

Kootenay Cuts was online from 2002 to 2011.

Resistance in the Hinterlands: The Story of Kootenay Cuts

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Moe Lyons (with Bonnie Nilsen)

This is the story of Kootenay Cuts, the little website that grew. It is a mini-saga about two middle-aged women on a mission, and the far-flung community we serve and from which we draw our inspiration.

Actually, Kootenay Cuts didn't start out to be a website at all. It was just an idea I had one day.

I live in a cabin in the bush in the Slocan Valley. Here I was, unemployed and nearly an hour's drive from the nearest town. As the overwhelming scope of what the Liberals were doing became clear, I tried to think of what I could do. I had to do something, I've been a political activist all my life! What to do, what to do?

Recently I had strung several hundred metres of phonewire to my home from my phone connection in the main house on the land. Previous to that, I used a cordless phone attached to a large radio aerial. The line loops and dips its way through the bushes and trees, comes in through my loft window, drapes down to my geriatric PowerMac, and voila! I am hooked into the virtual universe. My system always makes me smile: it is what we call "so Kootenays." It goes along well with my outside bathtub and my outhouse.

So I thought, OK, it's time, here is where the internet is going to work for me and for the whole West Kootenays. I will start a mailinglist and people all over the region will be able to communicate with one another and we will all know what is going on. I contacted BonnieNilsen, a website designer involved with the Kootenay Internet Communications Society (KICS), a non-profit that works with community groups throughout our region. I hoped she'd help me figure out how to set this thing up.

Immediately Bonnie said, "OK! I'll get the domain name and set up the website!" Now, I have to admit I hadn't even thought of a website, I had just thought of a mailing list. But Bonnie is a website designer so for her a website was just naturally what we would do. Next thing we knew, she had bought the domain name "Kootenay Cuts" and found the fish graphic I told her I remembered from Liberation News Service so many years ago, and we were on our way.

Thanks be to the goddess for Bonnie. And thanks for Tom, our techno-wiz, who in his work with KICS unfailingly assists us with any problems we have.

This was our very first posting, on January 23, 2002:

"The Nelson Daily News is organizing a public meeting on health care, slated for Jan. 31, 6:30 p.m. at the Civic Theatre. The intent of the meeting is to inform the public on status of health care reform in our region and to show support for the retention of core medical services at Kootenay Lake Hospital."

Bonnie started posting from the list to the website. After that the list and site just took off. People started signing up like mad, checking out the site, sending us info and links and suggestions, and we were an overnight success story.

When we say everyone reads it, we mean everyone. Recently when Nelson/Creston's Liberal MLA was scolded for not publicizing a "public" meeting, his indignant defence was, "It was on Kootenay Cuts!"

He's now the target of a recall campaign, having early on become the butt of a popular joking catcall heard at every public gathering: "Where's Blair?"

Now that we've started, we never get to quit. Fortunately we get lots and lots of input from people all over the Kootenays, and the province. We try to keep on top of everything to do with provincial politics that impacts on people in our region, or that shows what others in similar circumstances are doing to defend themselves. We also report some relevant federal actions and global news, promote community events and lately we have been posting material about the anti-war movement because it is so important. Up to the time of writing this article, KCuts has had more than 3500 postings.

One proviso we try to insist upon, is that this is not a discussion list. We are delighted to receive news reports, announcements, and interesting reprints, but just reporting on what is happening makes for an overwhelming amount of information. We did try setting up a discussion forum, but it never did take off, and there are lots of good places for this kind of thing, like www.rabble.ca, the Nelson List, KBiz and some Vancouver lists.

Most recently we were the first people to sell Mugshot Merchandise on line, thus supporting our volunteer efforts with a little entrepreneurial capitalism. We got a lot of coverage and a little flak for that.

So who are we?

Our masthead says: "Kootenay Cuts is an ad hoc enterprise run on a volunteer basis by community activists, and is neither sanctioned nor directed by any established organization." While many people contribute to our work, the two main persons involved are Bonnie Nilsen, webmistress, and Moe Lyons, list wrangler.

Bonnie Nilsen has been involved with computers since the mid-80's and has been creating websites since 1995. With a background in traditional publishing and desktop publishing, the shift to electronic communications came easily to her. "I love working with clients to help them shape and define their message in this new medium."

Bonnie is hoping that her webdesign business, BLNdesign (www.BLNdesign.com), will really start to take off this year. Her name is getting known around the Kootenays as a knowledgeable, creative and socially responsible designer.

Working on Kootenay Cuts is a daily endeavour. "I watch what comes through my email from Moe and others and pick out the most relevant items to go in the centre column of the website. I also try to keep the site as organized as possible, weed out bad links and check the viewing stats. I'd really like to do a complete reorganization of the site but just don't have time right now."

Bonnie's lack of time stems from her involvement with her two granddaughters and other activities in the community such as KICS and Kootenay Gay Pride.

She also copes on a daily basis with fibromyalgia which has been particularly bad this winter. "I'm one of the people who has been required to resubmit my claim for disability status to the government. What a waste of time and energy for everyone involved! My case has been well documented for years, and this has caused a huge amount of stress to go through the whole process again."

I (Moe) have been involved with the left, the women's movement and with community politics for about 30 years. I am a typesetter, graphic designer, writer, community organizer, dyke, singer/songwriter, animal lover, fat woman, thrift store/clothes freak, confirmed rural dweller, and I love to walk.

I started my political life putting out a newsletter for Amor de Cosmos Food Co-op in Victoria in the early 70s. Then I moved to the Kootenays, where I worked with a collective putting out an alternative newspaper, and was hired as editor of the local feminist paper, which I helped become a collective. I went to Ontario to work with Dumont Press Graphix, a workers' collective typesetting operation and publishing house in Kitchener, Ontario for over ten years, ran my own typesetting business in Nelson for five years, co-coordinated the women's centre in Nelson for five years, and have done vast amounts of both paid and volunteer work in the arts and in the community generally. Currently I am also the moderator of the Project X list, which has the avowed purpose of "rebuilding the left". I have a great sense of humour, four cats and one dog. I also have a great friend named Juanita, who is a donkey and shares many of my walks with me.

People ask me if I find working on Kootenay Cuts depressing. No, I don't. I am an information freak, so this kind of thing is right up my alley. I would be a lot more depressed if I didn't do this work: here I would sit, in my cabin, un(der) employed and ageing and freaked out, feeling as if there was nothing I could do to have an effect on what is happening these days. As it is, I am involved in something that fascinates me and that I get all kinds of positive feedback about. What I am doing is useful to my community and to the broader political community throughout the province. I do it for several hours every day.

A word of caution, though: I tell people, doing this is my political work right now. Reading it is not enough to make you a political activist. We do this work so you will take the information and use it in your political work.

We are also hoping people will eventually get it that you don't need to feel overwhelmed by a comprehensive list. It's like a newspaper - you don't read all of a newspaper. You can dump anything you don't feel like reading, guilt-free. Not all of it is relevant to you, but all of it is relevant to somebody. If you need it, it will still be there. We have a terrific search engine on the mailing list archives, and the information will not disappear.

We knew we could count on a supportive community when we set out to do this work. The Kootenays is (are?) the context that makes everything we do possible. This area has been lambasted by government cuts, and everyone knows the people here would never take this kind of punishment lying down. We knew we would be fighting side by side with our neighbours, our friends, and allies of all political stripes.

Let me touch on some points to show why we are so aware of being just one more bright thread in the Kootenay tapestry.

One of the most important historical and cultural factors here is the presence of the Doukhobours. These proud and steadfast people came here around the turn of the century and have remained unfailingly committed to "toil and a peaceful life." They are one reason the peace movement is so strong here in the Kootenays, and always has been.

Everywhere you go in the Kootenays, politics and art and culture are the fabric of our lives. We have more varied artists and writers per square kilometre than anywhere you've ever been. Kaslo has a world-famous jazz festival in a setting that takes your breath away. Castlegar has a national gallery. Nelson

prides itself on being one of North America's finest small-town arts communities. Trail's streets are lined with hand-built rock walls that are works of art in themselves.

Nelson, where Bonnie lives, is the best-known town in the West Kootenays, sometimes referred to as "The Queen City" and "The Jewel of the Kootenays." It is a beautiful little city nestled on the banks of Kootenay Lake.

This vibrant community continues to survive through setbacks that would destroy any other community. Its main industry used to be a plywood mill, but that shut down many years ago. It no longer really has an industrial tax base, although it does have one small but major employer that makes electronic components for cars. It had the first private university in BC, Notre Dame University, later the David Thompson University Centre, which was closed by the Socreds.

It is home to the country's oldest rural women's centre (about to be axed by the current government), two arts schools (one of which died, was re-born and then lost its government funding, the other of which is rising from these ashes), more alternative health practitioners than you can count, and a totally militant and diverse group called SOS that is determined to get the city's health services back. Its Streetfest is gaining international renown, and it has a colourful Gay Pride parade almost every year.

It has lost more government jobs in the last year than any other small town in BC. As a contrast to its previously overwhelmingly right-wing municipal government, it just elected a (mostly) very progressive city council, one of whom is a 24-year-old woman who is an anti-globalization activist and ran for the NDP in Alberta when she was just 21. Nelson City Council has just passed an anti-war resolution. Nelson was once described in some travel literature as "The trendiest little backwater in the interior of British Columbia," and its streets are a joy to people-watchers, hosting some of the most colourful crowds in Canada.

Trail has a long history of labour militancy, including a long period where the union was Mine Mill, one of the last great commie unions. Ginger Goodwin, whose murder for being a draft resister resulted in Canada's first general strike, organized here in the first part of the 20th century. For many years Trail's mayor was Buddy DeVito, well-known for his very left politics. Cominco very nearly became a stronghold of the independent Canadian labour movement, when the CCU and CAIMAW organized here in the 1970s. Steelworkers are currently active in the resistance against the cutbacks. Trail has a vibrant Italian population and is a beautiful, very European city with a strong community spirit and a fascinating past.

Castlegar has its own militant health group, HealthWatch, fighting for its hospital and 24/7 emergency services. It has a strong history of left politics, and its pulp mill and the workers at the local community college are organized under the PPWC, another independent Canadian union. The IWA is also a significant factor here, and the IWA banner has been prominent in local rallies and events. The Castlegar Citizen, surely one of the longest-running strike papers in the history of the planet, is a much better paper than its corporate-owned predecessor, the Sun, and enjoys strong community and union support. A number of Castlegar citizens are heavily involved in peace work and majority world politics, including the movement to shut down the infamous School of the Americas. Selkirk College has had an environmental studies program since before such programs were even heard of most places.

Argenta is largely a Quaker community, once home to one of the first alternative schools in North America. Some outstanding work on developing consensus decision-making has been done here over the years, and it is still home to Friends Press.

Silverton and New Denver are two lovely little lakeside towns on Slocan Lake. Silverton has its own art gallery and is rapidly becoming an arts destination, as its main street blossoms with small galleries. New Denver has been hard hit by government cutbacks, and is home to The Valley Voice, a feisty independent newspaper that has been criticized by folks of every political stripe, so it must be doing something right. New Denver is also home to Colleen McCrory, internationally recognized environmentalist, and her brother, Wayne McCrory, of grizzly bear fame.

Up the Arrow Lakes, around Nakusp way, the people have been unrelenting in their fight against the injustices they experienced when their lands were flooded to allow the Americans to control the flow of our water, and to generate electricity for the people of BC and for export. After many years of being ignored, they and the rest of the West Kootenays finally are getting something for their trouble, thanks to the Columbia Basin Trust, one of the jewels in the crown of the NDP while they were in government. Nakusp is largely a forestry town, and has been hard hit by the softwood lumber dispute. Forestry workers in the area are organizing to try to take more control over tenure in their area. Nakusp has been organizing to protect its beloved seniors' residence, Halcyon Home, which is under threat from government cutbacks.

And of course both up the Arrow Lakes, on Kootenay Lake, over in Harrop-Procter, and down in Glade, people have been fighting for their ferries. Now all that hard work is starting to pay off, as the government has finally agreed to enter into negotiations. It looks as if the ferries will continue without tolls, and Needles/Fauquier may even get a bridge! A crowd of fifteen people from Needles and Edgewood have recently put together a musical/political satire entitled "The Kootenays Are Revolting!", which is receiving rave reviews wherever it goes.

Creston is the breadbasket of the region. Its people have demonstrated their will to continue to live in a family-based agricultural area, surviving in this era of agribusiness by being both hardworking and innovative. It is also home to the Creston Wildlife [bird] Sanctuary, as fascinating and beautiful as it is ecologically valuable.

And finally there's the Slocan Valley, where I live. (In the local lexicon, there's only one Valley, [like on the coast there's only one Island], whether you like it or not.). It is home to Slocan Forest Products, which sounds nice and homegrown but is actually a multinational corporation. Our valley is probably best known these days for its residents' militant stands on watershed issues. It used to be famous as the place where all the hippies lived. And of course it is home to Corky Evans, twice a candidate for NDP leadership. It is also the traditional gathering place of the Sinix't (Arrow Lakes) people, declared extinct by the Canadian government many years ago. Members of the Sinix't nation have taken back one of their traditional burying grounds, where they are still involved in the longest-running peaceful occupation of First Nations land in Canada.

It's beautiful here. But boy, are "Valley" people ever contentious! Once upon a time I wrote an article about the Whole School, an alternative school in the community hall I helped to build 30 years ago. The story contained one of my favourite quotes from myself: "These were people who knew that anything worth fighting for was worth fighting about." It's still kind of like that here. It's not always easy to get along with your neighbours.

The Kootenays have an ever-changing population. As someone at the Amnesty International Film Festival (which had larger turnouts in Nelson than in Vancouver) said, "People are always leaving feeling discouraged, and arriving full of hope." It seems as if living in the Kootenays is a necessary stage in many seekers' development. Or maybe it's just that it is so hard to make a living here, even harder now. Another factor in the turnover is probably that people come here for a taste of rural life, but they are drawn here because really, it is a bit urban, and yet it is not sufficiently urban to keep them.



So here we are. Bonnie and I put out Kootenay Cuts. It's one of the most amazing and satisfying things either of us has ever done. We've developed a fabulous friendship out of doing it. Look us up: www.kootenaycuts.com. Check out what's going on here and elsewhere, wander through the various sections, link to anyone who is doing anything interesting in the fightback in BC. Click on the link to the mailing list and find out what's happening here, and province-wide. Use one or the other of our search engines to look up anything, really anything that has happened in relation to the provincial government over the last year, and you'll find all the information you need. It is a most wonderful creation, it's ours and it's yours. We're proud to share it with you and with everyone in our far-flung community!