

## TEN YEAR ANNIVERSARY FOR VORP IN FRESNO COUNTY

Larry Robinson referred the first VORP case Fresno County in February of 1983 (See VORP story below) from the Clovis Police Probation Team. After observing the initial five experimental cases Joe Walden, Chief of Fresno County Juvenile Probation, said they liked what they were seeing and wanted VORP to continue. VORP received 85 referrals by February of 1984. I worked with the first cases. In the summer of 1983 the first volunteer mediators received on-the-job training and worked with their first cases. The first four volunteers mediators were Dave Dupuis, Scott Stewart, Leon Isaac, and Tim Petty. Since then 497 volunteer mediators have received training and VORP has worked with 3,126 cases. In addition we have had a part in the development of VORP in 10 other counties in California.

At the December meeting of the Board of Directors, Mr. James Rowland, former director of the California Department of Corrections and current volunteer VORP consultant, presented a series of recommendations developed by a group of community leaders he convened. The task of this group was to look at the current needs in the community and make recommendations to VORP to provide direction as VORP starts its second decade of service. Following are three of their eight recommendations:

1. Continue to expand the juvenile VORP program.
2. **Start a pilot adult VORP program by summer 1993.**
3. Provide leadership in the churches and community advocating the principles and values of restorative justice.

The next several newsletters will focus more on the recommendations. In this edition we will look back, reminisce, and celebrate some of our history.

## Foolishness Or Faithfulness? VORP Sounded Like A Good Idea

The first VORP in the USA developed in Elkhart, IN in the mid to late seventies. I became acquainted with VORP while attending Seminary in Elkhart from 1978-81. Howard Zehr and Earl Sears, family friends from Church, were providing leadership to the Elkhart VORP. It sounded to me like a great idea but I had other plans. When I returned to Fresno in 1981 I talked with a few people about VORP because it seemed like it would be good to have a VORP in Fresno. But there didn't seem to be much interest until Russ Templeton, who was then director of Christian Conciliation Services, worked with a case from the criminal justice system and found that he lacked a good structure. Soon after that he met Howard Zehr at a conference in Wheaton, IL, and again heard about VORP. When he returned he asked me if VORP was the program I had been talking about and suggested that we convene a few people to discuss the idea of VORP in Fresno. Those attending the first meetings were:

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ation Services), Ron Claassen (interim pastor - Mennonite Community Church). In the summer of 1982, after about 6 monthly meetings to discuss various alternatives, sitting in a meeting room in the basement of the courthouse, this group decided it would be good to put some effort into introducing VORP in Fresno County. Since I had interest and had seen VORP in Elkhart, I was asked by the group to provide leadership.

In the fall of 1982 Howard Zehr visited us and met with our Juvenile Probation chief, Joe Walden, and several supervisors. At that meeting we agreed to start with 5 experimental cases and then evaluate. Alternative Sentencing agreed to serve as an umbrella organization for VORP for a year to see if it

was a viable program. In the months after that Roxanne, my wife, and I worked together part-time on developing a case management system and getting an office set up. College Community Church, Mennonite Brethren, agreed to give us space. A telephone answering machine and a manual typewriter were donated. Eastside Stationers donated some file boxes, cards, file folders, etc. When I talked to Don and Willard Neufeld at Pacific Printing about the need for a brochure they said that we also needed a logo, stationery, and business cards which they developed and donated. However, not all experiences were so encouraging. The first person I talked to about donating cash said that he didn't think so, "it would probably be throwing money down a dark hole." This was the first of many times during the last ten years that Roxanne and I questioned if working with this VORP idea was foolishness or faithfulness.

The September 9, 1983 minutes say "No movement yet on incorporation - financial instability." Alternative Sentencing, now directed by Mary (Banuelos) Stegall continued to encourage us and extended our time. April 25, 1984 minutes say we agreed on our bylaws. Those who attended this meeting were: Dave Purvis, Duane Ruth-Heffelbower, Margaret Hudson, Steve Nilmeier, Doug Lanier, Ken Quenzer, Buck Levis, Richard Unruh, Mary Stegall, Gail Boldt, and Ron Claassen. Duane Ruth-Heffelbower donated his time and talents to complete our bylaws and tax exempt, not-for-profit incorporation. Some of the critical early decisions that shaped our future were: a. VORP's purpose is reconciliation and our motivation and guide is the Bible, b. Consensus Decision Making. While all were not sure if it would work, all agreed that due to the "conciliatory and Christian nature of VORP, it is appropriate to try this form of decision making [consensus]." (When it was brought up if one could leave the room and abstain in order to allow consensus, we decided that we needed the wisdom of that person but would allow someone to indicate that it was not their preference. However, until "we can support the decision and work to implement it,"

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we are not ready to make a decision. When a decision is made we hope to be able to say as in Acts 15, "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." c. each board member will contribute financially, and our primary sources of funding for our general program will be sources that encourage reconciliation. d. all board members will be persons who can support the purpose and Church base of VORP. e. we will endeavor to grow to serve all victims and offenders who are willing starting with juvenile offenders.

To maximize VORP resources, rather than increase our paid time, Roxanne and I continued part-time and voluntary service program young people came on board full-time as case workers and case managers.

Gail Boldt and Greg Stobbe were the first to serve Fresno VORP through Mennonite voluntary service programs (they offer qualified and highly motivated

volunteers, 1-2 years, at subsistence cost to innovative Christian service programs). Others who have served Fresno VORP through voluntary service programs are: Christine Slonetsky, Larry Willms, Gretchen Schmidt Reimer, Todd Hofer, Shannon Jost Janzen, Mark Allen, Rudy Dyck, Elaine Enns, Beth Holck, Mark Bakker, Linda Olthoff, and Barbara Toews. Other shorter term office volunteers were John Hudson, Sue Ewert, Vicki Penner, Jerry Reimer, and Lachelle Hannickel.

I'm happy to report that many individuals who became aware of the financial needs of VORP chose to see it as a "beacon of light" rather than a "dark hole." There has been an increasing number of individuals who have voluntarily and generously contributed to sustain VORP financially. Some individuals have contributed a regular amount from VORPs beginning. VORP would not exist without these people. In addition to these visionary individuals, twenty-two churches are now committed to VORP as Sustaining Friends.

## First Fresno County VORP Case: Stolen Bicycle

The bicycle was returned to the victim but the referring officer did not know if it had been damaged. A visit with the victim made it clear that there was significant damage, and part of it was the bicycle but a bigger part was the sense of violation and injustice experienced by both the boy whose bicycle was stolen and his mother. They knew the offenders and doubted if they would be willing to take responsibility.

A visit with Danny (offender) and his mother, and several other family members, made it clear that they knew it was wrong to have stolen the bicycle and they were willing to work at "making things right."

A call back to the victim and his mother confirmed that they were also willing to work at "making things right."

We met at the College Community Church where our office was located. We started with Danny telling what happened. "I was with a friend and we knew that Danny had a new bike and we just went in the backyard and took it. We stripped a lot of the extra parts off hoping it wouldn't be recognized. But, we got caught."

Danny's mother asked if she could speak. She said, "First, you didn't just come into the backyard, you took the bicycle from right up against our patio door. That is just about like entering our home. I was home alone with our children (7) that night and if I would have heard you it scares me to think what I might have done. You don't seem like a bad guy now but I wouldn't have known that then. Did you know that each of our children gets just one bicycle and my son looked for months to pick out just the right one and now, just a few months after Christmas, it doesn't look at all like the bike he got. What's more, I went out and got an extra job, getting up early to deliver papers, in order to help purchase the bike. It sure doesn't seem fair." Danny listened carefully and recognized the injustice.

We looked at an estimate of what it would cost to have it repaired to new condition. Danny and his mother were shocked but agreed it was fair. He asked to talk with his mother alone. When they returned he announced that they didn't have much money but they thought they could borrow it from an uncle so that Danny could get the bike repaired as soon as possible. Then Danny would work for his uncle to repay him. They suggested that they bring it to the office the following Wednesday.

We then talked about the relationship between the boys at school. Danny volunteered that he would not cause any problems and said that he would tell his friends to back off if any of them cause trouble. They both thought they could get along.

The meeting ended with handshakes and the victim's mother commenting on her initial concern about meeting in a church but on reflection thinking that a church was certainly an appropriate place for them to make things right between them. They all agreed.

I was excited. The process worked as it was supposed to. On the following Wednesday Danny brought the money in. A few weeks later Joe Walden at the Probation Office said that what really impressed him about the case was that Danny and his mother knew, because of their poor economic situation and having brothers who had been in the system before, that they could probably have gotten around paying the restitution. But in this case they decided to pay. He said, I hope that you will take more cases.