

Christmas reminds us what 'Good News' is

by Ron Claassen

"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."

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. The boundary is extended. Jesus said that those who really love God will also love the enemy. But love for enemy doesn't make sense to English speakers because love in the English language includes warm feelings which, by definition, I don't have for the enemy. It only makes sense when we

realize that Jesus was using the meaning of the Greek word agape which means "to be constructive with." The good news is that regardless of my feelings, I 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. Jesus says that harming people—physically, economically, or any other way, is wrong. The good news

Continued on page 2

Skeptical VORP mediator changes mind about graffiti cases

by Beverly Jim
with Ron Claassen

Our story this month is from Beverly Jim, a long time mediator for VORP. Names and some details have been changed to protect the identity of the victim and offender.

I had been extremely reluctant to take a graffiti case as I have a most unchristian attitude about "tagging" and/or "art."

This case concerned Henry, now sixteen. The case was two years old. The victims own a business which had been graffitied—some by Henry.

The first time that I went to see Henry, his sister said that he was working and had a girlfriend. He was rarely home, but she would give him the message

About three weeks later, I talked to Henry on the phone. We met and he agreed to be cooperative. He needed transportation so I told him that I would take him to the joint meeting.

The victims were very cooperative and agreed to participate in a VORP meeting with Henry. They even suggested that Henry could do outdoor maintenance work in lieu of financial restitution as they had recently repainted their building and had some maintenance work that needed to be done. However, the victims were going to go

Continued on page 2

Below is a letter written by Dan McKay to Judge Robert Oliver. Dan was invited by an offender's family to participate in a VORP Community Justice Conference, and he chose to share his perceptions with the judge responsible for referring the case to VORP. The letter is reprinted here with permission.

Judge Robert H. Oliver
Fresno County Court
Department 13
1100 Van Ness Ave.
Fresno, CA 93721

September 29, 1997

Your Honor Robert H. Oliver:

It is not often that I find myself writing "fan mail" to anyone, much less to a judge. Perhaps we both could start a trend.

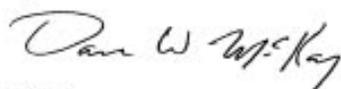
I have had the good fortune to be involved with a case that was handled by Ron Claassen and his people at VORP. I was (AM) impressed and not nearly so pessimistic about the entire criminal system, the cycle of crime, court and jail, as I was before seeing the "Victim Offender Reconciliation Program" in action.

I am making the time to thank you for trying something different. In this one case (VORP#97-158) your decision has made a difference to both the victim and offender. When this process began the victim felt not only the victim of a crime but also the victim of a massive and uncaring judicial system. We could actually see the healing begin in the victim. Much faster toward the offender than toward the court system. The victim had said more than once "I just feel so helpless". This seemed to be one of the keys to this program that would be easy to overlook. You have given the victim some control over the outcome of a situation that has made them feel helpless, has badly shaken their self respect and nearly destroyed their feeling of good will toward their fellow mankind.

As for the offender, well maybe he will become a judge one day instead of a junkie. Only time can answer that. Sometimes it seems like a criminal is looking for attention and this program offers something positive to them.

Again, thank you. If you ever need my vote for anything - just send me a bumper sticker, I'll display it proudly.

Sincerely:



Dan W. McKay

Coalinga, CA 93210

cc: Ron Claassen

VORP is counting on your support

VORP relies on your Gifts! The need is serious!

If everyone receiving this newsletter gave a Christmas gift of \$20, VORP would end the year with a small surplus.

The gift of responsible reconciliation that Henry and his victim experienced would not happen without Beverly volunteering her time and without a staff to train, coordinate, and support her. The total cost for training, support, office expenses, 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 \$20,000. Every year since 1983 we have been in an owing position in the beginning of December and in a slight 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.

VORP helps victims, offenders, communities work toward 'responsible forgiveness'

Continued from page 1

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 available. However, forgiveness is not a cheap pronouncement, but a costly recognition of the injustice, action, including restitution, to make things as right as possible (remember Zacchaeus), and an accountable, constructive plan for the future which must

include not continuing or repeating the injustice. The good news is also that because of Jesus, there is no restitution due in repairing our relationship with God.

VORP provides people, a structure, and strategy to train and support mediators who volunteer to help victims, offenders, and their communities work at responsible forgiveness. It happens when volunteer VORP mediators are willing to make themselves vulnerable and available to invite victim and offender to con-

sider the idea of trying to "make things right" between them. 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.

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 the mediators.

Victim Offender Reconciliation happens because staff members: Victoria Buksbazu, Amy Detweiler, Jay Griffith, Elaine Enns, Duane Ruth-Hefflower, and I, together with board members Mike Manghera, Leah Ann Alcazar, Dave Kleschold, Carol Fransen, Michael Blue, and Mary Beth Hogan are working as a team. Some are full time and some part time, some are volunteers 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. Volunteers will have worked with more than 500 cases this year.

Victim Offender Reconciliation happens because criminal justice officials are courageous and willing to make referrals.

Finally, Victim Offender Reconciliation happens because victim and offender responded to the invitation and allowed 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, 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.

'Tagger' swaps spray can for weed whacker

Continued from page 1

on vacation, so any further action had to wait. Finally, we had our meeting.

We talked about what Henry did and how the graffiti had impacted the victims. They said graffiti keeps potential businesses from coming to Fresno and hurts our economy with fewer new businesses and no new jobs. They also said graffiti is unattractive, and that having their property assaulted felt like a serious violation.

We then talked about how to make things right. The victims said Henry could do three hours of cutting weeds and general clean-up around the buildings. When we talked about the future, one of the victims offered to be sort of a big brother. We wrote out and signed the agreement.

In two weeks we met once again at the office of the victims. Henry got there before me as he had only half an hour of work left to complete his agreement. The victims were pleased with his work.

Henry said this ended his vandalism. He is going to school, has a girlfriend, and does childcare for his younger brother after school. He also has a good relationship with the people he victimized. He accepted responsibility for his offense, made things right, and has been reintegrated into the community. My opinion of mediating a graffiti case has done a 180 degree turn.

Thank you Beverly.

"Blessed are the Peacemakers"

1998 volunteer VORP mediator training dates set

VORP mediators learn and practice peacemaking skills they can use in the home, workplace, and congregation. The next scheduled trainings are:

January 13, 20 & 27

Tuesday evenings, 6:30-9:30 PM

January 23 & 24

Friday evening, 6:30-9:30 PM, and Saturday, 8:30 AM-3:30 PM

March 16, 23 & 30

Monday evenings, 9:30-9:30 PM

April 17 & 18

Friday evening, 6:30-9:30 PM;
Saturday, 8:30 AM-3:30 PM

May 7, 14 & 21

Thursday evenings, 6:30-9:30 PM

For information or registration, call the VORP office at (209) 291-1120.

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