

Creating Stone Curves:

A BRIEF HISTORY- 2001-2004

By Sylvia Tesh, June 2018

If this were the story of a classic cohousing community, it would go something like this: Once upon a time a small group of friends -- inspired by a vision of “living together with a common purpose, working cooperatively to create a lifestyle that reflects their shared core values”ⁱ – decided to create an intentional community. Overcoming many obstacles, but committed to their dream, they eventually located a building site; raised a lot of money; filed myriad legal documents; hired an architect, a builder, contractors, a landscaper and an attorney; and settled on the number and design of the buildings, the facilities in the common house, and where to put the paths and parking lots. They also agreed on a mission statement, learned how to attract like-minded folks to their community, determined what committees to establish and what kind of decision-making process to adopt. The process took many years, but it finally came to fruition and a new cohousing community was born.ⁱⁱ

Stone Curves didn't happen this way. Our community was started not by visionary future cohousers, but by three businessmen who created The Stone Curves Development Team. They were Jim Leach, a for-profit developer from Boulder, Colorado; Ross McCallister, a builder and real estate investor headquartered in Scottsdale; and James Hamilton, a seasoned general contractor in Tucson. The three met when they were building Sonora Cohousing, a project that was

completed in 2000. In James Hamilton's words, at Sonora they "not only learned to work together...but to respect and trust each other...Upon much soul searching we came to realize that from our past we could set up a very effective cohousing development team for the next project." ⁱⁱⁱ

For this brief history of Stone Curves I've drawn on interviews with five of the early members who are still here: Vicky Bradley who arrived in August 2001, Ania Rzeszutko, who arrived in early 2002, Dan Kruse who arrived in September 2002, Shawn Mulligan who arrived in August 2003, and Carlos Nagel who had lived in the Limberlost neighborhood for many years before Stone Curves was born and was active in the early years beginning with the first meeting on July 1, 2001. I am grateful to all of them.

I've also drawn on several written records. One is a sixty-page document dated June 14, 2001 titled "A User-Friendly Neighborhood Decisions, Policies and Agreement Manual" (later referred to simply as the Policy Manual). Another source of information is a three-ring binder labeled "Stone Curves Minutes of General Meetings" covering the sixty-six general meetings between July 29, 2001 and April 18, 2004. Yet another is a three-ring binder labeled "Decision Logs, Buddy Family Info, Policy Manual." Vicky Bradley has all of these documents. More recent information, starting in 2005 is archived in other binders stored in the Stone Curves library. Another record of community decisions, extending to June 6, 2004 can be found under "Archives" on our Members Only website. I've also drawn on reports of the Workshops held between 2001 and 2003. Three reports are in a

folder labeled “Visioning” in the Stone Curves office file cabinet; Vicky has the other two.

The history of Stone Curves begins in early May 2001 with the formation of the 3-man Development Team – Leach, McCallister, and Hamilton. They located a nearly-empty five-acre lot a mile west of Sonora cohousing; put \$25,000 in escrow to hold it, hired a group of professionals, including an architect, an attorney, a realtor, a landscaper, and a website consultant; and produced the Policy Manual mentioned above. That manual “compiled from [their] experience in working with other communities”^{iv} was fundamental to the creation of Stone Curves. Among other things, it contained a mission statement, instructions for attracting and retaining members, guidelines for decision-making at meetings, a list of appropriate committees, and a site design that laid out the placement and character of the buildings and pathways. Note that all of these actions were taken by these three men, not by residents -- or prospective residents -- of Stone Curves.

Then in late June that year, the Development Team erected a sign on the dusty building site announcing that a new cohousing community named Stone Curves was looking for members. James Hamilton later wrote that “...select[ing] a site first, without a group, has not been done a great deal. Yet the data from earlier cohousing groups is that agreeing on a specific location has been the most challenging aspect of early group formation and sustainability. So Stone Curves, to begin with, is a developer-driven vision.”^v

What is “a developer-driven vision”? The term appears several places in subsequent writing about Stone Curves, also rendered as “a

developer-led” project. Either way the term implies that the Development Team will guide or manage the creation of Stone Curves. And indeed, the 2001 Policy Manual makes this explicit in two places -- once referring to financial decisions, and later referring to the choice of professionals: The first one warns, “There are development decisions that are intrinsic to the financial/business plan of this project. These decisions would be difficult to change without significant consequences to the overall project...Any changes the neighborhood group wishes to make will be reviewed in full so that everyone understands the potential ramifications.” The second one asserts, “The development team has assembled a group of professionals to complete the steps necessary to develop and build this project...There may be changes, and if any changes are made, they must be agreed to and approved by the development team.”^{vi}

Yet, even at the beginning Stone Curves was not entirely a development-run venture. All the available evidence suggests that the Development Team wasn’t focused entirely on making money but also on “creating a cooperative cohousing neighborhood.” That meant first attracting a group of prospective members eager not just to live in the new community but to participate in creating it. In other words, while the Policy Manual supplies a “framework” for creating Stone Curves, it calls specifically for “additional community decision making.” It is reasonable to conclude that these two forces together – the professional developers and the eager community members – made it possible for the first residents to move into their new homes in August 2004, a mere three years after the formation of the Development Team. But how did this happen? How did the Development Team manage to attract members? Who were these new people? What decisions did they make?

The first question is easy to answer. Besides erecting the come-join-us sign, the team rented a trailer to serve as a sales office on the open land and placed ads in the *Tucson Weekly* inviting anyone interested to attend organizational meetings. Later there was a booth at St Phillip's farmers market, flyers distributed around town, radio spots, an online newsletter, and Stone Curves t-shirts. But the initial advertising was, by any standards, a success all on its own: at least eight people came to the first meeting. It was held on July 1, 2001, only a few weeks after the invitational sign appeared on the land. For rest of the year, a core group of about a dozen potential Stone Curves' members met together every couple of weeks.

Who were these folks -- these people so interested in creating a new cohousing community? The meeting minutes reveal little about them beyond their names. What is clear, though, is that with only three exceptions, not one person who attended the 2001 meetings ever lived here. Two of the exceptions are James Hamilton and his wife Diane DeSimone. Because James was project's director, he was a major actor in all the meetings. He and Diane were at the very first meeting in July 2001, continued as central figures in all of the subsequent meetings, and lived in Village 1 between 2004 and 2006. The third exception is Vicky Bradley, who began attending meetings in August 2001, consistently took leadership roles during the following years, and still lives here in Village 1.

In 2002, the list of people at the meetings begins to change. Fewer and fewer of the original names appear; new names take their place. By the end of that year, eight of the new names belong to people who later moved into Stone Curves. They are Ania Rzeszutko, Irma Call, Brad and Robin Fox, Lane Kornman, and Dan and Gina Kruse. During the next two years --2003 and 2004 -- many more new people attended these meetings and although a large number eventually dropped out

(some of whom – according to current members -- were “pretty weird,” “extraneous folks,” and “groupie wannabes” who “just wanted to sit around and talk”) an increasing number stayed. By the fall of 2004 everyone who moved into Stone Curves had spent many hours in organizational meetings.

What happened at these gatherings? There certainly were a lot of them (especially compared to the numbers of Stone Curves’ meetings today). Between July 2001 and November 2004, the various records show over seventy General Meetings, innumerable smaller meetings of teams and committees, and six or seven workshops, three of which met for an entire weekend. The gatherings are important because their discussions and decisions explain much of what our community is today. They are also fascinating as an example of how a for-profit Development Team interacted with a group of people whose interest was in cohousing.

Today’s Stone Curvers remember these early days as hugely exciting. After all, they were creating a new community from the ground up -- not only the community’s physical existence, but the new relationships that would sustain it. As one participant recalls, “There was a real sense of building community. Discussions were face to face. Everyone was so hopeful.” And another early member said that the meetings were “inspiring...we made decisions as a group, no formal stuff. It was democracy in action. We really bonded.”

The General Meetings were held twice a month on Sunday evenings in private homes, mainly in Carlos Nagel’s house on Limberlost Drive.^{vii} The gatherings usually included a potluck dinner. Later, when the Common House finally had at least a roof, everyone met there. In the beginning, as I describe below, the main item at all the General Meetings was financial: how to sell more units. But as time went by, the

agendas increasingly included daily life in the community. And daily life issues were crucial: people were preparing to move into an absolutely brand-new community. Few potential members had clear ideas about how cohousing actually works. Even fewer had given much thought to things like how to pave the parking lots, where to get tables for the dining room, what kind of trees to plant, and whether to install ceiling fans in back porches.

The General Meetings could not possibly address such a broad range of issues, so, following the Policy Manual, the group soon created teams, and everyone was required to serve on at least one. Some people served on several. James and Diane were the organizers, aided by other professionals^{viii}. The six teams were: Green, Finance, Common House (CHIC), Marketing and Membership, Construction Interface, and Process. (Later, after the units were all sold, Marketing and Membership became simply Membership; Construction Interface became Interface – or IT; and Process, which was concerned with the way group decisions should be made, pretty much faded away.) Team members met in one another's houses, sometimes along with one of the professionals, and the gatherings became as interesting and socially rewarding as were the General Meetings. By November 2002, the community “recognized the effectiveness of the work of the teams and decided to” turn them into the community's primary decision makers.^{ix} In other words decision-making was de-centralized: whatever the individual teams agreed upon became Stone Curves policy; every issue no longer had to be brought to the General Meetings.

The early Stone Curvers had yet another way to participate in the creation of the community: workshops. The major ones were the three weekend-long workshops in 2002.^x Each took up a different issue. In January it was siting the buildings; in May it was planning the common house; in August it was “design closure.” The workshops provided a

concentrated period for everyone to consider the initial plans and to weigh in on the final decisions. In contrast to all the other meetings, the workshops depended heavily on the Development Team's professionals. Chief among them was the architect, Thomas Saylor-Brown, owner of Saylor-Brown Bolduc Architects. He, or one of his assistants, along with project director James Hamilton and developer Jim Leach, proposed the initial plans for all three workshops, set the meeting agendas, and facilitated the discussions. Despite such apparent control by the architect, the workshop reports all indicate that community members made important decisions, almost all of which are part of the community today.^{xi}

Of course, everything didn't always go smoothly. There were disagreements, including "heated exchanges" and disappointments. Probably all current Stone Curves residents have heard about the long debate over the buildings' exterior colors (bright primary hues or subdued desert shades?) and the pet policy (free-range dogs or leashed dogs?). There was also initial disagreement about building the curvy exterior wall, about appropriate plantings, about whether to have a lawn. The color controversy went on and on, from early February 2003 until the spring of 2004. Some of the disagreements were exacerbated by the fact that the sign on the sales office invited all interested people to attend the Sunday meetings. Not all attendees were good at sticking to the meeting's agenda. And a new person could show up for a couple of weeks, participate actively in the discussion, and never appear again. For example, one of the strongest voices in the color debate came from a woman who dropped out after considerably influencing the discussion.

And the disappointments? Some current Curvers are still sorry that the site plan from the first weekend workshop was subsequently ignored. That early plan had a swimming pool alongside the common

house on the north, and a kids' playground, volleyball court and garden behind the common house. Other people wish that the policy adopted in January 2004 of assigning a "buddy family" to newcomers had not fallen by the wayside for so many years. In addition, some folks deeply regret that an early policy was dropped requiring prospective members to attend three community meetings. Perhaps the most widely held disappointment has to do with James Hamilton, the project director. A complex person, deeply committed to cohousing and an often-inspiring leader, he was also, in many people's minds, untrustworthy and deceitful. He and Diane left the community after living in Village 1 for less than two years.

But if James Hamilton was complex, the Stone Curves project was more so. From the beginning there was an inherent tension between the Development Team's desire to sell homes quickly and the residents' desire to attract owners committed to cohousing principles. As this was a "development-led project," the Development Team had the upper hand. Team members say so specifically in the 2001 Manual where they warn against too much community interference in financial decisions. And the issue of shared power came up openly at meetings from time to time. For example, after a meeting with Ross McCallister, the Interface team notes, apparently quoting McCallister, "One of the issues that is of great importance is how to define those elements that must be brought to the entire group for decision and which must be left in the hands of the developer/builder so that they can move ahead comfortably and not run the risk of being second-guessed." ^{xii}

The Development Team's predominance is reflected in a basic financial disparity. The initial deal was that at the end of the project, two-thirds of the profits would be divided equally between Jim Leach and Ross McCallister. Stone Curves would get the other third -- not

individual people of course, but the community as a whole, which would have a profit share fund for community needs.

The relatively greater power of the Development Team meant that for a long time, large chunks of the General Meetings were given over to the financial end of cohousing. Marketing, i.e. what has been done and what can be done to attract buyers, was a major topic. And at least one session was devoted to marketing psychology. So much money was spent on marketing that by November 2003 marketing expenses were “approximately \$6,000 over the original \$64,000 budget.”^{xiii} Even in 2004, the marketing team found it necessary to say, “It is vital that everyone in the community understand the need for promoting sales.”^{xiv} In other words, there was a lot a pressure to sell homes.

It is worthwhile pointing, at least briefly, to some of the ways the Development Team sought not just to attract buyers but to raise money. After all, they needed a great deal of cash to finance the land acquisition, the site development and the building construction, as well as such things as insurance, required permits and salaries for the professionals. One way to bring in money was the offer of an 8% interest rate to anyone investing at least \$50,000. More modestly, there were early-buyer discounts for potential homeowners as well as some surprising fees, most notably a \$500 price to attend each of the three weekend workshops.

None of this is to say that community members were uninterested in raising money; everyone understood its necessity. But to the professionals, selling units was more important than considering who bought them. To some extent, consciously or not, community members must have adopted some of the developers’ perspective. So the bar to get in was set low. The community failed to insist on

entrance requirements, on any vetting of prospective buyers, on a limit to the number of units that one person could buy or a cap on the number of rentals. Moreover, it is possible now to move here with neither knowledge of nor interest in cohousing. Clearly this was not the expectation of the early Stone Curvers who worked so hard to create this community.

However, it is also clear that despite the inevitable tension between economic and social goals, and despite the early disappointments and disagreements, Stone Curves today is an amazingly successful community. For that, we all owe a debt to the people who joined Stone Curves long before they moved in and who gave so much of their energy and idealism to it. This includes not only the very first people who lived here (James and Diane, Vicky, Ania, Brad and Robin, Lane, Dan and Gina) but also Suzanne and Garth Mackzum, Tom Zolay and Janette McKenna, Yoshi and Mark Davies, Kathy Olson, Rebecca Jackson, Susan Walcot and Kevin Lopez, Martin and Cynthia Plotke, Linda and Joe Breck, Jim Gardner, Shawn Mulligan, Norm and Judy Lindblad, Beth Runciman and Annie Guthrie, Chris Craig, and Monica Ulrich.

END NOTES

ⁱ Diana Leafe Christian. *Creating a Life Together: Practical Tools to Grow Ecovillages and Intentional Communities* New Society Publishers. 2003, p. xvi

ⁱⁱ For example, see chapter 22 in *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves* by Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett. Ten Staples Press, 1988. The book is in the Stone Curves library

ⁱⁱⁱ Message to community dated “prior to our 9/16/01 special meeting;” filed with Minutes of General Meetings

^{iv} See Policy Manual 6/14/01 page 4

^v The quotes are from a 4-page memo James Hamilton sent to SC members on or about September 16, 2001 in answer to several “concerns.” It’s in the white three-ring binder labeled “Stone Curves Housing Minutes of General Meetings”

^{vi} See pages 5 and 52 in the 6/14/01 Policy Manual

^{vii} Carlos has a special relation to the building of Stone Curves, not only because he hosted so many meetings at his home, but also because of his long, inspiring history with community organizations. A gracious host, a deeply trusted man, he served as a “spiritual leader” to many initial Stone Curvers.. He still lives on Limberlost Drive.

^{viii} “James and Diane provided much of the guidance and impetus for these teams, suggesting agendas and time lines, educating about budget issues, etc. They attended meetings as often as they could and were highly participatory and motivational.” See the Minutes of General Meetings, 5/6/04.

^{ix} Op cit

^x Kersten and Spencer Block, the owners of Buffalo Exchange and early investors in Stone Curves hosted all three workshops in their store’s meeting room.

^{xi} People from eight household attended the January workshop which considered drainage and the solar path and views and the existing vegetation and “village feel,” ending with an architectural sketch of the planned layout of the community. The May workshop consisted primarily of exercises to help people consider their emotional responses to various common house designs. From that, the facilitators devised a proposal for the use and “feel” of each common house room. At the August workshop participants reviewed previous decisions and agreed on the parking proposal, the landscape plan, the building materials, and the customizing options for each unit. (There’s no record of attendance at either of the May or August workshop but photos suggest that a dozen or so people attended each one.

^{xii} CIT minutes 9/8/02

^{xiii} Marketing team minutes, 11/13/03

^{xiv} Marketing team minutes, 3/30/04