One school’s experience with ‘Discipline That Restores’ gives hope for future

by Ron Claassen

I have hope that some day restorative justice will be what most people think of when they think of justice. Maybe some day we will have to explain to our children and grandchildren that there was a time when most people thought that justice was retributive justice.

An example that is giving me hope now is among students at Raisin City School. Roxanne (we’ve been married for 30 years) is the eighth grade teacher. She and I have been working on what we call “Discipline That Restores” (DTR) for nearly 10 years now. Roxanne completed her BA with a major in conflict and peacemaking and is now half way in completing her MA in conflict management and peacemaking. Her interest was in exploring Restorative Justice to guide how she would deal with conflict and misbehavior in her classroom.

At first those who watched her thought she was “soft” on misbehavior. But, as the principal and other teachers noticed, her approach not only reduced the misbehavior; it began to transform the climate in her classroom. In some very ironic ways, it made it more acceptable to disagree with each other but the disagreements became occasions to understand each other better and to negotiate and learn better ways of being together rather than occasions to put people down or hurt each other. So it became increasing clear that Discipline That Restores (DTR) was not “soft” on misbehavior.

Ten years ago, about the same time Roxanne started DTR in her classroom (with administration skepticism and blessing), the administration decided it was necessary to get “tough.” The hope was that if discipline was “tougher” it would stop what seemed to be a school-wide trend toward increasing misbehavior; conflicts among students, disrespect for teachers, and fights on campus. So the school-wide system called for increasing punishment—more warnings and detentions followed by more suspensions and expulsions. What happened was that the overall climate became more tense, less cooperative, and more stressful for everyone.

At the beginning of the next year, with new administrative leadership, we were invited to provide restorative training for the entire staff on Discipline That Restores (DTR). We started by exploring together

Offender accepts responsibility through VORP

Our story is from Ken Kanevsky. Ken is general manager of a large printing business, an active member of his church, and a student in the master’s program in administrative leadership at Fresno Pacific University. As part of his MA program, he is completing a certificate in mediation. Some names and details in the story have been changed.

Tim participated in stealing a car stereo from John’s truck on the high school campus where both boys attended.

During the individual meeting with John, he expressed that he was very open and willing to meet with the offender. He knew the offender—at an arm’s length—and was very interested in finding justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Tim, though willing to meet with John, did not readily recognize the injustice. He admitted to at one time possessing the stolen stereo, but said that a friend of his was the one who actually stolen the stereo.

Since this was my first VORP case Jay asserted that, “A lot of times it’s not as straightforward as I thought it was.” He was delighted that he did. The meeting began with introductions. There was myself, Jay, Tim’s father, John, an interpreter, and Barbara (an observer). We then discussed the purpose of the meeting and agreed to the groundrules.

Tim was then asked to describe his experience. He said that his friend had stolen the stereo. He said that although he had knowledge of the crime, and even had possession of the car stereo for a short time, he did not see how he had any responsibility since he wasn’t the one who actually broke the window of the truck and stole the stereo.

John summarized what Tim had said and then described what had happened to him. He described the feeling of being violated, and the hardship that the incident caused him and his family to have the truck in the shop to be repaired. Tim then summarized what John had said. Then John made the comment, “…with the kind of friends that you have you should not be surprised that you are being accused of stealing.”

Then the offender’s father had a few words to say. He recognized that his son did in fact have some responsibility in the theft. Father said, “We are all of the same blood—we are all humans—and we owe one another respect.” He then said that he had things stolen from him and that he doesn’t feel very angry or hurt. Tim listened intently to his father describe how it felt to be victimized. He included the internal pain, hurt, and anger crime causes for the victim.

After listening to his father, Tim recognized his part in the crime and the impact that the crime had on John. Tim then agreed that he did have some responsibility in the crime even though he was not actually the one who broke the window and stole the stereo. Tim recognized the injustice, apologized to John, and agreed to pay the $100.00 deductible with $50.00 being paid there at the meeting, and the balance to be paid shortly thereafter. Tim also agreed to be careful in the selection of his friends and agreed that this type of action and involvement in crime would not happen again.

The meeting ended with the victim, offender, and the offender’s father all shaking hands in a spirit of what I believe was true reconciliation.

Thanks Ken.

“Blessed are the Peacemakers.”

One volunteer mediator’s perspective

by Ken Kanevsky

How do I tie together leadership, community and values? One answer to this question is by being a volunteer mediator with the Victim Offender Reconciliation Program. As a student at Fresno Pacific University enrolled in the Master of Arts in Administrative Leadership program, I believe that it is important for leaders to recognize their responsibility to be peacemakers.

As a leader who is actively involved in church and community, I have found VORP to be a stretching and rewarding experience. VORP takes me beyond the traditional “comfort zone” and exposes me to a variety of circumstances that one would otherwise not encounter. As a volunteer mediator with VORP I am actively engaged in peacemaking and making community better one person at a time.

The Bible says “Blessed are the peacemakers.… I now know why this is. It is a thrilling experience to see the transformation of two people, once enemies, become people who have respect for one another.

VORP can be a life changing experience for all parties involved. I have so much enjoyed the experience of VORP and believe in its effectiveness, that I am looking at starting VORP in Tulare County, specifically in the Visalia area. I will be working under the direction of Ron Claassen and will be looking for a few good leaders who recognize and take seriously their responsibility to be peace-makers. Time is fairly minimal and the rewards are great. So if you have a desire to be blessed by being a peace-maker in Tulare County, please give me a call at my office: 559-592-8351.
VORP relies on your contributions

VORP RELIES ON YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS!

This is a good month to make a resolution to continue or to start supporting VORP financially. As you can see from Ken’s story, VORP is a community building activity for all involved.

If each person receiving this newsletter gave $20 per month, VORP could double its case load.

Please consider making a modest yet significant contribution to building a safer and more peaceful community.

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