

HOLTZ REFLECTS ON A HALF-CENTURY WITH THE PARK SLOPE FOOD COOP

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PHOTO BY JOHN MIDGLEY

Part 2 of 2

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By Hayley Gorenberg

On the cusp of retiring after a half-century, Park Slope Food Coop (PSFC) General Manager and first-ever staff member Joe Holtz reflected on pivotal moments for the Coop. Here is Part 2 of the Linewaiters' Gazette farewell—or perhaps one can say “exit interview” with Holtz.

Early on, Holtz focused attention on the Coop's physical plant as central to the estab-

ishment's continued existence. The first PSFC space was on the second floor, without an elevator. "You had to schlep really heavy things upstairs. Cases of groceries are heavy!" With the understanding that hauling "80-pound cantaloupe crates from California" upstairs was unsustainable, Holtz approached the owner of the building about leasing the first floor, with an option to buy at a fixed price by 1980.

After the Coop pulled off that initial purchase, Holtz went next door to the owner of the "twin" of the Coop's building, requesting that if that owner decided to sell, "You shouldn't forget to talk to us, because we might want to buy it." That second purchase followed in the late 1980s, as did a similar conversation with the owner of Kline's rug cleaning business—with that property marking a third purchase.

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The properties served Coop goals of growing the range of products and ability to serve member needs.

"Improvement is important," Holtz says, recalling a standout conversation with a member who approached him to say, "I love the Coop, and I'm quitting. Why? Because I'm a busy person." It was problematic for the otherwise enthusiastic member that the Coop was open on a very limited schedule and carried a relatively narrow band of items. "I've got a family. I don't have time to work and go to multiple stores. There are so many things I can't get at the Coop."

"That was like a roadmap," Holtz says. "That was such a gift. How do I make it so that person doesn't quit in the future?" Soon the Coop was open for longer hours, and carried a wider range of products.

Product choices

Some product choices came easily, guided by members. At one point the Coop carried nonorganic as well as organic kale and collard greens. But the nonorganic greens didn't sell well. Even a single case a week didn't stay fresh. "Members spoke!" says Holtz. "Organic kale was almost every time better-quality. So we dropped nonorganic." The Coop still carries lemons, oranges and one-pound bags of carrots—both organic and nonorganic. "We double-market certain things. It's the will of the members." Pineapple is also double-marketed and "very often nonorganic costs more. Why? They taste better. Why don't we handle nonorganic bananas? Organic got up to 100 cases a week. Nonorganic—even five cases, we had trouble moving them fast enough."

From early days, Holtz exercised judgment to bring quality to Coop shelves; price was a factor, but not the only driver. When Holtz started visiting the Hunts Point green market in the mid-1970s, he found two choices of green peppers, priced at a difference of eight cents per pound. He bought the better peppers for eight cents more.

"Red leaf lettuce: We never thought twice. Always bought the local, because it was better. It didn't matter that it was four dollars more a case; we had a good price on so many things, the fact that we had a slightly less good price on lettuce—but better quality? We had the luxury of not having to worry, because members realize pricing is done honestly and transparently, and that we can have good food and support local agriculture when possible."

Years ago the Coop decided to stock nonorganic honeydews from one source only. "Why? Because they're the best honeydews. Why? Because his company only ships the best ones. People were blown away by them. We still get them. Instructions to a produce buyer are, 'If you're going to buy conventional honeydews, these are the only ones you buy.' Even when they don't have much give, they are delicious. The less expensive honeydew? No one shoulda bought it! That's the kind of thing you learn over time. It became clear that it was OK for us to make a quality decision that would really be serving the members better."

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Then there were stocking choices that implicated questions about production methods. The Coop did not initially carry meat. When the GM voted to stock meat, Holtz was personally relieved that it excluded factory-farmed meat. “I’m personally happy with that,” says Holtz. “Does that mean some people will decide they won’t be members? Some people want meat to be part of their lives, and they can’t afford meat that’s not factory-farmed.”

Could some people say the choice not to stock factory-farmed meat fails the test of “leading with cooperation,” because the cheapest meats are factory-farmed? Holtz acknowledges there may be an argument: “That’s sort of saying, ‘The Coop’s not for you.’ I’m not particularly happy with that. On the other hand, the alternative of being part of factory-farmed meat culture—that personally for me is a step too far.”

Boycotts

The Coop has joined boycotts over time and historically participation has been “very much noncontroversial,” Holtz said, referencing Nestle and occasional boycotts called for by national labor leadership. Calls to boycott products from Israel, on the other hand, reveal significant division in the membership. Holtz remarked on being “horrified by what’s going on in Gaza... horrified by attacks on civilians because they happen to be in the vicinity of people Israel wants to kill,” and also “horrified by October 7.” He continued, “If members voted on a ceasefire and return of the hostages, I suspect well over 90% would vote in favor.” In contrast, he said he believed a stance about boycotting products from Israel (as opposed to letting members decide what to purchase) would show deep divisions. “I’m worried about the members who will never join in the future and the members who will now leave,” he said. “We have little prac-

tice when a community is split, thousands on each side. I think the fact that there are thousands on each side is an incredible problem for the Coop. I frankly don't know how the Coop decides this or gets out of this conundrum."

International and post-retirement cooperation

Over the course of 50 years, Holtz has developed deep expertise and affinity for the International Principles of Cooperation, springing from mid-19th century concepts of a cooperative in Rochdale, England.

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Core to his commitment to those principles, for anyone seeking assistance in exploring creation of a cooperative: "The answer is always 'yes.' It's in the cooperative principles to say 'yes' to a young person who wants to learn about cooperatives. It's our duty." Relatedly, "coops help coops," he said, adding, "I love talking to people from other coops, even if they don't work the way we do."

By way of example, when the United States Federation of Worker Cooperatives had a conference in New York City years ago, organizers asked for meeting space to plan, and PSFC shared work space. The conference then asked whether PSFC members would help at the registration table, and PSFC gave members work credit to help.

In the 1980s Holtz made up a packet of "important things to do if you want to start a coop like PSFC." He mailed it all over the United States, and "made clear I was there to help them, and not just by sending something in the mail." Then he extended help abroad. To help start a food cooperative in Paris, Holtz and GC Ann Herpel participated in years of weekly Skype sessions, helping to plan, discussing structure and how to source fruits and vegetables.

After he retires on the last Friday in June 2025, 50 years after he was hired in June 1975, Holtz plans to visit a bevy of European cooperatives in coming years, “not as a paid consultant, but just as a person who wants to do this. Just to say, ‘Hi, how are you doing?’” He intends to return to New York City, but if he ever left the city for another locale, “the day I move there, I’m joining the food coop, even though they don’t operate like we do, and they’re not going to give me an opportunity to run a checkout line and stock the shelves. It’s still a community-owned business that’s not part of mega-corporations of the world.”