

GROWING UP IN THE COOP'S AISLES: MEMORIES OF LIFELONG MEMBERS

November 7, 2023



By Juliet Kleber

This year the Coop celebrates its 50th anniversary. In its half-century, the Coop has grown and evolved, and so has its membership—and not only in numbers. The children who grew up shopping alongside their parents (or waiting for them in the Coop's childcare room) in the early days are now grown, and many are members in their own right.

As part of its 50th-anniversary coverage, the *Gazette* interviewed some of those children of the Coop—whose families joined when they were children or even before they were born. They spoke to the *Gazette* about their memories, their favorite childhood treats and the place the Coop has had and continues to have in their lives.

The following interviews have been edited and condensed for clarity and concision.

Bryce Komaroff, 34

When did your family join the Coop?

My mom is one of the early members from the 1970s. She wasn't a part of the original team, but she was in the second wave of people that turned it from the smaller space into what it really is now.

She learned more about food by going to the Coop; she made friends; she learned stuff about gardening. It became a community for her.

My dad became a member when they got married in 1982. They've been members long enough that they're both retired now. But my mom still comes once a year to help with inventory.

What do you remember about the Coop from your childhood?

I've always been a child of the Coop; I don't remember a time when I didn't go there. My mom was a squad leader for many years, and I remember going to the childcare area when my mom would shop, when the bulk room was still the childcare room. I believe she even donated some of our old PlayPlace stuff.

Sometimes I would be annoyed about being contained to that one room, but I thought it was so fun that we could play in there.



PHOTO BY B KAMAROFF

I've always been a child of the Coop. I don't remember a time when I didn't go there.

Favorite childhood Coop item?

Cinnamon raisin bagels.

Did you ever leave the Coop? If so, why did you join again?

I left when I went away to college. So I didn't go to the Coop from the time I was around 18 until I was 26, since I wasn't living in New York.

I moved back to New York in 2016 and rejoined in 2017. I moved home with my parents and got a very stern reminder that anyone who lives in the house should contribute to the Coop. But also my mom really believes in the mission of the Coop (not that I don't too!).

I love the consistency of knowing that our foods are higher quality, that the prices are better and I can get everything I need. I see how much of an impact it has on the bottom line that the majority of the work is volunteer, so they're able to keep prices low.

How has the Coop changed over the years?

It's gotten less crowded, which I love. Because my number one issue with shopping before the pandemic was that you just couldn't fit anywhere. But I always felt like I was in the way when I would do receiving. Some people enjoyed that because they'd get to see lots of people they know. But now that things are a little more regulated, I feel like it's a better shopping experience.

I love the work system being online now. I definitely think that it's helpful that people can sign up for shifts and look at what's available. And not only do you have your recurring squad, but you can also do random shifts if you want.

I like the carrot system too, because I know there are shifts that people tend not to

want, like early mornings or maintenance. And the unofficial app so you don't have to worry about taking your card everywhere. I love that they've introduced those things and come along a bit more to the technological age.

I always found that the people who worked for the Coop are very good about making tools and systems that are clear. When you have so many workers who are just volunteering—this might not be their regular shift, or this might be the first time they're ever doing certain things—it really builds confidence for people.

Did the Coop influence your relationship to food and groceries?

I definitely think I internalized the messages about knowing where your food comes from and trying to eat as much organic food as possible. I don't always stick to that. I'm also a millennial, so I like convenience; I'll have food delivered sometimes. But when I look at my friends or my husband who didn't grow up like that I see that they have a different perspective. I didn't know what fast food was until I was a teenager—which is very different from most of my American friends.

I am a healthy person. And I wonder if that foundation helped to get there.

How do you imagine your future relationship to the Coop?

Working in the office now I learn a lot about other parts of the Coop that I never would have known about otherwise. There's a PowerPoint that they have up on the screen for people to learn more about the shift schedules and all those things. And one of the slides is about the retirement process. I was looking at that and thinking, "Okay, 30 more years and I can retire as well."

As long as I stay in Brooklyn (and after living outside of New York for nine years, I definitely never want to leave again), I plan to be a member of the Coop. If I have children in the future I would also want them to grow up in the Coop. I definitely see it as a part of my family's life.



PHOTO BY B. KAMAROFF

I didn't know what fast food was until I was like a teenager.

Nathaniel Parrott, 28

When did your family join the Coop?

I grew up in Park Slope and my parents have been members since as long as I can remember, maybe before I was born (in 1994).



Nate Parrott remembers that his parents were perpetually being suspended.

What do you remember about the Coop from your childhood?

I remember that my parents were perpetually suspended. My mom would work at the daycare and I would go there with her. I would be dragged there to shop and I was not a huge fan, because I was a kid, and I didn't like being dragged anywhere. Sometimes we'd go to the General Meetings and I would be really bored.

When I was a teenager, I would occasionally work a shift with my dad in the dairy cool-

er, which was fun.

Favorite childhood Coop item?

My sister recently reminded me of a chocolate bar we always got. I'm not sure if they still have it. It was very Coop-y: not super creamy. It was a brown rectangle.

And the huge bagels they would give us at daycare.

Did you ever leave the Coop? If so, why did you join again?

I went away for college and I wasn't involved with the Coop for a long time, from when I was 18 until 28. I moved back to New York, then back to Brooklyn and finally back to Park Slope. And my parents were telling me, "You gotta join the Coop."

My girlfriend, who I live with now, was very down for it because, of course, my parents talked it up a lot.

Intellectually, I knew the idea that the Coop was cheaper, it was better produce. But that didn't really settle in until I was an adult and I had left and come back. I would go to Key Food and try to get an avocado and they would just be horrible. I realized why my parents were willing to work the shifts and put up with the incredible crowds.

My girlfriend and I both work jobs on the computer all day, so for my shift, I'm excited to have a job that's not on the computer but is still useful.



When Nate Parrott moved back to New York his parents insisted that he and his girlfriend join the Coop.

I also think there's a bit of nostalgia. It just seems nice to be part of the community.

We finally joined about two or three weeks ago, because it took a while to get an appointment for orientation. My first shift was this past Tuesday.



PHOTO BY ROD MORRISON

Nate Parrott seen here working in the basement. He's currently doing freelance shifts.

Did the Coop influence your relationship to food and groceries?

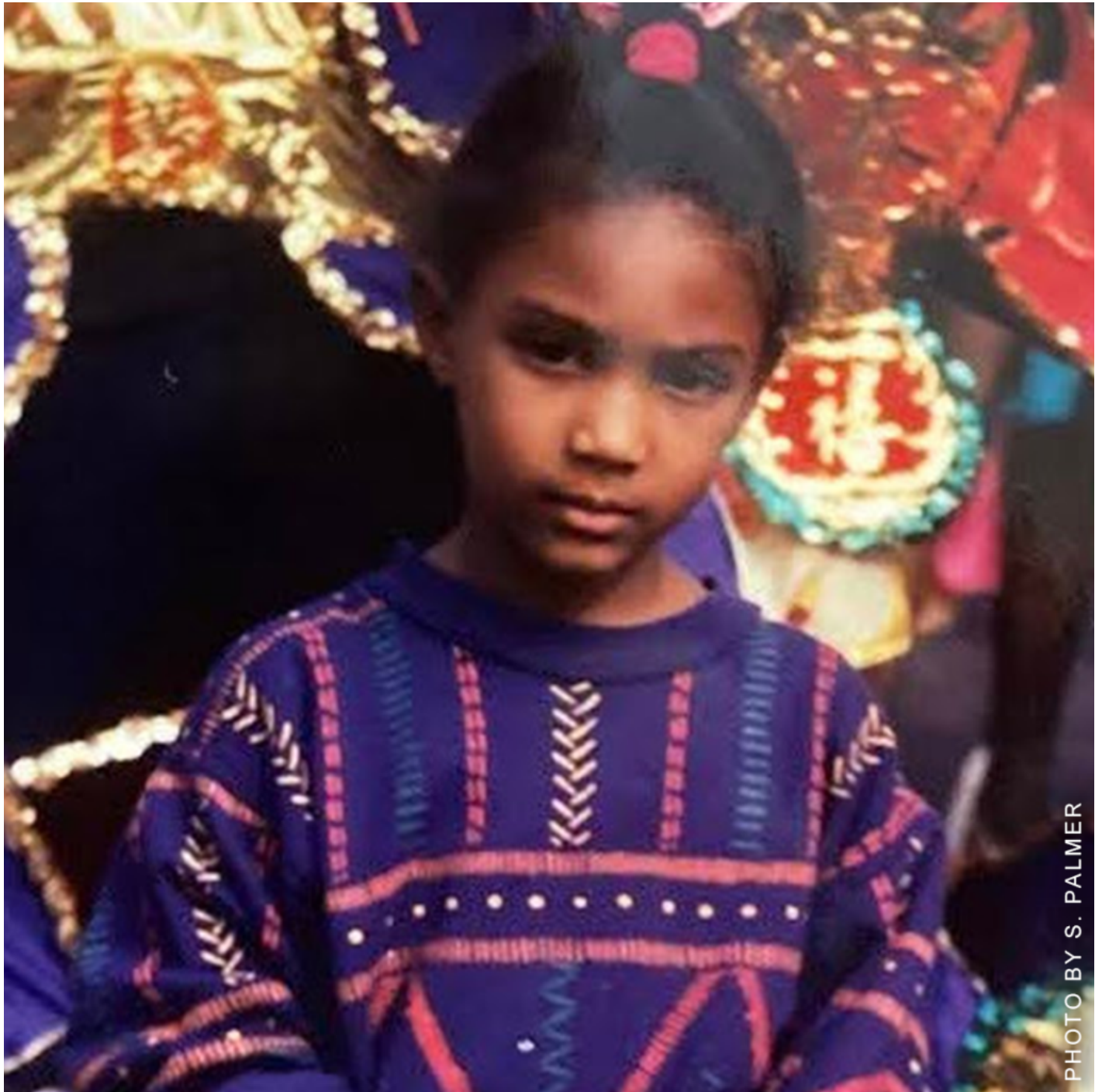
We were always eating the Coop brand stuff, and I'd go over to my friends' houses and they'd have Kraft Mac & Cheese and I would think, "This is the coolest thing in the world." We had the Coop, they had Key Food. It was a little bit of a culture differ-

ence. As a kid, I resented it. If we went on vacation and got Kraft Mac & Cheese, I would be the happiest kid in the world. Of course, now as an adult, I appreciate that [the Coop's is] better stuff.

Soraya Palmer, 38

When did your family join the Coop?

It would have been in the early nineties. I'm not exactly sure what year, but I was in elementary school.



Soraya Palmer's parents were very into food and that has influenced her relationship with what she eats.

What do you remember about the Coop from your childhood?

My dad used to be on the Entertainment Committee so he would DJ for parties, which I thought was really cool.

It was an interesting place. It wasn't really like other supermarkets. It was always

very crowded, and you would always see your neighbors and people you knew—teachers from my school, other people I grew up with who also grew up in the Coop.

Favorite childhood Coop item?

I'm not vegetarian anymore, but I was for a while. And they had a lot of different vegetarian stuff. I remember when Amy's first came out—now it's everywhere, but then it was a big novelty. It was exciting.

Did you ever leave the Coop? If so, why did you join again?

I went out of state for college. When I moved back to New York in 2016, I was living with family friends who were members, so I had to rejoin. Then I left again when my life was just very busy.

I only recently rejoined a few months ago. Eventually, I missed some of the things they have at the Coop that they don't have everywhere else—certain sauces and seasonings, loose teas, certain vegetables; they have so many different kinds of mushrooms. A lot of different Caribbean and other ethnic ingredients.

You probably can get them somewhere else, but you would have to go to multiple places. It's nice that it's in one place.

How has the Coop changed?

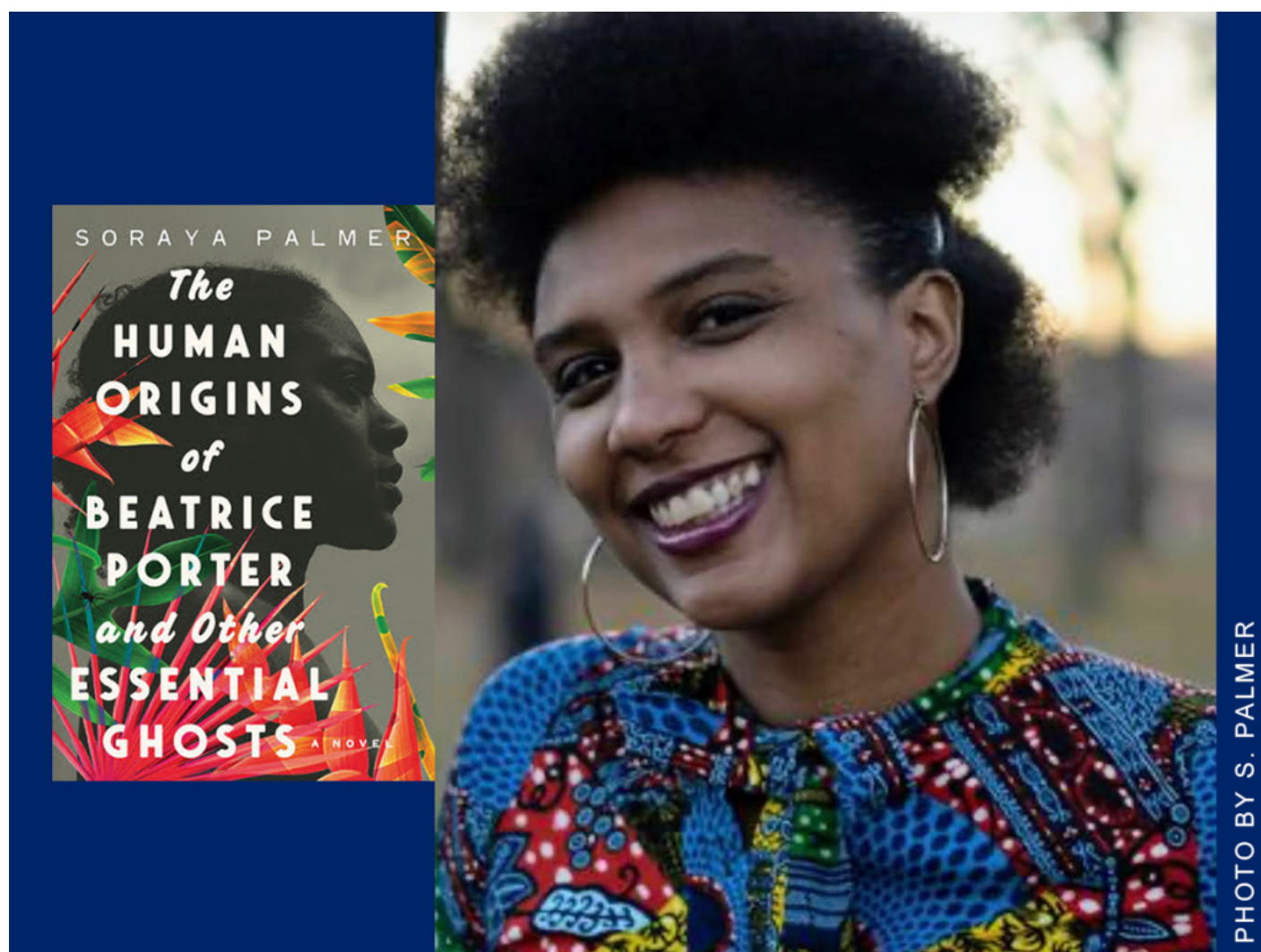
I feel like things have mostly changed since the pandemic. But since I was a kid, I think it's just mostly gotten bigger.

I don't think I necessarily always understood it as a kid, why would they go all the way to Park Slope to buy things because there are so many grocery stores in our neighborhood (Lefferts Gardens). I get that more now.

Did the Coop influence your relationship to food and groceries?

My parents are very into food, so I think the combination of the two did. They have always been into buying organic, local and buying things when they're in season. My mom is macrobiotic. Those things felt important, and they would talk a lot about the Coop and why it was so great. I remember there were things my parents wouldn't want to buy at other places because they would be better quality and more affordable at the Coop.

Food is so expensive now. It's hard to find healthy food at a good price. The Coop is definitely really helpful for that. I eat meat now, and they find more humanely--sourced meat.



Soraya Palmer only rejoined the Coop a few months ago. She had missed

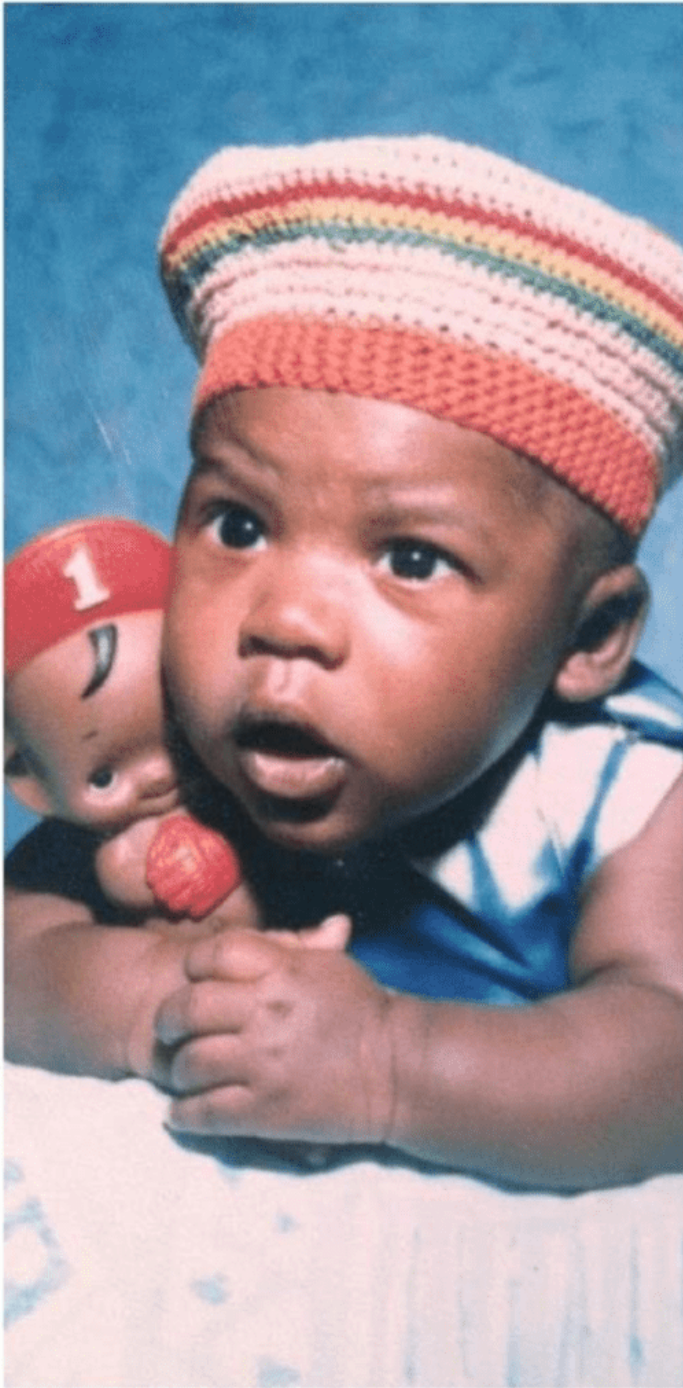
the sauces, seasonings, loose teas, and certain vegetables.

And in my book (*The Human Origins of Beatrice Porter and Other Essential Ghosts*), one of the chapters is in a grocery store that's semi-based on the Coop.

Hemamset Angaza, 34

When did your family join the Coop?

I've been a Coop lifer. My parents have been members since before I was born. My mom probably has the biggest relationship to it, she's been on the Diversity Committee for years, maybe a decade now.



Hemamset has never known a time when he or his family have not been a members of the Coop.

What do you remember about the Coop from your childhood?

I was always tagging along with my mom, and sometimes I would stay in the daycare while she would shop. I don't remember too many details, but I remember that I always looked forward to it. The time would go by really quickly; I could be in there for

two hours without realizing it.

I also remember loving being there when my mom would do the shift where they'd count the money. I was probably eight, and I'd never seen that much money in my life before.

When I got old enough, I started working as a walker.

My favorite moment was a makeup shift I did. I was in my early-mid 20s. I was kind of dreading waking up to do it—I'm a late riser, so usually I do afternoon shifts. They signed me up to work CHiPS, the soup kitchen. We got to take food from the Coop's leftovers and donations, and we cooked whatever we could make.



PHOTO BY ROD MORRISON

Hemamset's Coop shift is taking donations and damaged but eatable food to CHiPS who run the soup kitchen on 4th Avenue.

I had never done any kind of volunteer work like that in my past. A few of us hadn't been there before. It was just a nice vibe, and it was really rewarding to be able to serve the food at the end.

Favorite childhood Coop item?

I was very consistent about a few snacks. I really liked these brown rice chips that they used to have. If I left the Coop without a bag of those, it was a wasted day. They were amazing—crunchy but very light. They also had this thing called a “Cashew Butter Krinkle.” I don't think the company makes them anymore, but those were just absolutely delicious.

I've been a vegan my whole life. My parents have been vegan for probably 40 years. So we had a very specific set of things that we ate. We really did them to death. And when they stopped making them it felt kind of like a betrayal.

Now my go-to snack is probably the raw cashews combined with the golden raisins.

Did the Coop influence your relationship to food and groceries?

The fact that the food is affordable is something that you definitely take for granted until you're not shopping there. They have a price point and atmosphere that encourages me to try new things.

At other places you go shopping with a specific budget, and you look down at the end and realize you might not even be able to get all of it with the money you had allotted. But at the Coop, I can usually look at it more like a playground, “This looks good. I'm gonna try this. Let me try that.”

Not everything is going to hit the right spot. But I've tried more things from the Coop

than I've probably tried at any other supermarket.

Did you ever leave the Coop? If so, why did you join again?

I've always been a member in one way or another. I've been suspended probably too many times. But I've always been a member, just maybe not the best member...

How has the Coop changed?

I'm not sure if it's a change in the Coop or a change in me, but I think it's become more rigid. There's an atmosphere where it feels like some people are kind of watching what you do, if you're performing as an appropriate member of the Coop society. I've gone in and had members chastise me for things and we're both doing the same thing here, just trying to get some groceries.

That was never something I used to worry about. But that might be because I'm an adult and I see more now. When I was a kid that could have been the same, I just didn't notice that.

I definitely miss the bulletin board. Sometimes people would get jobs from there. As a kid, I loved looking at it just because I was curious. But as an adult, I think that's an important part of what we can do for each other.

How do you imagine your future relationship to the Coop?

I still live with my folks, and my family is definitely invested. My mom is routinely in meetings with the Diversity Committee, talking about what they can do to make the Coop a better place for people who are members. She's very ingrained in the culture of the Coop.

So I'm always gonna have that connection. And just going there my entire life, we know a lot of members who are friends of my family, who are in the same social cir-

cle, who are also vegans. It's not unusual for me to go to the Coop and see three or four people I know. I'll see a familiar face—somebody I haven't seen in a while—we'll catch up there for a little bit, and maybe they'll offer me a ride home.

I definitely want to keep that as long as I live in New York, at least, and if I have kids. It's not just about food and shopping, it's about being a part of something that you can fall back on as you grow.

Juliet Kleber is a writer and editor based in Bed-Stuy. She serves as a member of the editorial board of n+1 magazine.