

Roots of Positive Peer Culture: Harry Vorrath – The Man and the Myth

Richard Quigley

Harry Vorrath is widely recognized as the founder of Positive Peer Culture (PPC) which seeks to reverse the adversarial climates common in programs for troubled youth. In contrast to adult-imposed behavior modification, PPC enlists challenging youth as peer helpers to create a climate of respect, responsibility, and empowerment. A long-time colleague of Vorrath provides an inside perspective on the pioneer behind this positive paradigm.

For those people involved in the field of peer group treatment, the name Harry Vorrath will generally evoke an interesting response. Harry Vorrath is not a person you meet and easily forget. He is the founder and developer of the treatment modality called Positive Peer Culture. This brief story will not dispel some of the myths surrounding Harry's fascinating career, but it may help clarify his leadership role in a most difficult field.

Harry had his high school education in the Canadian Provinces, served in the U.S. Marine Corps, and attended theological seminary in Iowa and Ohio. During college and his early work years, he focused on working with troubled adolescents and the programs that served this population. From 1957 through 1967, he honed his group treatment skills working in Ohio, Kentucky, and the District of Columbia with youthful offenders and the more sophisticated delinquents.

During these years, he expanded his ideas and theories with his graduate internship at Highfields Residential Treatment Center in Hopewell, New Jersey, where Guided Group Interaction (GGI) was in practice. He was impressed with the results of the process but was convinced attitudinal change would be even more dramatic if the goal was positive (a productive life) rather than negative (threat of time in the "big house").

Harry came to the field of corrections at a time when few people were advocates of problematic youth. With a master's degree, an uncanny ability to mobilize youth, and an obsession to give troubled youth the hope that life could be better, he went to work for the Department of Child Welfare in Kentucky. While change is often a taboo word to youth, Harry Vorrath knew then that "wounded self-esteem's heal best and revolt less in a caring, giving atmosphere." He was prepared to demonstrate that the hard-line approach was counterproductive and that personal involvement produced positive change. Kentucky Village was the first state correctional institution to undergo that painful change under Harry's direction.

Harry was often called to quell some of the most difficult disturbances. Such was the call that took him to Minnesota as consultant to the Department of Corrections. He directed the implementation of peer group treatment at the juvenile training school in Red Wing and other facilities under the direction of the department. During his years in Minnesota, as associate professor at the University of Minnesota, he was director of Project Newgate, a group interaction program for maximum security prisoners at the State Reformatory in St. Cloud. Newgate was named after a London prison credited with starting prison reform a century ago.

In the early seventies, Harry founded and became president of the Center for Group Studies, which consulted and trained others in the use of Positive Peer Culture. This action began an odyssey of development that continued over twenty years in more than twenty states, including Kentucky, Minnesota, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Missouri, West Virginia, Virginia, South Dakota, Nebraska, Texas, North Carolina, Louisiana, Illinois, Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Alaska, Northwest Territories, and several Canadian Provinces.

During much of this whirlwind tour of the continent, there were many battlegrounds in which Harry and his staff became embroiled. They seemed to be on a crusade to make positive changes in juvenile programs everywhere, to right the thousands of documented cases of institutional abuse throughout the United States.

State correctional systems especially can be very slow to grow and change, even when the need is obvious. Within many states, he found juvenile facilities using crude and inhumane forms of treatment with the adolescents in their care. Racially segregated housing, prison uniforms, toilet facilities visible to all, extended periods of isolation, sexual abuse among youthful offenders, punitive punishment, and extensive physical and verbal abuse by staff are only some examples of the wrongs that demanded change.

The Center for Group Studies was not intimidated by conditions they were often called to change. To create a higher standard of treatment for youth, they had to deal with existing staff and some very tough delinquents resistant to change, governmental bureaucracies, and politicians. This would be an overwhelming task for any organization, but even more so for a small, not-for-profit organization operating on grants or other unstable state funding sources. When you consider the massive job the Center for Group Studies was attempting, it is clear that a great deal of determination and strength was necessary at the helm.

It seems fair to say that Harry Vorrath and his organization have created a very significant impact on this country's juvenile justice system. It might also be fair to surmise that this impact has gone relatively unnoticed and unheralded. Under Vorrath's leadership, the Center for Group Studies single-handedly

developed new cutting-edge peer group treatment programs in state juvenile institutions and in countless other public and private treatment centers as well. Public schools in several cities in the United States and Canada had the foresight to see the need for peer group programs for their students.

As Harry moved from state to state, project to project, and battle to battle, his reputation grew. In some circles it grew in a very positive light, while in others he developed a number of critics. There was no question that Harry was extremely tough and demanding. He was a no-nonsense mentor, secure in his knowledge of what needed to be done. Harry's intense and combative style became well known throughout the field of juvenile justice.

Harry's critics labeled him as outspoken (he was), strong-willed (no doubt), and too controversial (definitely). Other adjectives were used to describe the man, and many intriguing stories, tremendous rumors, and assorted tales circulated through the field that may have been both fact and fiction. It was no secret that he had no love for the more clinical type social worker, psychologist, or psychiatrist who performed treatment from a notepad and only during limited office hours. He would not pass up the chance to verbally spar with them, or in some cases, actually chastise them in open debates. This chastisement also extended to correction officials, counselors, administrators, teachers, and any adult in a position to make a positive impact for youth but could not, or would not, commit to it for whatever reason. His defense was that children must come first and he would protect them and their rights against anyone and against all odds. He was never afraid to question any program modality, treatment technique, or personal motive that might be harmful to young people in out-of-home care. Those who worked with him could verify that he worked endless hours, days, and nights in his determination to assure that all troubled youth receive safe, caring, and effective treatment.

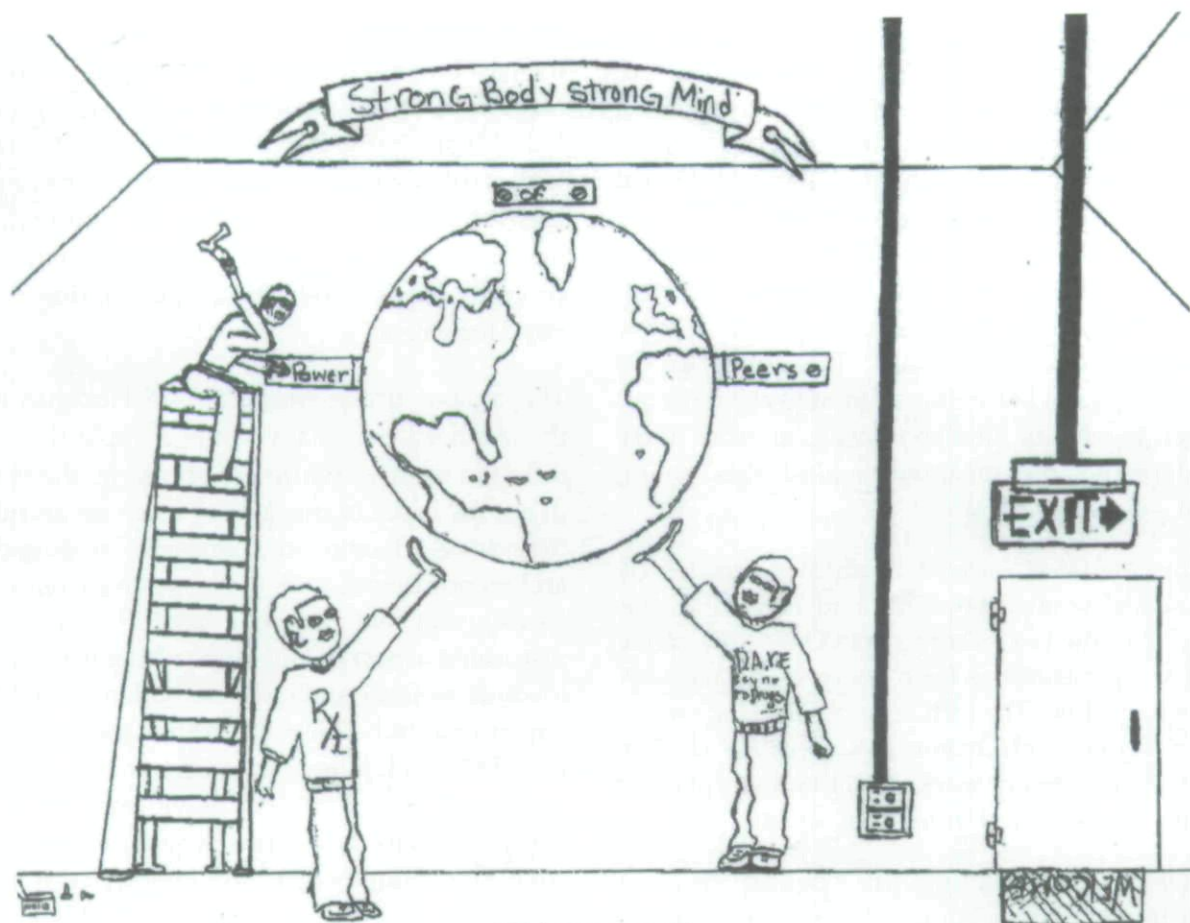
Few people questioned Harry's ability to organize youngsters and get them to work on problems and accomplish wonderful things. He would stand up to the toughest delinquents, outnumbered ten to one, in extremely risky situations, yet manage to come out of the fray unharmed. He remained confident in the face of danger. On other occasions, he would weep with troubled young people and share their

hurt as if he were their father. There seemed to be no bounds to his energy, commitment, determination, and tenacity.

Harry Vorrath has made his mark by pioneering a treatment model that grants respect, responsibility, and empowerment to young people. He has helped us understand the powerful impact peer influence has on youth and how to change the negative influence to the positive. His book, *Positive Peer Culture*, co-authored with Larry Brendtro, helped spread PPC throughout the United States and the world.

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