

WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY EXISTS TO CREATE NEW SYSTEM

In several recent meetings with high level officials I have been hearing them say things with a new focus and a new intensity: "We know that the idea of 'get tough' and 'lock-em-up' is not solving our crime problem." "Our present system is very costly and yet not even addressing many of the crimes considered 'not serious' (as judged by someone who is not the victim)." "What we are doing with our offenders is not causing them to want to be more cooperative with society." "Victims are angry." "We need a new system."

I believe there is a window of opportunity now to create a new system. Some of the common interests I am hearing from victims, offenders, criminal justice officials, concerns citizens are listed below.

(I would appreciate your response. Do you share these concerns?)

To deal with the offense and reduce its long term negative impact victims need:

1. a. Opportunity to describe their experience and its impact. b. Recognition, by a community that cares and if possible by the offender, that they have been violated. c. Answers to as many of their questions as possible.
2. Opportunity to describe needs created by the offense and involvement in deciding what could be done to address the needs and "make things as right as possible."
3. a. A more safe and secure future (preferably a voluntary commitment from the offender). b. Where possible, to see something positive come from the bad experience.

To learn from the offense and be accepted as a contributing member of society offenders need to:

1. Recognize the violation/injustice and the needs and obligations created by the offense.
2. Assume responsibility to make things "as right as possible" with the victim(s) (primary plus secondary victims including the community, their family, etc.).
3. Make the necessary changes to become a cooperative, constructive, and productive member of society (may include dealing with their own victimization, addictions, employment, living conditions, etc.).

Since not all offenders or victims would be cooperative there would need to be a back-up. But a restorative justice system would have these (or a modified set) objectives as their first priority.

GRAFFITI ARTIST REPAIRS

■ Our VORP story from Linda Olthoff demonstrates many of the above concerns. Linda is serving with Fresno VORP as a volunteer under the sponsorship of Mennonite Voluntary Service. She is from South Holland, IL which is near Chicago. In addition to case work she is responsible for following up with offenders and victims on the agreements made. Her approach is respectful of all parties and the results are that 90% are completed. Some names and details have been changed to protect identities.

Graffiti has become a big problem in Fresno, causing a lot of anger and frustration for Fresno residents. It seems to be an insurmountable problem, but VORP has had the chance to work with some of these types of cases and has had some success. One of these cases involved two brothers that had climbed up on a billboard sign and painted their names on it. When I visited the boys they both admitted to the offense and along with their parents agreed they needed to take responsibility for the damage they had caused. Of course they were nervous about meeting the victim, thinking he might try to get more restitution out of it than they owed or could afford. They also figured they were going to take some real heat from this victim who, they acknowledged, had a right to be very angry with them. I assured them that the process would be fair and I would be there to help maintain a constructive atmosphere.

I then went to see the victim and after meeting with him I realized I may have had my own misconceptions about what I should expect. I did not realize the seriousness of the victimization when I first went to see John. I thought because John owned an advertising business that this would not be a big problem for him, and he could probably afford to cover the damages. However, I learned that John had been victimized over and over again. His child had been killed by a drunk driver, his car had been broken into, and now his business was being hurt by graffiti "artists". Along with graffiti

cleanup he also had to worry about liability for someone if they fell from one of his signs. He had put a lot of money into finding ways to prevent kids from climbing on his property. The graffiti incident was minor compared to some of the previous victimizations John has experienced. But it was one more incident, out of his control, that he had to deal with. He was frustrated by the senselessness of it all. Although he wasn't too excited about it, he agreed to meet with these kids.

It took a couple of weeks to arrange a meeting. The younger brother was unable to attend, but Tom, the older one made it. Both sides arrived late which added slightly to the anxiety. There seemed to be quite a bit of tension in the room as the meeting began. John had a lot to say to Tom (and rightly so), and was immediately ready to begin to let him know the problems he had caused. However, as we had agreed, we started the meeting by first reviewing the process that the meeting would follow. After discussing the preliminaries, I asked Tom to tell us his story. He said that he and his brother climbed the sign one night and painted it. He really had no good reason for doing the graffiti, except that he thought it would be fun. He went on to state his remorse. John was a little more willing to listen to Tom after hearing him apologize. After Tom finished, John and his wife were invited to describe their experiences, the impact of the offense, and to ask any questions they might have.

(Continued on back page)

(Graffiti story - continued from front page)

They told Tom about their other victimizations and shared a lot of the pain that they had gone through because others went out to have fun. They pointed out that sometimes someone's fun can lead to someone else's pain. This had an impact on Tom and after hearing John's story, he really wanted to take responsibility for what he had done and wanted to know how he could make it up to them. John's wife, asked Tom how they could prevent others from destroying their property. Tom said that the only thing that really affected him was to come and talk to the victim, put a face to the sign he had destroyed, and hear that they were real people with real problems. He stated that up until that point he just thought he was painting some sign. He did not realize that there were people behind the sign that were strongly effected by his actions.

By the end of the meeting, a lot of positive dialogue had taken place and stereotypes had been broken down. The

victim later told me that he really did not want to come and meet this kid - he figured he was just some "punk" who had no regard for the property of others. However, he found a person that felt genuine remorse, and wanted to make things right. Even after paying restitution Tom asked what else he could possibly do to make it up to the victim. Though there was nothing at the time, John has since called Tom and has hired him to do work at his house. Perhaps he will even be doing some painting.

Though there was anxiety and animosity before the meeting, the parties left in a friendly manner, both saying how they appreciated the chance to get together and get things worked out and brought to a closure. Though reconciliation doesn't always happen immediately at the initial meeting, I believe I witnessed it that night.

Thanks Linda!!

OUR COMMUNITY NEEDS YOU!

Our community needs more people trained to do what Linda did. VORP training sessions provide leadership skills, both assertive and supportive, to help parties constructively deal with an injustice or other very negative experience between them. Fall training events are Sept 16, 23, 30 (6:30 - 9:30pm); Oct 25, Nov 1 & 8 (6:30 - 9:30pm); Nov 12 (6:30 - 9:30) and Nov 13 (8:30 - 3:30). Cost is \$15 for those who work with VORP cases, \$75 for others. All are welcome. Pre-registration is required. Number of participants is limited.

FINANCIAL SITUATION IS CRITICAL!

Finances are critical. Our case load has increased to more than 40 cases per month, but financial income has not met expenses for the last three months. It is critical that you contribute if you want to see these kind of stories continue and multiply in number. Please feel free to request a financial statement. You will see that your money is used wisely and efficiently. If everyone contributes a little, it doesn't have to be a big burden for anyone. Please don't delay. Contribute now.

Shalom

Ron Claassen, Director

(c) 1993 Claassen. Any portion of this newsletter may be reprinted. Please acknowledge source and send us a copy of the reprint.



2529 Willow Avenue • Clovis, California 93612 • (209) 291-1120

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage Paid
Clovis, Ca. 93612
Permit #376

Victim Offender Reconciliation Program