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## Victim-Offender Reconciliation Program

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Spring/Summer

NEWSLETTER

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### Program Philosophy

SLV-VORP brings young offenders, victims and the community together to search for reconciliation and solutions to “make things right.” We also serve 1) Schools—facilitation, training and development around conflict resolution, peer mediation, and restorative discipline; 2) Families—Parent-Teen Mediation.

# SLV-VORP NEWS

## VORP Hosts 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Teen Mediator Summit

On April 20, 2005, the ASC student union was buzzing with activities for 60 teen mediators and sponsors from eight local high schools. The event was VORP's 6<sup>th</sup> annual SLV Peer Mediator Summit. Coincidentally, but with a sobering connection, the event fell on the 6<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Columbine shootings.

Based on the theme, “Personal Power: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly,” participants came face-to-face with the realities of power abuse, harassment, and bullying as experienced within teen culture and relationships. Ken Puhler, a teen prevention specialist with the Colorado Department of Human Services, kicked off the day with Star Power, a “power simulation” game. The game underscored in a telling way how those with greater power (resources, status, allies, etc.) typically exert that power to increase their control. Teens debriefed how the “insider” and “outsider” nature of cliques and other power dynamics play out everyday at school and in social relationships.

The balance of the day looked at the critical role the “silent majority” of bystanders can play in interrupting and even preventing the whole range of bullying-type behaviors so prevalent in every school setting. While peer mediation is not appropriate for more extreme cases, peer leaders learned they can still assert positive influence by saying “no” to power abuses, modeling appropriate responses of peer and adult intervention, and lending an ear to students struggling with how to handle unhealthy situations.

A highlight of the afternoon was an inspiring performance by Crestone Mountain Thunder Taiko. At the hands of this troupe of youth and adult drummers, Carson auditorium reverberated with the powerful rhythms of the traditional Japanese Taiko drumming style. The day ended with recognition for each team and the important volunteer work they do to promote a healthy environment in their school settings. High schools participating included Alamosa, Antonito, Center, Creede, Moffat, Monte Vista, Mountain Valley and Sargent. Creede, the newest and smallest team, was honored for outstanding efforts during their first year of peer mediation at their K-12 campus.

Several individual students from around the Valley were also honored by their sponsors and teams with the “Extra Mile Award” for going beyond the expected as a peer leader and helper during the past year: Cici Martinez, Alamosa; Melissa Trujillo, Antonito; William Myers, Center; Meagan Hines, Moffat; Rebeckah Vigil, Monte Vista; Elise Lovato, Mountain Valley; Kendra Stoeber, Sargent.

As students grabbed snacks and prepared to catch their buses, closing comments included: “The drummers were awesome!” “Thanks for the fun games that were also relevant!” and “I learned I can actually help stop bullying.” - Alice Price

## Tales from the Table - Restorative Justice at Boys & Girls Club

In recent months, VORP staff have interacted regularly with the staff of the Alamosa Boys & Girls Club around a variety of skills trainings and direct interventions. This work will continue and broaden with the kick-off of the Bullying Prevention Initiative at the Club later this summer. The goal is to work with staff, youth and parents to integrate core principles of Restorative Justice into day-to-day personal interactions, problem-solving and disciplinary practices, and group processing of “hot topics.”

VORP’s initial work with the Club on restorative processes began over three years ago. Shortly after an arson that destroyed a nearby storage building, VORP staff visited with Club board member, Judy McNeilsmith, about the possibility of a victim-offender dialogue with the three young teens charged with the incident. The on-duty staff person, along with the Club’s director and attorney, responded affirmatively to this invitation. Because of the large restitution involved, the youths’ families also felt that a process outside the confines of the court system held some opportunities. In particular, the dialogue provided a way for each youth to accept personal accountability for a set share of damages, along with a realistic timeframe and agreed allocation of payments for each of the six separate parent households impacted by the agreement.

Despite financial and personal challenges in each setting, one pair of parent households has fully met the 3-year payment deadline. A second pair has completed one household portion and is very close to completing the second. The third pair has fallen the farthest behind, and further remedies may be needed if the Club is to be “made whole” under the terms of the agreement. Given the dollar amounts involved and barriers present, however, this less-than-perfect outcome represents a far higher level of restoration than would be typical through

the courts under similar circumstances. The personal nature of the process and involvement of concerned community members made the difference.

Although restorative options are not a panacea for every circumstance, the Club remains intent on exploring the opportunities that lie within restorative principles: accountability, community safety, and development of skill sets to promote healthy problem-solving. Unlike traditional law enforcement and disciplinary processes, restorative options do not focus on “rule breaking” and “punishment.” Rather, they focus on involving all affected parties in determining what harm has been done, how it can best be repaired or restored (relationship-wise, as well as property), who should be responsible for “making things right” to the extent possible, and how to avoid such harm from recurring.

As part of an integrated approach, VORP has begun to train teens who serve as junior staff, along with adult staff, in inter-personal mediation skills, as well as restorative discipline principles and processes. Specific bullying prevention and intervention skills are next on the training agenda. The unit director also recently participated in a VORP-facilitated disciplinary intervention between two households following a more serious behavioral incident at the Club. The creation of restorative options for youth is not simply a “program” or even a “skill set.” It is more fundamentally a cultural shift that involves a high commitment to change how people in a community relate to one another and address the harms and offenses that inevitably arise in relationships. The Club is to be applauded for exploring ways to empower youth and adults on a system-wide basis to undertake this important journey.

- Alice Price

# REFLECTIONS

Having nearly completed my first year here at VORP, I have found myself reflecting on the incredible wealth of situations I have had the opportunity to learn from and experience. I came into my role at VORP with little real experience with mediation, facilitation, training, or administration. However, after only a brief time here I feel indescribably thankful for the opportunities I have had to learn and grow in each of these areas. (This is thanks, in no small part, to the expertise and wisdom of my two VORP mentors: Alice and Paula.) In an effort to briefly outline the vast array of experiences I have had with VORP, the following is a list of first year highlights:

- Participating in a victim-offender mediation between two teenage girls around a restraining order issue. The highlight of this mediation was a) its overall success, b) the fact that a conflict between the parents of the two girls came to light and was subsequently successfully mediated, and c) that the mediation between the parents was successful in large part due to the modeling and example set by the girls.
- A victim-offender mediation between two teenage boys who were involved in a network of teens, both guys and girls, in conflict. This situation involved gang ties, involvement by various other parties, and police charges. Ultimately, the two boys were able to reach an understanding and there has remained a tenuous truce among the group in conflict.
- An impromptu mediation at the Alamosa program for suspended and expelled students. After being called in to work with some kids, we were faced with a hornet's nest of conflict. The preceding day a flurry of cruel notes had been passed, and upon their discovery parents were called in as well as VORP mediators. We ended up working with six students in both individual mediations as well as in a group setting. It was ultimately a fairly unsuccessful situation; however, I certainly learned a number of very important lessons in not taking ownership of disputants' problems, not working harder than the disputants, and the importance of laying the proper groundwork prior to engaging in the mediation process.
- A case in which we facilitated a meeting between a student and a school to lay down a framework for allowing the student back into school following a suspension. The highlights from this case included a successful parent-teen mediation as a requirement for the student being allowed back into school, as well as the successful re-entry of the student back into the school setting.
- Doing a mediation at the county jail through the glass dividers—an interesting experience, but certainly not an ideal situation.
- Mediating a neighbor-neighbor dispute and providing on-going follow-up support to the two disputants.
- Co-training at least ten area schools in peer mediation.
- Helping plan, coordinate, and facilitate the 6<sup>th</sup> annual VORP Peer Mediator Summit for area high school peer mediator teams.
- Helping plan and facilitate a restorative discipline dialogue at the local Boys & Girls Club.
- Conducting a “parent-teen” mediation in which we worked primarily with addressing issues between the two siblings involved in the mediation. This was perhaps a little bit out of the scope of our normal parent-teen situations, but was certainly a valuable mediation.
- Having the opportunity to witness and occasionally participate in the grant writing process as VORP successfully applied for a substantial grant to undertake bullying prevention work at area after school sites.
- Overseeing the Parent-Teen program (with assistance from Alice).
- Participating in numerous other parent-teen and victim-offender mediations.

This list could certainly go on and on, but hopefully has provided a snippet of the varied and unfailingly interesting work VORP has been doing over the past year or so. Reflecting on my time at VORP I have become more and more thankful for the opportunities for growth and creativity VORP presents to all those who are associated with it—juvenile offenders, victims, families in conflict, our volunteers, our staff, and our community. Basically, everything adds up to an overwhelming amount of excitement for the upcoming year!

-Luke Yoder

## *VORP Awarded Colorado Trust Grant*

On April 1<sup>st</sup>, VORP received one of 45 awards in a 3-year Bullying Prevention Initiative funded through the Colorado Trust. The statewide Initiative is to help schools and community-based organizations to prevent bullying and bullying-related behaviors. The Trust's goal is to provide both youth and adults with opportunities to learn how to effectively intervene in and prevent bullying activities. VORP's work locally will be done in conjunction with Tu Casa and 5 after-school sites around the Valley. These sites include the Alamosa, La Jara and Monte Vista units of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the SLV, Valle del Sol Community Center's after-school program in Capulin, and the St. Avelino Youth Guild after-school program in San Luis.

Along with supplemental activities and resources, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program will form the core of VORP's bully prevention work. The Olweus program is an internationally recognized, research-based model from which many school-based bullying prevention programs are derived. During the 3-year implementation process, VORP will also work with the after-school sites to share resources with parents and to complement the anti-bullying activities of neighboring schools, churches, and other interested community organizations.



**SLV-VORP is a member of Valley Community Fund**



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