LOOKING BACK TO 2016

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PHOTO BY DEBORAH TINT

By Christopher Cox

With some founding members nearing their 50th anniversary at the Coop, it may seem odd to interview the cohort that joined in November 2016—just five years ago. For the five members who agreed to talk to the *Linewaiters' Gazette* for this article,

it’s been an eventful half decade, stretching from an orientation that took place in the aftershocks of Donald Trump’s election to the complete upending of the cooperative model during the pandemic.

Ryan Gellis said that, until member labor was suspended in the spring of 2020, he was an enthusiastic member of the “parm squad.” He took pride in his ability to lift and expertly subdivide the 80-pound wheels of cheese. “There’s a special technique for cutting them,” he said. “It’s rare to be able to say this about your not-full-time job, but I feel like I learned a craft on the job at the Coop.” He was eager to return to his parmesan-processing duties, but that workslot has been eliminated, at least for now.

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Kate Gyllenhaal joined the Coop after she moved to Park Slope from Manhattan five years ago. She still remembers the demoralizing feeling of shopping in her old neighborhood: “I would walk into a store and look at the produce, and it wasn’t very good and I had to buy it for inflated prices. I would just get angry.” She knew she wanted to join as soon as she moved to Brooklyn—her brother was already a member—but her husband was more skeptical. That changed quickly, however, once they visited the shopping floor. “He just walked by the cheeses and he says, ‘Okay, that’s it. I’m in.’”



ILLUSTRATION BY DEBORAH TINT

Both Gyllenhaal and another five-year member, Paul Jarrett, praised the member-labor system for one particular benefit: in Gyllenhaal's words, "I enjoy it because it's so different from the rest of my life." Or, as Jarrett put it, "You can turn off a part of your brain and turn on a different part of your brain." Jarrett joined with his wife shortly after moving to Park Slope and talking to some neighbors who were members. It wasn't quite love at first orientation, though. "There seemed like there were a lot of rules, and there were people who were really interested in the rules. There definitely was a culture that I was not quite sure I fully understood," he said.

The experience of orientation—and that avalanche of rules—was a touchstone for several of the members. Theodore Theoharis, however, wasn't fazed. He joined the Coop after he got married since his wife was already a member. "The nature of the Coop was known to me," he says. He did feel some sympathy for the younger attendees at orientation, though: They were clearly overwhelmed by what they were getting into. "Maybe New York City was a new environment to them," he said. "Joining the Coop

was a layer on top of that strangeness." Theoharis had spent most of his career in retail, so there was little in the building—from the workings of the baler to the squawk of the intercom—that surprised him.



ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

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Asked to recall a memorable moment from the past five years, several members talked about the regular satisfactions provided by working a shift and, maybe, bumping into an old friend on the shopping floor. But Jarrett had a more dramatic example at the ready. He was in the Coop when Joe Biden was declared the winner of the 2020 presidential election. "My wife texted me and then everyone else around us was getting the same messages and people were hooting and hollering," he said. It felt like a

fitting place to mark the end of the Donald Trump presidency.



ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

Others mentioned Trump's election as a significant part of their decision to join the Coop. Matt Cordeiro said that he was drawn to the cooperative model from the beginning, but that November, the work being done at the Coop took on a new significance for him. "I was pretty depressed after Trump got elected," he said, "but it made me appreciate more of the community side of the Coop, how it's persevered. When peo-

ple are very organized, they can do a lot of really amazing things.” He joined when he and his girlfriend moved in together. Now they are planning a wedding for next June.

The future of the Coop itself is perhaps less secure. Will full member labor ever return? How long will supply-chain woes last? Can cooperative structures survive in this new reality? Nonetheless, all the members interviewed here thought that, barring something unforeseen—and who knows what another five years might hold—they’d still be members when their tenth anniversary arrived.