

# True accountability leads toward reconciliation

by Ron Claassen

I believe that *true accountability* will always lead toward *reconciliation*. True accountability includes assuming responsibility, making things as right as possible, and changing behavior patterns to prevent the injustice from happening again.

The primary goal of VORP is reconciliation and restoration of those persons and relationships damaged by crime. A secondary goal is to provide a constructive and cooperative response option available to police, probation, and the courts.

Reconciliation is our primary goal because crime is primarily a violation of individuals and relationships, and secondarily a violation of a law. It is that primary violation, the violation of persons and relationships, that VORP focuses on. When we say reconciliation is our goal, we recognize that reconciliation cannot ever be forced. We also believe that the primary reasons reconciliation happens so infrequently are: (1) individuals lack the skills and strategies to lead an effective reconciliation process; (2) society lacks structures designed to encourage and assist with a reconciliation process; (3) individuals hesitate to invite people in damaged relationships to consider reconciliation; and (4) we believe that if one violates a law they must be punished (made to experience pain as opposed to being required to be responsible and accountable).

VORP trains volunteer mediators to invite, and for those who are interested and willing, to assist victims and offenders (and their mini-communi-

ties) in pursuing a reconciliation process. The process starts by confirming that all parties want to search for a constructive resolution and are willing to be responsible and accountable for their actions. (Approximately 80 percent of all victims and offenders asked say they would like to pursue this option.) If they all wish to proceed, the mediator helps them to recognize the injustice, to explore and decide on how to restore equity, and to make agreements and personal commitments regarding the future which are restorative for the

individuals and their relationship. The agreements are written and signed because the key to building trust in a damaged relationship is the willingness of the parties to make agreements and then to be accountable for keeping their agreements. The VORP Peacemaking Model described above is a process to help victims and offenders make agreements. VORP continues to stay involved to assist in the follow-up and accountability stage, and a reconciliation ends

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## Extraordinary encounter...

# Victim meets offender in stolen property case

by Lucile Wheaton  
with Ron Claassen

*Our story this month is from Lucile Wheaton who was initially trained as a VORP mediator in November 1993. Lucile, now retired, was employed many years as a public defender.*

*Names and some details have been changed to protect identities.*

This meeting between the victim and the offender was the most extraordinary encounter I have ever witnessed.

The offender, Jerry, denied the essence of the crime, (knowingly receiving stolen property) to which he had plead guilty, yet paradoxically accepted full responsibility for his mistakes in judgment.

At the end of the meeting the victim, Ken, told him, "You sometimes wonder when you buy a used car from an individual if it's been stolen. It's a matter of judgment. It's easy to make a mistake. I understand how it happened."

We had a potentially destructive misunderstanding that momentarily shook Jerry, the offender. Jerry thought the \$300 he had been paying at \$50 a month was restitution. He was shocked to find out the \$300 was a court fine, and that restitution still had to be reckoned with. He was near tears when he said, "I felt pretty positive about all this at first. I thought I could really dig myself out of this hole, but things keep getting harder. I thought the restitution was \$700 to \$800 but that the court had reduced it to \$300."

We all sat quietly. Then Jerry recovered and looked straight at Ken, the victim, and said, "Then I apologize to you. I thought you were getting the \$50 a month. I'm sorry." Then he added, "I'm here, because of the court. But I'm here too because I don't want you to hate me. I don't want you to look at me and see a thief. I don't want you to see me as a bad person. I'm trying to do something positive."

Then Ken said to Jerry, "I don't hate you.

Before I came here I was ambiguous. My car had been stolen. In fact, I saw it being taken and couldn't run fast enough to stop it. Do you know what it feels like to watch your car being stolen? I needed that car. I have a family. I had my tool box in it, and I lost my second job that was 15 miles away because I didn't have transportation, but I don't look at you as a bad person."

Jerry recognized Ken's experience and then described how he bought the car and his experiences and the consequences of being arrested. Jerry added, "I spent 16 days in jail, lost my apartment and belongings, and my younger brother who had been living with me, also lost a place to stay. Having a felony on my record has made it hard to find a job."

At the advice of his attorney and before his sentencing, he did several months of volunteer work at the veterans hospital. Jerry said, "I don't really regret the 16 days in jail. It made me examine my life. I had made wrong decisions. I had spent my time smoking pot and partying. Now everything has changed. My life is entirely different. I have cut off all my old friends. I loved working with the vets at the hospital. The hospital became my second home. I am trying to take everything positive that I can from this experience. I figured there were two ways I could look at being locked up. One was that I was in jail and I didn't do it. The other was that I am in jail I'll have time to think about how to get my life back on track. I chose the second. Now I'm going forward and moving up and I know I will never be in jail again. And I am happy to pay you restitution."

We used this comment to move to discussing restitution. Ken told Jerry, "Restitution is very important to me, but I don't want to stress you. I want you to live." Jerry explained he is isolated from his parents, but living temporarily with the mother of a friend and she is flexible about his paying his share of the expenses. Jerry said he

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## CRIME

### A NEW RESPONSE!

#### RESTORATIVE JUSTICE CONFERENCE

FRESNO, CALIFORNIA  
OCTOBER 25-26, 1996

*Come participate in defining the roles of legislation and the church in restorative justice.*

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**CALL 800-909-VORP**

#### YOU CAN START A CHURCH-BASED VORP (VICTIM OFFENDER RECONCILIATION PROGRAM)

#### 1996 TRAINING SEMINARS

Lancaster, PA | Fresno, CA  
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(pre-conference)

[HTTP://WWW.FRESNO.EDU/PACS.HTML](http://www.fresno.edu/pacs.html)

Center for Peacemaking & Conflict Studies  
Fresno Pacific College

# Extraordinary encounter

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enrolled in city college as soon as he was released, taking the same classes as his friend, so he could use his text books. He was ordered to do 30 days of adult offender work and has to pay \$5.00 a day to take part in that. And, he still owes \$160 on the court fine. He makes \$500 a month at his current job and said he intended get a second job as soon as he finishes the work program. Then Ken repeated, "I don't want to stress you." After some thought Ken said, "You were told restitution would be between \$700 and \$800. I could get by on \$500. Now how much can you pay me a month?"

Jerry said he could pay \$50 per month but Ken pressed him. "With the \$50 you are paying to the court that will be 20 percent of your income." Jerry insisted that he could make the payment. Ken cautioned him, "You have to take care of

yourself, too. Do you understand that? You won't be able to take care of me until you do that."

They agreed that the payment is to be \$50 a month due on the seventh day of each month beginning on July 7th. Ken said, "I don't want to stress you. This could be harder than you expect. Call VORP if there is a problem."

Jerry said again, "I'm sorry you haven't been getting paid." He added, "Sorry about your second job, and please tell your wife for me, I am sorry." Then Ken said, "When I came here, I understood my side. I needed to understand your side and now I do. I will write a letter for you when you go back to court." Jerry said, "I'm incredibly lucky, out of all the people out there, that it was your car."

They shook hands and said good-bye.

*Thanks Lucile!!*

*"Blessed are the Peacemakers"*

# Accountability

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with celebration of the progress made.

We define reconciliation as movement along a "Care Continuum" from increasing hostility toward increasing care. We know that those who participate in the VORP process experience significant movement on this continuum (see May 1996 VORP News).

I hope the day will come soon when all criminal offenders will be invited, encouraged, and if they are willing, assisted in becoming truly accountable.

## Urgent Need for VORP Mediators Continues

*Please consider becoming a VORP Mediator.* VORP mediators attend a nine hour training which continues throughout the first case and thereafter as needed. Mediators often work in pairs or with assistance as needed from VORP staff. Cases are assigned and selected based on the mediator's experience and comfort level.

Mediators provide a significant service to the community and report significant improvement in their relationship and leadership skills. For mediators who work with three or more cases, the cost for training is only \$20 (\$100 for those who do not choose to mediate VORP cases).

The dates for the next training events are: September 13 & 14; September 24, October 1 & 8; and November 15 & 16.

## THIRD ANNUAL VORP BENEFIT

### Raffle & Silent Auction

CSUF Banquet Facility at Residence Dining Hall  
Saturday, Sept. 21 • 7-9 PM

◀ *Gourmet Coffee & Specialty Desserts* Σ

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**CALL VORP, 291-1120, FOR BENEFIT & RAFFLE TICKETS**

**Admission: \$15.00 per person (includes refreshments & entertainment)**

**Raffle tickets: \$1.00 each (12 for \$10.00)**

**Raffle prize: Margaret Hudson 'Lion & the Lamb' sculpture valued at \$400.00**

## VORP Relies on Your Contributions!

VORP relies on your contributions! VORP cases would not happen if it were not for you who contribute some of your hard-earned finances.

Your contribution makes it possible for mediators to approach offenders and their families and ask them if they are willing to

accept responsibility for the offense. Your contribution makes it possible for mediators to meet with victims and listen to their frustration and pain as they seek healing. Your contribution makes it possible for mediators to encourage and assist reconciliation between victims and offenders.

Your contributions made it possible for Ken and Jerry to transform their relationship.

***If you haven't yet, you will receive a phone call inviting you to make a financial pledge to VORP. Please say "Yes!"***

***No amount is too small. The need for accountability and reconciliation is great!!***

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