

# VORP

## NEWS

of the Central Valley, Inc.  
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*'Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy, which shall be for all people. For to you is born...a savior. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth Peace, good will among all people.'*

by Ron Claassen

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 that this peace, right relations with each other and with God, is for all people. Jesus, the reason for this wonderful season, said that we should even love (agape—to be constructive with) the enemy. The good news is that regardless of my feelings, we can choose to be constructive, even with the enemy.

The good news is both judgment and forgiveness. Peace is not possible when injustice is ignored. Archbishop Desmond Tutu (Chair of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission) says, "Denial doesn't work. [Denial] can never lead to forgiveness and reconciliation. Amnesia is no solution. If a nation is to be healed, it must come to grips with its past." Jesus says that harming people is wrong. The good news is that when we live in ways that don't harm each other we will experience peace. The good news is also that when violations (of God and others) do occur, forgiveness is possible. Remember the story of Zacchaeus. The story illustrates that forgiveness is not a cheap pronouncement but a costly recognition of the injustice (confession), action including restitution, to make things as right as possible (atonement—a combination of restitution and grace), and an accountable, constructive plan for the future which must include not continuing or repeating the injustice (repentance—turning to do things in a different way in the future). The good news is also that because of Jesus, there is no restitution due in repairing our relationship with God.

It is this Good News that has given birth to VORP. VORP provides hope to those who are impacted by the kind of harm we call crime. Restorative Justice is possible. Responsible forgiveness is possible. 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 what is needed to restore equity, and agreeing on accountable future intentions that ensure safety, assist healing, and prevent its reoccurrence.

Then follow-up is essential because trust only grows when agreements are made and kept.

The Good News of VORP happens because many of you contribute financially. Your contributions make it possible to have an organization in place to receive and manage cases and provide training and support for volunteer mediators. If more would contribute, more victims and offenders would be invited to consider Restorative Justice. Volunteers have talked to and invited more than 1000 victims and offenders to consider this option this year. In addition to our usual referrals from probation and the court, we are working with 6 experimental cases per month (paid for by the county) referred to VORP to help a family, victims and community member determine a restorative sentence for se-

lected non-violent felony cases. In New Zealand, a similar process led to reducing the court load by 75%. It also reduced the number of lock-up facilities by more than half because people who felt free to consider all options, rarely place the offender together with other offenders as means to help them reform their ways. Instead, the family was (re)empowered to assume responsibility with assistance as needed from church and government agencies. We could do that here in Fresno County with your help. This is Good News.

Christmas is a time for celebration. On behalf of our board of directors, staff, and myself, I wish you a Very Meaningful and Happy Christmas Season, one that reflects the spirit of Jesus, the reason for our Celebrations.

Shalom

## VORP enables offenders to apologize for armed robbery

by Sara Rickard  
with Ron Claassen

Our story is from Sara Rickard who is a full time staff member at VORP. She came to VORP through the Mennonite Voluntary Service program. She graduated from University of Iowa in the spring of 1998. Her primary responsibility at VORP is restitution/follow-up manager. She also carries a case load and helps train new volunteer mediators.

Two young men (age 17) had robbed a convenience store. Both were wearing ski masks. One carried a gun. The customers were ordered to hit the floor, the clerk was ordered to empty the cash drawer with the gun pointing in his face, and then he was ordered to hit the floor. They were arrested and the money returned. The offenders had been through court and had served time incarcerated. They were still on probation. They were referred to VORP.

As a mediator first looking at this case, my mind was flooded with images. I could hardly imagine the sensation of lying on the floor, unable to see what was going on, or to look down the barrel of a gun. I wondered about these two young people behind the ski masks. What kind of people could possibly have subjected other people to such terror?

I had difficulties contacting Marcus. I talked to Eddie in his front yard, where we sat at a picnic table and went over

the rough details of the event. I noticed that he had a hard time meeting my gaze—instead his eyes scanned the street behind me. After more discussion he said yes, he wanted to meet the victims. He'd been drunk. He was sorry. After spending several months incarcerated and reflecting on what he had done, he wished he'd never done it. He said if he could go back in time, he never would have done it.

I was surprised at my victim meeting. I met with Linda, an accounts manager who worked in an office, distant from the scene of the robbery. I couldn't have prepared myself for the extent of her anger. In spite of that, she was pleasant and curious about VORP, and she said she would be willing if it could change the boys at all. The other woman at the meeting, Shirley, was supervisor of the clerk who had been victimized. She had received the phone call at 2:00 a.m. to tell her that the store had been robbed. Shirley told me about the clerk. He was extremely shaken and afraid to identify the suspects for fear someone would come after him. She said he was not willing to meet with us. He had quit working at the convenience store soon after the incident. He said he could never do that sort of work again, which was a tremendous loss to him since he had worked as a cashier for as long as he was able to work.

See "VORP meeting helps..." on page 2

## *VORP relies on your Gifts! The opportunities have never been greater!*

There are many cases that are never given the opportunity to consider Restorative Justice. It is not because our criminal justice officials are unwilling. It is because we don't have the capacity to meet the need. If everyone receiving this newsletter gave a Christmas gift of \$20 (or better yet, \$20 per month), VORP would be able to significantly increase the Restorative Justice efforts in Fresno County and demonstrate to the world that Restorative Justice is possible. This is Good News.

Please consider giving a Christmas gift to Victims and Offenders today!

If you would like to be trained as a volunteer mediator, call the VORP office at 291-1120 for information about the January training and other 1999 training dates.

# **VORP meeting helps resolve feelings of hostility, bitterness**

Continued from page 1

Just as Shirley was finishing describing her experience, the owner of the store arrived, wondering what I was there for. After briefly explaining VORP he explained that during the years he has owned convenience stores he has seen more than one employee shot at the register. "In my opinion," he said, "there's nothing in the world that will change criminals like that. If I'd had a gun on me, I would have shot those kids myself. So you can go around trying to save the world, but don't do it on my time." With that, he turned and walked out of the room.

"He's very bitter," Linda told me. And at that moment I could not think of any reason at all for the man not to be bitter. However, Linda and Shirley wanted to proceed, if for no other reason than to represent the clerk who was too shaken to even consider a meeting.

I finally contacted the other offender. Marcus was much harder to talk to. His mother drifted in and out of the room, trying to encourage him but with frustration and angry words. She finally left the room suggesting maybe I could get him to talk. After she left the room, Marcus, still avoiding eye contact, said, "this isn't something I'm real proud of, you know." We then began to talk about what he did and its impact. As our discussion

continued it seemed his trust grew. We talked about this process being a chance to take responsibility for his actions and an opportunity and to let the victims know him and his intentions. Finally, he said he'd go ahead with it.

Shirley and Linda arrived early at the meeting and Marcus arrived shortly after. It was tense while we waited for Eddie to show up. Marcus again withdrew behind a tough guy front while Shirley asked some hard questions. When Eddie finally arrived and we formally started the meeting, Shirley talked about the clerk whose life, in her opinion, had been ruined. After talking more about the impact of their actions on the victims, the boys each summarized what they had been hearing and in addition express a lot of regret. Then the boys talked about problems in their lives: struggles with drugs and alcohol, and several long months in detention. Eddie missed the birth of his son. He explained how he was staying away from alcohol because he wanted to make good for this children. Shirley asked him how he would feel if one of his children was threatened with gun. Eddie said he couldn't even imagine—and Shirley added that the fear of something like that happening only gets more intense as children grow older.

Towards the middle of the meeting, the hostility and bitterness that had fro-

zen conversation in the beginning had drained from the room. Eddie and Shirley continued to discuss their children, how difficult it is to raise them in this world. And again, Marcus let his guard down and began to trust the people around him. More than once he described his regrets for what he had done and his intentions of making better choices for his life in the future.

It was Linda (who was so angry when I first met her) who reminded the boys that this episode could be put behind them. She wanted to see that they made choices that would ensure better lives, free from old habits. The boys assured her that they truly did want to change. When we talked about restitution Linda and Shirley thought the best thing they could do is to get their lives in order so they wouldn't do something like this again. After hearing about a mentoring program from Linda and Shirley, Eddie and Marcus decided they could benefit from such a program. It was left voluntary.

Finally, they decided that Eddie and Marcus would write a letter of apology to the clerk who had been afraid to meet with them. It seems a small gesture, but hopefully the written words of the two young men along with a report from Shirley and Linda will help bring some healing and do something to dispel the lingering images of ski masks.

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# **VORP**

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