

UNION STREET'S OTHER HALF-CENTURY-OLD COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

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By Dan Bergsagel

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The Gardens of Union comprise two community gardens, two blocks down from the Coop on Union Street between 4th and 5th Avenues. The first, Annie's Garden at 640 Union, is a deep narrow lot squeezed between the high brick walls of two handsome brownstones and easily mistaken as a private space. It is quiet, ideal for sitting and contemplation.

The second, The Garden of Union at 636 Union, is a wide break in the streetscape, seemingly overgrown and a little wild behind a standard-gauge less-than-welcoming chain-link fence. It is a working garden, with an impressive composting infrastructure

and active vegetable beds.



These gardens are easy to walk past without a second glance, but their history is closely tied to the Coop's—in fact, they have been the destination for the Coop's compost program since its inception. Now in their 50th year, these humble community spaces tell a story of a changing neighborhood then and now.

The *Gazette* spoke with two active Gardens of Union members to understand more: Dan Joseph, a 58-year-old composer, technology consultant and current Coop member; and George Horner, a 72-year-old artist, gallerist and former Coop member who worked his last Coop shift as a cashier.



A GARDEN HISTORY

Annie's Garden was founded by Annie Thompsen in 1974. The garden sits on the former site of Unity Bakery, which was once part of a thriving commercial strip of grocers and funeral parlors. In the 1940s this stretch of Union Street had no street trees, and still had active trolley tracks running amongst cobbles until the line was closed in 1945.

In fact, Palo Santo, an incongruent restaurant slipped in among residential units in the lowest level of a brownstone at 652 Union Street, is a throwback to how the street previously looked.

"I met Annie in 1991 when I moved two blocks down from Annie's Garden," Horner recalled, "and she used to say that you could smell the bread being baked at Unity Bakers. You could give him your turkey or ham and he would cook it for you in his oven-

S.”



It was a local institution, but like many famous bakeries (the source of the 1666 Great Fire of London on Pudding Lane, I’m looking at you) it burned down. And much of the neighborhood was burnt out or boarded up. “Even in 2001 when I moved to the neighborhood there were some vacant buildings on this block. Burnt out or boarded up was typical in the 1970s,” explained Joseph. “It was a pretty depressed neighborhood.”

Thompson worked for the Democratic Party—its local headquarters was nearby—and was a politically active long-term resident. As the garden’s founding story goes, after the bakery burned down, Thompson saw it as another symbol of the neighborhood’s decline.

To arrest that decline, she used her community connections to found Annie’s Garden.

“She was sick of looking out of her windows into a pile of garbage and rats.” Horner

continued, “The city wasn’t doing anything about it and she intended it as a safe green space for the local children to explore, to teach the kids respect for earth and show them how to grow plants.”

The larger garden opened a few doors down in 1976 on the cleared grounds of two unstable five-story apartment buildings.

At the time these were rare community green spaces. Today there are a generous handful of other community gardens within the same three-block-wide, three-block--long rectangle—although the others are not as old and not as focused on vegetable production and gardening.



THE GARDENS AND THE COMMUNITY

The Park Slope Food Coop has longstanding ties to the gardens: laborers from the

fledgling Coop were said to have assisted in clearing the land for the establishment of the Gardens of Union, and early in the Garden's history, the Coop compost program started there.

The compost system has evolved over the decades and today is a well-organized, multibin ventilated system housed along the back wall of the Garden of Union, and staffed as part of the Coop's member-labor system. Many active members of the Gardens are also active members of the Coop.

In addition, the Coop will pay for the material needed to repair the compost bins. If a carpenter is needed, the Coop will give them a work credit. From a shared start in down-and-out Brooklyn, the organizational vibrancy and engagement trajectory of these two Union Street communities have diverged.



Instead of a membership like the Coop that boasts many thousands, the Gardens of Union membership is currently about 50 people.

“The neighborhood has become increasingly gentrified and expensive, and added to that disruption from the pandemic, the community aspect has frayed,” explained Joseph. “In its prime, we used to have an informational kiosk and monthly garden meetings, but today we are down to exactly one annual virtual meeting.”

Unlike the Coop, the gardens are not entirely independent—they are administered by the membership as part of the citywide Green Thumb program, and as such they have some mandated requirements “largely to protect the gardens from becoming private fiefdoms.”

They must be open to anyone, but not quite in the same way as a regular public park—there are risks to having a working garden with compost and tools and a pond open and unsupervised, so the Garden of Union is open for only a few scheduled hours a week, in addition to being open whenever a garden member is in attendance.

Annie’s Garden is more akin to a public park in terms of risks and uses and is operated as such—Horner, who lives two doors down, endeavors to open it every morning for most of the day.



PHOTO BY JOHN MIDGLEY

The membership rules at the garden are less rigorous than at the Coop. Any member can join the garden for \$25 each year and have all-round access to the garden, “although no one is turned away for lack of funds” assured the current copresident of the garden, Megan Saynisch.

About 10–15 members are designated “stewards,” who commit to a certain amount of volunteer work and can care for a growing bed in the garden. While there is no official requirement to volunteer a minimum amount, the membership can assist through gardening, sweeping the paths, or simply keeping the garden open.



AN INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY SPACE FOR THE FUTURE

The gardens host annual community dance events organized by Spoke the Hub, as well as the occasional open-air concert or wedding reception. Since the 1990s the gardens have been the distribution location for one of Brooklyn’s CSA programs. Rumor

has it that in the 2000s the members used to regularly picnic and BBQ in the space, too.

However, the membership is quieter today. The gardens are looking to further engage with the local community and increase its active membership.

“There is still a lot of misunderstanding about whether the garden is public or private, and we aren’t doing such a good job of being open and being accessible,” Joseph explained. This is corroborated by some local residents who live directly opposite the larger garden.

A neighbor, who asked to remain anonymous, said: “We’ve lived here on Union Street for five years now and have never been into the gardens. They are a little mysterious, and to be honest we have never felt welcomed.”







PHOTO BY JOHN MIDDLEY



Horner acknowledged that that is not an unusual view.

“I understand. Local neighbors who grew up in the area often feel that the garden is off limits now. But it just isn’t true.”

The garden team is working to change this closed perception. They are looking for more community partnerships—concerts, weddings, readings—and a new mural by Subway Doodle is in progress in Annie’s Garden.

The garden team are also hoping to reinforce the importance of gardens like these in their communities to help safeguard them from future changes in city administration.

“An active and informed membership is in the long-term interests of the garden,” said Joseph.

“Many developers would kill their own grandmother to get their hands on the site,” in-

terjected Horner. “The city might even turn around and annex the big garden to build something like affordable housing. A community who stands up for the garden can help prevent that.”