

INSIDE ANOTHER BROOKLYN FOOD COOP'S JOURNEY TO SURVIVE AND THRIVE

September 12, 2023



By Sara Ivry

The first rule of a Food Coop shop is: Arrive at its storefront. I'd forgotten this basic tenet this past summer when I set out to buy milk and whatever else struck my fancy at the Greene Hill Food Coop (GHFC). When I was there last—several years and an entire pandemic ago—it was located on Putnam Avenue, around the corner from a bar, just near Fulton Street in Clinton Hill, the neighborhood I call home.

Now, it was nowhere in sight. That is, in my sight. It had moved a few blocks away, closer to the border of Bed-Stuy, and I had no idea.

And there's the rub: too few would-be shoppers know anything much about the GH-

FC's existence. And fewer still take the step of becoming a bona fide member. Indeed, membership has hovered around 300 for several years now. The GHFC General Manager Jake Boxenhorn wants to change that. He's making a renewed push to grow his member pool and ensure its longevity.

"I really had no idea what a coop even was until I got here to New York City," says the Long Island native. After graduating college two years ago, he moved to Brooklyn "right down the street from where Greene Hill is now, and I was looking for part-time work, as well as a good place to shop. Greene Hill happened to be offering a part-time job on the weekend, and to become a member at the same time."



Opportunity knocked and Boxenhorn welcomed it in. About eight months ago, he graduated from part-time weekend gig to full-time General Manager when his predecessor left.

Since then he's been stymied—as have others before him—by the question of how to

gain new members, how best to spread word of the GHFC and how to get people to join up.

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“Everyone knows about the Park Slope Food Coop, and everyone shops there,” he says. “I’ve done a lot of work on the floor at other coops and see that people just don’t really know who we are. We’re pretty small.”

General Manager of the Park Slope Food Coop (PSFC) Joe Holtz agrees the relative size of GHFC vis a vis PSFC presents a hurdle.

“A Coop like ours has 9,000 items, and 6,000 square feet, and theirs has many thousand fewer items because of the smaller selling space, and because of our size we can get better prices,” he says. “We’re a problem for Coops near us, so we try to help in every way we can.”

PSFC members are allowed to shop at the GHFC, and support the tiny food coop. The *Linewaiters’ Gazette* has covered the GHFC’s efforts to shore up membership, the PSFC has given the GHFC loans, and Holtz has responded to Boxenhorn’s request for semi-regular meetings to think of what policies and changes might work best for the GHFC to meet its growth goals.

Among them, having “open shopping” days this past summer, to entice passersby and members of the local community as well as allowing PSFC members to shop at Greene Hill without having to work there. So doing raises overall sales and encourages PSFC stalwarts to consider joining Greene Hill as well.

“They said, ‘Can we let your members shop here?’” Holtz says. “And we said, ‘You

can do whatever you want for our members. But I'll tell you what we don't do: let your members shop here because that would be like us killing you.”

“When I think of any Coop, your first job is will you survive, and your second job is will you thrive,” Holtz says. “Surviving without thriving means you’re still vulnerable.”

At present, GHFC is vulnerable. It routinely does about \$20,000 a week in sales, Boxenhorn says, a figure it can live off of—if modestly.

“We’d like to get up to 25, that would help us thrive,” Boxenhorn says. “Right now, we’re in a survival mode. And we’re trying to get out of that through inward restructuring.”



Getting there is contingent on growing membership; Boxenhorn is aiming for a base of a solid 500.

He says he and his board are discussing a lot of ideas regarding how to grow. He wants to improve the Coop's operation and its general presentation by patching up and painting the basement and the store's interior, fixing its flooring, and generally swapping its "original homey Coop look" for something less worn in and, hopefully, more compelling. He's also hoping to change how shifts at the GHFC are structured—to shorten them and make them more frequent and to implement more serious repercussions when a member is delinquent.

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"We've been very lax about how we maintain our shift structure," he says, contrasting it with the rigor of the PSFC. "What you guys do is much more strict. That's something that we're thinking of doing to make our membership more accountable in general."

He also has embarked on a semi-regular meeting with Holtz to brainstorm other ways that Greene Hill might start to thrive. Holtz welcomes this opportunity to lend his insight, accumulated over more than four decades as a PSFC staff member.



“When I was the only employee in June of 1975,” Holtz says, “I was given a lot of freedom to try things. I would ask Jake if he feels like he has that freedom, because I think that’s important—a certain entrepreneurial aspect.”

Holtz says he’ll also encourage Boxenhorn to consider lowering prices on produce and ensuring it is of a quality superior to what is generally available in the area. “Increase the sales on that, increase the turnover, and become famous for that,” Holtz suggests.

Until then, Boxenhorn is buoyed in this work by the community he stumbled into.

“I feel so strongly about this Coop in the sense that we are so close knit,” he says, noting that he knows the name of every single member. “We know each other so well. It’s such a friendly environment that I don’t think any other coop has. The vibe of the Coop is what makes it special and you have to experience that to understand. We don’t beat the prices of other coops. We don’t have the biggest selection, but we

have a group of really passionate people.”

“We’ve been around 12 years,” Boxenhorn adds, “and we’re still here. So whatever we’re doing is working. “

Sara Ivry is a long-time member of the Park Slope Food Coop.