

VORP

NEWS

of the Central Valley, Inc.

December 1996

RECONCILIATION IS GOOD NEWS

by Ron Claassen

The angel said, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today...a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord..."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among people of goodwill."

Christmas is a wonderful reminder that God's vision for our world is that we will live in right relations with each other and with God. This historic announcement to the shepherds was and is good news.

The good news is both judgment and forgiveness. Peace is not possible when injustice is ignored. Jesus says that harming people is wrong—physically, economically or any other way. The good news is that when we

live in ways that don't harm each other we will experience peace. The good news is that when violations (of God and others) do occur, forgiveness is possible.

Forgiveness is not a cheap pronouncement, but a costly recognition of the injustice, restitution to make things as right as possible (remember Zacchaeus), and an accountable plan for the future to not continue or repeat the injustice. The good news is that because of Jesus, there is no restitution due in repairing our relationship with God.

The good news is that this peace—right relations with each other and with God—is for all people. The boundary is extended. Whom I treat with respect and dignity is no longer just my family or my neighbor, but even my enemy—even offenders. The good news is that distance is not the only way to respond to conflict and injustice. Responsible forgiveness as de-

scribed above is an alternative that leads to reconciliation rather than alienation and distance.

VORP is a structure to train and support mediators who volunteer to help victims and offenders work at responsible forgiveness. It rarely happens when left to chance. It happens when VORP mediators are willing to make themselves vulnerable and available to invite victim and offender to consider the idea of trying to "make things right." The VORP mediator never suggests ignoring the injustice or acting as if it doesn't matter. Rather, each is invited to participate in recognizing the injustice and its impact, deciding how to restore equity, and agreeing on accountable future intentions that move beyond the offense and prevent its recurrence.

Victim offender reconciliation happens because many of you contribute financially. Your contributions make it possible to have an organization in place to train and support VORP mediators.

Victim offender reconciliation happens because staff members Laura Fultz, Julius Lockett, Jay Griffith, Elaine Enns, Victoria Buksbazen, Duane Ruth-Heffelbower, and I, together with board members Kay Mathison, Mike Manghera, Dave Kleschold, Carol Fransen, Michael Blue, and I, are working as a team. Some are full time and some part time; some are volunteer and some are paid a modest salary. Together we manage to stretch the dollars that are contributed to train and support the maximum number of volunteers in their efforts. This last year saw an increase from 450 cases to 650.

Victim offender reconciliation happens because criminal justice officials are courageous and willing to make referrals.

Finally, victim offender reconciliation happens because the victim and offender respond to the invitation and allow the spirit of reconciliation to prevail over the desire for avoidance or revenge.

Christmas is a time for celebration. On behalf of our board of directors and staff, I wish you a very meaningful and happy Christmas season—one that reflects the spirit of Jesus, the reason for our celebrations.

Changes of mind lead to changes of heart

by Sarah Watters
with Ron Claassen

Our VORP story this month is from Sarah Watters, a Fresno Pacific College student. Because this was her first case, she worked together with Julius Lockett and Jay Griffith of the VORP staff.

To protect their identities, the names of the victim and offender families have been changed.

Stepping out of the car, it finally struck me. I was going to try to lead these people through the VORP process. How strange. I didn't even know them. They didn't know me. This was my first case, and I was sure glad that a veteran VORP mediator was with me. I was nervous and feeling hesitant, but I knew from the VORP training that reconciliation would never happen unless someone took the initiative.

Julius and I were headed to Brian's house for the individual meeting. Because his family's

telephone had been disconnected, no one knew we were coming. Fortunately, Brian and his mother Julie were there. We introduced ourselves and sat down at their dining room table.

I started by telling Brian the purpose of VORP—for him to make things as right as possible with the other party. I told him that VORP was a community program and not part of the criminal justice system. I told him that participation in VORP was voluntary. I told him about the meeting I'd have with the victim and the joint meeting we would all have where each person would have a chance to tell how they experienced this incident, listen to one another, and then work out an agreement for "making things right."

As I explained the process of the joint meeting, I could see Brian was a little nervous. What else was there to say? I

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VORP relies on your gifts!

THE NEED IS SERIOUS!

Our wish is that each of you would send \$20.

The gift of responsible reconciliation that Brian and Steve gave to each other would not happen without Sarah volunteering her time and without a staff to train, coordinate, and support her. The total cost for training, support, office expense, etc., is approximately \$150 per case.

I wish I could tell you that VORP is in great financial shape, but we aren't. We owe almost \$10,000. Every year since 1983 we have been in an owing position at the beginning of December and in a positive position by the beginning of January.

IF EVERYONE RECEIVING THIS NEWSLETTER WOULD SEND A \$20 GIFT OF RECONCILIATION THIS MONTH, VORP COULD PAY OFF ITS DEBT AND HAVE A GOOD START ON NEXT YEAR. RECONCILIATION IS THE REASON FOR THE JOY OF CHRISTMAS.

Plans are being worked on to accept more cases, but first we must deal with current reality. The only barrier is finances.

Reluctant victim, offender grateful for opportunity to reconcile through VORP

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asked Brian if he would like to do this now that he knew what it involved. He immediately replied that he did not want to go through VORP. I tried to understand his reluctance. He finally said that he didn't know what the other guy would do.

To be honest, I didn't know what to say. Suddenly it dawned on me that this was a case of mandatory restitution. My first thought was to tell him this to put more pressure on him to participate. But I also remembered that I had just told him VORP was a voluntary process. Even though I was discouraged, I didn't want to give up. What if I could say something else—or just keep talking to him so that I might convince him otherwise. I wanted Brian to do this. I didn't want him to turn

down this opportunity to take responsibility and make things right!

Julius, who seemed to sense my frustration, stepped in to address Brian's concerns about what "the other guy" might do and helped Brian consider why he might want to go through the VORP process. As Julius drew upon his knowledge and experience to encourage Brian, I was content to listen and learn. Soon Brian began to see what Julius was saying. After some thought Brian decided he wanted to do this.

I asked Brian to tell us what happened. Brian described what happened and why he took the car. Brian said he saw the car in the alley—the keys in the ignition, the doors unlocked, and no one nearby—so he thought he would take it for a ride and go pick up his friends. That didn't make any sense to me. Did he think it was OK to do this? Brian didn't even seem to think about possible consequences. Wouldn't he be concerned about getting caught? It just amazed me.

When I first called Steve, the victim, he said he didn't want to work with us. He said he didn't need any restitution for his car because he had been reimbursed for most of his losses by his insurance company. Then Julius called and explained to him how VORP works for both the victim and offender. Steve was ultimately persuaded to participate because he thought it might be good for Brian. Steve agreed to have the joint meeting in his office.

Julius could not attend the joint meeting, so another VORP staff member, Jay, took his place. In addition, four observers had come for the meeting. (The observers, who had come from Washington, Texas, and Los Angeles, were participants in a training event designed to help them start VORPs in their communities. Part of the training was to observe an actual case.) Since Brian did not

know about the observers, I waited outside to tell him. When Brian and Julie arrived, I apologized and explained the reason for having the extra people.

Steve's office was filled to capacity. Steve was sitting at his desk, with Brian and his mother Julie on the other side. I was standing at the end of the desk. The observers stood at the other end of the room. Everyone was very attentive.

I began by confirming that both parties chose voluntarily to participate in the meeting. I described the purpose of VORP and asked Steve and Brian to agree to a few groundrules. Next, I explained the process: each would take turns speaking and listening, then we would see if we could agree on restitution and future intentions. I felt I was stumbling as I spoke, and I desired to have Brian and Steve conversing very soon. Finally I asked Brian to start.

Then the meeting seemed to take on a life of its own. Brian told Steve the same thing he had told Julius and me, and then he apologized. Steve asked him a few questions. One I remember was, "What were you planning to do with the car if you hadn't been caught?" Brian replied that he hadn't really made any plans. After they had talked awhile, I asked if they had said all they wanted to say. Steve said he was glad to have the chance to say how much trouble the incident had caused and to ask a few questions. He added that he appreciated talking with Brian.

We then talked about restitution and about the future. What impressed me most about this was there did seem to be a significant level of commitment established by Brian with Steve that he would not steal a car again. I think that getting to know Steve made a big difference.

Blessed are the Peacemakers!

Thanks Sarah!

URGENT NEED CONTINUES FOR VORP MEDIATORS

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

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

The dates for the 1997 training events are: January 21, 28 & February 4; January 24 & 25; March 10, 17 & 24; April 18 & 19; and May 29, June 5 & 12.

Call VORP (291-1120) for information.

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