

FRESNO COUNTY BAR ASSOCIATION GIVES LIBERTY BELL AWARD TO VORP



Peggy Liggett, Paul Hokokian; Law Day Chairs, Ron Claassen, Elaine Enns, Barb Toews, Linda Olthoff; VORP staff.

On behalf of all of you who have contributed to VORP (volunteer mediators, financial contributors, staff members, those who provide prayer support and personal encouragement for someone involved in VORP, and the many other individuals have provided support and encouragement in many other ways), I accepted a beautiful plaque at the Law Day Luncheon attended by more than 100 attorneys and judges. It now hangs in the VORP office for all of you to see. Please stop by one day to see it and celebrate with us.

VORP EXPERIENCE CHANGES OUTLOOK AND PROVIDES HOPE

Last week my son and I played a round of golf. A person joined us who we didn't know. It turned out he was a junior high school teacher. Play was slow. As we strolled along he began talking about how discouraged he was in his job and couldn't wait to retire at the end of this year. As he talked his voice became more and more angry. He finally said that he thought that all kids who violate the rules of society like stealing someones property, vandalizing someone property, assault, rape, carrying a gun, etc. should be exterminated. Later he remembered some good teaching memories but his outlook remained very pessimistic.

I shared this story with Ed Barton, a VORP volunteer mediator who teaches high school and is also near retirement. He said, "If I hadn't been taking VORP cases over the last 7 years and been exposed to the ideas of Restorative Justice, I would be saying the same thing he told you." "I realize that I had heard the ideas of restoration in the Bible many times but VORP made the scripture real for me."

Gal 6:1 says "when one is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness." What a contrast. Rather than exterminate, restore.

Restoration doesn't mean ignoring the bad behavior or saying that it is OK or that it doesn't matter. Rather, restoration happens when offenders take responsibility for their offense by recognizing the violation, doing something to make things as right as possible, and making a commitment to do things different in the future. The beautiful part is that taking responsibility like this not only restores the offender, it also restores the victim. When offenders are offered this option many are willing. Ed has seen this happen over and over and has internalized a shift in thinking, a change in paradigm. When an offender is caught, rather than immediately thinking that he should be punished, he now thinks there are needs and obligations that have been created by the offense. If the offender is willing to assume responsibility, that would be the best option. Restorative Justice benefits victim, offender, and the community.

YOUNG GRAFFITI OFFENDER LEARNS WHAT THE "R" IN VORP MEANS

Our story this month is from Chuck Deckert. Chuck is from South Dakota and has been studying at Fresno Pacific College. In fact, he came to Fresno Pacific College because he wanted a significant part of his education to be working with our VORP program. In addition to his studies this last semester, he volunteered 20 hours per week working with VORP cases and assisting in follow-up. Some names and details have been changed to protect identity.

As we were about to begin the joint meeting, Pete (the principal) asked Jim to remove his cap. It had writing on it and Pete construed it to be a gang symbol.

I always pray in preparation for a joint meeting and especially this time since I expected some tension. I was concerned about the attitude of these two young offenders (13 and 14 years old) who had been caught writing graffiti on Pete's elementary school. When I explained the VORP process to Jim, Billy, and their mothers, I found their mothers very supportive of VORP. But the attitude of Jim and Billy gave me the impression that they were being coerced

into cooperation by their mothers, and they might be difficult to work with.

In a prior conversation with Pete, he expressed his concern about the attitudes of these offenders. He was willing to meet but he would not want them working off restitution on his school campus because he just didn't want them around.

But my concerns proved unnecessary as Jim and Billy spoke openly about what they had done. Pete wanted to know what they had written, what their nicknames were, and where on the building they had written (other graffiti had also been written). Pete pulled some pictures of graffiti from a file and Jim and Billy looked at these pictures, trying to identify their graffiti. Pete talked briefly about his own experience with a nickname. Jim and Billy listened while Pete told them how the younger children especially, were frightened by graffiti and the fear of gangs. Then he explained how the school needed a paint job badly, but it couldn't be done because the paint crews were frequently occupied painting over graffiti.

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(Story continued from front page)

When I asked Jim and Billy to summarize, they clearly repeated the two major impacts that graffiti was having on Pete's school.

When I asked Pete what he believed fair restitution would be, he replied: "Well, for it not to happen again." As they discussed the costs Pete suggested that each boy should be responsible for about twenty dollars restitution. The others thought that was fair. Jim's mother asked if the boys could work it off. Pete expressed his satisfaction concerning the attitude of responsibility that Jim and Billy had taken, but he explained that his staff would not have time to supervise the boys. When Jim's mother offered to supervise Jim and Billy if they could work for the school, Pete was happy with the offer.

Pete said that he would be willing to ask for less labor if Jim and Billy would be willing to speak to several third and fourth grade classes about the need to stop doing graffiti. Both boys immediately agreed to Pete's offer. Furthermore, both boys assured Pete that their graffiti writing was over.

I was amazed at the positive attitudes Jim and Billy had chosen to take. As I watched Pete shake hands with Jim, Billy, and their mothers, I knew that God had done something here. As we were finishing up the meeting, Pete asked me, "What does the R in VORP stand for?" "Reconciliation," I replied.

Thanks Chuck!

IMPROVE YOUR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT SKILLS AND SERVE YOUR COMMUNITY AT THE SAME TIME

More mediators are needed. VORP mediation skills improve relationships at home or work or wherever applied. New volunteers work with experienced mediators on their first case(s). Bring a friend and work as a team. Two nine hour VORP mediation training sessions are scheduled: Session 1 - July 1, 8, & 15 (6:30 - 9:30) and Session 2 - July 9 (6:30 - 9:30) and July 10 (8:30 - 3:30). For those who work with VORP cases the only fee is the \$15 materials fee. For others the fee is \$75. Call Linda or Barbara at 291-1120 for details. Pre-registration required. Sessions limited to 25 participants.

Your serious consideration is needed. VORP relies entirely on individual and church contributions. The small reserve that carried over from the end of the year is gone. The equivalent of 20 new donors at \$20 per

WANTED!

month is needed to maintain the current level of activity. This is needed in addition to the many faithful who regularly contribute to make VORP possible. No amount

is too small! WITHOUT YOUR INVESTMENT, STORIES LIKE THESE WOULDN'T HAPPEN. All contributions are tax deductible. Financial reports are available.

Shalom

Ron Claassen, Director

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Victim Offender Reconciliation Program