

# NO LONGER LOCALS, BUT STILL SHOPPING AT THE COOP

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*By Jess Powers*

The Coop experienced a precipitous decline in membership during the pandemic, for a variety of reasons. But some members hold on to their ties to the institution despite moving out of the city. That sense of connection shows that there is more to Coop membership than good produce at fair prices.

General Coordinator Joe Holtz laments that there is a “problem in terms of the statistics,” regarding membership numbers and

the attrition rate. The stats show membership rising throughout the pandemic, with people rejoining during the pause in member labor and others joining existing households. Interestingly, in the year before the pandemic, the Coop experienced historic lows in terms of people who departed (12.3%).

Holtz believes that around 4,000 people left the Coop during the pandemic. That number will become more apparent with the return of member labor and people dropping off after not completing their shifts. Many left the city on or around then, as remote work and social distancing led to a desire for more space. But some members have hung on to their membership despite moving away.

#### ON THE NORTH FORK

Kendal Bayer never imagined living outside of the city. But after having a baby at 47, she realized that rather than juggling the logistics of childhood activities in Brooklyn, having outdoor space for her child to play was a priority. After living in the same apartment in Prospect Heights for 23 years, Bayer and her family moved to Mattituck, on the North Fork of Long Island. Even so, she says, there was “no way I could give up the Coop.”

Kendal and her husband Michael would drive into Brooklyn, and he would work their Coop food-processing and office shifts, while she would do their shopping for the month. They would spend roughly \$800–1000 and pack food into about 14 boxes. “I created a whole pantry system in our basement,” she mused.

When the pandemic hit, nearby Greenpoint Harbor Brewery in Suffolk County experienced an early outbreak. Suffolk County rates

of infection were higher than those in Brooklyn. They “felt terrible,” but briefly put their membership on pause to “buy some time” and not risk exposing fellow Coop members.

After shopping at the local King Kullen and IGA, Kendal “came home crying, depressed at how the rest of the world shops.” They started driving to Whole Foods in Lake Grove. Kendal describes the experience as a kind of “scavenger hunt,” attempting to “piece together the Coop shopping experience.” She even called a beef supplier for the PSFC, who shipped directly to the Bayers as a one-off.

Currently, the Bayers both work individual office shifts. They are “thrilled to be back” to working and shopping at the Coop. Kendal enjoys running into people she knows and the energy of the place. She fantasizes about bringing the model out to Long Island.



A sampling of the Coop's fresh local produce.

## ON THE SOUTH FORK

For me, the pandemic and fully remote work provided an opportunity to realize a lifelong dream and live at a house my family owns in Sag Harbor, on the South Fork of Long Island. It's not as rural as it was during my childhood, and a favorite farm stand has since closed, but easy access to nature is a gift.

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I concur with Bayer's assessment of many of the local markets.

Notoriously overpriced, they generally don't have the quality of the produce at the Coop, either. Here, local eggs cost \$9 a dozen and products such as the sprouted grain bread I purchase at the Coop cost \$2 more. It adds up. Acquaintances who live nearby and terminated their membership lament missing the reasonable cheese prices—and the smaller portions available for single-person households.

Prices aside, I lived in cooperative housing in college and joined the Coop decades ago. I believe in the values of cooperatives, and it feels like a community whenever I shop there. I lived in Gowanus for 20 years and used to shop at the Coop several times a week, depending on what I was inspired to cook. These days, the schedule and logistics are different.

I travel, to use the local parlance, “up island” to Brooklyn frequently. (Up island, derived from seafaring lingo, means traveling west, or “up” in longitude.) Adding shopping at the Coop when I'm already visiting friends and taking care of other business in the city makes sense to me. I fill in my larger Coop shops with items from local stores. I mainly buy local seafood out east.

Having a shift on the *Linewaiters' Gazette* means that I can do my work shift remotely, which is an added convenience. During the height of the pandemic, I reported on General Meetings that I watched over Zoom.





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## IN NEW JERSEY

Taigi Smith and her daughter, Savannah, split their time between Prospect Heights and the New Jersey suburbs. Smith wanted to give her then-newborn daughter access to a less urban environment, as well as to Brooklyn. Now 10 years old, Savannah is “100% a Jersey girl,” Smith shares. But “she loves the pummelos, kale, and plantanos that she’s enjoyed from the Coop her entire life. Before she bites into a piece of fruit, she’ll often ask, ‘Is this from the Coop?’”

As a writer and editor for this publication, Smith reflects on a time when, without childcare, she brought her daughter to a disciplinary hearing that she covered as a reporter. “To this day, [my daughter] remembers all the details of the meeting, and at one point, used to act out the more salient parts of the hearing.” Watching someone defend themselves against accusations of theft for the first time and Coop’s system of democratic governance left quite an impression on Savannah.

“Time moves so quickly, and I find myself asking Savannah: ‘What job will you do for the Coop?’” adds Smith. Savannah is intrigued by the idea of working on the shopping squad doing check-out, at least at this time.

Since, unlike Savannah, new members generally hear about the Coop through word of mouth, rather than their parents, Holtz believes that it is important that the Coop remain a “compelling place to be a member of.” He’s invested in ensuring that people are “satisfied enough” that they help to spread the word.

Holtz stresses that onboarding new members is critical to the financial stability of the PSFC. He is optimistic that by the end of October there will be an interim system in place to admit new members.

Smith acknowledges that even though she still shops at the PSFC, with recent price increases at the Coop and decreases in prices for organics through big box retailers, it is less cost- and time-effective to make the drive. Holtz also wonders about the future of a brick-and-mortar store like the Coop, with the increase in home delivery competitors.

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*TAIGI SMITH*

And, yet, Smith and others—even those who have moved out of Brooklyn full time—continue to shop at the Coop.

Despite any doubts about practicality, she explains: "Then I get to the PSFC. And I see folks like Allen Zimmerman. And I talk to him about the difference between pummelos and grapefruits. I have a chat with the walker or listen to someone brusquely say, 'Excuse me.' And then it all makes sense."

Besides the feeling of community, there is something intangible to membership. "Being a member of the PSFC is a calling," Smith continues. "It sometimes supersedes logic. At this moment, it all makes sense. I'm all in."