ONCE-RESISTANT COOP MEMBER EDDIE ROSENTHAL LEAVES STAFF AFTER 20 YEARS RECEIVING MILK, EGGS

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By Hayley Gorenberg

It would be sugar-coating to say Eddie Rosenthal, the Coop's milk and eggs Receiving Coordinator for more than 20 years, joined the Coop reluctantly. "Honestly, I had contempt for the Coop, because they were not overtly political," he said of his initial awareness of the store. Rosenthal had plunged into politics at an adjacent organization called the Mongoose Community Center, which he thought of as a center for "various kinds of liberation: antiwar, civil rights, feminism…a grab bag. I don't remember what the organization actually did," he said. "We gathered, we talked about things." But the Mongoose folded, and "I guess food won out." After a stint shopping at Back to the Land (a nearby natural foods grocery store some Coop members nicknamed "Back to the Bank" for its prices), Rosenthal joined the Coop "sort of unhappily."

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He quickly discovered he enjoyed socializing at the Coop. “I like people being crowded into a place and talking. It was a life.” The Coop had an atmosphere he experienced as “very homey,” and he played music with Fun’raising Committee. He recalls Park Slope as “nascent” and said, “I remember thinking of it as a postgraduate neighborhood.”



Rosenthal believes he quit the Coop around the time it acquired big freezer units and started selling chicken. He was a vegan at the time. He nonetheless returned (and is now an omnivore). And then the information technology job he worked at Methodist

Hospital evaporated when the hospital changed hands and most computer facilities moved to the Upper East Side. Eschewing a wee-hours commute, he quit. Without a job for a year, he showed up at the Coop nearly daily, perhaps banking work credits, and certainly hearing about open positions. His first job application at the Coop did not succeed. “I was rejected, but I was told they liked me very much, and I should apply again.” He did, and landed the receiving coordinator job managing the milk and egg departments.



Bringing important new products to fellow members and growing relationships with farmers and distributors were highlights of his job. “I really felt for the small distributors,” he said. He remembered one distributor who rolled up routinely with eggs in an unrefrigerated station wagon. “It stunk up the whole block! Their eggs were absolutely delicious.”



Giving school groups tours of the Coop was another bright spot of any workday. “I enjoyed asking children which was the biggest fruit they could see, or ‘Why is a trumpet mushroom called a trumpet mushroom?’”

And he waxed nostalgic about Coop staff parties back in the day when “staff pretty much cooked everything,” generating “lavish” feasts he imagined could have graced the magical tables of Hogwarts. “It was always about bringing staff closer to each other,” he said, recalling his efforts to create his mother’s Hungarian *gesztenyepure* from pureed, sweetened chestnuts topped with whipped cream.

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Rosenthal's stint at the Coop took a tough turn with the pandemic. COVID frightened him, and working remotely was tough because it required installing new technology in his apartment, which made him very uncomfortable. He gave up significant parts of his job, and in addition after he returned, he started to experience problems with balance and other neurological symptoms he's still working to have assessed. He was out on disability, and ended his employment at the Coop on November 26. He hasn't decided what to do next, he said. He has worked as a math tutor in the past, and may return to that.



He remains a Coop member, and decades after his initial disdain, Rosenthal said he now tells people, "I would shop at the Coop even if the prices were a little higher, because the Coop is my family, and I would support my family—even if they were unreasonable."

Over time, he's even come to detect a family resemblance among Coop members. "When I walk down the block, as I approach the Coop, I'll try to pick out who's a Coop member and who's not. And I'm pretty accurate!" he said, describing typical Coop members as appearing "harried and optimistic." He continued, "I would like it if people were aware of their identity as Coop members. It's something very special, regardless of the problems that come up or injustices that happen. Maybe all groups have to work through that."

What changed for the former member of the Mongoose? "Compromise!" he said. "You have to start judging your battles. Human beings count for more than food. The relationships are important," he said. He described interrogating himself about conflicts, and learning from them at the Coop. "What's bothering me?" he would ask himself. "Should they change, or should I change? Once you stop turning away from people and turn towards them, your view of them changes, and people start trusting each other more."

When she's not writing for the Gazette or teaching LGBTQ rights, Hayley Gorenberg may be found playing the Brazilian dobra with the Fogo Azul drumline.