



Victim Offender Reconciliation Program

VORP of the Central Valley, Inc. NEWS
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Twenty seven people representing twelve counties met on Thursday, October 5 for the Second Annual California VORP Gathering. Our guest speaker was Dan Van Ness, President of Justice Fellowship, an arm of Chuck Colson's Prison Fellowship.

Dan gave strong affirmation and encouragement to VORP because it is a demonstration of Restorative Justice. Justice Fellowship, with his leadership and Chuck Colson's encouragement has been studying the history of criminal justice, looking for why what is happening now is not working. He described the optimism of the early efforts of rehabilitation and how the idea of forcing people into a certain environment and making them act in certain ways for a period of time just didn't produce the results that were hoped for. Forced rehabilitation was given up about 10 years ago and we have moved to the safety, order, and punishment mode. The hope was that with harsher punishment, longer sentences and more prisons, safety and order could be assured and the offender would think twice before offending again. It is clear now that that is a very expensive experiment and it is not working either.

What is needed is a new vision. Dan suggested that it should take into account our history. Because of our current emphasis on the offense as breaking a law and our way of resolving it as punishment, the only ones involved in the criminal justice system are the offender and the government. To balance that we need to include the community and the victim. A new vision would start by recognizing that crime creates harms and that justice should focus not only on safety and order but also on identifying the harms and "making things right." While eventually what is needed is legislative changes to balance our criminal justice system, what is needed now to help make the vision of Restorative Justice visible is a church based VORP in every community.

Dan also met with several local groups; Pastors, Criminal Justice Officials, VORP volunteer mediators, and the VORP Board of Directors. He reminded us that Fresno VORP, and the network of VORPs developing in California, are more than just local efforts. They are also a model that Justice Fellowship is looking to in developing their guidelines as they encourage VORPs to develop in every community.

Dan's presence, thoughtful insights, articulation of restorative justice, and his interest in VORP have provided new hope and encouragement. It was exciting to realize that what we have been doing is gaining momentum. It is also important to remind ourselves that it is working on a daily basis as volunteer mediators get involved with victims and offenders to help them find a restorative resolution.

This month Michael Pierce, a senior social work major at Fresno Pacific College, and a volunteer mediator is sharing a VORP experience. Some names and details have been changed to protect the identities of those involved.

Jimmy is a young offender who lives in a run down little house. His mother is a single parent whose only source of income is the assistance she receives from the department of social services. Apparently, Jimmy wasn't involved in any social activities and wasn't doing very well in school. His only friends consisted of a couple of buddies he ran around with in the evenings after school. One night Jimmy and his friends painted graffiti on a sign at a very large corporation facility being built across the street from their neighborhood. Vandalism.

The victim, in contrast to the offender, was this very large corporation. This case was fascinating to me because it exemplified the contrast between prosperity and poverty. Quite frankly, I sort of expected this corporate giant to indulge in condemnation and elaborate descriptions of the moral defectiveness and irresponsibility of the offender and his parents.

As I set up the joint meeting between Jimmy and the Corporation, I wondered if any good could come out of this. I thought Jimmy would once again feel the humiliation of being the "bad" person.

My first surprise came when I found out who would be representing the corporation. It was not a low level official, it was the president of the corporation. The owner even took the time to meet us and introduce us to Robert, the president. The meeting didn't consist of accusations or degradation. Instead, Robert immediately tried to develop a rapport with Jimmy. He spent the better half of the meeting asking Jimmy questions about his interests, trying to find out what the good things were that Jimmy had going for him. Jimmy had no interests to tell Robert about and could not say anything good about himself. Finally, Robert ended this part of the conversation with, "Well, you sure are a good looking boy!" Later, Robert found out that Jimmy did have an interest in baseball and gave him a baseball cap and shirt along with an invitation to come back and tour the company.

The restitution they agreed on was for Jimmy to clean up the sign, which estimates said would cost the company from \$300 to \$500. We all agreed that the act of cleaning the sign would leave a far greater impression on Jimmy than would having his mother pay cash from her assistance check. I am quite sure that because of the loving and caring way that this large corporation treated a young, poor, delinquent, Jimmy will not participate in any activity like this again! I wonder what will happen to Jimmy. I wonder if the impact Robert made on his life is strong enough to encourage him to seek a better way of life for himself.

Robert responded to Jimmy in a way that was consistent with how Jesus taught us to respond. Jesus did not so much seek to condemn sinners as to challenge them to recognize their sin and then to "go and sin no more." As VORP volunteers we have an opportunity to see the other side of the belligerent, irresponsible, and indifferent behavior of some offenders. We have an opportunity to help offenders experience caring through our patience, reassurance, and consistency. Further punishment of Jimmy at this point would only have reinforced his negative view of himself. Instead, this turned out to be an exceptional story of one victim's positive response to build him up, rather than tear him down.

Thanks Michael!!

More volunteers are needed now!! The opportunity is great and I believe the resources are available. We have over 350 churches in Fresno and if each one just provided one volunteer who would work with one case per month, we could expand our service to meet the need both in juvenile and adult cases.

Our next mediator training sessions are Nov. 6 and 13. Each training consists of the two sessions, 6-10 pm each evening and one case experience or as much on-the-job training as needed.

Our other concern is finances. The good news is that we are doing better than last year, in fact, we are doing better than we have ever done in the history of Fresno VORP. The bad news is that this means that we are not as far behind. Last month we didn't receive enough to cover expenses. As contributors, you are making possible the kind of story above. If you have been considering making a donation but have been putting it off, this would be a good time to do it!!

Shalom
Ron Claassen

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