

Kutztown Strong – Our Story

A Latin proverb tells us that necessity is the Mother of Invention. I am sad to report that necessity was the genesis of our organization.

We had an opportunity to make a difference for all the wrong reasons. We had experienced significant losses related directly to opioid addiction. However, we also had the attention and concern of everyone connected with our community, so shame on us if we didn't do something with our undesirable opportunity.

We worked with Senator Judy Schwank and the superintendent of Brandywine Heights Area School District to put out a call to action to our two communities. Our two groups have followed parallel tracks since then, supporting each other along the way.

We knew it was important to have deep representation at our initial meeting, so we reached out to legislators, law enforcement, borough council, pastors, service organizations, Kutztown University, local business owners, physicians, Caron Treatment Center, the Council on Chemical Abuse, and all members of our school district.

On April 21, 2014, we launched our community-wide efforts that led to the creation of Kutztown Strong. 212 people responded to our invitation. After an introduction to our purpose, we put the entire audience to work. We divided into breakout sessions, each room with a facilitator who had been coached ahead of time to lead the subgroup discussions to identify our areas of concern.

One of the action groups that resulted from our first meeting focused on positively engaging students in grades K-16, which means we include college students. As we were brainstorming the many activities in which we thought students should want to participate, one of our young people asked us, "Why don't you ask the students?" And, so we did. We now have student branches of Kutztown Strong at the middle school, high school, and Kutztown University. They plan an impressive array of activities that appeal to a wide variety of young people.

The synergy of these groups is demonstrated by the Cougar Chronicle. This is a short quarterly magazine. The high school students work with an English teacher. The middle school students work with an art teacher. Together they create a magazine full of information, games, contests, and strategies for good decision-making for elementary students. The Cougar Chronicle brings the efforts of Kutztown Strong full circle.

Another way we assessed our students' needs was to implement the biennial Pennsylvania Youth Survey that provides data on our students' attitudes towards drugs and alcohol and determines the protective and risk factors present in our community. Due to the value of the data we got from the survey, we along with Kutztown University's Social Work department, designed our own similar survey to give in the intervening years, so we have a constant data stream reflecting the attitudes of all students. The data are always considered in our strategic planning decisions and grant applications.

Before obtaining our first grant, we had a lot of freedom to grow into what we needed to be. We didn't have the constraints of grants and the requirements they carry. But, we knew if we were to become a sustainable presence, we needed to go down that road. By the time we received our first grant, we were well-poised to meet the conditions required to get the financial backing we needed.

Part of our process was developing mission and vision statements. Together, we determined that the mission of Kutztown Strong was To Combat Substance Abuse for the Well-Being of the Kutztown Community. Our vision came from the letters in strong: Strengthening the resolve of the next generation.

Some of our original founders have cycled out of Kutztown Strong, but new faces appear on a regular basis. This replenishment is what keeps our organization sustainable and new.

The Structure of Kutztown Strong

As a fledgling organization, the beginning structure of Kutztown Strong looks somewhat different than it does today. In April of 2014, when Kutztown Strong became an official entity, our group focused on the formation of a number of different sub groups, or in our case, work groups. Here are a few highlights:

- The Executive Group made up of the Officers and Board of Directors, created a much-needed structure for our group. We began with the formation of a transitional board, followed by the creation of by-laws, and next, the arduous task to applying for tax exempt status.
- The Education Group focused on the review of the school's K-12 drug and alcohol education standards. The group worked closely with our older students to create a suitable quarterly publication for our elementary students that focused on positive decision and communication skills.
- The Community Research and Resource Inventory Group focused on identifying what resources already existed in our community, and compiling a comprehensive list to share with families and individuals in need. The group also identified where the holes in service existed (and still exist) in our area.
- The Research Group focused on collecting and analyzing data to better direct the needs of our community and the goals of our organization. This group was integral in the identification of our risk and protective factors, as well as the need to expand the PAYS data to a privately developed and funded survey given bi-annually that compliments the state data collection.

- Finally, the Community Options and Activities group worked with our students at the middle and high school levels to identify activities that students could do to find a more productive and safe use of their free time. The direction and insight from our students has guided our successful programs for all secondary students in the district.

In addition to our work groups, Kutztown Strong has been blessed to have received grant funding to assist with the coordination of the organization. The most beneficial part of the grant was the acquisition of a mobilizer. This position, has energized, focused, and sustained our group as we move forward. Now entitled “Community Organizer” we rely on the skills sets and knowledge of this position to help in the process of creating long-term viability.

As we continued into our fourth year of existence, there was a need to create a new streamlined organization that moved our existing initiatives forward, while creating a structure that better suited to grow Kutztown Strong and strengthen our ability to function for our service population, and to begin to ensure the long-term viability of this valuable organization.

While we remain true to our roots, and our initial mission and vision, we now operate with new committees that work parallel to our first work groups. Through research, reflection, and prioritization, Kutztown Strong now is embodied with the following Steering Committees:

- Governance
- Public Relations
- Service Populations
- Finance
- Volunteers
- Research

In addition to fundraising efforts and the generosity of our community, our organization has been successful in securing nearly \$160,000 in grant funding, granted Non-Profit Status by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and revived 501C3 status from the Internal Revenue Service.

In order to be recognized as an official entity by the Commonwealth, our group needed to partner with the Kutztown Community Partnership as our financial sponsor. After four years, we are finally ready to break those ties and move forward on our own. We are grateful for the generosity and direction of the Communities that Care program to allow us to grow and establish continuity as an organization.

Establishing a solid reputation has been important to our organization. We have worked hard over the last four years to have Kutztown Strong be not only legitimate, but reputable. Part of

this has been accomplished through local exposure with the Berks County Council on Chemical Abuse – People’s Chronicles as well as national pieces on NPR and the Christian Science Monitor. In addition, our organization has been awarded The Kutztown Community Partnership Award as well as the Caron Foundation Community Leadership Award.

Along with the Kutztown Community Partnership, our organization has been able to thrive with the strong relationships we have with Kutztown University, The Center for Addiction Studies, The Brandywine Heights Area School District, the Kutztown Community Library, and the Kutztown Optimist, Lions, and Rotary Clubs. While our roots remain in the Kutztown Community, we have made a concerted effort to reach beyond the borough limits to our entire school district especially where transportation and resources are severely limited. We look forward to a future where we build partnerships with all neighboring school districts to Strengthen the Resolve of the Next Generation for as many young people as possible.