

What
DEMOCRACY
looks like



Kuna, Idaho

*Where a community pulls
together to face growth*

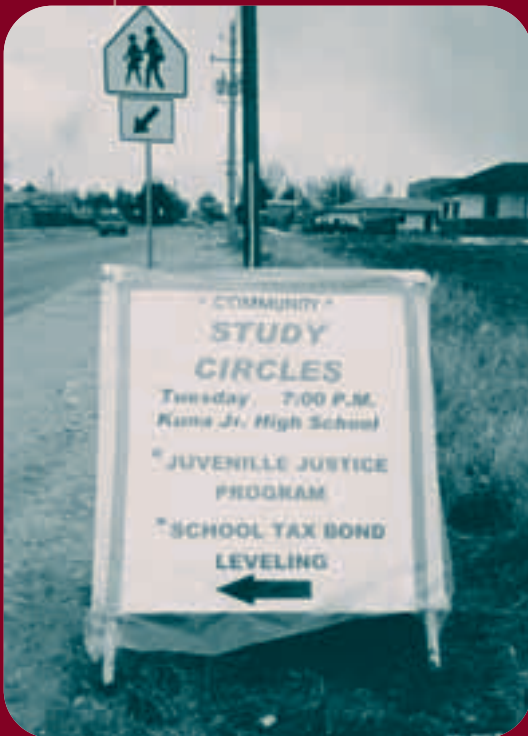


STUDY CIRCLES
RESOURCE CENTER

Helping People Work Together
For Creative Community Change

*"...Amid all this change and conflict,
Kuna has quietly initiated a unique
experiment in deliberative democracy."*

—Joe Goldman of the Kennedy School
of Government at Harvard



Kuna, Idaho

Where a community pulls together to face growth

Every weekday afternoon at rush hour, busy state Highway 69 feeds traffic from the bustling Boise metropolitan area south toward Kuna, Idaho. Low housing prices and an easy commute through Idaho's Treasure Valley are fueling Kuna's rise as one of the West's fastest growing communities. But as the five-lane highway turns into Kuna's two-lane main street, signs of small-town life remain plain to see. Kids ride their bikes, people chat on corners, and there's hardly a national chain retailer or restaurant in sight. On the edge of town, new subdivisions border fields still tilled by farmers.

Kuna may remain relatively small, but its recent growth has been staggering. In only 13 years, it more than quadrupled in size—from 1,955 in 1990, to 8,839 in 2003. And regional planners expect Kuna to have about 23,000 residents by 2020. So what does a small town do when it starts becoming big almost overnight? How can Kuna retain its relaxed, hometown atmosphere? How can schools keep up with surging enrollment? How can local businesses survive when big-box retail stores are a short drive up Highway 69? How can the city's infrastructure handle nonstop demand for new water and sewer lines?

Kuna faces many questions these days. Often, the answers—or at least a sense of direction on how to tackle ongoing issues—come through Kuna ACT (the Alliance for a Cohesive Community Team). Launched in the late 1990s, Kuna ACT is one of the oldest ongoing community-based study circle programs in the country. When a major issue emerges in Kuna, the odds are that local officials will call for a study circle to look into the matter.

Kuna's city limits sign still reads 5,382—its population in 2000—but nearly 10,000 people live here four years later.



Principles guiding study circles ...

- Involve *everyone*. Demonstrate that the whole community is welcome and needed.
- Embrace diversity. Reach out to all kinds of people.
- Share knowledge, resources, power, and decision making.
- Combine dialogue and deliberation. Create public talk that builds understanding and explores a range of solutions.
- Connect deliberative dialogue to social, political, and policy change.

A study circle ...

- is a small, diverse group of 8 to 12 people.
- meets together for several, two-hour sessions.
- sets its own ground rules. This helps the group share responsibility for the quality of the discussion.
- is led by an impartial facilitator who helps manage the discussion. He or she is not there to teach the group about the issue.
- starts with personal stories, then helps the group look at a problem from many points of view. Next, the group explores possible solutions. Finally, they make plans for action and change.

A study circle program ...

- is organized by a diverse group of people from the whole community.
- includes a large number of people from all walks of life.
- has easy-to-use, fair-minded discussion materials.
- uses trained facilitators who reflect the community's diversity.
- moves a community to action when the study circles conclude.

Study circles have thrived in Kuna despite contentious local politics and growth pressures. Joe Goldman, who researched Kuna’s study circles for the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, put it this way: “Kuna leaders have had to deal with an entirely new set of challenges and issues that had not been urgent in the past... Amid all this change and conflict, Kuna has quietly initiated a unique experiment in deliberative democracy.”

Toward better communication

When Doug Rutan arrived in Kuna to become superintendent of schools in 1996, he found a longstanding lack of communication among the town’s institutions: the city, the schools, the sheriff’s office, and others. Rutan had long been interested in finding ways to get people involved in public life, and he pulled together a team of local people who became the nucleus of Kuna ACT. In November 1998, six of them, including two high school student leaders, traveled to Kansas City to attend a seminar led by staff from the Study Circles Resource Center.

Based in Pomfret, Connecticut, SCRC works with hundreds of cities nationwide to help people solve community problems democratically. In Kansas City, the Kuna delegation learned how to conduct study circles—respectful conversations where a wide range of people can voice their concerns and come up with ideas for solutions they can work on together. “The timing was really good for us,” Rutan recalls. “We wanted to take Kuna ACT and really make it beneficial to the community.”

In the beginning, Kuna ACT faced some big obstacles. The district had purchased land for a new high school and would soon be floating a bond to fund construction. And, as Kuna became more of a bedroom community for Boise, there were fears that more urban problems—including drugs and teen pregnancy—were making their way to town.

City Councilwoman Laurale Neal, a Kuna ACT board member, had convinced two colleagues to support the budding study circle program with some city funding, but the

Former City Councilwoman Laurale Neal, left, and high school Student Body President Holly Keller, right, joined more than 160 adults and high school students in study circles.



TEENTALK



Leadership Class Mission:
As a voice for the students, we will inspire and involve our peers and administration to achieve excellence in ourselves and our community.

High school students joined the community's Teen Talk study circles. Participants planned a "senior prom" for teenagers and older Kuna residents to dress up and dance in a cross-generational celebration.

...study circles' structured, moderated format ensured respectful dialogue among the participants. Even if they still did not agree, Kuna residents understood better why their neighbors believed as they did.

other two council members—including the town's longtime mayor—objected. Critics also questioned Rutan's motives

in forming Kuna ACT. Beset by this political wrangling and last-minute, anti-bond coverage in the local newspaper, the proposal went down to defeat, as did two of the three Kuna ACT supporters on council.

But the study circle proponents were undeterred. When Kuna ACT held its formal kickoff on Sept. 30, 1999, just two weeks after the failed bond election, about 80 people showed up to take part in the conversations. During the next month, Kuna residents met five times and talked with one another as they never had before. Teen Talk study circles were held at the high school that same fall, though many students took part in the community-based effort, too. Together, the circles generated more than 100 action ideas, including improved communication between citizens and officials, public planning for growth, creating a community mission statement, boosting volunteerism, and much more. Participants even planned a "senior prom," with teenagers and older Kuna residents all invited to dress up and dance in a cross-generational celebration of their newfound sense of community. Kuna ACT was on its way.

The way Kuna does business

The following spring, Kuna ACT began holding monthly forums on topics of local interest. Because many Kuna residents preferred to meet only once or twice about an issue, they modified the study circle format. For the first hour, participants heard presentations on the month's designated issue. They then broke into circles to discuss the matter at hand and make action recommendations. Kuna ACT uses this same format today.

At the April 2000 forum, education re-emerged as the monthly topic; among those who attended were a number of people who had worked to defeat the school bond the previous fall. "I thought, 'this is going to get



The \$15.2 million bond funded the new Kuna High School, which was finalized with input from the April 2000 Kuna ACT forum on education.

ugly,” Rutan recalls. Instead, the people on hand found they truly were being asked for their input. The school board even postponed finalizing the next bond package until citizens had a chance to discuss whether it was necessary and, if so, how the proceeds should be spent.

The community-centered approach paid off. In September 2000, just a year after the defeat of the previous bond issue, a vote on the \$15.2 million bond measure easily surpassed the two-thirds majority Idaho requires to pass a school bond.

Over the next few years, study circles gradually became the way most public business gets done in Kuna. At first, city officials were wary, but Kuna ACT worked hard to establish itself as a nonpartisan group that simply wanted to encourage public input and facilitate discussions on Kuna’s future.

Rutan gradually backed away from his leadership role, and Arnette Johnson, a lifelong area resident, became coordinator. Rather than suggesting topics and convening study circles on its own, Kuna ACT looked to local government entities to request study circles. Because Kuna ACT never tried to set an agenda, local officials realized the organization had neither preconceived ideas nor axes to grind.

Moreover, Rutan says study circles’ structured, moderated format ensured respectful dialogue among the participants. Even if they still did not agree, Kuna residents understood better why their neighbors believed as they did.

Residents also learned there was much to be gained by simply getting together and talking. Program coordinator Arnette Johnson recalls how a study circle on disaster planning drew people from the fire department, city hall, the county emergency management team, schools, law enforcement, and churches. Each had crafted a disaster readiness plan, “ but none of them had

As this sign indicates, Kuna's study circle participants had a chance to discuss whether a school tax bond was necessary and, if so, how the proceeds should be spent. As a result, the city easily passed the vote on the \$15.2 million bond measure.





Leaders of Kuna ACT shared their experiences in a panel discussion at the 2003 Idaho Association of Cities annual conference. Clockwise from right: Belinda Gordon, Doug Rutan, Study Circles Resource Center Senior Associate Matt Leighninger, Zella Johnson and Arnette Johnson.

ever talked to the others before,” Johnson says. It was rewarding for each party to see the many local resources already in place and to know they could pull together in a crisis. According to longtime Kuna ACT volunteer Zella Johnson, (no relation to Arnette), better communication is the best thing that has come out of Kuna ACT. “That had never happened in this city before,” she says.

By 2002, city officials faced with any pressing issue were likely to say, “Let’s take it to study circles.” That year, the city’s planning and zoning board requested a study circle on its comprehensive plan. More than 60 people took part.

Afterward, Arnette Johnson reviewed their recommendations with the P&Z board, page by page. It’s not enough to gather the information, she says. Study circle participants need to know their ideas will reach the agencies that request the information and implement public policy. The study circle input was pivotal in many of the planners’ decisions, including reducing the size of a proposed industrial area and setting aside parks and open spaces.

Sharing their success

In 2003, Kuna ACT received a “Brightest Stars” award from Idaho Gov. Dirk Kempthorne “for exemplary service to the State of Idaho and for outstanding contributions to Idaho families and children.” That year, four Kuna ACT leaders and SCRC Associate Matt Leighninger presented a class on “The Kuna Experience” to Northwest Community Development Institute participants. Although Kuna is one of the smaller towns using study circles, its lessons are ones communities of all sizes can draw from.

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Says Zella Johnson, "I have three pieces of advice: Keep at it, keep at it, keep at it." If Kuna ACT leaders had quit during the early years, she notes, they'd never have known how successful the process would ultimately become. Leighninger cites in particular Zella Johnson's persistent efforts to maintain civil relationships even with Kuna ACT's most ardent critics. By keeping the lines of communication open, he notes, Kuna ACT leaders were eventually able to convince skeptics that study circles provide a fair arena for community conversations.

Now, even when study circles are not involved, the way community decisions are made is more collaborative. Early in 2004, Kuna faced a dilemma. The city's wastewater system had long been out of compliance with government regulations and inadequate to developers' demands. The city council decided to place a three-month moratorium on new building permits to give the city's infrastructure and planning process a chance to catch up.

It was a difficult decision to make, since the moratorium put some developers in a scheduling bind and temporarily cut permit revenues to the city coffers. The council's proactive move reflected the deliberative atmosphere study circles have created in Kuna and the way city officials and the public approach issues. "Study circles changed the dynamics of Kuna," says Zella Johnson, who was elected to city council in 2003. "I think because of the improved communication in the community, people understood why we needed the moratorium."

Kuna ACT is entering a new phase of its development. The original leaders have moved on and new volunteers have stepped forward, but the commitment to study circles principles remains strong. The group is always on the lookout for new innovations; recently, Kuna ACT applied for an AT&T grant that would

Kuna ACT members pose in front of a new community bulletin board that was installed at the recommendation of Kuna's study circles.



“... I realized this is where the community gets a voice” before decisions are made, rather than when it’s too late to do anything but complain.

—Kuna resident
Brenda Bishop
on study circles.

enable residents to take part in study circles using handheld wireless devices, even if their commuting schedules or family demands make it hard to attend in person.

And grass-roots dialogue, whether face-to-face or via telecommunications, remains at the heart of study circles. The mother of four young children, Brenda Bishop recently started attending study circles “because I realized this is where the community gets a voice” before decisions are made, rather than when it’s too late to do anything but complain. “This is where my kids are going to be growing up, so I want it to be the best place it can be,” says Bishop, who now serves as a liaison from the Hubbard Elementary School PTA and attends each study circle, whether the topic is education or not. “It all affects our community,” she adds.

Current Kuna ACT president Jim McNall agrees that study circles work because they give citizens a chance to have input not just before officials make up their minds, but early in the decision-making process. “So seldom in our society do we have an opportunity to discuss issues in a non-threatening way,” McNall says. Study circles give people that opportunity, and help create communities where people can talk with—not past—each other to solve problems and make individual voices heard.

Author Julie Fanselow is an independent writer working with the Study Circles Resource Center to document success stories in participatory decision making and democracy



Kuna ACT Project Coordinator Arnette Johnson and Kuna ACT Vice President Don Seeley drive around the city promoting study circles.

Open space and agricultural land around Kuna, Idaho, is disappearing as new subdivisions handle the town's demand for housing.



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The Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC) works to find ways for all kinds of people to engage in dialogue and problem solving on critical social and political issues.

SCRC is a project of the Paul J. Aicher Foundation (formerly the Topsfield Foundation, Inc.), a private, nonprofit, nonpartisan foundation dedicated to advancing deliberative democracy and improving the quality of public life in the United States.

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