

STAFF SPOTLIGHT: MEMBERSHIP COORDINATOR JANA CUNNINGHAM'S QUARTER CENTURY OF SERVICE

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By Leila Darabi

If you've ever been shopping at the Coop when a shopper uses the intercom to ask "Are we out of almond milk?" you may have heard the voice of Membership Coordinator Jana Cunningham. She keeps her ears open for food-related intercom pages, and if the Coop is in fact out of the product, she sometimes shares a recipe instead.

"Call me if you want to learn how to make the best almond milk ever in five minutes!" she recently invited.

AN ISLAND GIRL

Cunningham was born in New York City. "I'm an island girl," she said, explaining that

she was born “on the island of Manhattan, in the village of Harlem,” before moving as a young child to “the mainland” and growing up in the South Bronx.

She describes her mother as an excellent cook. “My goodness! We could go to any restaurant, and she could walk out of there and recreate whatever the dish was from taste.”

When Cunningham was 13, she discovered Islam through her older sister and converted. Rather than explain to her mother that she now wanted to follow a religious diet and avoid non-Halal meat, she announced that she was vegetarian. Nearly five decades later, diet and nutrition remain extremely important parts of her life.

While her mother continued to cook meat, she also served vegetables and “beautiful salads” with every meal, and Cunningham said the “unintended consequence” of her shift in diet was feeling healthier.

“At 13, you don’t think you’re not feeling optimally well. You think this is how you feel,” she explained.

LEAVING CORPORATE LIFE

In her early years, Cunningham studied theater and dance and practiced yoga at home, and she has continued throughout her life. As an adult, however, she worked a corporate job at AT&T. One day, while listening to the radio on her lunch break, she heard a promotion for a yoga event. As a child, she had loved the PBS program “Lilias, Yoga and You” and she described watching the show, following along, and then teaching her younger sister the poses she had learned.

The lunch break radio promotion reminded Cunningham of this early passion, and she decided to attend the event to meet the teacher. While there, she caught the teacher’s eye. “What are you doing in my class?” the teacher asked. “You should be teaching yoga.”

Cunningham eventually became a yoga instructor.

DISCOVERING THE COOP

Cunningham joined the Coop in 1993, not long after moving to Brooklyn. “In those days there was a street squad,” she explained—members whose work shift involved setting up a table in front of the store, talking to people who walked by, and canvassing for new members. Cunningham agreed to a tour and signed up.



Cunningham has seen the Coop evolve from the over 3,000-member community she joined to a peak of over 17,000 members just before the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I had made a commitment to all-organic food, and I had three young children, and I practically emptied my savings account sticking to that commitment,” she said. The access to organic produce without breaking the bank and the cooperative philosophy of the Coop appealed to her.

In the beginning she worked different shifts, trying out different roles as a member. “Then I went to the office and I was like, ‘Oh, I like this best.’” One day in 1997, while working that shift, a staff member informed her of an open role for a paid position.

Cunningham applied and got the job.

MEMBERSHIP COORDINATOR

Twenty-five years later, Cunningham remains on staff and has seen the Coop evolve from the over 3,000-member community she joined to a peak of over 17,000 members just before the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Running the Coop’s membership office has always been a very challenging job and requires a balanced, compassionate approach with great attention to fairness,” said Coop founder and General Manager Joe Holtz. “Jana has mastered this and more and has been a positive example for her colleagues. The Coop is lucky to have hired her more than 25 years ago.”

Cunningham said working in the office appealed to her “mommy gene.” She has always enjoyed both helping people and teaching, as she did when she taught yoga. (She continues to teach tai chi.) As a Membership Coordinator she counsels members on “cooperative behavior” and encourages them to be considerate and mindful of their roles in the Coop community.

When asked what advice she has for shoppers, Cunningham said, “When people come to shop here, they should not be in a rush.”

PANDEMIC SHIFT

Like all Coop staff, Cunningham’s role changed when the store adopted strict COVID-19 protocols.

“The pandemic happened, and I went from an office job to managing a grocery store and being on the floor eight hours a day,” she said.

Only staff could work, and members of any status could shop, eliminating the need for a team upstairs tracking member work shifts. “It didn’t matter if you were sus-

pended with five makeups, you could still shop,” said Cunningham. “So all the membership coordinators went downstairs to run the store.”



Like all Coop staff, Cunningham’s role shifted when the store adopted strict COVID-19 protocols.

Rather than working from an office and managing member labor, she and her colleagues found themselves managing the store and temporary workers. “It was very different. It was a physically very demanding and exhausting couple of years,” she said.

PERMANENT CHANGES

Now that the Membership Office is back open, Cunningham and her colleagues have shifted jobs again, though they have not fully reverted to the roles they played prior to March 2020. “A lot of what we did [pre-pandemic] has moved online, so the job is changing,” she said.

While several membership coordinators have left their jobs in the past few years, the Coop has not filled every opening, in part because the labor needs have shifted. “The jobs here continuously evolve,” Cunningham explained.

“When I first started, there were only five or six Membership Coordinators.” Two years ago, she said, the membership staff was around 18 people and is now about 12, including a few on parental leave.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Cunningham typically works Tuesday through Friday, four 10-hour shifts per week. She arrives at 7 a.m. to open the store and set up the membership office. She makes sure the cashiers have what they need, that there are tags at the entrance to help count the number of members shopping at any given time, and she sets up the office for her colleague who arrives at 8 a.m. to greet members working that shift.

Then it’s time to “open the gates.” Over the course of the day, Cunningham might help someone on suspension get a day pass to shop, respond to pages from members working on the floor who need assistance, and attend a staff meeting. A big part of her job is the behind-the-scenes office work that helps manage membership.

Cunningham shops at the Coop every day, purchasing greens and avocados to make a salad for lunch, or picking up blueberries and yogurt for the next day’s breakfast. On Fridays she does a larger shop for her days off and likes to walk the produce aisle to see what’s new.

One of the many perks that has kept her happy in her job for over 25 years is the constant possibility of new discoveries.

“I like to try new things,” she said.

Leila Darabi joined the Gazette as a reporter in 2016. She is the cohost of the Cringe-

watchers podcast and shares photos of the things she cooks with Coop ingredients @persian_ish on Instagram.