

VORP Honored By The U.S. Department Of Justice

VORP was honored recently when I was one of eight people asked to write a white paper for the Chief Administrator of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, an office of the U.S. Department of Justice. We were all honored because VORP is the reason I was asked. My area of focus was prevention and diversion and I was invited to be bold about suggesting a plan based on the Restorative Justice principles that guide VORP.

This interest, even from high places, didn't happen instantly. In 1982, one of the first persons I contacted about possibly helping to support VORP financially refused me saying that he didn't want to put money down another dark hole. I also remember well one early presentation when the response to the idea that victims and offenders could meet and "make things right between them" was followed by a ridiculing laugh. Well, thanks to many of you being willing to give your time, integrity, finances, and expertise over the last 9 years, VORP, as little as it is, has been recognized as making a significant contribution. Restorative Justice, confession, repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation and restoration offer hope.

As Howard Zehr in his book CHANGING LENSES has pointed out, focusing on the "violation of law" rather than on the "violation of the victim" distracts from the real meaning of the offense. It leaves victims out of the process and angry and frightened about the future. It means coercive power is used to punish, generally incarcerate, the guilty offender. It offers only short term safety and in many cases tends to escalate the conflict rather than resolving it.

What we are learning is that many offenders will accept responsibility to make things right when they are valued as fellow citizens, invited to recognize the injustice, and given opportunity to participate fully in both the benefits (we have a long way to go here) and responsibilities of our society. Victims are usually willing to cooperate in a process intended to restore both when the offender is willing to accept responsibility.

God's desire for the world is that we would live in shalom (justice and peace between all people and with God). Each time a conflict is resolved in a cooperative way the hate and violence in our world is reduced a little. Fresno County Criminal Justice Officials estimate that 4,000 cases each year would be appropriate to be invited into the VORP process. All that would be required is for each church to provide one volunteer to work with one case per month.

Cooperative resolution of a crime incident, long term safety, and shalom cannot be forced but invitations can be offered. Without someone making the invitation it almost certainly won't happen.

An Accusation Ends With a Handshake

Pete Johnston, a former corrections officer at a prison, is a member of the Bethany Church and a trained VORP mediator. Following is a summary of a case he recently completed. Some names and details have been changed to protect the identities.

Oscar, 16, used willful and unlawful force and violence upon the person of Vince, also 16. That's a battery and a violation of California Penal Code 242. There was no doubt about it as it took place where there were a crowd of witnesses.

When he denied it, he was told "Vince said he saw you."

Vince recalls the incident began when Oscar informed him three other students had accused Oscar of stealing hubcaps. When he denied it, he was told "Vince said he saw you." According to Vince, even though he tried to explain to Oscar he had said nothing of the kind, the incident concluded with Oscar hitting him in the eye.

Oscar admits hitting Vince and his description of the incident is essentially the same with the added comment that he didn't believe Vince because it was the word of three students against one.

VORP Relies Entirely On Your Financial Contributions

Last month we were \$400 short. It was the first time this year which is good but in addition to paying the current bills, we need to make this amount. If you are a regular contributor, thanks!! If you haven't yet given, try it this month and see how good it feels to support restoration and reconciliation.

The injury was sufficient to take him to an emergency room for examination where the attending physician insisted a police report be filed. His mother was called and she had to take time off from work to pick him up.

I first met with Oscar and his uncle Owen. They already understood the program and were eager to participate. They wanted to do what was necessary to make things right.

She said "Death is the equalizer, we all end up in the ground, then we are all equal."

After leaving Oscar's house, I drove to Vince's house and met him and his mother Virginia. After answering their questions about the purpose and

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process of the meeting, Virginia insisted that she did not want restitution for her half day of lost pay. What she wanted was a chance for reconciliation. Vince agreed. We set up a joint meeting in a room at a local church.

The night of the meeting Vince and Virginia arrived early. I greeted them and showed them into the meeting room. After 15 minutes of waiting I asked them what they would like to do. We decided to wait 5 more minutes but after that passed, we agreed to leave. We also decided that I would contact Oscar and would try it again if they had a good reason for missing this meeting.

When I arrived home Owen and Oscar had called twice because they had lost the directions to the meeting. They wanted to try again and I told them I would check with Virginia and Vince but that I thought it would probably work. I said I would bring a map by their home.

Saturday I drove to their home (no home telephone) to give them a map. When I was ready to leave Oscar's grandmother wanted to know if Oscar was being discriminated against because they came from another country. We talk about the injustice of discrimination and prejudice. She said "Death is the equalizer, we all end up in the ground, then we are all equal." I agreed with her in part but replied that a hole is not the end God intended for us but that Christ's resurrection insures more.

She said she was interested in hearing more. So Oscar, Owen, and Grandma and I sat on the porch and I shared my faith with them.

When it was time for the joint meeting, Oscar and Owen arrived first and soon Vince and Virginia arrived.

As they told about the incident Oscar told how he felt now; he told Vince he was sorry. Virginia affirmed him by saying "it takes a man to do that."

We finished making our agreements and writing them on the contract form. As they signed the agreement it was clear that they both meant it when they included that this would never happen between them again.

During the closing discussion we talked about using ways other than fists to solve our conflicts. In spite of their full recognition of the confusion that started this conflict and their gratitude for the resolution and reconciliation, one of the adults said "but sometimes you have to use your fists." We all looked at each other, acknowledging the inconsistency and the strong pressure to think in those terms.

Oscar and Vince shook hands as they left.

Thanks Pete!

The next VORP mediator training is November 12 and 19.

There are many Vince's and Oscar's who don't have an opportunity to end their conflict shaking hands because there are not enough mediators available. Bring a friend, get trained, and "VORP" together. Call Elaine or Mark to make your reservations. If your church would like to host a future training, call Elaine or Mark at 291-1120.

Shalom,

Ron Claassen



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