

Sharing Stories, Struggles, and Solutions

BY ELLEN MICHEL



Member-owners are the lifeblood of the co-op; their patronage and input are more important than ever when a store undergoes a change.

Bloomingfoods is looking for a new general manager.

There are, of course, many stories there. Stories, struggles, questions, and uncertainties: all in a day's work in the "new normal" of retail sales. The one certainty seems to be the message member-owners keep repeating: "I think we're going to be okay. The co-op is resilient." Challenges open up new opportunities, too.

I'm writing this after a shopping trip to my hometown co-op, Bloomingfoods Market and Deli, where I worked for a dozen years as marketing and outreach manager. I go to the co-op every few days, and, despite numerous other options in town, I can't bring myself to shop anywhere else.

I know, that makes me a "core" shopper. I ask myself a version of something Michelle Schry asks in a recent video made by CDS Consulting Co-op: "Do I want to spend my food dollars making the Kroger family richer? The Marsh family? The family in Kentucky who owns the Lucky's chain?" I don't, really, although I don't have anything in particular against those grocers: they all do a few things well. It's just that the co-op is heart and home to me.

To a large extent, this comes down to the people who work there: The board members, who work on decision-making and big-picture issues, something I did for seven years before joining the staff. The produce guys, The produce guys I chat with about the kale, zucchini, and pomegranates on sale this week, produce that is visible the moment I step into the store. The cashiers, who share hugs, ideas about using persimmons, and observations about the day.

I see our board president in the parking lot, and thank her for the work she's doing. She's deep in conversation with another co-op owner. I see another member, a carpenter who has built a small house on wheels, open to those who want to peek inside. We chat about its construction, and I sign the book in which visitors have left enthusiastic comments.

Like a number of food co-ops across the country, Bloomingfoods has struggled in some ways this past year, due in part to competitive landscape changes. The former general manager, after a long history of contributions to our sector, stepped down. Co-op workers voted to adopt a union, followed by a mediated process of needs-based negotiations as a contract was put into place. The co-op benefited from assistance provided by National Co+op Grocers, who sent Paula Gilbertson to serve as interim general manager. Now, like many other food co-ops across the country,

Even though co-ops have been a huge part of my life for several decades now, I certainly don't have all of the answers about how we best continue to thrive and grow. When a store stumbles, it's a humbling experience. When a store finds its footing, whether as a startup or as a 40-year-old store like Bloomingfoods managing a difficult transition, it's cause for inquiry: How are they doing that? What's working? What's not?

Sharing voices, opinions, and resources

That's why I am grateful to CGN, the Cooperative Grocer Network, where many voices, opinions, and resources can be shared. We are up and running with our new collaborative platform, where conversations can take place across job title demarcations, among staff people and board members. More private and confidential messaging can take place also, as individuals make connections across what is an increasingly international food co-op landscape. Files can be uploaded, our history preserved. We can identify and reach out to peers.

CGN is this magazine, too. The previous issue of *Cooperative Grocer* magazine is one of my favorites (and I've read them all). One of the articles in it, by attorney Heather Wright, opens up the topic of unions and food co-ops, providing us much-needed balanced information. Another offers "Operational Wisdom from General Managers," written by CDS Consultant Thane Joyal. There's a piece about Harmony Co-op in Bemidji, Minn., concerning the lessons learned as its board adopted policy governance. And, of course, there is more.

If you missed that issue, know that you can continue to find it at CGN, where we archive articles, discussions, and examples of our work. We also post pieces gleaned from external news sources, giving a sense of how our industry is perceived.

All of these voices and observations, differing points of view and hard-earned perspectives, are what contribute to the enduring value of our work in food co-ops. Let's carry on, supporting one another, upholding the vision of mutual benefit as we go. □