

A PARTNERSHIP COMMITMENT DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

Margaret R. Frimoth, PhD

Abstract

Riane Eisler challenges us to identify and embrace partnership relationships in every aspect of our lives – personal, social, cultural, environmental, and economic. Her trove of written work and public appearances shape a vision of our greater selves working together to achieve more than the sum of our separate lives. Now, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the reality of overwhelming separation, grief, loss, and social distancing begs the question: Is it truly possible to achieve partnership values? Sometimes, we need to step away from news reports and social media to seek comfort in the stories that make positive differences in our lives. In this article, the author shares a story, more than three decades in the making, of a small group of committed volunteers who tackle a most difficult and disturbing form of oppression – child sexual abuse. An annual camp program, first requested by child survivors themselves, is deeply linked to partnership system ideologies. The Victory Over Child Abuse (VOCA) Camp story actualizes partnership values by firmly wrapping them around a tenacious vision of intentionally safe community. When communities commit to partnership systems, healing and non-violence become the norm, social transformation is possible, and children are safe.

Key words: Partnership; domination; child sexual abuse; transformation; intentional safety

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INTRODUCTION

We live in communities with families and cultures that are highly influenced by, if not driven by, the dominant values of the times. Social-economic values, community

standards, and family convictions are all impacted by a foundation of systems. Some systems are visible. Some are indiscernible. There are attempts to shift systems toward the power of equitability, social-emotional health, and prosperity. These endeavors are often challenged by an infiltration of dominant ideals that re-establish principles and practices of oppression, regression, and repression. Despite ever-evolving aspirations to create non-violent cultures, domination seems to gain momentum, resulting in a repetitive re-creation of dominant culture. Are equitable systems possible? Is it worth the seemingly endless effort to transform reoccurring systems that rely on domination? I believe so. I find hope and direction in the voluminous work of Riane Eisler and her research on and commitment to Partnership Systems (Eisler, 1987, 2019).

My intent in writing this article is to describe the efforts of a small but committed group of individuals who model partnership as a means to eliminate child sexual abuse. The annual Victory Over Child Abuse (VOCA) Camp maintains a steadfast reverence for innately human connection, understanding, and empathy as the foundation of the organization, rather than defer to the learned systems of domination.

REFLECTION

As you read the article, please take time to think carefully about the concepts, the words, and the ideas while using a partnership lens. Without it, the words may seem typical, even trite. Too often our culture either dismisses the needs of children or offers simplistic, sappy generalizations about our love for children. While we want to believe children are happy, safe, and loved, there are far too many medical records, social service reports, and community service provider statistics that tell a different and deeply disturbing story. According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), a person in the United States is sexually assaulted every 73 seconds, and a child is sexually assaulted every nine minutes. Five out of every 1,000 perpetrators serve prison time for the crime of sexual assault. Despite a decrease in the rate of

reported sexual assault and rape incidents since 1993, the number of children identified as victims of *substantial or indicated* sexual abuse remains at nearly 60,000 assaults annually. Within the general public, Americans aged twelve and older endure 433,648 sexual assaults or rapes annually (RAINN, 2015).

It is timely to compare the seemingly incurable condition of sexual assault with the current devastation caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic. The virus has ravaged our lives and killed more than 500,000 people in the US in one year. As horrendous as the virus is, there has been an extensive response, including the development of vaccines to reduce deaths and control the virus within a year or two. The sexual violence pandemic, in comparison, has existed for decades. Sexual violence damages or destroys more than 400,000 lives annually in the US, and has done so for generations. There are no well-funded national or international task forces. No daily reports from experts. No daily counts. The elimination of sexual violence needs no vaccine. It relies only on a shift in thinking to stop the behavior. Yet, it continues. It is through this lens that I write.

VICTORY OVER CHILD ABUSE - AN ANNUAL CAMP PROGRAM

The Victory Over Child Abuse (VOCA) Camp story begins more than thirty years ago in a small basement office in a rural area of the Pacific Northwest. The stark gray cement walls resemble the gray wet days that abound. In this room, however, the environment is made cozier by children's artwork displayed on the walls next to several empowerment posters. A thick rug on the floor adds further warmth. The room is used for weekly support groups: parenting groups for adults, groups for kids in foster care, and the groups I facilitate for child survivors of sexual abuse. Each of my groups is distinguished by common ages and genders. On one particular day, during a group for girls between the ages of eight and twelve, a timid voice arose during an art activity and mused a seemingly small desire. "I wish there was a camp just for us." The room hushed. Drawing pens slowed and the shuffling of papers quieted. Faces looked in the

direction of the voice, which continued, “A camp for us so we could just play and we wouldn’t have to hide what happened to us.” Silence. Then again, “It wouldn’t be a secret anymore.” Another soft voice offered, “And nobody would care about what had happened to us.” After another moment of stillness, a third voice added, “And we wouldn’t care because we wouldn’t have to remember.”

“Yeah,” whispered the group in a near unison exhale. Then, in a strangely automatic manner, they abruptly returned to their art projects. But for me, time slowed in that fleeting moment. The girls spoke truth to a power that existed without form or identity, yet it held infinite control over their lives. Most of the time, they dared not speak their truth, dared not think honestly about their experiences, their feelings, their reactions. It was easier to talk *tough* to hide insecurities, laugh at fears, or shoulder the blame because *they* should have made the abuse stop. Child survivors regularly describe tactics that perpetrators employ to blame *them* for the abuse, and then threaten retaliation on siblings, or promise further punishment, violence, destruction of the family, and loss of parental love. What chance does a child have to counteract adult violence, collusion, and justifications? How can a nine-year-old stand up to an adult bully? What thirteen-year-old is able to deconstruct intimidation and manipulation, especially when there may be benefits to remaining silent and or to acquiesce? Yet, during that group meeting, in that singularly courageous moment, the truth spoken aloud by one child revealed an interconnected longing, an internal strength and a persistent hope for a time when what happened to them could no longer define their lives.

At the moment of truth-telling, the room reverberated with electricity that was now quickly dissipating into the ordinary. Colored markers doodling on paper and sounds of mumbled chatter began to crescendo. The richness of that one moment needed to be honored before it faded into the norm. Truth-telling exists to be of use. I glanced at my co-facilitator, her eyes wide and watching. I took a breath and then asked with

matter-of-fact curiosity, “What would your camp look like?” Truth-telling whirled back into the room electrified in expectation. Lively proclamations, punctuated with giggles and table slaps filled the room with imagined experiences of singing songs around the campfire, eating s’mores, swimming without embarrassment, laughing without fear, crafting, and canoeing. Followed by tempered hopes – sleeping in cabins with other girls without worrying about having a nightmare, or not getting into trouble if you wet the bed. Not being afraid in the dark. Not having to hide in the bathroom with the door locked.

If, at that time, I’d had more group facilitation experience, I would not have been surprised by the sudden, earnest yearning of young eyes all focused keenly in my direction, pleading for a camp. Just for them. It was my move. I could change a bit of the system to nurture healing or remain wedged into the singular role of nice group facilitator.

PARTNERSHIP LEADS TO PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION

The moment was overwhelmingly transformational for me. The truth-telling energy jolted us all toward a belief that the healing process could be better, more honest, and maybe it could create safer families. But most overwhelming to me was the recognition that nothing in my job impelled me to do anything but take credit for the skill used to accomplish a feel-good, solid moment - a group “aha!” during that meeting. That was the professional expectation metric. That was not, however, all that the children expected from me. But would my supervisor support the camp idea? I could not know this then, but within two years, my position would be eliminated, outsourced, and replaced with an over-reliance on minimally trained community volunteers. I was not aware of the pending changes, and at that moment, the children’s request for a camp was eminently important. Their request was brilliant and honored the young survivors’ deep wisdom. They knew, internally, perhaps instinctually, what they needed to heal. They knew how to recover from sexual abuse trauma. But they needed help. They were

asking for assistance. Isn't the point of truth-telling to challenge and change the current social structure? Isn't reconciliation an act of integrity, accountability, and justice? I felt deep admiration for the power of group work facilitation and the willingness of the children to be honest and frank. Their genuine request was a call to action, to create a different kind of camp, one that was designed to awaken an internal healing process, establish safety, and rekindle wholeness.

PARTNERSHIP IN ACTION

Logistically, planning a camp is fairly clear. A one-time grant was written to provide funding for a camp for children. Yet, I was aware that throughout the planning process, a persistent undercurrent lingered around the decisions; an undeniable theme emerged as we designed activities and developed objectives. The children's camp idea was, in reality, the symbolic breaking apart of a long-standing silence that surrounded generations of sexual abuse trauma. By acknowledging the rampant reality of sexual abuse, especially as it existed within our own rural community, the camp was clearly stepping outside the traditional institutions of mental and physical health. This particular camp leaned toward justice. In essence, the children were demanding their right to be safe at home, at school, and throughout their community. Could a camp create a new story about healing from abuse? If we viewed abuse as a form of oppression, could healing occur if power was only used appropriately, safely, and caringly? What if an entire community committed itself to an integrated web of intentional safety to ensure a healing environment? Could we establish what Riane Eisler describes as *partnership in action* (Eisler, 2000) and create a community where child abuse was inconceivable?

Emotional undercurrents ebbed and flowed as the co-facilitator and I gathered together a core group of trusted women. We discussed ways to create a camp just for child survivors. We shared our personal stories of victimization and dreamed of childhood

and adult aspirations for a safer world. Our sharing helped us better understand how to actualize a safe camp for children. However, the children remained the key decision makers as we developed camp ideas. We shared and discussed ideas during group meetings and consulted with children throughout the entire planning process. In time, we were ready to select, screen, and train a wide cross-section of adult community volunteers, survivors and non-survivors, men and women. Together, we named the camp *Victory Over Child Abuse (VOCA)* and breathed life into the dream of a camp for girl survivors of sexual abuse. The next year, the camp continued, strengthened by a year of evaluation and a heart-filled obligation to children who firmly requested another camp. By the third year, two camps existed – one for girls and another for boy survivors of sexual abuse.

Because the camp training identifies child abuse as a form of oppression, many adults feel welcome and validated by the training and the camp community despite personal experiences of injustice and ostracization. VOCA Camp adults are diverse – racially, economically, religiously, in their expressions of gender fluidity, and often, as survivors of abuse. The VOCA Camp community understands that sexual abuse is not confined to one group. The camp design, based on a commitment to intentional safety and an intra-sectional understanding of oppression, extends safety to individuals who have experienced abuse and injustice. While the training acknowledges that all oppressions are interconnected, the camp focuses specifically on the needs of children and their quest for healing.

There is an unintended benefit of the camp training and participation in the camp community. Personal resolution can occur during the process of devoting camp time to children's healing. We discuss this during training as a possibility, though not as an expectation. This can be a difficult, yet key concept to understand. Our 30-year camp history repeatedly demonstrates that personal experiences of trauma resolution are authenticated as an outcome of serving others - in this case, adults serving children. In the VOCA Camp community, we define *abuse* as *the misuse of power*. In the world

around us, misuses of power occur so often that we may participate in the misuse of power without realizing it. The goal at VOCA Camp is to recognize differences in power, to distinguish between the use and misuse of power, and to strive toward shared power, caring, and nurturance.

From the outside, VOCA Camps may look like other camps, but there are several, distinct differences, in large part due to our goal of enacting partnership systems. Four ideologies emerged during our early years and remain steadfast today:

- Children have an absolute right to safety and non-violence.
- Healing is possible.
- Survivors know what they need to heal.
- “How we do it is what we get.”

In essence, when adults adhere to the belief that children have an absolute right to safety and non-violence, and when every interaction is viewed through the lens of partnership, then the responsibility rests on adults to share their power *with* rather than maintain power *over* children (and others) to ensure safety. When we accomplish this, the entire community benefits because everyone experiences intentional safety. This is different than striving for perfection. We do not strive for perfection. However, we constantly evaluate whether we are in tandem with our ideologies. For instance, we may reflect on whether we can we say, “No” to each other safely. If not, then we are replicating tactics of domination that deny self-efficacy. Is it safe to make a mistake and take responsibility for it? If not, then the community is leaning toward systems of domination, which means we are supporting abuse more than safety, even if unintentionally.

Historically, about the same time that VOCA Camps were forming, Riane Eisler published her quintessential book, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future*

(Eisler, 1987). A constant theme in Eisler's writings is *sharing power with* rather than *maintaining power over* others. VOCA Camps reinforce this theme by their most obvious difference from other camps by assigning an adult "*buddie*" to every child camper. The term *buddie* is used interchangeably for both adults and children. We are all buddies at camp. A buddie is a trusted friend. Children and adults are safe buddies within the context of cabin groups. In this way, VOCA Camps focus on trust-building in primary relationships as replicated in buddie relationships as well as in family-sized cabin groups. The concept of trust building is amplified by the entire camp community, generating a typical camp ratio of three adults for every child. Rather than experiencing this ratio as oppressive, children thrive within a supportive array of caring and attentive adults.

Trained volunteer buddies circulate throughout each camp, practicing the camp philosophy in their roles as cooks and kitchen assistants, providing nutritional offerings and ensuring that healthy snacks are available any time. This is an important aspect of VOCA Camps because many camp children experience significant food insecurity. Body image issues and food issues are common, and the continuous availability of fruit, bread and jam, nuts, milk, and herbal tea provide nurturance and alternatives to common, media-hyped sugary fillers.

Camp adults share recreational skills as lifeguards who promote safe swimming activities, canoeing, and fishing in the lake. Flag football and basketball are offered (because the children really wanted these games at camp) but with a goal of *doing your best* rather than winning. Morning Circle presents alternatives to competitive sports by encouraging whole-group, non-competitive activities. The camp nurses use their SuperPowers to soothe bumps and bruises with colorful bandaids and reinforce safe care with words of encouragement. Craft Queens coordinate arts and crafts projects, from beaded butterfly pins to birdhouses to tie-dyed shirts. Completed crafts are announced and celebrated at mealtimes. Camp leaders model constant communication and affirmation that defines an empowering, safe, partnership community. Adult roles at

camp are based on interests, skills, and attributes rather than on gender, except for buddie matches, which correspond to the child's gender identification. Adult volunteers model holistic relationships by continuously practicing healthy communication with each other and with children in a collective effort to promote and maintain an intentionally safe community.

RECKONING WITH A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

VOCA Camps have a decades-long history of wonderful stories along with experiences of organizational successes, struggles, internal and external conflict resolution, and regular financial strain. Still, it's a story of determination and intentionality that remains steadfast, which was needed this past year during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Annual camp planning began in early February, 2020. The word *pandemic* was edging into the news but was not yet a regular news segment. It was hard to imagine in February that VOCA Camps might be impacted. Our camps are scheduled every Fall. It was believed that the pandemic would be resolved by then. Still, the Core Committee (akin to the Board of Directors) decided to cancel monthly in-person support groups, replacing the in-person meetings with letters, phone calls, and activity boxes mailed to the campers.

By mid-March, summer camps across the nation were being cancelled. Should we cancel the Fall VOCA Camps? We could not decide. By the end of March, the question was posed again: With what we know now, should we cancel 2020 camps? The group consensus was a resounding "No." Why? Because children relied on camp. They expected it. We retold the story shared by an early adult volunteer, also a survivor of sexual abuse. She shared her personal story of a traumatizing childhood, yet she knew that every year she would be sent to her grandmother's house, which meant time away

from her abusive family. Growing up, she anticipated the visit all year, surrounding herself with memories of sitting safely on her grandmother's lap, recovering a bit of security in her life. That time was life-saving. She told us that VOCA Camp reminded her of sitting on her grandmother's lap.

The volunteer's story expanded the discussion. If children relied on VOCA Camps, then it was the responsibility of the Core Committee to make it happen somehow, even during a global pandemic. But how? Could we offer a one-day camp on site? It would be delightful to be together, to reconnect for a few hours. Everyone would be required to wear masks and maintain social distancing. But, no, we realized that if we conducted any activity at the regular camp location, the children would expect VOCA Camps to be and feel the same. In reality, it could not be the same. VOCA Camps had to be different in scope but still represent camp as closely as possible. We asked the question differently: How can we make VOCA Camp *be* VOCA Camp without being *at* VOCA Camp? What was most important for the children? We asked. They responded.

Arts and crafts were top of the list. The annual tie-dyeing activity produces incredibly colorful t-shirts worn proudly at Camp. Craft projects of any kind. Other important memories from camp included buddies sharing time together, home-cooked food, safe hugs, laughter, and songs. Could we somehow take camp to kids? We thought of the successful monthly boxes that replaced the in-person group meetings. The idea of *VOCA Camp in a Box* emerged and caught on as an idea that might work. Adult buddies could personally deliver camp boxes filled with craft activities and food. This seemed possible, but only if families felt comfortable with deliveries by volunteers. Office volunteers contacted all campers from the previous three years (sometimes children miss or skip a year because of illness or school sports and we did not want to assume that they would not want a box). Families loved the idea. We began to hear about how important the monthly support group boxes were for VOCA kids. As we talked with parents we also realized that there were other children in the families who had not

attended VOCA Camp, but who needed to be included as we packed the boxes with food and activities. Since we were including the entire family, we needed large boxes!

The next step was to communicate with our VOCA community of volunteers. Deliveries to families would span the county, an area of just over 1,000 square miles. We would plan delivery routes along the main roads. It would be challenging, but *VOCA in a Box* seemed possible.

“Yes,” voiced a Core Committee member during a planning meeting. “We can do this.” All others promptly agreed. “Just like camp,” she continued. This particular Core Committee member attended camps annually from age six until she left for college. When she returned to the area, she attended the volunteer training and became a camp volunteer. Now, as a Core Committee member, she continued aloud with her thoughts. “We need to make sure the families have three meals each day, just like camp.” There was an audible gasp heard over the Zoom call. “And we need to plan enough VOCA Camp Boxes for more than one day to replicate camp as much as possible. The kids need to wake up thinking about VOCA Camp and knowing there will be VOCA food and VOCA activities for the day.” What had seemed keenly possible suddenly grew exponentially into a much larger project. After a pause, she concluded, “It’s what kids need. It’s what I would have needed.” The air filled with truth-telling.

One of VOCA Camps’ ideologies is, “How we do it is what we get.” The statement reminds us that end results reflect our planning – every step of the decision-making process, all areas of funding, and every action that results in camp activities. Every part of the process is as important as every other component. Each detail contributes to the finished product. Each individual involved in the process adds to the process.

Leadership tasks are designed to match the abilities of the volunteers. This hierarchical methodology – what Eisler terms *hierarchies of actualization* (Eisler & Fry, 2019, p.12,

103) – reflects shared power, cooperation, respect, and dedication to a partnered, community approach. To be aligned with our goals, the results must match our philosophy – children have an absolute right to safety and non-violence. They know what they need to heal. If camp leadership could not rise to this essential ideology, then we risked perpetuating harm because we limited our ability to think outside the norms and expectations of dominant culture. If we did not create VOCA Camps intentionally, aligned with partnership ideals, we risked inadvertently devaluing the children’s needs and claiming the project as our own success. Instead, we needed to engage in healthy relationships based on trust, equity, and empowerment, creating an empathy-based feedback loop that enables the camp community, wherever it takes place, to assess success most dramatically by *how it feels*. Children and adults alike call this *VOCA Magic*.

VOCA campers and adult volunteers have various life experiences along a vast continuum of ranked systems, from heavily domination-based systems to primarily partnership relationship systems. Despite multiple and overlapping differences in social, political, religious, economic, and cultural backgrounds, the quest for a safe community is discussed, modeled, evaluated and kept keenly alive through community education, volunteer training, and year-round events. Within the context of an intentionally safe community, children and adults experience partnership and healing. When the Core Committee member spoke the truth of her childhood experiences at VOCA Camp, she re-established an internalized vision of camp as different from the norm. Her message was clear, and despite the seemingly enormous tasks before the group, there was a deeply felt consensus to replicate VOCA Camp as much as possible by carefully planning, creating, and filling VOCA Camp boxes for more than one day for every VOCA family.

At this point in the planning, a call went out to all volunteers to decorate the boxes. Volunteers agreed and involved family members and friends in socially distanced, box-decorating parties. More camp ideas were generated during creative moments while

decorating boxes. More questions surfaced. How would we feed families three meals a day over the course of two days? Could we design a mobile tie-dye station? What crafts can be added to the boxes? Should we make a songbook for this camp? Will deliveries be made by individual buddies, or will we caravan the boxes to the camper's houses? How do we do all this while maintaining safe distancing? We relied on previous VOCA Camp planning and collaborative discussions to answer the questions.

For instance, for decades VOCA Camps have received generous donations from local businesses of bread from a local organic bakery, soup and pizzas from local restaurants, coffee for the adult volunteers from a local coffee roaster, and vegetables from the local co-op grocery store. This year, however, local restaurants have been devastated by pandemic shutdowns. Many are barely hanging on to their businesses. We could not ask for donations. However, when we reviewed VOCA Camp finances, we realized that since there were no costs for the camp rental this year, we could re-budget camp expenses to purchase food from the same businesses that typically donate to us. We could give back some of the generosity they have shown to us. Pancake breakfast supplies were purchased from the co-op, bread was purchased from the local bakery. We purchased specific restaurant-made lunch and dinner items sized for family needs. Our VOCA Camp Cook baked the favorite camp cookies and contributed them to the food donations. We coordinated restaurant food pick-up days and times with delivery times confirmed by families.

We planned to distribute boxes on two days to families over the course of two consecutive weekends. Depending on how many people were in the family, at least two boxes would be delivered – an activity box and one or more food boxes. As we communicated with families, we learned that many, though not all families were willing to drive to the VOCA Camp office to pick up boxes on one day. With this in mind, the Craft Queens figured out how to set up two tent areas, socially distanced and confidential, to be used as tie-dye stations. Families would arrive to pick up food on a

schedule that allowed campers to tie-dye their t-shirts within the perimeters of safe, social-distanced tents. The shirts, after soaking overnight, would be rinsed, washed and dried by volunteers, ready to be delivered the next day with the second round of VOCA Camp boxes. For those families unable to drive to town, tie-dye t-shirts would be made by volunteers and delivered along with the family boxes.

Songbooks were printed with a camp theme, *Never Give Up*. The songs and the act of singing is an important part of the Camp's mission because it underscores the process of finding one's voice and expressing emotions. The songbook's front and back covers, along with four additional pages, included photos of the many boxes created by volunteers. Craft projects were developed, supplies were ordered and packaged for each day. Origami, puzzles, and coloring and journal pages were all age-appropriately designed with specific children in mind. Volunteers found a fortune cookie-making company, Fancy Fortune Cookies, that inserts customized messages into the cookies (www.fancyfortunecookies.com). Orders were placed in time for VOCA Boxes to include cookies for the family with messages such as, *Never Give Up: You are smart and capable!* and *Never Give Up: You are Brave!* and *Never Give Up: You are enough!*

Almost instinctively, volunteers started greeting each other with *air hugs* to replace the *safe hugs* we practice at camp. A delivery schedule was established with routes and directions to houses throughout the county. *Safe pods* would caravan in separate cars to most of the houses. A small team of volunteers were assigned to children who lived more than an hour away from the office. The massive organization was paying off. We were on track for a successful camp year, or so we thought. Then, unpredictably, widespread and devastating fires exploded around Oregon. Wind dropped a smokey blanket across the region. The wind stalled. Orders to stay inside were announced by the County Health Department. Some VOCA volunteers lived in areas that were under fire evacuation watches. Camp activities were put on hold. We waited, but kept in contact with families. Ultimately, we decided to move forward with a revised schedule. All tie-

dyeing shifted to the second weekend. We had enough volunteers to distribute boxes over the first weekend once the air cleared a bit. VOCA Camp was still in operation.

In September 2020, during a global pandemic and a devastating fire season, VOCA Camp remained a success! The first day of home visits, the children were wide-eyed while watching the caravans of volunteers arrive and seeing the delivery of boxes of food and activities, and hearing camp sing-along songs sung from cars or circles outside houses. The second day, most children gleefully ran out to greet volunteers as soon as they heard the cars arriving and immediately joined the chorus. One camper, however, was waiting outside on his porch, and when he caught sight of the approaching caravan, we saw him run inside, only opening the door once we were all circled in front of his house and in full song. Then, he threw open the door and jumped out onto the porch throwing air hugs to us and dancing to the sounds of *a capella* voices joined in song. His Mom said that he'd been waiting all day, but wanted to feel surprised by our arrival. Other parents thanked us for caring for their children and for including the entire family. We received hand-drawn thank you notes from children when we arrived the second day.

One family's farm is located several miles outside of town. On the first home list, the VOCA camper remained reserved and quiet when the volunteers arrived and presented *VOCA in a Box*. The second day, however, she hosted a tour around the farm, pointing out her favorite chickens and sharing the names of all the goats. When we left, she and her siblings waved air hugs while singing along with a camp song as we drove down the long gravel driveway and out of sight. About five minutes after we left the farm, a group text message was sent to all cars in the caravan. One car was returning to the farm to pick up a hand-painted thank you note that had been on the kitchen table, waiting for our arrival, but had been forgotten when VOCA Camp volunteers arrived at the farm. The child insisted that the card be hand-delivered. The urgency to reciprocate an act of gratitude was viewed by VOCA volunteers as part of the healing process. It required immediate attention. The only response was to return and whole-

heartedly accept the gift. See the photos of VOCA Camp in a box at the end of the article.

NEVER GIVE UP

VOCA Camp training links the oppression of children with all other oppressions. Wherever sexual abuse exists, injustice prevails. The sexual abuse of children is a powerful tactic used to maintain domination. When children are expendable, then life itself is devalued. We all suffer in systems of domination, and the environment around us suffers because we are forced to limit our full potential as caring, compassionate, brilliant human beings. The continuing exploitation of the most vulnerable is a clear sign that systems of domination are in control. Whether seen or invisible, a system of ranking exists. Abuse exists. Violence exists. The power of healing is trivialized, judged as a “snowflake” response associated with those deemed weak and expendable. But this does not have to be our story. Violence and oppression are not innate human norms. Nor do violence and oppression represent a sustainable future.

The VOCA Camp story actualizes partnership values by firmly wrapping them around a tenacious vision of an intentionally safe community. In our hearts, VOCA Camp volunteers believe that children have an absolute right to safety and non-violence. Partnership systems demand constant processing and evaluation. It is hard work, but there is tremendous delight in sharing stories about accomplishments and achievement rather than conquests. Perhaps, Dr. Eisler frames this best when she states: *Contrary to what we're taught, life is not a zero-sum game. Energy is never destroyed, and love does not decrease in the giving – the more we give, the more of it we have to give* (Eisler, 2002, p. 208).

The VOCA Camp commitment, in its own small but dedicated manner, shifts social systems towards partnership. When communities commit to partnership systems,

healing and non-violence become the norm, social transformation is possible, and children are safe.

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Frimoth: Partnership Commitment During a Global Pandemic



Volunteers decorating VOCA Camp boxes.
(From author's archives, 2020).



Core Committee members (aka Tie-dye Queens) express VOCA love in their newly dyed onesies.
(From author's archives, 2020).



VOCA Core Committee members Light Up the Night as a planned activity during the first weekend of VOCA Camp in a Box, which included glow sticks for campers to use at a synchronized time. (From author's archives, 2020).



VOCA Camp custom-made fortune cookies. (From author's archives, 2020).



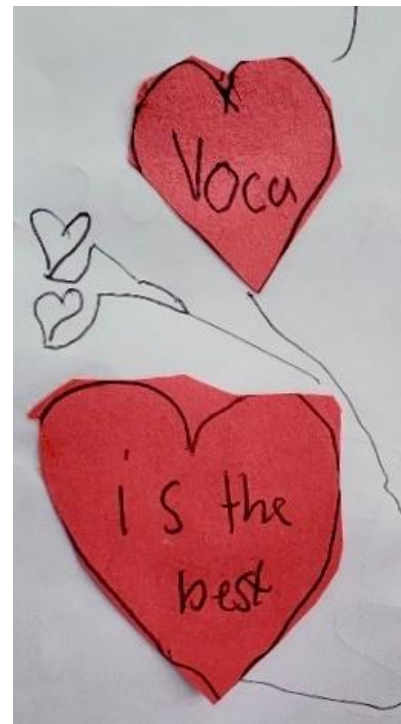
VOCA Camp boxes, lined up and ready to be packed with arts and crafts activities, songbooks, tie-dyed t-shirts, and food for VOCA Campers. (From author's archives, 2020).



Despite smoky skies, VOCA volunteers gather for last-minute instructions before delivering VOCA Camp boxes to families. (From author's archives, 2020).



VOCA Core Committee members and volunteers pose before traveling by caravan to campers' homes to sing and share VOCA Camp boxes with families. (From author's archives, 2020).



Thank you card made by a camper and given to volunteers on the second day of VOCA Camp box deliveries. (From author's archives, 2020).