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## Victim-Offender Reconciliation Program

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Restorative Justice brings victims, offenders and the community together to search for solutions and reconciliation. SLV- VORP offers the opportunity for young offenders and their victims to meet with trained, volunteer mediators from the community to discuss the offense and "make things right." VORP also assists schools in developing conflict resolution and peer mediation programs, and other restorative alternatives to suspension.

# APRIL

# NEWSLETTER

# 2001

## Courage, Culture & Confidence Themes at Summit

*2nd Annual SLV Peer Mediator Summit  
Adams State College, Alamosa  
Wednesday, March 21, 2001*

The event space, a spacious carpeted room in the College Center, was adorned with colorful banners donated by local artist Mettje Swift. Last year's student "graffiti wall" sat next to this year's "peace wall," along with a table full of markers, stickers and other art materials. It was as if we had decorated a fishbowl, full of sunlight, colorful plants and brilliant fish. We wanted the space to convey to the teens and their sponsors a sense of how valued and appreciated they are.

VORP volunteers and Board members greeted the participants as they arrived. We directed students to the Peace Wall, where they could create and post their own images of peace. Our new college intern, Jeremy, circulated with a microphone, recording the event for coverage on KRZA, our community radio station. Meanwhile school sponsors met one another – some for the first time – and began trading questions, pointers and stories about their own programs.

65 high school mediators and 10 adults sponsors from Alamosa, Centauri, Centennial, Center, Moffat, Monte Vista and Sargent High Schools – representing 5 counties throughout the San Luis Valley – showed up for the day's events. After a warm welcome and opening activities, Sue Niedringhaus and Brian Harper, both

actors, comedians and mediators from the Denver area, launched into their improv theater workshop, "Telling Our Stories about Peace." "We're asking you to be courageous today," they began. "If you're going to do or say something, do it from your heart. Say it with gusto. Take the risk to put yourself out there."

They began the session with examples of "story-telling" strategies from theater. Intermixed groups of students were then given peacemaking stories submitted by participants prior to the Summit. The students' task was to transform the written pieces into drama, using different techniques to bring them to life and convey their deepest meaning. Groups of students from communities as distinct as Sargent, San Luis, La Jara and Moffat were given just 20 minutes to create these "skits."

The performances were astounding. Some were done without words, while others put words to movement and rhythm. Although they enacted stories of teen conflict and resolution from specific school environments, they seemed to resonate with all of us.

Below: Shirley Atencio facilitates a work group, made up of Centennial, Monte Vista, Sargent, Alamosa and Centauri peer mediators, in the morning drama session

Following the drama workshop, we asked the students to talk with one another about their views on school discipline and community justice. In small groups they talked about whether their school disciplinary codes were fair and evenly enforced. We also asked if they felt safe in their schools and communities, and whether they felt that certain groups of kids were singled out in either of these environments.

We were surprised by the teens' eagerness to discuss these issues with one another across typical school boundaries. We attribute much of their openness to the tone of trust, honesty and risk-taking set by the morning's activities. Their discussions and surveys pointed to a general sense of unfairness in how discipline and dress codes are implemented and enforced in most settings, particularly the targeting of certain groups. We plan to continue this discussion in the future, both with students and adults in the broader community.

If the morning session emphasized courageousness, the depth and importance of each person's story, and creativity as a deepening force, the afternoon session epitomized all of this. Mike Ipiotis, Zimbabwe Nkenya, "Kung," "Dan Polanco, Melissa Lozano, "Robzilla" and "Stunt Man" arrived from Phoenix, Albuquerque, and Los Angeles. Their coordinated arrival felt like a minor miracle, and the rest was icing on the cake. Within minutes of their arrival, the turntables were scratching, the beat-box going, the teens captivated. It stayed that way through two hours of poetry, b-boy (break) dancing, and straight-talking about the importance of *telling your story*. Whether through words, rhythm, dance or music, it all seemed to be about courage. Courage to call poetry about your abuelita "hip hop," courage to put your culture on your sleeve with pride and dignity, and courage to open your heart to see wisdom beyond color, age or culture.

The students were encouraged to participate. Gerald Rodriguez, a mediator from Centennial Schools in San Luis, rapped along with Mike "360" to the beats of an upright base and scratching turntables, while two dancers performed "urban judo" to awed students in the middle of the circle. The rest of us were enthralled.

We concluded the afternoon by giving out awards and reflecting on the day. Eunique Medina and Jesseray Trujillo from San Luis, and Rosa Villegas and Rocio Urbina from Sargent, each received "Above and Beyond" awards for assisting VORP with training and role playing during the past months. Several other mediators and teams received awards for their visible commitment to peacemaking during the last year.

So what made this a "Peer Mediator" Summit? Where were the key note speakers? The mediation role plays and practice sessions? The round table talks about diversity?

What we have learned was summed up by one teen evaluation comment: *"Each year there should be an artistic base to convey these messages."* Other comments demonstrated that creative expression imparted more than words alone ever could:

*"Today I learned to believe in myself." "I learned to see through judgments." "I learned how to be more courageous and trust in myself." "I learned a lot about teamwork." "I realized that a lot of problems that other schools have are similar." "I hope to have the courage and dedication to model myself like today's presenters!" "I hope that each mediator will carry these messages into everyday life."*

AMEN!

- Ryan Golten, SLV-VORP School Program Coordinator & Summit Organizer

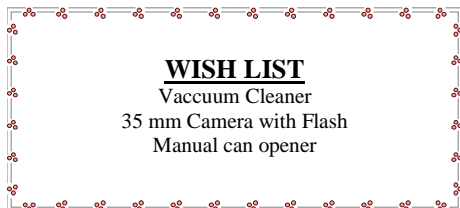


Gerald Rodriguez, a peer mediator from San Luis, performs with Organic Ghetto Soundsystem at the Peer Mediator Summit.

## TALES FROM THE TABLE

"No, you can't come in!" This was our greeting at our second family interview involving an harrassment charge between two young (16 and 17 years old) parents who were living, on and off, with each of their parents. The first family was happy to see us. The interview went well with the grandparents and the young dad. They were open to our services. The grandmother in the second family had been hurt before by agency "help" and was not open to speak to us. That afternoon her daughter had called and asked us to come for the initial interview so as to set up a joint meeting and mediation with her and her daughter's dad. Through perseverance, patience, humor, and good listening on everyone's part we were able to join with this angry grandmother. She allowed us to explain our program and service and to speak to her daughter. A joint meeting was arranged to discuss and develop a mediated contract between the young parents to be presented in court the next week. This grandmother turned out to be a fun person, a loving parent. The next week, after the joint meeting, we went to show the families the thoughtful agreement that the young couple had developed with our help. We were welcomed in both grandparents' homes amid laughing and celebration. Such is the power of communication – to move a position, change an attitude, and open the door to hearing each other's needs.

**Editor's Note:** As a matter of policy, VORP does not normally mediate these types of harrassment or domestic violence cases. Our juvenile referrals do occasionally involve single incidents of teen-on-teen minor assault, or requests by the court to work with extended family issues following a teen-on-teen incident.



*"We all know about prophetic speaking, but prophetic listening means listening to others in such a way that we draw out of them the seeds of their own highest understanding, of their own obedience, of their own vision, that they themselves may not have known were there. Listening can draw forth out of people things that speaking to them cannot. "*

*(Elise Boulding, New Call to Peacemaking Conference, Dartmouth College, 1980.)*

*Susan Eldredge—2001 Counseling Advocate of the Year  
Colorado School Counselor Association Award*

**On 4/10/01, the Colorado School Counselor Association named Susan Eldredge the 2001 Counseling Advocate of the Year. Susan works for the Alamosa County Department of Social Services and her work supports the counselors at Ortega Middle School and Evans Intermediate School by offering therapeutic groups for children in the school setting. Mention was also made of Susan's work with the WRAP Committee, helping children at risk of placement out of home, and her work as a board member and volunteer mediator with SLV- VORP. Congratulations!**

## VORP CALENDAR

- COMMUNITY MEDIATOR TRAINING at the Sacred Heart Church in Alamosa—JUNE 8TH & 9TH. Call Paula at 589-5255 for more info.
- *VORP Volunteer Mediators and Board Members—MARK YOUR CALENDARS!!!!!! We will be having a mediator get-together & BBQ following our training on JUNE 9TH. This will also be a farewell party for Ryan Golten who will be heading to law school and a welcoming party for our new staff members. More information will follow, but please mark your calendars TODAY!*
- VORP will be hosting a 2-3 hr. workshop with a specialist in police/school relations, who has been coordinating an innovative “alternatives to suspension” program in Loveland. The workshop will be in the May 21-23 timeframe. Call us at 589-5255 for more details

### SLV VORP SUPPORTERS

- Please add me to the mailing list for the next mediator training
- I am enclosing a tax deductible contribution for \$ \_\_\_\_\_
- I am enclosing the name & phone # of a church or civic organization that may be interested in a presentation about VORP

SLV-VORP is a member of Valley Community Fund



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