. I asked him if he felt he had been wronged. When he didn't answer immediately, his older sister, overhearing from the next room, asked him in her own words, "Did he do anything wrong to you?" He answered with a bashful nod. Later in the meeting, he talked of his feelings of being afraid of Jason and wanting to run when he saw him coming. He agreed to meet with Jason.

Mike's account was similar to Randy's except Mike was quick to demonstrate how he had been wronged, pointing out how Jason had stuck a pencil in his back, used "I'll beat you up" threats, and had intimidated him. His parents listened with concern, too, as we talked in the living room together. They too wanted to get things cleared up with Jason. Mike wanted to meet with Jason.

The joint meeting was held in the cafeteria of the school where the offense occurred. The 3 boys and I sat together in front of the parents. There were nine of us. After I had clarified our purpose and the rules for the meeting, we listened to each boy's story. The boys told the "whats" and "hows" and "whys" of the offense and the differing damages were revealed. Parents were also invited to share their thoughts. Both Randy's and Mike's dads explained that they were Christians and wanted to, as a first choice have the boys experience forgiveness maybe even become friends. The boys indicated their openness to this. Jason also wanted this but he felt that in order to make things right he should do something for them. Jason's dad, who had been silent up to this point, shared his concerns and feelings both with the group and some specifically with Jason. To Jason he said that this forgiveness is what he had been talking with him about immediately after the arrest; that it is important to "own up to your actions." They agreed that Jason would do work at home for his parents to earn money so that \$10 could be paid in restitution to each boy.

Handshakes were exchanged as we left the cafeteria. Things had been taken care of.

Thanks Jerry

The only reason we are not working with more cases is because we don't have enough trained volunteer mediators. The next mediator training sessions are scheduled for August 8 and 15. Each session is from 6-10pm. Participants learn listening, negotiating, leadership, empowering, and other conflict management and mediation skills that can be put to work in home, work, and church settings as well as assisting victims and offenders in "making things as right as possible" between them.

Please remember that our only financial support is from individuals, businesses, churches, and others interested in supporting reconciliation. Your contribution, whatever the size, together with many others, is what makes VORP possible.

Shalom
Ron Claassen, Program Director

The Ruth-Hefelbrowers
3198 E. Menlo Ave.
Fresno, CA 93710

Victim Offender Reconciliation Program
2529 Willow Avenue • Clovis, CA 93612