

VORP

NEWS

of the Central Valley, Inc.

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Why do offenders 'go straight'?

by Ron Claassen

Have you ever wondered what causes a person who is involved in criminal activity to stop?

I interviewed two gang members who had left criminal activity behind. At the time of the interview they were each 18 and were employed. It was their employer who suggested and arranged the interview. Some of their activity that had been a violation of the law included car theft and graffiti.

One thing that struck me was that among their friends, the kind of car theft, for joy riding, they were doing was ratio-

nalized as OK. It was something done for fun. The places that they did graffiti was guided by their code and if it was done only in these places, it was OK.

I asked if they were continuing that activity and they said no. When I asked why, what we discovered after a long conversation, was that now that they had jobs they preferred to buy their fun (cars, movies, etc.). They had decided to stop the illegal activity.

What they told me was confirmed by a research article I recently read in Restorative Justice: International Perspectives, edited by Galaway and Hudson. The article was written by Julie Leibrich.

She interviewed 48 people who had committed multiple offenses and now said they were "going straight."

One of the first things she found was that her initial definition of "going straight" and that of 25 percent of the offenders was not the same. In the interview she found that although all of these offenders described themselves as going straight, 25 percent of them meant that they were being more honest, leading a more responsible life, etc. They said they were "going straight" because their illegal activity was not as serious and not as frequent as before. Most of the remaining 75 percent reported doing less serious and less frequent illegal activity before they stopped all illegal activity. An example of this was a person who had stopped doing burglary but was still doing some drugs occasionally.

Offender 'goes straight' into new job with victim

by Catherine Maye Brown
with Ron Claassen

Our VORP story this month is from Catherine Maye Brown of Westside Seventh Day Adventist Church. Names and some details have been changed to protect identities.

The VORP joint meeting was scheduled on a night that ended up being the worst weather of the winter in Fresno. It was raining very hard, the wind was blowing and it was cold. The offender showed up, but the victim did not. We waited for over an hour and decided to call it quits.

When I had first contacted the offender he was afraid to meet with the

victim. He was afraid the victim would be upset and would try to hurt him. I explained to the offender my job was to make sure he was not placed in a dangerous situation. If I felt he would be placed in a dangerous situation I would never allow the meeting to take place. He had finally agreed and now the victim hadn't shown up.

When I had first contacted the victim, he was not sure he could be constructive with the offender. His store had been burglarized a number of times and he was very angry and frustrated. He was surprised that an offender was actually willing to accept responsibility and face him directly. He finally decided that this might be good for the offender and maybe good for him also. I was surprised and disappointed he hadn't shown up at our scheduled joint meeting.

I called him and a second meeting was scheduled. The offender arrived first and was very nervous. He felt the victim might be even more upset now, not only had his shop been burglarized but now he was being inconvenienced and had to attend this meeting. Then the victim arrived. The victim did not look like he wanted to be there. In fact, he sat with his arms folded until later in the meeting when he began to speak.

The ground rules were reviewed and agreed to by everyone and the meeting started. The offender started by describing his experience. The victim listened. He looked very angry. The offender said that he was in bad company and peer pressure was a major part of the reason he was involved. He also told the victim the truth and said he and his friends were out drinking beer just before the incident happened. The offender and his friends had broken into the victim's shop and had caused a lot of damage before they were caught.

Reasons for going straight

Shame was the most common dissuader mentioned. It was a feeling of personal disgrace, public humiliation, and private remorse. It was a painful and life changing experience when they personally and in the presence of others, including strangers and friends, became aware of the pain they had caused others.

Self respect was the most common persuader mentioned. Something had happened that had caused them to get in touch with their own sense of self worth. One person who had been convicted of several assaults reported a significant relationship and a job as the things that helped him get in touch with his own worth and as the beginning of developing self respect. This self respect lead to respecting others as well.

In all cases, going straight was a personal decision. It was a commitment. It did not just happen. It was a deliberate and conscious decision not to offend again. The main condition for making this decision was having something of value that was too precious to risk losing, including relationships, job, status, and a sense of self worth.

The key to their success was in the degree of the commitment to change and the extent to which their need for support was met.

I found this research very exciting and very congruent with my interview and our VORP experience. If we accept this research, then it is logical that the way we design our community response to crime should cause offenders to get in touch with the harm they have caused, and to get in touch with their own sense of self worth. This is why VORP is so valuable.

VORP relies on your CONTRIBUTIONS

This is a great time to make a New Years resolution to support healing, restoration and reconciliation by contributing to VORP. The most significant limitation at this point is our financial ability to provide training and support to volunteers and coordination with the courts and probation department.

The most stable support we believe will be if many members of the community voluntarily contribute a reasonable amount. For some that might be \$20 and for others \$2,000 or more.

If you haven't been making a financial contribution to VORP yet, please make 1997 the year you start. Please consider making a contribution from your finances to help VORP facilitate more experiences like the one in this month's story.

Research supports principles of VORP and Restorative Justice

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The VORP Peacemaking Model guides a constructive community response for offenders who are willing to accept responsibility for what they did. The Peacemaking Model calls for discussion and constructive activity until there is a mutual recognition among victim, community, and offender that the injustice is recognized (the most frequently mentioned dissuader), equity is restored (an activity that builds self worth in the offender—the most common persuader), and an agreement is made regarding a constructive future (criminal activity only stops when an offender makes a deliberate decision). The VORP Peacemaking Model also calls for follow-up accountability and support as the agreements are completed (a necessary condition for offenders to success-

fully abide by their new commitments and decisions).

But what about the victim? While we have not focused on the victim in this article, it is interesting and exciting to note that what the research indicates is a necessary condition for the offender to make a positive change, is also what victims need to assist them in healing (recognition of the injustice, repair of the damage as much as possible, and a safer future plus seeing some good come from the painful experience).

We will know we are doing Restorative Justice when the community response to a crime creates the conditions where victims are being healed, offenders are deciding to be cooperative and constructive, and the community is feeling safer.

'Going straight' takes offender in challenging new direction

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They were caught, but not before thousands of dollars worth of damage had been done to merchandise.

When the victim spoke, he described the thousands of dollars of damage and explained this was not the first time. He was upset and yet it was obvious he cared about the offender. He told the offender that he had four sons. One of his sons was the offender's age. He told the offender that he always told his sons, "There is no excuse for giving in to peer pressure, because you can always walk away."

The offender listened to him very carefully. With regret and sincerity he told the victim he was sorry for the trouble he had caused and he wanted to make it up to him.

As we talked about restoring equity

and future intentions, the victim told the offender he wanted to help him. He wanted to know if the offender would be willing to go on a retreat. His sons belong to a scout troop and they take young men to retreats to teach them skills. He explained it would be hard work, but it would give him the opportunity to work off the money he owed from the damages created by the offense because he would count those hours toward the restitution he owed. He also offered to employ the offender in his store to work off the rest of the money. In addition, he offered to teach him the trade, which could possibly help him get a job in the future. The offender was very happy. He had been looking for a job since I had contacted him.

Not all cases end up so well, when both parties benefit. The offender has an opportunity to learn skills in a trade

More VORP Mediators Are Needed!

Cases are being received at record rates. If you are already trained and haven't taken a case in a while, this is a great time to call Julius and tell him you are ready.

In addition to current active mediators, to meet the projected demand in 1997, 150 new mediators will need to be trained. New mediators are supported by staff and experienced mediators as needed.

If you ever have any conflict in your life, this training will be of value to you in your personal life as well as preparing you to "seek the welfare" of our community.

The cost of VORP mediator training is \$20 for those who work with at least three cases, \$100 for others. The dates and times 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.

that will benefit him in the future. He also has an opportunity to go on a camping trip which he has never done before, and to meet young men his age who are involved with activities that will teach him to be a responsible young person (quite different from those he would be with if he went to juvenile hall).

Having a meeting end in such a positive way restores my faith in mankind, and makes the hours I serve as a volunteer for VORP worthwhile.

Blessed are the peacemakers!

Thanks Catherine

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