

Key learnings from the Kootenays

If there's one duo who really got dialogue from the get-go, it's Jen Driscoll and Alison Ko of the East Kootenay Harm Reduction Collaborative.

They started with the idea of asking people in their community two key questions: "What is it like to be you?" and "How would you like to be understood?" Those who were interested in the questions were invited to share their answers in photographs and stories, with the goal of using the collection as stimulus for community dialogues around the region.

Jen says their week-long series of Photo Voice dialogues in six towns in early May 2017 taught them even more about what it takes to connect communities.

"Really good food, a beautiful setting, and a great facilitator—that's the recipe for meaningful dialogue."

Jen says the people with lived experience who participated in the Photo Voice project were very proud of their contributions. "They had a sense of belonging. And they felt like they were helping to build a more positive society."

It was a feeling that extended to the harm reduction folks, too.

"At first they were a little lost about how Photo Voice could be used to bring people together or help people with lived experience. But the process of putting it together brought all of us to heart level right away."

And it wasn't long before other people in the community—photographers, parents and others—were coming forward to offer help.

The momentum continues to build, and people throughout the East Kootenays want to come together to talk more about the opioid crisis and its effects on their communities. This is why the group has applied for Phase II funding, in addition to funding received from other sources.

"The opioid crisis matters to people now," says Jen, adding that "working on this project has become the highlight of my career."

Examples of dialogue formats that worked well in the Kootenays:

In Fernie, the community dialogue took place in an art gallery, where participants were invited to sit in a circle and use connecting exercises to get to know each other.

In Invermere, attendees were led down "a trail of photos" before sitting down to talk.

In Golden, 100 people were brought together in a U-shaped room for unifying exercises before embarking on conversation, sparked by the photographs, and marked by compassion and empathy.

In Cranbrook, a crowd of 100 mingled in the lower part of a theatre and art gallery, or went upstairs to the silent area featuring a remembrance table.

Each venue featured a reflection area where participants could write about how they think and feel about the opioid crisis, and what, if anything, they might be interested in doing to help their community.