

# VORP NEWS

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Victim Offender Reconciliation Program of the Central Valley, Inc

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## Laughter and Embrace

- Teri Johnson

Diagonals of sunlight crossed the plastic table where I sat with the two families—three victims, a young offender, and his mother. Children pelted up the blue stairs of the castle behind me as we talked, and the sunlight in the Playplace grew stronger. Before the mediation, the two parties were strangers, connected only by their experiences and regrets of a crime. In the course of an afternoon, I was privileged to see that relationship change.

The first, indirect contact of the parties was a painful one. The offender and other juveniles vandalized a rental property owned by the victims (an older married couple and their daughter). The damages cost thousands of dollars, more in terms of lost rental income and time while the victims conducted repairs. They were not optimistic that they would see any restitution money. The incident also caused the victims to fear for the ongoing safety of the property. Nevertheless, they wanted to meet the offender; they wanted to see him learn to make better choices. The offender and his mother, in turn, wanted a chance to apologize. The offender told me how much he had learned since the incident about the consequences of his actions and the power of peers. The two parties finally met at a McDonald's, where the offender's younger siblings would have a safe place to play while we talked.

I was surprised by the warmth of their interaction. The offender and his mother brought a gift bag and cards for the victims. They apologized immediately upon introductions. One of the victims, the husband, counseled the offender on the importance of picking the right friends. Smiling and relaxed, he sounded for all the world like the young man's grandfather. The victims all expressed a desire for the offender to succeed in life—he is involved in baseball and music, and the victims said they wanted to see him become a professional athlete or musician.

The actual mediation was lighthearted and friendly. From the beginning, the parties seemed comfortable with each other. The members of the two families did not sit down to either side of me, divided by the table;

instead, they took seats that placed members of the different families side by side. Their communication sounded natural, sometimes even slipping onto tangents. The parties and I also laughed together as the offender's siblings occasionally wandered off or dripped ice cream onto the tile floor. The male victim, seeing that the offender's mother had her "hands full" with the children, said he would be comfortable with whatever restitution amount the family could afford a month, even if it took over a year to pay back.

The mediation ended on a hopeful note. After discussing everyone's experience of the crime, future intentions, and how to restore equity, the parties reached a workable agreement about restitution. Knowing that the offender's mother was out of work, the victims explained their at-home business and how she might join the venture. "Maybe this all happened for a reason," the wife said, marveling at the prospect. The victims then opened the gift bag and cards; they were touched by the statuette and written apologies. The meeting concluded with handshakes all around, and the wife hugged the offender.

The face-to-face encounter transformed the parties and the tone of the situation.

Strangers, potential enemies, became potential business contacts. The victims were pessimistic about ever seeing any money; now they trusted they would be paid. The offender had previously only communicated to the victims through his participation in vandalism; now he could apologize and express his determination to make better choices in the future. This was my first joint victim-offender mediation, and it taught me that even a serious issue like crime can be handled with laughter and embrace.

Teri Johnson is a native of Porterville, CA, and a Fresno State graduate. Teri is now pursuing a Masters in Peace and Conflict Studies from Fresno Pacific University. She was trained as a VORP mediator in September 2010.

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## Thank you for your continued donations!

Without your donations VORP would not be able to operate and touch the lives of many youth offenders, victims, their families and the community. Thank you for making a difference!

## **Meet the Interns!**



### **California Victim Offender Gathering**

On November 9th there was a convening of 18 people from six Victim Offender Programs from around California. Our Community Justice Conferencing program was highlighted in the morning with a presentation by Director, Noelle Nightingale. The afternoon consisted of each program presenting new ideas or programs that have been implemented in their county as well as problems they are currently facing. It was a great time of sharing information and knowledge for all the participants as well as inspiring new ideas for future implantation.

Thank you to all who participated!

**Antonia Guzman-** My name is Antonia Guzman, and I am a student at Fresno Pacific University. I'm currently working with VORP as a bridge between the school and the program. I was hired by the Office of Spiritual Formation on campus to connect the FPU students with VORP. The Office of Spiritual Formation would like for FPU students to get involved with VORP and experience the mediation process. I am very happy to be working with VORP to make a change in the community and get students involved as well, and I strongly believe VORP makes the change in the lives of people in the community. Overall VORP offers the opportunity to become a peacemaker, and I recommend the community to get involved with VORP.



### **VORP Mediator Training**

**January 13 & 14**

**February 2 & 3**

**March 23 & 24**

**Fresno Pacific University**

**Steinert Campus Center 122**

(Next to Dining Common)

Call (559) 455-9803 for reservations or check out our website for more information: <http://vorp.org/training.shtml>

### **We now offer an e-newsletter!**

Please sign up to receive our free e-newsletter. It will have additional information to our printed newsletter as well as helpful or interesting links online.

In order to receive the e-newsletter please go to our website: <http://VORP.org> and enter your email and name and you will be automatically added to our email list!

**Hla Vang-** My name is Hla Vang and I work with VORP through the Office of Spiritual Formation. VORP offers opportunities for interns and volunteers mediation that will help restore relationships between victims and offenders. VORP provides great opportunities to change peoples' lives and to make a difference in society. I believe that VORP will continue to help classify the relationship between the misunderstood minors and give them a chance to explain themselves with the opportunity to change. Having the chance to mediate and be part of a life changing moment is always so pleasing. The feeling and satisfaction that you were able to help resolve a conflicts between two strangers gives you the self esteem to better your own life.



**Isamar Mendez-** I'm a senior at Fresno State University pursuing my bachelor's degree in Criminology with option in Victimology. I'm originally from a small town called Salinas. Along with going to school and interning at VORP, I commute back to my hometown to work for JC Penney as the Salon receptionist on the weekends. I took this

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VICTIM OFFENDER RECONCILIATION PROGRAM

