

# RECEIVING COORDINATOR MIRIAM EUSEBIO PULLS UP STAKES FOR WEST COAST PARENTS

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By Hayley Gorenberg

In the late 1990s, Californian Miriam Eusebio set off to pursue a master's degree in directing at Brooklyn College, and her friend enrolled at New York University in the West Village. "We looked at a map, and put our fingers on the campuses—and in between was Park Slope. So that's where we decided to move," she said. The roommates soon learned of the Coop. "I thought, 'This seems kinda weird and cult-y. Don't know about that!'" Eusebio said. "Plus, I was going to be in grad school, which is designed to be more work than is humanly possible."

A turning point came when Eusebio tried to buy a single zucchini at Key Food. The squashes were packed in plastic-wrapped polystyrene trays, three zucchini to a pack-

age. Eusebio inquired about purchasing a single zucchini. An employee disappeared into the back with the heavily wrapped three-pack, and returned to Eusebio after breaking open the package, discarding the original wrapping, and rewrapping a single zucchini in more plastic and polystyrene. “That was it,” she said. “I had to join the Coop.”



*Eusebio has been a receiving coordinator for nearly 25 years.*

Even though Eusebio and her roommate were frequently on work alert for missed shifts, and she had to reschedule for a new squad whenever her semester schedule changed, she stayed. “I really found a place that matched my values as a person in the world,” she said.

She earned her graduate degree in directing, but with jobs in theater scarce, Eusebio needed other work. She recalled being encouraged to apply for a part-time receiving coordinator position that seemed flexible enough to accommodate her efforts in “the real off-off-Broadway world, lots of self-produced stuff.” She landed the Coop job in 1999, and even made some connections to fellow members that led to theater work, stints teaching theater arts summer camps, etc. At one point she left her Coop job to

do teaching artist work for a few semesters, but she soon came back. “The Coop does not forget you!” she said.

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Needing more money, she took on more hours. She had started as coordinator for “health and beauty” items, but over time her responsibilities shifted to other disparate categories: stationery, batteries, and super-local Union Street Honey, advertised as “produced by a father-son duo who keep four beehives in Park Slope, Brooklyn.” Eusebio enjoys working with the distributors, recounting how she keeps in touch with the local honey business: “John calls me and says, ‘The bees have made some honey!’ And I say, ‘Send me as much as you can!’ And we get maybe ten cases.”

While she’s enjoyed her work at the Coop, Eusebio feels a pull back to her hometown of Davis, California, where her parents, now in their mid-eighties, could use her help. “It’s a pretty big life change, and I have a lot of sadness about leaving New York and leaving the Coop,” she said. “But I also feel really positive about the next part of my life.” Living with her parents, she plans to focus her outside work on theater. This spring she will direct a play with Acme Theater Company, a youth theater where she participated when she was growing up. The group plans to stage David Ives’ “The Liar,” based on a 17th-century French comedy full of “mistaken identities, running in and out of doors.”



*Eusebio uses her theatrical directing skills to teach members how things should be done.*

Eusebio applies her directing and teaching chops at the Coop, as a staff member connecting with working members. “It takes a lot of effort to teach 15,000 people something,” she said. “In other relationships you have, you say a thing, and it’s said: ‘This is how you stock the eggs.’” But at the Coop, with members who take shifts for a couple hours every few weeks, “even if someone is experienced, you always teach them how to rotate the yogurt, even if they think they know.” On a standard stocking squad, accumulating the working hours that would correspond to a week of labor in a new, full-time job could take a year, she noted. “You feel like you’ve been [at the Coop] a year, so you know stuff. But you’ve only had the job a week. Sometimes [members] feel like they know stuff, but you still have to teach them without alienating them,” she said. “It’s the nature of the lightly controlled chaos of the Coop.”

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Monitoring the Coop floor, she often finds herself “communicating and teaching, saying the same thing over and over again.” She admitted having felt “ticked off” early on at some of the required repetition, and she had to learn to approach members with patience. “I’ve learned to recognize the look in people’s eyes when they actually understand, which, as a director, is useful. I don’t have to wait as long to figure out whether they got it or not. You get a lot of practice.” She described the sequence: “Teach! They do something different. You recognize what you said taught them that thing that they did. You have to switch the way you say it. You get another chance to teach that same thing. Because we’re constantly stocking the shelves.”



*Both workers and shoppers need to have a good experience at the Coop.*

Further melding her directorial mindset with her Coop approach, she said, “You have to pay attention to the psychological balance of the ‘cast.’ I want everyone to have a good experience at the Coop, whether they’re working or shopping.” She tries to pay attention to how members are feeling about what she asks them to do, telling a member nervous about working the dairy case, ‘Do it as long as you can stand it,’ so that they have an out. It’s not quite a cast, but it sort of is. It’s a little group of people who are working together on a particular project for a particular length of time.”

Among the most memorable events at the Coop was the impromptu marriage ceremony of two coworkers. They were moving out of town, and realized that as a same-sex couple who eschewed certain heteronormative institutions, they nonetheless needed health insurance benefits available through marriage. With their departure clock ticking, another staff member who had secured a Universal Life Church ordination offered to help. An announcement over the PA system summoned staff to the ups-

tairs community room, where the couple exchanged twist-tie rings, “because they hadn’t been planning it, and it was what they had,” Eusebio said. “It was just the most wonderful and moving ceremony. They’re still together and happy.”



*Eusebio uses the PA system to thank members at the end of their shift.*

The spur-of-the-moment wedding PA announcement may be most memorable for Eusebio, but her own end-of-shift PA announcements have secured special regard. “I like to have an ending point rather than the shift just fizzling off,” she said. She makes a practice of announcing appreciation for the squad. “I thank them for being part of this weird experiment that’s been thriving for 50 years,” she said. “People don’t always understand the nature of what they’re part of. We’re so trained in our whole lives to being in a hierarchical structure. Sometimes learning to be in a cooperative is like learning to shave off the corners of your square peg to fit in a round hole. I emphasize they’re not a customer; they’re part of something. They came, and they’re running the business that they’re part of owning,” she said.

“It’s kind of a little miracle, a place to find community and to stretch your brain about how the world works, and the structures that we live in,” she continued. “We are so interconnected. The Coop shows how much we gain when we depend on each other, and when we’re responsible to each other. The Coop is a place where you can really live that out—not only to members, but to the world, to say, ‘Look at this thing that works!’”

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*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.*