BOARD CANDIDATES: WHO THEY ARE AND WHY THEY RUN

May 17, 2022



ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN DONOHUE

From the Editors

The Park Slope Food Coop Board of Directors plays a crucial role in running the Coop. The Board makes its decisions based on the advice of members who attend the monthly General Meeting. There are five seats on this Board, and each term lasts three years. Members submit their applications to run for open seats in March each year, and then candidate statements are published in the *Linewaiters' Gazette*. Thanks to the pandemic, members will now have the chance to start voting online via a Coop-wide email that will go out in late May, and results will be announced at the Annual Meeting in June.

There are six candidates for two open seats. Here is the 2022 slate:



IMANI Q’RYN

I was elected to the Board of Directors nearly 17 years ago and have continuously served in this capacity. I have served on the Board longer than any other elected

member. I am also a member of the Chair Committee and have been so throughout my service on the Board.

Our Board of Directors is not a typical board. It was required by state law that the Coop have a Board of Directors. As a co-operative we liked our town hall style of governance, that every member has a say, every member has a vote. We wanted to continue that tradition. The Coop's attorney at that time came up with the idea that the Board should take the advice of the members on all subjects as a means of limiting the powers of the Board. It was written into our bylaws; most of the Board members that we've had since the Board was instituted decades ago have accepted this policy.

"I take the mandate to trust the membership and take their advice as a sacred duty. It's not my opinion or my position on an issue that is important. It is vital that I respect and trust the voice of the membership. The membership guides my vote."

I wrote those words three years ago in my bid for candidacy letter. I take the opportunity to state that again. These last three years have been the most challenging for me as a Board member and most dangerous for our form of governance and possibly the Coop in general. We had to do things as a Board that we had never done. We never meet outside of the General Meeting. During the beginning of COVID so much changed for the Coop and we were in uncharted territory. We got advice from our general counsel. We not only had to meet but we did so every week for hours! It was exhausting. We wanted the membership to have their voice, to weigh in and decide the direction that we would go as a co-operative. It is in crisis times like those that we could have lost what we had worked over 50 years to protect.

I was so proud and honored to be with that group of Board members: Bill P., Allen Z., Rachel A., Sukey T. and Joe H. We went through that fire and kept our word, our promise to the membership.

I ask for your vote one last time. I hope that more members will step up and choose to participate in our form of governance. It's easier now to come to our meet-

ings—they are on Zoom! All the Coop laws are made here. I also hope that those that really understand our kind of board will consider running next time we have an opening.

I love the Coop and hope that it exists for generations to come!



TIMOTHY HOSPODAR

In October 2020, when our Coop introduced a new phase of member labor, we met with an online scheduler deployed to support it. I showed up on that very first day to contribute in a way different than I had ever worked before—on a truck-unloading shift. Despite advance scheduling, a hiccup in the system prohibited me from working that first morning. And so, I showed up again on the very next morning, as scheduled, and I worked on the sidewalk at 5:30 AM. I was surprised to like the shift, as there was a reason that I had never tried the shift before, counter to my history of working a variety of FTOP shifts, from CHIPS to childcare to cashiering. Well, here's an inconsequential fact about me: I greatly detest predawn roll calls, not to mention my distaste - for cold outdoor activities in general. Be that as it may, I made truck-unloading shifts a weekly practice and showed up 27 times across the eight months before the broader phase of member labor began in July 2021.

There's an analogy here as it relates to one thing fatherhood helped me learn. Early morning hours, before the babe awakens, are sometimes the only chance to devote one's free time to the things that matter most. The Coop—as a market and as a community—has mattered so much to me, since joining 12 years ago and certainly in the last two. And its future, following these complicated times, is of grave importance. While my optimism helps me trust that survival is a given, I expect that our future state features exciting changes. I'd like to pledge my work shift to the Board and our membership at large, because I understand the General Meeting (as a whole) comprises the stewardship of change.

If granted the opportunity to serve our community in this role, I commit to employing several fair tactics I have learned in other roles. In the effort to mitigate bias, I'll exercise sensitive feedback tools of active listening, to ensure that the Board clarifies and validates as appropriate in addition to echoing the majority message. I'll help the Board identify any unsatisfied concerns to acknowledge disagreement around consensus. My prior work as a facilitator in decision-making sessions for executives has prepared me to promote a diversity of voices while encouraging dissenting opinions be

taken into consideration. I respect that any upcoming changes can only result from an array of debate, and I am equipped to support the process. The timing is right, I believe, for me to support the Coop in this capacity.



AMY CAO

Fellow member-owners, my name is Amy Cao, and I humbly submit my candidacy to

the Coop's Board of Directors. My growing passion for good food—its origins, its impact, its accessibility—I owe to the Food Coop. I was drawn to the Coop for the promise of delicious, affordable food, and over the years, I find myself becoming more and more attached to the less tangible aspects of what makes our community a true collective—and how to nurture this spirit to help ensure its lasting success.

In my professional life, I am a communications strategist for nonprofits, schools, professional organizations, and public and private companies. This often positions me as an advisor to executives, faculty administration, public officials, and even board directors, to help them plan for growth opportunities, manage crises, and minimize risks. Previously, the City contracted me to work alongside social workers as a financial empowerment counselor. This brought me face to face with struggling New Yorkers, as I helped them navigate scarce resources in unforgiving situations.

These experiences have exposed me to unique and diverse challenges at all levels of an institution. This formed an inclusionary perspective that informs my daily life. As a liaison to stakeholders at many levels, I am a good listener. I do my best to understand differing points of view, encourage dialogue to solve problems, and respond thoughtfully and decisively when the situation commands it. As a Board Member, I would do this by leaning heavily on my member community.

I believe an elected Board Member has a duty of responsibility to the membership. Over the years, I've had the privilege to speak with many of you over the course of countless shops, while stocking shelves, scanning your IDs, and walking your groceries home with you. I am immensely proud of the Coop community, and I am committed to working together with you to secure its financial health and future sustainability, in service to our founding Cooperative principles. With your confidence in my ability to take your lead by heeding the advice of the membership to act in the best interest of the Coop, I hope to earn your vote.



BRANDON WEST

My name is Brandon West, I have been a member since 2009, when I first moved into the neighborhood, and soon after became a squad leader for stocking and receiving. I also recently ran for City Council in the community, in 2021. For a career, I'm currently a labor organizer for local journalists and have worked in voting rights and organizing. I have always been very close to the Coop and its mission. It is incredibly chal-

lenging to maintain large membership-led organizations. I have experienced that fact, not just as an active member of this Coop, but in other collective processes and while working in government.

As the pandemic put an incredible strain on the Coop, and some challenging decisions were made about how to plan for the present and future, I wished I had an avenue to be more directly involved with the Coop. Not just as a way to be more directly connected in a community important to me during a time when “community” is harder to find, but also so that we can bring more member input into some of the seriously important decisions this Coop will have in the future. My goal and intention of running for this position is to mainly focus on decision-making, and helping work to build participation in the general meetings, which were once much larger.

We all remember the more contentious, but better-attended meetings in the past 10 years. While we have progressed a lot in this time, I think the challenge our Coop faces as being large but also democratic is critical, especially when our membership numbers have dropped in light of the pandemic, and that we are in a more vulnerable state financially than we were before it started. I also pledge to work to make sure that members are brought more into major decisions in the future and support developing a process for how we rethink our democratic processes in the face of so much change to the Coop. Our leaders made several tough decisions quickly, and I believe the Coop is much better for it, but I think more tough questions are ahead, and there are a lot of unknowns. I think it’s important to try to bring as many folks into these decisions as we can, and make more members aware of the challenges we face as a Coop.

I think our mission is strong and widely felt and believe the next few years in the City will be challenging with a shift towards living with the pandemic. What that does physically and financially to the Coop remains to be known. We must make sure that our members who are most negatively impacted, and who struggle financially, should be centered as much as possible.

In addition to this, I think the fiscal health of the Coop is incredibly important, and I will also work to make sure that the relationship between coordinators and staff is always a focus and highlighted. The Coop needs to be a great place to be a member and to work, and I will use my background in conflict negotiation to help mediate any issues if they come up, and contribute to mitigating conversations if needed.


PHOTO PROVIDED BY CANDIDATE

GEORGE SARAH OLKEN

I knew the Park Slope Food Coop was magical when I saw the red sign-in books at La Louve Coopérative in Paris, which is not only built on our model but copied our store down to the color of the binders. There is a special pleasure in our rituals: calling out over the intercom “What are those little mushrooms in miso soup?” (enoki); the line painted on the backyard wall to indicate how high to stack compost buckets; walking a member and their cart up Seventh Avenue and learning how they came to New York in the 1960s—or last month. The Coop is my happy place, I’ve made friends there, I run into friends there, I want it to flourish.

I would like to join the Coop Board of Directors to be a voice for that flourishing. I believe Board members, like coordinators and committee members, can use their position to influence discussions and decision-making in a positive direction, especially because the Board is our one elected leadership body. With a mandate from the membership, I will use this position to emphasize working together and building community.

Recently the Coop has had to make difficult decisions: How to run the virtual GM? How to re-organize member labor? How to support members struggling from the pandemic? There is no abstract entity “The Coop” to address these questions. We must address them through cooperation as members.

We need to re-educate ourselves about how our Coop functions and re-imagine our role within it. As we become more reliant on technology (goodbye red binders), we must find ways to make that technology accessible so that every member can learn how it operates. As our finances fluctuate due to unforeseen crises—the next pandemic or future supply-chain breakdowns—members need to take an active role in the decisions of how we react.

This is work I’ve tried to do on an individual level as a squad leader, by bringing items to the GM, by joining with members of the unofficial Coop Study Group, and by speak-

ing with staff and community elders: What was the Coop like before we owned the building? How do we resolve disputes? How do you pick the perfect melon?

Since joining in 2007, I've worked on the shopping floor, in the basement, and in the office. In 2018, I became a shopping squad leader. I was heartbroken when the pandemic severed the relationships with my fellow squad members and with the members of the Coop staff who supported us. These relationships are as important as the smooth operation of our grocery store—they are what make the Coop what it is! I believe the GM and management should be guided by the goal of fostering greater connection among cooperators.

Outside the Coop, I drive the Bookmobile for Brooklyn Public Library, bringing library service to communities all over the borough. I live just south of Prospect Park with my partner, Jenny, and our cat, Tahini (who never does her work shift). I look forward to answering questions at the March 29th GM and I hope I can continue to serve the Coop as a member of the Board.



JESSE ROSENFELD

A member since 2004, I have worked as cashier, cheese and olive bagger, FTOP stock boy, babysitter, and in second-floor guest registration. My paid profession is that of Addictions Counselor on the Lower East Side. My free time has been galvanized by the 2016 elections; I have joined Get Organized Brooklyn and regularly do phonebanking to support voter-expansion drives.

Demonstrably supporting our cooperative goals of shared success, I have brought products to our shelves and successfully brought a proposal to the approval stage at our GM. Pre-pandemic, my work slot was Secretary for the General Meeting and I took the minutes every month. Our meetings are one special set of gears in the whole enterprise, and I was proud to have been re-elected yearly for eight years straight. I consider myself very familiar with the GM and AM processes.

I love it at the Coop. I meet people here I wouldn't usually encounter and discuss things I wouldn't ever know about. I shop every couple of days because of its warm familiarity, and I like being part of an organization that is a standard-bearer for food and environmental justice. The Coop is my chosen community and I feel a part of it every day when I walk down Seventh Avenue, seeing fellow members on their way to and from the store.

With a proven record of support for the health of our enterprise, I am running for the Board of Directors because I see the Coop as a business first. As such, the Board is obligated to remain alert to the legal and fiduciary responsibilities of the Coop rather than maintain advocacy for any particular issue. Members at the coming election will likely ask a version of, "How will you improve the Coop as a member of the Board-?" My answer will be, "There is nothing that a Board member should do outside of taking the advice of the membership on how to vote for proposals, which they have always done."

For any proposal that is problematic, I will ask myself the same questions as any Board member: Will a proposal ratified by the General Meeting put the financial and legal health of the Coop at risk? Does the proposal violate the spirit and letter of the Coop's own bylaws or NYS articles of incorporation, and our own mission statement?

Thank you and I look forward to your vote.