

The History of KOD

Imagine the unthinkable. You've joined Romance Writers of America®, and there's not a mystery suspense chapter in sight.

This isn't just a mystery lover's worst nightmare, it really happened. At an RWA conference in San Francisco around 1992, after a workshop given by romantic suspense author Joanne Pence, attendees discussed this horrifying revelation.

These women did what women do in times of crisis. They fearlessly collected business cards with ideas and suggestions that would lead to the formation of "The Romantic Suspense Network."

Maggie Price, one of the early members recalls receiving a letter from Catherine M. Nelson that the "Romantic Suspense Network" had been formed, and after paying her \$15 dues on December 30, of 1992, Maggie agreed to write an article for the RSN newsletter about her work as a civilian police crime analyst.

Then on a dark and stormy night in 1994, in a hotel suite in New York, the Romantic Suspense Network took murder and mayhem a step further. This spooky group placed a sign in the corridor of a RWA® National convention and invited mystery and suspense writers to attend.

And so it was, with suggested names like Cliffhanger, The Crime Detail, Mysterious Women, An Air of Mystery, Suspects, Mystery Writers and Suspicious, Kiss of Death was decided upon, and the chapter was born, with it 29 charter members.

Officers for this neophyte group included President Peggy Jaegly, Secretary Marsha Thompson, Treasurer Carol Kaelin, Critique Coordinator Helen Radjeski, Newsletter Editor Patty Burns, Newsletter Assistant Telaina Ericksen, and Bylaws Coordinator Virginia Cole.

Peggy Jaegley, the one who conceived KOD was elected president, but life and deadlines got in the way and soon after Carol Kaelin took over the role. And within six months, this budding organization had grown its membership to seventy.

In February of 1995, the chapter released its first newsletter, and at the helm was none other than award-winning Patty Burns, KOD's one and only newsletter editor to date.

From 1996 to 1998, Miriam Pace became president, Nina Bruhns vice president, and these two brilliant instigators put to the membership the need to offer more than just a once-a-year-meeting at National.

During this time too, the novel idea of on-line workshops came into being. The plan was to offer monthly classes for craft and research, and to keep prices so low, people would be enticed to join. From this discussion, Clues-N-News and Lethal Ladies blasted into cyberspace.

The plan worked. By 1998, KOD's popular workshop had grown to such an extent, it violated fire codes for having too many people in the Death by Chocolate suite at National.

Early guest lecturers of CNN included Chicago Police Lt. Paul Briggs, firearms expert Greg Brown, psychologist Terrill Helander and Dr. Gregory Moffatt, a therapist and FBI specialist in violent crime, while the first Coffin courses were taught by Greg Moffatt, Merline Lovelace, Maggie Price, Debbi Cowan, Meryl Sawyer and Linnea Sinclair.

In 1997 Nina and Miriam came up with KOD's First Page Contest, which drew more than 100 entries that very first year.

This contest evolved into one called Good Things Come in Threes (a three-page contest), and during their last year in office, Nina ran the unpublished contest and Miriam worked the published, and with a membership of 75 and a fee of \$5 for members and \$10 for nonmembers, the chapter had nearly 200 entries. From there the contest grew from three to five pages, and the powers that be continued to shower the membership with tremendous insight. What did they spend the contest earnings on? Death by Chocolate, of course.

In 1998 Jean Willett and Moyra Tarling took over the reins, and by this time KOD had 250 members, 150 of whom were on line. Jean and Moyra began the daunting task of rewriting the bylaws to bring the chapter in line with Romance Writers of America®. These two firebrands also moved the e-mail loops to Yahoo, established backup positions for every office and function and wrote the KOD Policy and Procedure Manual.

Under Jean and Moyra's guidance, Coffin was streamlined, the first tours of KOD were developed, and in 2000 in Washington, D.C., Death by Chocolate was moved to the main floor of the RWA® National Conference from the hotel suite so that more members could participate.

It was their dream to set KOD's Chapter contest apart from other RWA competitions, with goals not only to help its members get published, but to continue recruitment of new mystery/suspense writers to this auspicious organization.

So with this goal in mind, the board moved forward, contacting and receiving permission to use a name synonymous with suspense. And in 1998 the Daphne du Maurier Award of Excellence for Mystery/Suspense was created to promote and enhance the Kiss of Death's Chapter Contest, with the stipulation that the contest would not be limited to romantic suspense. After all, Dame Daphne considered herself foremost a mystery/suspense writer

Next time you stand in awe of all that KOD volunteers have contributed to KOD, consider this, too. Miriam Pace's son developed the first website for KOD. Mark, an artist friend of a KOD member drew the skull-rose logo which was used on the newsletter and official KOD paperwork. Jean took the skull logo, enlarged it and worked with Wendell August Forge for the ultimate design for the Overall Daphne Awards.

Membership Chair Janet Rogerson, came up with the outstanding lip pin logo we all wear at National, and also created the membership spread sheets.

From 2000 to 2002 Diana Rowe and Mary O'Gara were elected co-presidents of the chapter. These dynamos left their mark on the chapter, incorporating KOD tours of the FBI and

ATF in Washington; the Coast Guard tour in New Orleans; and the Arvada Police Department in 2002. Who can forget Diana on stage at Death by Chocolate? Not only was she a hard, savvy worker, but she also had an amazing presence. Mary was and continues to be one of KOD's instructors, advisors and constant chapter members.

In 2002 to 2004, Lori Arnold Mann and Dixie Schultz headed the group, and with Lori's resignation, Dixie did a remarkable job of keeping the membership on track and growing the group. The KOD tour that year involved the International Bank, where the world stores its gold underground, organized with the assistance of Stephanie Wilson Flaherty.

Next year 2004, came Dallas, and under the watchful eye and planning of longtime conference chair Debbi Ward, KOD attendees toured the Garland Bomb Squad and FEMA.

In 2004 Dianne Despain and Beverley Bateman became captains of the vessel. Immediately after assuming office Beverley was left alone at the helm from 2004 to 2006. During this period the Annual General Meeting was moved to Tuesday night after the Tour and became a dinner meeting with a speaker following the meeting. Scholarships to National were introduced. CafePress was opened and we held our very first Canadian Retreat. In November 2006, longtime BMAL, Treasurer and all around volunteer Darlene Roberts, joined Beverley in the lead.

Who can forget the intrepid KOD members who went up the fire ladder in Reno in 2005, or those who couldn't wait to take part in shooting at the firing range in Atlanta in 2006? KOD's tours have become one of the most popular events at RWA® National.

In addition, to online workshops, the organization has added annual retreats for its members, the first in Pensacola, the second in San Antonio, the third in Victoria, British Columbia, with more getaways planned in the future. The Pre-Conference Tours and Death by Chocolate parties continue to be annual sellouts.

KOD's AGM meeting now hosts a dinner for members and enlists motivational speakers such as award winning authors Jennifer Cruise and Bob Mayer (2005) and Suzanne Brockmann (2006) after the official AGM meeting.

So it's really no surprise that membership today continues to grow to an average of 1,000 members a year. The Kiss of Death Chapter might even be called an international group with members as far away as Australia, Japan and Europe.

Just imagine, what started out as an unthinkable nightmare has evolved into a dream come true. It's been a privilege to watch it grow and we owe a debt to the many, many who got us here.

Special thanks to the people who helped put this history together, including, Beverley Bateman, Nina Bruhns, Patty Burns, Caroline Dunsheath, Joanne Pence, Maggie Price, Debbi Ward and Jean Willett. The KISS OF DEATH CHAPTER is nothing without its volunteers.

Respectfully submitted,

Becky Martinez and Donnell Ann Bell