

# When the going gets tough ...the tough get going

STORY BY JAY STULLER

## Here's how Kiwanis clubs in hard-hit communities are coping—and thriving

The spearpoint of an economic slump pierced Indiana's Elkhart County when U.S. gasoline prices began climbing early in 2008. The proud "RV Capital of the World," Elkhart is home to more than a dozen recreational vehicle manufacturers and companies that produce accessories for these fuel-consuming luxuries. When the subsequent collapse of the financial and real estate sectors started to generate heat, the RV industry was already well into a meltdown.

Elkhart County unemployment soared from 5 percent to more than 18 percent, and a wave of foreclosures on home mortgages followed. In Goshen, leaders

at one of the city's three Kiwanis clubs pondered ways to keep its membership not only healthy, but motivated to meet greater and more urgent needs for community services.



AL MACKOWIAK  
GOSHEN KIWANIS  
CLUB

"While we have a pretty tight club, this is not a place where anyone would say, 'I'm hurting,'" explains Al Mackowiak, president of the Goshen Kiwanis Club. But as the local unemployment rate

### Silverlining

Elkhart County, Indiana

**Condition:** Unemployment rate raced from 4.7 percent to 15.3 percent in just one year.

**Good ideas:** Tend to members' needs.

Set membership and service goals.





## Silverlining

Iceland

**Condition:** Banks failed; currency in free fall.

### Good ideas

Postpone or waive dues.

Encourage supportive fellowship at meetings.

Serve new needs in your community.



continued to soar, the board of directors decided to focus on the emotional care of the members. Phone calls, e-mails and cards kept everyone connected. "We put together a directory that enabled members to advertise their business within the club, and encouraged everyone to give our people the first shot at a sale or project," Mackowiak says.

While the club added 11 members to its roster, the board also challenged the membership to meet its community's emerging needs. It set goals of putting in 500 additional hours of service and gathering 500 additional pounds of canned food for a food kitchen and a Salvation Army facility. As of this past April, the club was well on its way to exceeding both goals—easily.

## WORK IT

**I**n many troubled economies throughout the world, Kiwanis is a shovel-ready organization, full of experienced volunteers with the knowledge and mindset to fill emerging service needs. "But that doesn't mean the clubs are not struggling too," acknowledges Jill Madinger, Kiwanis International's director of Growth and Club Excellence. Communities need more services than ever, even as clubs have to do more with less. "We're hearing about fundraisers that used to generate \$20,000 and the money is just not coming in like in the past," Madinger says. "So we're seeing less check writing and more hands-on service."

It's an evolution that may be a blessing in disguise.

"Club members are having more heart-to-heart experi-

ences with their communities, which in turn can only help strengthen memberships," observes Madinger.

Yet clubs and members are not immune from shrinking incomes or retirement accounts. "A number of clubs that held weekly meetings where lunch cost \$20 have had to think about simplifying," explains Madinger. Others have created satellite groups that meet less often, at different times and without meals.

Iceland is a prime example. Relative to the size of its economy, Iceland's banking collapse last year was the largest suffered by any nation in recent history. With some 300,000 inhabitants, what once was one of the richest countries in the world became one of the most indebted.



ÓSKAR  
GUÐJÓNSSON  
KIWANIS ICELAND-  
FAROES DISTRICT

"People lost their savings, their jobs, houses and their positive outlook on life," says Óskar Guðjónsson, governor-elect of the Kiwanis Iceland-Faroes District. "But Icelanders have not lost their dignity."

In prioritizing options, Kiwanis dues—and membership—appeared expendable to many members. But the clubs reacted quickly, many decreasing dues and changing meetings to cut costs. Some clubs postponed—or waived—dues for financially stressed members.

"To our delight, overall club attendance increased and meetings became an outlet for social interaction," adds

Guðjónsson, “a fellowship for people with the same worries and burdens.”

Many of Iceland’s clubs added members, while refocusing their service projects. When members of the Husavik-Skjalfandi Kiwanis Club learned that an annual school trip to Denmark lacked funding, they cancelled the club’s annual anti-drug seminar and sponsored the trip instead. Other clubs worked with ministers to deliver food baskets to families who had approached the churches for help.

## SHOW IT

**G**rowing, while becoming an anchor in hard times, is also the case at the Woodhaven Kiwanis Club in Michigan. Virtually all of the club’s 40 members have been directly or indirectly affected by the economy. Yet the club has grown by 25 percent in each of the past two years.

“It’s something that’s talked about every meeting,” says club President Al Cotto. “But we make it easy for people to join. We try to keep meal costs under \$10, but if a person comes up short, they’re covered. We’re very conscious of members losing work hours or having salaries cut.”

Woodhaven is exceptionally active. Its members recently worked with students from two elementary schools and packed up 10,352 meals for distribution to pantries and shelters in the area.

“We’ve found ourselves doing more for schools, especially where you have at-risk children,” says Cotto. “We keep a contingency fund so that if a teacher calls us and says a student needs a pair of glasses and can’t afford it,

we’ll get him those glasses. There’s an agency that sets up a mobile homeless shelter at churches in our area, for one week at a time, so people have a place to stay and look for work and services. When it comes nearby, we’ll have folks there at 5 a.m. to cook and serve breakfast.”



AL COTTO  
WOODHAVEN  
KIWANIS CLUB

Though the demands for services are increasing, Cotto doesn’t find it particularly overwhelming. “I sometimes worry we take on too much,” he concedes, “but if we pick up five or six new members, we can do even more. And this is really an opportunity for Kiwanis to be more visible in the press, which generates more calls for service projects.”

Back in Goshen, Al Mackowiak is finding similar experiences from the exposure, which has clearly invigorated his club. “Financial contributions are important,” he notes, “but being there is more important. Community service has always been the heart of our mission, and our club has always placed tremendous value on sweat equity and human connection.”

In uncertain times, that’s the kind of club people want to join—one that gets tough in tough times.

 **If your club needs assistance** as it steps up to meet local challenges, check out the resources at [www.kiwanisleader.org/inspire](http://www.kiwanisleader.org/inspire) or e-mail [memberservices@kiwanis.org](mailto:memberservices@kiwanis.org).



## Silverlining

Wayne County,  
Michigan

### Condition:

County’s unemployment rate hit 14.9 percent in March.

### Good ideas

Reduce meeting costs.

Add hands-on projects.