

## PANDEMIC GIVES NEW MEANING TO LINE WAITING

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For many of the Coop's dedicated members standing in line for 1 1/2 - 2 hours is worth the wait. | Photo by Rod Morrison.

*By Peter Grant*

When the pandemic hit and the long lines started forming outside the Coop, I had a disagreement with my wife, Sharon, over whether the store's great food and low



prices were worth the wait.

She was right, as usual. The Coop is worth waiting for.

What convinced me was spending an afternoon earlier this month interviewing Coop members as they waited on a line that snaked up Union to Seventh Avenue, along Seventh to President Street and then down President Street about halfway to Sixth Avenue.

As I talked to members—at the appropriate social distance, of course—I also gained a better appreciation of the Coop community and how its depth of character and experience will help us face the challenges ahead.



The line stretches up Union Street, round onto 7th Avenue and ends halfway down President Street.

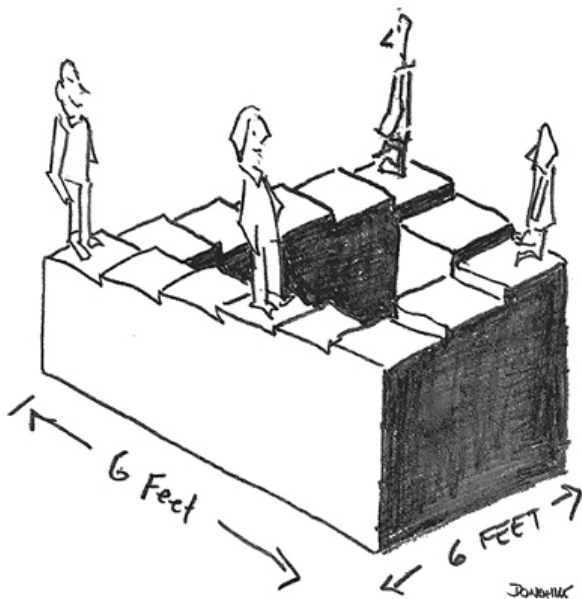
## Keeping Things in Perspective

Consider Graeme Simpson, a Park Slope resident who works on global peace and conflict resolution issues in the developing world. Standing on line on Seventh Avenue, still not in sight of the Coop he put the lines outside U.S. stores in perspective.

“For a lot of people in the world, it’s not about inconvenience and having to isolate. It’s about food security,” Simpson said. “You can’t assume that, however long the line is in a shantytown in Nairobi or Johannesburg, you’re going to get food,” Simpson.

Coop member Eugene Rasporskiy lived through the collapse of the Soviet Union before immigrating to the U.S. in 1994. “Believe me, I’ve been in much longer lines for much simpler products, like just for bread and milk,” he said. “The whole production system was broken. The whole country was broken.”

## Safety First



But why not shop at the nearby Key Food or Whole Foods Market where lines are much shorter or even non-existent at times?

Fabiola Bergi, who was standing on President Street near the end of the Coop line,

said she had tried shopping at a neighborhood store in Prospect Park South but didn't feel safe. "There's no protection. Everyone is all over the place," she said. "The Coop, when you get in there's hand sanitizers and there are wipes and there are guide-lines."

She added: "I would rather wait in line two hours every two weeks than go to my corner supermarket that's taking no measurements to prevent anything. Not for the workers. Not for the shoppers."

Other members shared that view. For example, Bradford Davis got in line at 1:15 pm and was near the front at 4:01 pm when I talked to him. We stopped our conversation to listen to a staff member explaining to members who were about to enter the Coop the procedure for sanitizing hands, wiping down carts and maintaining a flow of shoppers through the store.

"I love the way they're taking care of everything," he said. "If you're in Key Food, people are one foot away and they're sneezing and coughing."

Line waiters that afternoon also noted the high quality and relatively low prices at the Coop compared with other area grocery stores. "There are certain products you can get here you can't get anywhere else," said Tina Osterhoudt, who had been waiting for an hour and 20 minutes and still wasn't in site of the Coop.

Osterhoudt said she had checked the Coop site on Instagram before she left on her shopping trip. "I knew what I was in for," she said. "But my cupboards are almost bare."

Applause for the Staff

Throughout the line members applauded the heroic work the staff is doing to keep the Coop going. "We're lucky to have this," said Sarah Gerstenzang, who was waiting with her husband Michael.

Marco Albanese, who lives with his two sons and his wife in Gowanus, had been in line for two hours. “We’re part of a cooperative,” he said. “We’re supporting the Coop.”

Members also were understanding of the Coop management’s decision to suspend member shifts for the first time in the Coop’s 47-year history. Even if members were working, the lines probably wouldn’t move faster, noted Bergi.

“It would just be a mad science project for [the staff] to coordinate everybody and check everybody,” she said adding: “If this is important to you, you come here and do like everybody else.”

#### Nourishing Each Other

Members also said they were being creative with food to nourish themselves and their families as the city lives through weeks of restricted movement and interaction. “I’m Greek,” said Ellen, who was waiting towards the line’s end with Tony. “He’s learning how to make Greek food.”

Anna Bongiorno, who lives in Bayridge, said she started ordering market boxes from [misfitsmarket.com](https://misfitsmarket.com) when she can’t make it to the Coop. The subscription service sends customers edible but “a little ugly” that grocery stores would have thrown out, she said.

“The subways are starting to slow down. So worst comes to worst I still have a source of something fresh,” Bongiorno said, adding that “my goal if I ever win lotto is to live within a walking perimeter of the Coop.”

Bergi said there are “positive things” happening in her household amid the “loss and suffering and pain” caused by the virus. For example, she said she and her 16 year old son are cooking together more.

“There was one night that we were making pizza from scratch at midnight,” she recalled.

When I got home later that afternoon, Sharon asked me if I had been able to shop while I was doing my interviews. "I thought you'd get my [organic Canola] oil," she said.

I explained I had spent all my time talking to people waiting outside and never made it in. "I'll go some other day," she said, adding that we also need guacamole which costs "about two dollars more per container" at the Key Food than it does at the Coop.

The next morning she went shopping. The line was even longer than the one I saw, extending all the way down President St. and back along Sixth Ave. towards Union.

Sharon wasn't fazed though. She'll go back again when the larder gets bare. "Next time, I'll bring a lunch," she said.