

Interview with offender's mother reveals power of VORP Community Justice Conference process

by Ron Claassen

I am coming to believe that in most cases, the response to a crime has more impact than the crime itself. The long term effects of most crimes are determined by the response. Some responses re-victimize the victim, devalue everyone involved, and cause everyone to be less cooperative with each other and society. I don't think this is our only option.

While almost all of us think crime is wrong and shouldn't happen, when an offender is caught or admits the wrong, we are at a crossroad. The response to the crime may cause the victim to feel left out, feeling unsafe, and devalued. It is also possible that the response can help the victim regain a reasonable sense of control, feel more safe, and recover the dignity damaged by the offense. The response to the crime may cause the offender to feel disrespected, unable to make any constructive responses to correct the wrong, and end up feeling stigmatized and less cooperative with the community. The response to crime may also help the offender understand the damage caused by the offense, encourage and empower the offender to make things as right as possible with those damaged by the offense, and become the occasion to make significant life changes to prevent its reoccurrence and increase ones positive contribution to the community. The response to the crime can alienate the offender's family and leave them angry at both the offender and the system that stepped in and took over. Or, the response to the crime can empower the family and help support them in influencing and directing the offender in positive directions.

The following interview is a testimony to the very constructive role of the VORP process.

VORP meetings range from including just offender, victim, and mediator to including 15 or more people. The larger meeting is called a Community Justice Conference (CJC). The CJC meetings are generally convened when VORP is being utilized to allow the community to determine a restorative justice sentence and/or when the case is a more serious offense. In the case below, the offender was referred to a Community Justice Conference to decide on a restorative justice sentence. Since those present at the CJC meeting came to a unanimous agreement, this agreement was submitted to the court and became the restorative justice sentence.

The offense was auto theft and damage to private property. While driving

the stolen car, he had an accident that damaged a neighbor's fence.

The CJC meeting included offender (Tony), parents, grandparents on one side, grandmother on the other, two community representatives, probation officer, victim substitutes, and VORP mediators (Jay Griffith and I). One victim preferred to not participate. The other victim intended to come to the meeting but had a medical emergency at the last minute. Since everyone was already convened, the victim preferred that the meeting go ahead. The victim substitutes were those present who had at one time had their cars stolen. This included a grandparent, mother, both community representatives, and the probation officer.

The agreement included that the injustice was recognized, there would be compensation for losses (\$750 damage to auto, \$250 for fence) apologies to victims, regular school attendance, spend more time together (mother and son), help grandmother with ranch work (grandfather is very sick), obey laws and household rules, increase work hours (offender has a part-time job), volunteer as a stage crew member for the next high school play and attend at least one follow-up meeting to celebrate the success of the agreement or work on any areas that are not working successfully. Everyone was asked to give the agreement the test of whether it was reasonable, respectful, and restorative for everyone. Everyone agreed.

Following is an interview with the offender's mother about three months into the agreement period. (Names and some details have been changed to protect identities.)



"What has this experience been like for you and Tony?"



"It's made a real impact on us all. This has been a real trying year, real heartbreaking in some ways and real positive in others. The impact on me was more than I would have ever dreamed. I never expected Tony to do something like that.

"The attorney said they could probably get him off on a technicality, and we considered if maybe we should go that route. But Tony said, 'No, I did it.' I was so proud of him, but so scared, because he could have been incarcerated. I prayed so much. I believed that incarcerating him would have only given

him so much more reason to go around and do it again.

VORP relies on your contributions!

VORP relies on your contributions. As contributions increase the case load will increase. If you can share \$20 per month or \$20 per year or more, you will be making a substantial investment in the peaceful future of our community. Please consider the changes made in the lives of Tony and his mother and consider if you would be willing to help make that possible for others. While volunteer mediators work with most of the cases, we need staff for training, liaison work with probation and the courts, mediator support, and follow-up.

"I've never been to the courts before. I never experienced that. This whole thing even led to me having to be taken off work by my doctor because of the level of stress I was experiencing. I felt like I had failed him. I hadn't been spending enough time with him, enjoying him. I got real sick over all this. I still cry about that. It still hurts. But I'm surely trying to make up for it now. I'm doing some things differently for myself and for Tony. So is Tony.

"This past year Tony had started acting up at home with me. He started talking back and not doing his school work. He started sneaking out. He was always out, but not with the family, friends and his grandparents. He was getting increasingly angry with me and I was getting increasingly angry with him. We had a lot more arguing.

"Since I am a single mom, my dad thought that if he had a male figure he might listen differently and start making some changes. So he spent more time with my dad. But this new arrangement gave him some more freedoms—more than I would have given him. It was somewhat helpful because he wasn't hearing just from me all the time now. I was still concerned. I was still involved,

VORP Community Justice Conference helps offender discover...

'People care about his future'

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and I let my dad know things that I didn't think were good for him. For one thing, I didn't think it was good for Tony to be hanging around a couple of his relatives who had been in quite a bit of trouble and were pretty street wise. My dad promised he'd look out for that.

You can be trained as a VORP volunteer mediator!

VORP needs already trained mediators to take more cases and more volunteers to be trained. As more mediators are available, more victims and offenders will have the opportunity to experience a constructive response like Tony and his family. Our next mediation training events are scheduled for:

- March 16, 23 & 30
- April 17 & 18
- May 7, 14 & 21

To register or for additional information, call the VORP office at 209-291-1120.

"It was hard to see him start making the choices he did with his 'new friends' and especially this incident. I know how hard it is though, when you are being teased by your friends. I've been through a lot too and had some difficult choices to make. My mom showed us how to see things for ourselves. She taught me right and wrong. I learned to walk away from 'friends' who teased me.

"Being divorced and not having been around Tony very much myself in the last few years, I think that really hurt him. I also think that my life had become very stagnant since my divorce. I was doing everything I could to just keep my head

above water. My priority had become work and providing Tony's materialistic needs. But what he really needed, I didn't even see.

"I was trying to do everything for him so he wouldn't do these stupid mistakes. And when this happened all this hit me. It hit home. I had to make some changes.

"I used to go to church, but when I got divorced it just didn't seem right to go back to church and to God.

"I used to take Tony to Church with me. He kept going for a short time after I got divorced and then he gradually stopped going. I think church was good. It reinforced in him the right and the wrong. Given what he's said to me, I think he's very aware of how this was wrong. I'm glad it hurts him inside, but it's hard to see him go through this. I've started going back to church myself and to Bible study again. This shows me my wrongs too and ways to be different. It's hard to believe it has taken all this to wake up and see what's been going on for me and Tony."



"What value have you seen for you, Tony and the family in having the Community Justice Conference?"



"The mediation was good support for Tony and the group was also there for us as 'the family.' It wasn't just us trying to do it alone. I believe it has taught Tony some valuable lessons: that people are for him, even people Tony didn't expect like those at the mediation. It let him err and not feel condemned to where he couldn't get up and go on with his life.

"Tony had recently expressed his disappointment with all the people he had hurt. He tried to talk with one of the victims and he wouldn't talk to him. At first, he was leery of this whole thing with you guys—the mediation. I think he felt alone and that he would not be supported. I think by having you and all the people around you there at that meeting it showed him that there were other people out there that didn't have to be there but were voluntarily involved. They cared about him and his future. I didn't like the way he expressed himself at times in the meeting, but the group was very patient and understanding with him.

"I've made changes and Tony has been making changes as well. We are more respectful of each other now. Also, Tony has been more helpful with the family, especially his ill grandfather, and back to his old self helping out with the neighbors and even joking around like he used to before all this. Tony is working as a volunteer stage crew member at the high school. Tony is choosing better friends now.

"At first, Tony would tell me that he didn't want to talk about the incident, but recently, he's admitted that he does think about it, and that it really still bothers him, even after the mediation, although it did help. I think we'll work through all this. Right now, I need to just enjoy him and our times together."

You can help us tell more stories of healing and hope. Please consider making a commitment of your time or financial support to VORP today.

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