

AFTER MANY YEARS OF SHIFTS, A GOLDEN REWARD: COOP RETIREMENT

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By Zach Schiffman

Dolores Natividad had been a Coop member for more than 31 years. Hitting three decades of shifts marked an important milestone for her: retirement. She recalled being at the Coop on a Saturday, thinking to herself, “It’s been a really long time since I’ve been working here at the Food Coop. Since I am 65, how much more time do I need before retiring?”

Natividad went upstairs to the Membership Office and gave her member number. She soon learned that she had earned that golden ticket, Coop retirement, which offers her a well-deserved privilege: membership for life without having to do shifts.

The retirement program has an almost mystical air about it, which was made clear in discussions with several members.

“I hope I can afford to live in New York long enough to make it to Coop retirement,

whenever that is," one member remarked.

Early in the Coop's existence, members could only ask to stop working when they reached 75. But in 2008, a new program was established with a sliding scale, granting retirement status to members based on a formula that takes into account their age and the number of years they have been a member.

Members who are 60, for example, can retire if they have been a member for 30 years, while members who are 70 or older can retire if they have at least 10 years of membership.

Walecia Konrad, a former reporter and editor for the *Linewaiters' Gazette*, recalled that she realized that she might be eligible when she turned 64, given that she had been a Coop member for 22 years.

"I was just looking on the website, and I was really surprised," Konrad said. "My husband is younger than I am; he was like, 'Oh, you should look for the formula. I think you might be able to retire.'"

After applying through Member Services, approved members receive a phone call congratulating them on retirement.

"It had become really hard to get shifts," said Sandye Renz, 66, who has been a Coop member for 19 years. "So I thought, 'Hmm, maybe I won't have to do any more.' So I went to the office and was told I could retire, but I still owed one shift. And I still couldn't get a shift."

Renz, who primarily worked office and checkout shifts, later got a call clarifying she no longer owed that shift, along with congratulations on her retirement.

The retirement program is voluntary, as many long-time members enjoy their shifts and elect to keep contributing to the Coop. Renz said she "won't miss doing shifts,"

but she looks back fondly on working days like Halloween. “We did costumes,” she said. “That was always fun. One year I was the tag for vegetables—I just wore it as a mask on my face.”

Retirement can spark a lot of reflection, as it does outside of the Coop. As a reporter for the *Gazette*, Konrad attended countless General Meetings, and she remembers votes that have changed the Coop over the years, from approving benefits like walking shifts and daycare to things we may take for granted now, such as the ability to purchase meat or beer.



Dolores Natividad in front of the Membership Office

Natividad recalled the days before the Coop accepted debit cards as payment.

“I used to do the new member orientation shift, and I remember getting tired of saying, ‘Debit cards coming soon!’ Every month, over and over,” she said. “If you didn’t have enough money, you’d have to run to the bank and get money or use a check.”

Major world events have shaped the membership experience. Many retired members mentioned the pandemic, which made it more difficult to feel a sense of community at the Coop. Others recalled the time on Union Street after 9/11, when a wooden sculpture was erected outside the firehouse next to the Coop. “Having that sculpture right between the firehouse and the Food Coop, it was very emotional,” Natividad said.

Over decades of membership, retirees worked a diverse array of shifts. The office shifts were a favorite. “I started doing the office for a while, because my daughter was little and she didn’t like staying in child care, so it was easy for her to run into the office all the time and hang out with me,” said Renz, whose children are now grown. “But when the office got more computerized, I started doing checkout, and then I did everything. I have done every shift pretty much.”

Way back when, Natividad said, she did some grueling shifts. “The first was helping to unload at the wee hours of the morning—helping get the food off the truck and put it on the gurneys—because I liked lifting heavy things. It was satisfying. It was like a workout,” she said.

She also served on the Coop’s Diversity Committee and gave new member orientations, though her favorite shift was serving food at CHiPS, the pantry and soup kitchen nearby on Fourth Avenue.

Natividad believes that her Coop shifts, specifically her time working on the Diversity Committee, informed her own field work as an exercise physiologist.

As an over-three-decade member, she said, the Coop has been involved in the fabric of her life. “Even when my husband asked me to marry him, I said, ‘The household needs to be in good standing and you need to join the Food Coop.’”