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## Victim Offender Reconciliation Program

VORP of the Central Valley, Inc. News  
March 1990

Preparation for working on any conflict is very important. In VORP we prepare ourselves as mediators and help the individuals we will be working with to prepare themselves. In the Bible the important relevant ideas are love (agape) and forgiveness. Love is the preparation which forms the foundation on which forgiveness can happen. Forgiveness is the process leading to reconciliation. Love (agape) is a decision and commitment to care, whether or not the other reciprocates. Sometimes we write this idea off because we think it's not possible, it's too hard, or it's not the way we do things in our society. It's much more common to think that if that's the way they treat me then I will treat them the same (or maybe a little worse). This leads to resolving most conflicts with distance and/or domination (physical or psychological) rather than reconciliation.

"An unconditional commitment to be constructive whether or not they reciprocate" is the way this preparation is stated in Getting Together: Building a Relationship that Gets to Yes by Fisher and Brown from the Harvard Negotiating Project. They are recommending that this constructive commitment in families, organizations, businesses, churches, communities, nations, and in international relations will lead to better resolutions of conflicts.

In preparation for bringing the victim and offender together VORP mediators ask both if they can commit themselves to being constructive and trying to make things as right as possible between them. Their natural question is "How about the other one? Are they going to be constructive?" The mediator helps each party decide their own intention and assures them that they will not bring them together unless they are both committed to this idea. It doesn't mean that there will be no disagreements or intense and negative feelings expressed. It does mean that these will be used to help clarify the problem so that a good resolution can be found. I recommend that our mediators then verify this commitment as a part of the opening of the meeting, giving each individual a chance to remind themselves of this constructive commitment and giving each of them a chance to see that the other has made a similar commitment. I would recommend that all of us do this each time we try to work on a conflict whether between spouses, in committees, at work or wherever. It gives us something to remember and provides hope when the feelings are down and resolution seems distant.

Our story this month is from Elaine Enns. She came to VORP through the Mennonite Voluntary Service Program. She is from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. She is living on a subsistence allowance which is one major part of what makes it possible for VORP to serve so many people in our county on such a low budget. She concentrates her time mostly on case management (assisting our volunteers) but also carries a significant case load. The story is from a letter which she wrote home to let her parents know what she was doing here in Fresno. The names and some details have been changed to protect the identities of the victim and offender.

Dear Mom and Dad

Life for me here in Fresno is fast and furious. I've got 20 minutes so I'll give you a quick run down.

Well, I just completed my first case and what an incredible experience that was!! It looked like a fairly simple case, two boys (Carlos and Eddie ages 11 & 13) had thrown rocks at a HUGE picture window and smashed it... I could probably deal with this (I thought).

Ah...the first call...that's a tough one. I finally built up enough courage to call and they hung up because they didn't speak English. After several attempts at calling and getting nowhere I decided to make a house visit.

I found the apartment. Carlos and Eddie are beautiful boys. They told me their story. Their mother said that she keeps them in (its a tiny one room apartment) as much as possible because she doesn't want them to get in any trouble. Then one evening they were out and threw rocks at a house because they wanted a thrill. They now feel awful about what happened and of course my heart is breaking, the kids and mother are great people. They really care and are ready to be as constructive as they can.

I talked to the victim several times on the phone. At the beginning of each phone conversation he (Charles - the victim) was very angry but by the end of the conversation he seemed to be ready to work in a constructive way.

So it came to the day of our joint meeting. I got to Charles' house about 10 minutes early. Thank goodness!! Carlos, Eddie and Mom were also early. As we approached Charles' door he yelled out and began swearing at the boys. I couldn't get a word in so (being the calm, cool, collected trained mediator that I am - BA HA!!) I got mom and the boys to start walking away with me. (In training we are told if we are not all prepared to be constructive, we don't meet.) I was upset and had a huge lump in my throat, Carlos was crying and mom's pride was gone. It seemed like an incredible mess. What happened then was more incredible!! Charles yelled out for us to stop. I didn't know whether we should stop but mom and the boys wanted to. Charles apologized!! (Perhaps he remembered his constructive intentions.)

We talked about what had happened. The boys told what they had done. Charles explained how the incident had TERRIFIED him and his wife and how he wanted some assurance that it wouldn't happen again. The boys said that they were really sorry and assured him they wouldn't do it again. We talked about what it cost to repair the damage and to my amazement Charles said he wanted to cut the charges in half (I have no idea how that happened.) The agreement was written and signed. By this time everybody was smiling and shaking hands and they parted in a very positive way. An amazing thing had just happened I don't really know exactly how or why it happened the way it did. VORP experience seems to be saying that people need a chance to discuss what happened and how it felt while the right people listen. People need to be heard and understood and then make agreements to make it as right as possible and have an assurance that the future will be different. It sounds too simple for the amazing outcome.

It's absolutely gorgeous here in Fresno. It's warm!! I hope everything is well with you. I miss you like mad. Take Care!! I love you!!

Love Elaine

Thanks for sharing this letter with us Elaine!!

According to our Court/Probation officials, there are approximately 2,000 appropriate cases involving Juvenile Offenders and they would make the referrals if we had enough mediators to handle them. Our next VORP mediator training will be April 23 and 30, 6-10 each evening. Call to Register.

Thanks for your contributions! We did better in February but still didn't receive enough to cover all of the expenses. If you support what Elaine was able to help happen, please consider a contribution if you are not already giving.

I hope to see you at our VORP Gathering. Please join in the VORP Celebration. Our speaker, Howard Zehr, is one of the founders of VORP and a leader in articulating the vision of RESTORATIVE JUSTICE.

DATE: March 15, 1990 TIME: 6:30 - 9:30pm

LOCATION: 2529 Willow Ave, College Community MB Church

POTLUCK MEAL: A-M, Main Dish and Rolls; N-Z Salad & Dessert

Shalom

Ron Claassen